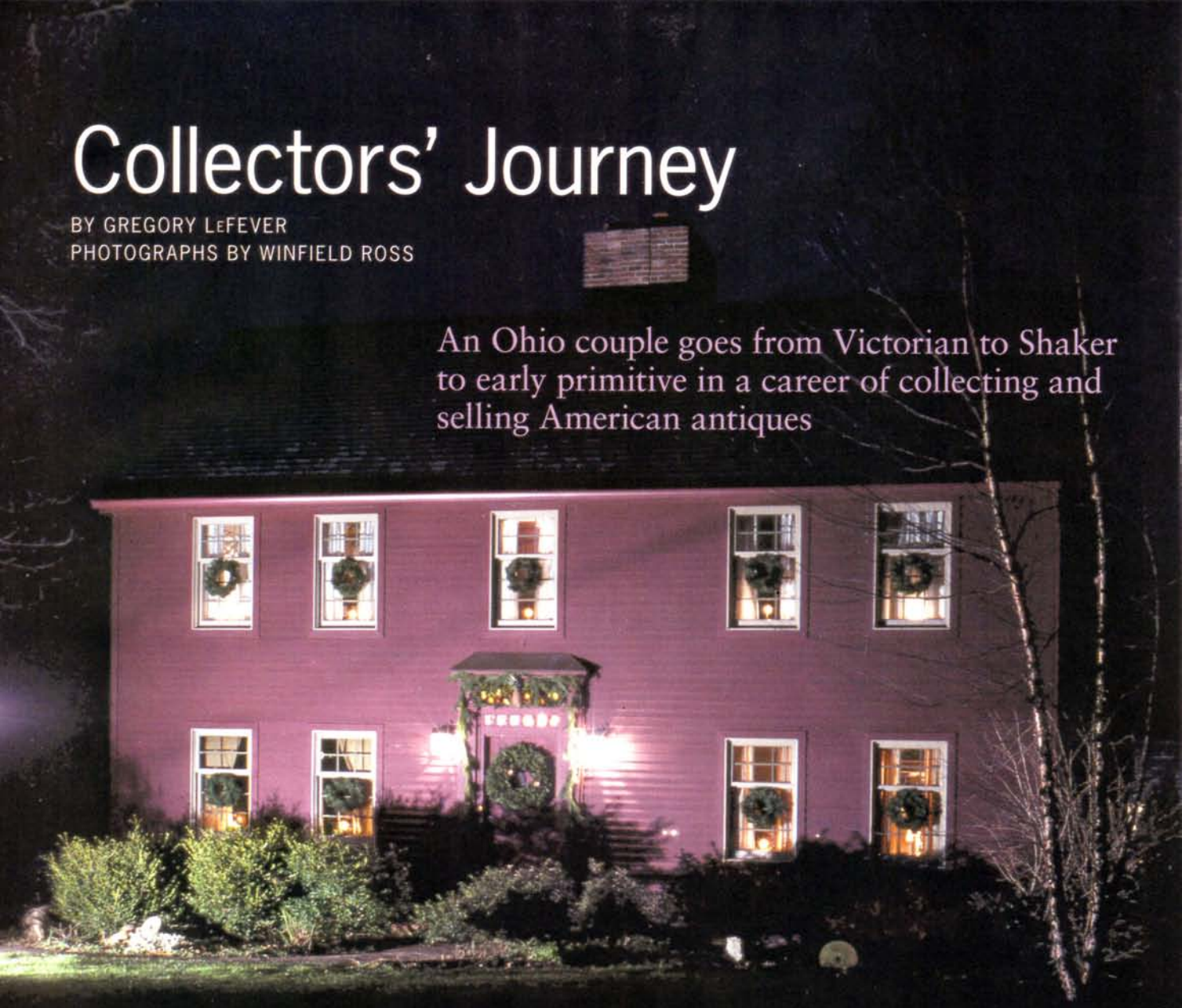
Collectors' Journey

BY GREGORY LEFEVER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WINFIELD ROSS

An Ohio couple goes from Victorian to Shaker to early primitive in a career of collecting and selling American antiques



Missing among the maladies listed in medical literature is early American antiques collecting. Be alert. This disease can get in the blood and stay a lifetime. It can steadily progress from a simple passion into a full-fledged obsession.

The "bug," as those with the lifelong affliction affectionately call it, can strike an unsuspecting person at an antiques mall, show, flea market, estate sale, or auction. A particular piece catches your eye and you buy it—whether you can afford it is irrelevant—and suddenly you're a collector. Even your first purchase can addict you. Then your very peace of mind depends on finding other elusive items for your collection. You do whatever it takes to possess them, even if it means selling another treasured piece you now consider less vital. Suddenly you're trafficking in antiques. You've become a dealer.

Ask Jack and Betty Rhodus of Lebanon, Ohio. That's how they got started. In forty years of collecting and selling early American antiques, their instincts, keen eyes, and fortuitous timing have filled their home with a treasure trove of rare American furniture and earned the couple a reputation as respected dealers of early, primitive American furniture.

The keeping room is resplendent with several of the Rhoduses' most treasured pieces. The c. 1825 Connecticut River Valley chair-table, with early green paint over original red, is flanked by a collection of New England banister-back chairs dating from the 1740s. Behind the table is a large c. 1810 pewter dresser in original dry gray paint, from a Cape Cod house that was being torn down. It holds Betty's prized treen collection. At right is a primitive Shenandoah Valley primitive candle stand she believes to be early 19th century. The early-18th-century portrait above the cooking fireplace is from New Hampshire.

As with many of today's veteran collectors and dealers, they began during the American antiques boom of the 1960s with Victorian pieces. By the 1970s, they had moved on to Shaker, then still relatively plentiful and reasonably affordable. As Shaker availability dwindled and prices skyrocketed in the 1980s, the Rhoduses turned to rare, early, original-surface American primitives.

After years of traversing the East, Midwest, and South to purchase and sell pieces in a variety of

The large downstairs living area of the rebuilt 1815 log cabin has an array of prized furniture, including the banister-back chair built by the King family of Deerfield, Massachusetts. The candle stand and step-back cupboard were made in the early 1800s in New Hampshire. An 18th-century Pennsylvania settle is next to a tavern table of the same vintage from New Hampshire. The cabin now houses the Rhoduses' antiques business.

venues, the Rhoduses now surround themselves in their replica 1715 home with keepsake pieces. Behind it a recently reconstructed log cabin serves as the latest iteration in the series of antiques shops the couple has operated over the years.

SMITTEN BY SHAKER

Both Jack and Betty Rhodus are native Kentuckians and direct descendants of the state's early settlers, sharing a deep interest in the region's rich history. During the early years of their marriage, they built a simple brick ranch house in Springdale, a suburb north of Cincinnati. While Jack worked as a manufacturing technician at the Ford Motor Company transmission plant in nearby Sharonville, from which he retired in 2000 after forty-one years, Betty was busy raising four children. Preferring to surround themselves with pieces of history, they stocked their home as best they could with an eclectic mix of antiques from the area, many of them Victorian pieces.

Then a new passion took hold.

"I'd bought a Jacobean-style chair in 1968 in Berea, Kentucky, and went to the library to do some research," Jack recalls. "For some reason, I started reading about the Shakers and found out we had Shaker communities all around us. I thought their furniture was interesting and well made, and that fascinated me. That's how we got hooked on Shaker—accidentally."

Around 1800, the Shakers decided to capitalize on revivals in what was then the West, establishing in 1805 their first western community, known as Union Village, in Lebanon, Ohio, near where the Rhoduses live today.

"They were excellent craftsmen, which is what first attracted me to Shaker pieces," Jack says. "Betty and I became interested in Shaker during the years when the pieces were still pretty available. Just a few years earlier, during the fifties, there had been auctions of Shaker furniture at Union Village where they couldn't give the stuff away."

Even at low prices, collecting Shaker pieces was not easy for a young family of middle-class means. To acquire Shaker, the Rhoduses began shedding their Victorian pieces and became part-time antiques dealers in the process.

Jack tells about one time when he had the chance to buy three Union Village pieces from an elderly couple: a dry sink in blue-gray over a yellow wash, a two-child school desk with bottle legs and a slanted writing surface, and a walnut linen press with a four-panel cherry door and scrolled base.

"They wouldn't sell them separately, only as a package. So I decided to go to my credit union and take out a loan," Jack explains. "It was the only way I could get them. And right after I got the loan and bought the pieces, I started thinking, 'Oh no, what have I done? Maybe I shouldn't have gone into debt for these.' But then we realized you pay a price for the opportunity to acquire these one-of-a-kind items."

The Rhoduses stuck with their search, driving thousands of miles to attend sales and auctions where Shaker pieces were offered. "We picked up a little bit of Shaker here and a little bit there," Betty says.

Over the course of several years, the couple was able to assemble a substantial collection of Shaker ta-

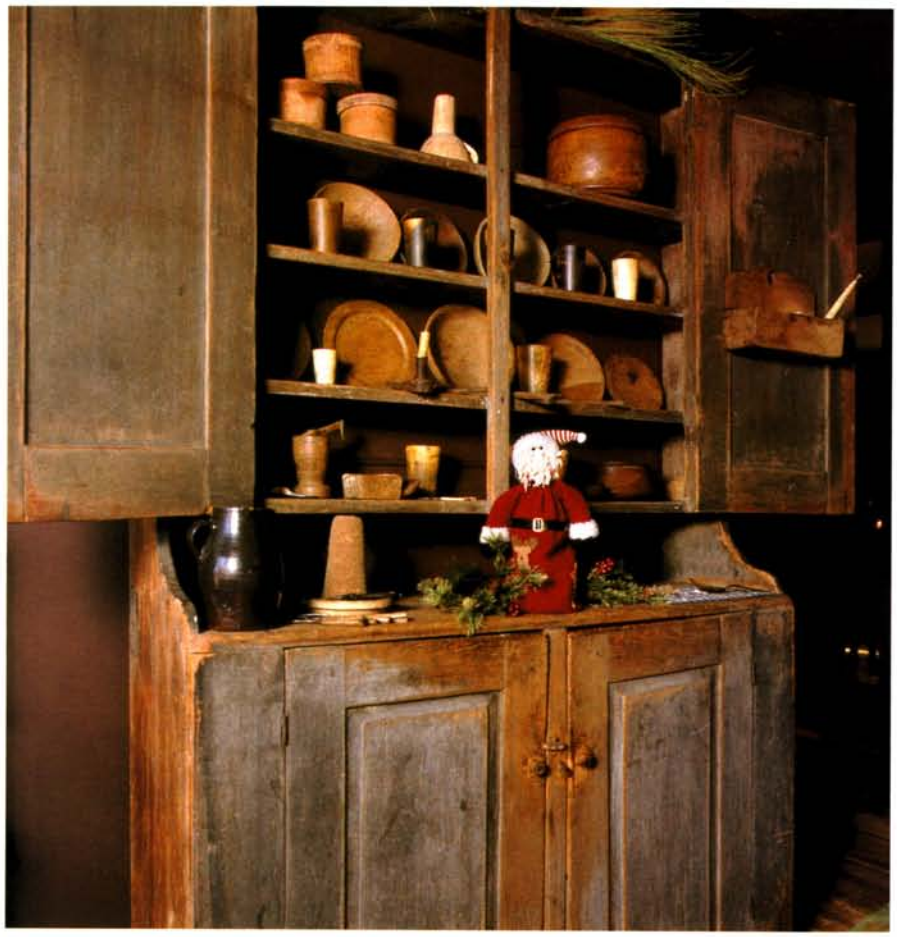
The Rhoduses dine at a c. 1750 stretcher-based worktable from Maine, surrounded by sausage-turned 18th-century chairs from Massachusetts. The late-18th-century step-back cupboard is from New England and is topped with an old hand-carved folk art crow with marble eyes the couple found in Massachusetts. An old rag doll made by an elderly woman in Iowa sits in the splay-legged Windsor youth chair from Kentucky, c. 1820. The old wooden wall box is from Germantown, Ohio.

bles, chests, beds, and other furnishings. Photographs of some of their pieces appeared in books on Shaker furniture, which had by then become a fad in American decorating.

Prices leaped as Shaker became increasingly popular. Within a few years, as the "Shaker look" took hold, most remaining authentic Shaker furniture had been purchased by museums and a close community of affluent collectors. For the Rhoduses and many other lovers of Shaker, the time had come to become even more aggressive in collecting Shaker or move on to something else.

THE ALLURE OF THE PRIMITIVE

"When we were collecting Shaker, we'd travel to New England and hit all of the Shaker auctions," Betty says. "That's when we found ourselves attracted to the early, more primitive New England furniture, especially from the 1700s." The



The pewter dresser in the Rhoduses' keeping room is c. 1810, from a home that was demolished in Cape Cod. Still in its original dry gray paint, the piece today holds Betty's prized collection of treen.

This country Queen Anne high chest holds some of the Rhoduses' bandbox collection: the large one made in 1831 in Portland, Maine, as indicated by newspaper used as its lining; the middle one with a hunting scene, c. 1830 from Kentucky; the small 1842 one on top from Maine. On the floor are an 1843 bandbox from New Hampshire and a small 1841 one lined with a copy of the *Windsor* (Vermont) *Chronicle*. All wall and woodwork colors in the Rhodus home are custom-mixed from Benjamin Moore paints.

timing was excellent for selling off their Shaker collection and acquiring the older New England pieces.

"We sold our Shaker collection privately," Jack says, "with most of it going to other collectors and to the museums."

The Rhoduses found a new affection for early pieces that fell under the wide umbrella of early American primitives, especially the tables, chests, chairs, and cupboards with their original paint genuinely distressed by centuries of everyday use. "We began collecting the eighteenth-century rural country pieces with their original surfaces," Betty says. "We've always—even going back to the Victorian pieces—always dealt in pieces with their original surfaces."

Today the Rhoduses pride themselves on having an impressive selection of tables, chairs, and cupboards—as well as extensive collections of early bandboxes, firkins, rag dolls, stoneware, and paintings—in the old reds, blues, greens, grays, and browns so sought after by collectors of early American furnishings.

Acquiring them has been an adventure for the Rhoduses. Jack recalls a trip where they stopped at the home of a dealer friend on the way to a New England show and spotted a rare red-and-green Connecticut River Valley chair-table in the woman's kitchen.

"We were immediately in love with the table and I asked her if she'd be willing to sell it," Jack relates. "Well, she gave me a price that was two-thirds of the total we'd planned to spend. We still went to the show but couldn't enjoy it—all I thought about was, where would we ever find another table like that? We knew we just had to have it."

So they left the show nearly empty-handed—but with their funds intact—hurrying back to the

This living room has a c. 1725 banister-back chair with bulbous rung-turnings, from Maine, and a c. 1750 tavern table from New Hampshire, with breadboard ends on the top and original green paint. The couple found the unsigned 18th-century portrait in New Hampshire, the wooden wall box in Maine. The Chippendale couch is new.

friend's home to buy the circa 1825 table, which now sets prominently in the keeping room of their home.

Betty tells another die-hard collector story concerning a primitive candle stand from the Shenandoah Valley. As dealers at Nashville's Music Valley Show one year, Jack and Betty spotted the candle stand at another dealer's booth on the first day of the show. They bought it, took it back to their hotel room for the night, then sold it in their own booth the next day for a good profit.

"The trouble was, I'd fallen in love with that little candle stand when we had it in our room," Betty says. "I'd become attached to it, and when we sold it, I felt terrible."

Jack tracked down the woman who'd bought the candle stand and offered to buy it back from her, but the woman refused. After considerable haggling (Jack finally offered

The couple rebuilt the original fireplace from the 1815 cabin stone by stone.

the woman more money than he's comfortable confessing to) Betty got back her candle stand, which to this day also has a place of honor in the couple's keeping room.

"Sometimes you get so attached to these things," she says. "It's like that little candle stand spoke to me and I just couldn't bear to part with it."

EVOLVING HABITATS

As the Rhoduses acquired early primitive pieces, they tired of the brick ranch and began scouting for an old house to restore, one more befitting their antiques, interests, and Jack's handyman aptitude for restoration. Finally they found a gem, an 1823 Federal house in Mason, Ohio, northeast of Cincinnati. Peter Tetrick, a Revolutionary War veteran with a land grant, built it and became the first white landowner in what is now populous Deerfield Township.

Jack and Betty restored the Federal farmhouse and enjoyed the bucolic countryside for nearly a dozen years. But when Proctor & Gamble build a new laboratory near the house, the rural ambiance disappeared. "It was farmland when we moved there, but by the time we left, everything was different," Betty says. "The traffic became unbearable, and even the place where I used to go fishing became a strip mall."

They sold the farmhouse and, in 1994, began construction of a new "old" house. They acquired plans from architect Russell Swinton Oatman for a replica saltbox based on the 1715 Richard Dole-Little house in Newbury, Massachusetts. (See floor plans on page 38.)

After they had purchased a sizable residential lot in a housing development in the rolling farmlands north of Lebanon, they ran into both lot restrictions and conflicts with Ohio's building codes. The original plans for the seventeenth-century saltbox measured 1,960 square feet, but the development's minimum was 3,000 square feet. Somehow they had to increase floor space by more than 1,000 square feet without damaging the home's historical integrity.

"Russell worked with us every step of the way to modify the plans to meet the specifications," Jack recalls. The addition of a buttery, which became one the Rhoduses' favorite rooms, and a bonus room over the garage filled the space. "I needed a bigger house when I had four kids," Betty says, laughing. "Not now."

The chimney posed another problem. The plans for the original house had a flue juncture to accommodate a beehive oven in the keeping room's fireplace and flues for fireplaces in the dining room and living room. But Ohio fire code prohibited a shared chimney within the space confines of the floor plan. Something had to give—the beehive oven. "The beehive oven was one of my favorite things in the house," Betty says. "When I realized we weren't going to have it, I admit I just

A c. 1830 Luman Watson tallcase clock from Cincinnati dominates one wall of the dining room. Next to it is a mid-1700s great chair from Massachusetts and an early Ohio candle stand. An old rag doll made by an elderly woman in Iowa sits in the splay-legged Windsor youth chair from Kentucky.

The buttery is a variance from the original floor plan of the replica Dole-Little house, added to help meet square-footage requirements of the development in which the Rhoduses live. Jack designed and built the room and shelves, which hold several pieces of Jack's stoneware crocks from early Cincinnati merchants, an extensive collection of firkins, and an early blue grain measurer and herb grinder. Betty made the curtain from a homespun towel. They found the vacant hornets' nest in Indiana.

went out in the driveway and cried."

Today the somewhat altered replica house is a stately though somewhat anachronistic presence among the contemporary homes that dot the countryside around it. The reconstructed log cabin behind the house heightens the glimpse-of-the-past effect, as does the large backyard woods the Rhodus grandchildren refer to as "wild America."

Archibald Thompson built the cabin in Pendleton County, Kentucky, in 1815. By the time the Rhoduses learned of it through a log-cabin broker from Lexington, Kentucky, it was in serious disrepair.

"My mother, who's ninety-five, was raised in a log house in Kentucky and I've wanted one since we were married," Betty says. She got her wish,

The master bedroom has a reproduction pencil-post bed with French toile bed hangings. The small table at right is an 1845 piece with Hepplewhite lines built by Henry Spainhower of Paint Lick, Kentucky. The paint-decorated game table at the foot of the bed, c. 1850, is from Maine.

but now—after fifteen months of tedious work—Jack rolls his eyes with one of those "never again" looks.

A Kentucky crew dismantled the cabin and hauled it a hundred miles to Lebanon in 2003. Everything from the roof and floors to the fireplace and chimney plus all interior work fell to Jack and Betty to finish. "They put the logs up, and it was our baby from then on," Jack says.

Although most of the wide-plank flooring in their main house is from Carlisle Wide Plank Floors of Stoddard, New Hampshire, the cabin uses wide poplar planks. Jack arranged their milling with a sawmill in Georgia and now runs his own business selling wide-plank flooring.

"People don't realize how much work these cabins are," Betty says. Family members helped in the reconstruction, especially the laborious chinking, which took the better part of a summer. One stretch of chinking on the back of the cabin has small signature handprints of several of the couple's thirteen grandchildren, who filled the spaces between the logs.

The completed cabin now houses the Rhoduses' antique business, called Plain & Simple Log House Antiques.

HISTORY REPEATING

Jack and Betty now sense that the early American antiques business is going through another major change. Early primitive pieces are following the trend of Shaker furniture in the 1980s—the numbers have shrunk and the prices have risen dramatically because of their rise in popularity over the last several years.

And something even more unsettling is happening to dealers in the Midwest. Betty remembers when a dozen or so years ago a prospective dealer had to wait in line to get a shop or mall space in the region's antiques-rich towns while dealers from points west blocked the streets with their trucks loading up their finds.

"It's all changing," she says. "Now those dealers are skipping the Midwest and going straight to the East to try to find the few pieces that are left. And more and more of the antiques shops are closing."

Certainly eBay also has affected antiques shops. A growing number of dealers are now joining rather than trying to beat the online trend. Moreover, today's younger generation usually has little time, money, or inclination to afford the good early pieces.

"But you know," Betty says, "when we were young, we had to cut corners to get the pieces we

The 1840 arrow-back rocker in the back bedroom still wears its original red paint. Hanging from the Shaker-style pegboard are an 1830s calico dress with chintz lining and an 1839 show towel with the initials "JR." The Shaker-style straw hat on the press bed is a reproduction.

One of Betty's favorite pieces is this two-piece 1840 apothecary from a doctor's office in Fall River, Massachusetts. Its original red paint, drawers, and casing are in immaculate condition. The chair is a c. 1740 New England banister back.

The back bedroom, which Betty calls the "grandbaby room," has a folding 18th-century press bed in early red from New England. Beneath it is a trundle bed in its original green paint, with wooden rollers to ease its movement. The blue bed quilt is linsey-woolsey. The trundle bed is covered with a loom-made, two-part wool blanket.

wanted. I think it's always been that way with antiques. If you want these wonderful pieces, you just do what you have to do to get them. You make your sacrifices. And, I'll tell you, it's worth it." ✻

Gregory LeFever is contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

SOURCES

Jack and Betty Rhodus
Plain & Simple Log House Antiques
4634 Handyway
Lebanon, OH 45036
513.932.9282

Carlisle Wide Plank Floors
1676 Route 9
Stoddard, NH 03464
800.595.9663
www.wideplankflooring.com