

CANADIAN PICKERS

Antique hunters uncover bits of prairie history

Television show hosted by Alberta antique enthusiasts travelled the country looking for old and unusual artifacts

BY BARB GLEN
LETHBRIDGE BUREAU

MEDICINE HAT, Alta. — There they lurk: old granaries and sheds on farms across the Prairies, loaded with junk and with treasures.

However, Western Canada doesn't have the lock on such hoards. Sheldon Smithens of *Canadian Pickers* fame says there are similar collections across all of Canada.

"They're everywhere, and I'm reluctant to say hoarders," he said. "There's just a lot of serious collectors."

Smithens and fellow picker Scott Cozens started in four seasons of *Canadian Pickers*, the reality television show in which they travelled around Canada buying antiques and artifacts they found, primarily in rural areas.

"We were out of cities more often than not," he said.

"The types of merchandise that the producers of the show were interested in exposing were more often found in rural areas, much to my chagrin sometimes, because my background is a little more in classical antiques — furniture, silver, glass, china, those sorts of things."

The show is no longer in production, and these days Smithens, a trained auctioneer, appraiser and third-generation antiques dealer, is also in demand as a public speaker.

That's what he was doing in Medicine Hat during the Farming Smarter annual conference in early December.

The show continues to air in the United States and other countries, where the two men are known as the Cash Cowboys.

"There was no script to our show," Smithens said in an interview before his speech.

"We did have somebody go out and pre-scout because it's a great big country out there and we



Auctioneer and antique collector Sheldon Smithens says visiting the barns, shed and homes of collectors for the *Canadian Pickers* television show was like 'Animal House on wheels.' | BARB GLEN PHOTO

weren't just knocking on doors, but it didn't go too much deeper than just finding somebody that had an accumulation of stuff."

I'm pretty well entrenched in Western Canada, so that's my personal interest, Canadian history.

SHELDON SMITHENS
AUCTIONEER

After that, it was a matter of looking around and offering sometimes

eager and sometimes reluctant owners to sell some of their items. Reluctance was part of it more often than not.

"That was sort of a common theme," he said.

"That was part of our challenge, was occasionally getting in somewhere where somebody didn't want to part with anything or they didn't want to part with it at a price that we could turn it over on a profit.

"That was part of the ball game. It wasn't just strictly a purchase arrangement. It was buying it at a reasonable price."

Smithens and Cozens bought

and owned the things seen on the show. It wasn't made-for-television fakery. Then they would sell their purchases at auction later.

Born in Lethbridge, Smithens grew up in Calgary and learned antiques and auctions at an early age.

"I didn't just fall off the picker turnip truck," he said.

His grandparents were collectors and buyers. His grandmother loved and collected 18th and 19th century Dresden china, as well as antique jewelry. His grandfather was a watchmaker.

At one time they operated an antique store where the Glenbow

Museum now stands in Calgary.

His parents owned and operated auction businesses in Lethbridge and Calgary. Smithens himself launched Smithens Antiques and Fine Art in Calgary, and while doing that he supplied period merchandise for movies and television series shot in southern Alberta, including *Legends of the Fall*, *Unforgiven*, *Open Range* and *Lonesome Dove*.

He left that business in 2008, and in 2010 he was contacted by a Toronto media company about a show based on *American Pickers*. He and Cozens, who is a lawyer and fervent garage sale and antique seeker, were chosen as hosts.

"I don't think I ever had so much fun as being on the road with what I call the circus," Smithens said.

"It was Animal House on wheels."

Among the weirdest purchases made during the show's run was a trepanning kit from the 19th century.

"It would actually bore a hole in your brain if you were having psychological problems," he said.

"We bought that in Ontario and sold it at auction. It sold exceptionally well, one of those strange things that two or three bidders just had to have."

He also has fond memories of possibly discovering the bell from the train that killed circus elephant Jumbo in St. Thomas, Ont., in 1885.

The word is "possibly" because Smithens and Cozens were unable to definitively prove it was the bell in question.

The wild and the weird are nevertheless not his primary goals when buying.

"I like things that are historically significant, especially when it comes to the Prairies," he said.

"I'm pretty well entrenched in Western Canada, so that's my personal interest, Canadian history."

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