

Seeing Old Things Anew

MOVING FROM A LARGE HOUSE IN RURAL MISSOURI TO A SMALL, HISTORIC HOUSE IN ST. LOUIS HAS PROMPTED VERNON REEVES TO DISCOVER NEW, CREATIVE DIRECTIONS IN HIS COLLECTING.

By Gregory LeFever

Photographs by Jill Peterson



Since the age of ten, Vernon Reeves has surrounded himself with antiques – from rare New England pieces to pioneer make-do furniture and hundreds of “smalls” in between. He’s sifted through more boxes in more antique shops than most people ever dream of, and has traveled thousands of miles to countless flea markets, yard and estate sales.

Growing up in Missouri, he’d long felt the lure of St. Louis, and while still in his early thirties bought a small house there in 1995 that he quickly filled with vintage treasures. He stayed 10 years and then moved south of the city to a rural wooded hillside where he built a house nearly four times as large – part new, part 1840s



log cabin. Again, he filled every room with an extraordinary array of antique furniture and collectibles he'd gathered over the years.

Vernon stayed in his house in the woods near High Ridge, Missouri, for four years and in 2009 moved back to St. Louis. "I'd always wanted a federal house," he says of his charming 1870 brick federal in the Marine Villa neighborhood, just a few blocks from the Mississippi River. "Living in the country was nice and peaceful, but the downside was that I like to be around different places, different people, and even different ethnic restaurants. In the city, there's just more going on."

There was only one problem: this latest house is 1,100 square feet – less than a third the size of the High Ridge house. "I knew there were certain items I wanted to keep, but this house is much smaller, so I sold the majority of my things," he says.

Parting with such an extensive array of rare original-surface cupboards, chests, tables, chairs, and rope beds would throw many collectors into despair. But Vernon saw it as an opportunity.

"Having a smaller space sets limits on what you can use and how you use it," he explains. "It also encourages you to use your imagination more – you see something and begin thinking of different ways you could use it, what other functions it could have in your home."

Vernon is living proof of that philosophy.



Previous page, top: The front door to Vernon's 1870s "sidewinder" house is located on the side of the narrow house.

Previous page, bottom: The living room features a mantel Vernon acquired on Cherokee Street and a make-do mirror he built from a discarded Victorian window facing he found lying in a back yard while "alley shopping." When he asked the owner what he was going to do with it, the man gladly gave it to Vernon. The large cupboard is from Alton, Missouri, and has its original buttermilk paint, while the attic-finish table is from St. Mary's, Missouri. The cupboard next to the fireplace belonged to Vernon's grandmother and, the lamb statue is a gift from a friend. The armchairs are a St. Louis thrift-store find.



This page, top and bottom: This large step-back cupboard is an early Illinois piece and holds a selection of leather-bound books, two large barn pullies and old tools. The apothecary still has its early Windsor-green paint, and the footstool supports a collection of port glasses.



Left: Vernon rescued the long cupboard from the basement of an old warehouse near the Mississippi River. It had suffered fire damage and he restored it so it could sit next to the home's front entry. It now displays two early boxes, pewter plates, and a group of green bottles. The early wooden trencher holds several large balls of string.

Above: The home's main entrance is on the side of the house and opens into the living room, which is located in the mid-section of the house, while the master bedroom faces the street. The layout is typical of "side-winder" houses.

Dramatic Downsizing

Vernon conducted his first yard sale at age eleven. The fact is, if he didn't enjoy searching for vintage items and then selling them so he could hunt for more, he probably wouldn't have been psychologically capable of making the drastic shifts in house sizes he's accomplished in the past eight years.

He bought a small house in St. Clair, Missouri, and in 1995 was able to move into St. Louis when he found his 1929 Cape in the city's Harlem Heights neighborhood. But after living in that 1,000-square-foot house a decade, he needed something larger. So when his friend Joan Lucas arranged for him in 2005 to acquire the 1840s two-story log cabin in Beaufort, Missouri – free, on the condition that he haul it away – he jumped at the chance.

Vernon purchased several acres on a wooded hillside in High Ridge near Joan's house and designed a new home that would accommodate his vintage furniture and collections. It blended new construction with portions of the old cabin to provide a dramatic showcase for his 18th and 19th century antiques. Forests of maple, hickory, and dogwood surrounded the 3,700-square-foot house, while inside, the combination of chinked log walls, new white walls, and pine flooring created a deep sense of serenity.

Maybe too serene. After four years, a number of factors – missing the bustle of city life, a job change, and seeking a less-expensive lifestyle – drew him once again to St. Louis, where he found the brick Federal on Chippewa Street. He bought it in April of 2009 and turned his attention to selling the house in High Ridge.

The early primitive furniture that filled room after room of the High Ridge house didn't last long. "A number of friends who are dealers had said, 'If you ever want to sell this piece or that piece, just let me know,'" Vernon explains. "So I'd kept that information in a log book, and when the time came, I called them. Almost everything I'd hoped to sell was gone in two weeks."

In the Spirit of 'Make-Do'

Sitting on a narrow, 20-by-150-foot lot typical of the Marine Villa neighborhood, Vernon's house is just 15 feet wide. Most of the interior is on the main floor, and a single room upstairs forms a partial second floor.

"The house is called a sidewinder," he explains. "It has a wall facing the street, but the main entry is on the side of the house."



Left: A friend gave Vernon the lamb statue in commemoration of his return to St. Louis when he purchased his home in 2005. It has the place of honor on a cupboard that belonged to Vernon's grandmother.

Below: The bucket bench by the living room window is an early Missouri piece in early green paint, while the two firkins and wooden box have their pale buttermilk paint, similar to the color of the large cupboard. The table is one of Vernon's favorites due to its superb attic finish. The portrait in the background is an artist's copy of an early one. "Everyone says it's a portrait of me," Vernon laughs.





Above: The dining area features several mid-1800s pieces, including a narrow early table and corner cupboard from Illinois, a rustic bench from Ohio, and large hutch from Missouri. Next to the hutch is an early bead-board grain bin with a hide-covered trunk sitting on it.

Top right: The early Illinois corner cupboard displays a selection of worn leather-bound books and a number of Vernon's "smalls," including some of the putz animals a friendly St. Louis antiques dealer gave him when he discovered them in an old box.

Right: An early red buttocks basket from Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, sits on the dining room table, with an old wood box containing stone apples.

He says the house sat vacant for five months before he bought it. "All of the copper plumbing had been stolen, along with the air-conditioning compressor unit and all of the copper parts from the furnace," he says. "And when they cut the plumbing, they didn't shut off the water. There were four feet of water in there before anybody discovered it."

He and a contractor worked a month to replace the plumbing, heating and air-conditioning systems, and to upgrade the electricity. The previous owners had refurbished parts of the house, most of the work satisfactory to Vernon. "The main living area had nice new white paint," he says. "The floors throughout the first floor are ceramic tile, which is not my perfect choice, but they seem to work with everything. The upstairs still has its original wood-plank flooring."



“But the kitchen was pretty sad,” he continues. “There was an old metal sink, an old stove and old refrigerator still there. There was tile with pictures of fruit and cornucopias part way up the walls, and that had to go.”

In his teens, Vernon had become handy at refurbishing damaged antiques, and has applied his skills to creating make-dos that would make any pioneer proud. The kitchen is a good example of his ability to see new functions for found objects.

In it, he ingeniously has turned a discarded black ceramic laboratory sink he discovered in a salvage yard into an attractive farm-style kitchen sink. Likewise, he cleverly has taken an old lab table from a St. Louis high school and replaced its ruined top with large concrete paving stones to create a unique work island that’s both functional and stylish.

He also has replaced the kitchen wall tiles with white bead board, creating a more

Top: The gray apothecary hanging on the wall is actually an early make-do item Vernon found. Its drawers are made from old cheese boxes and the knobs are sewing thread spools.

Left: The hanging cupboard with the cubbyholes is from an old hotel in Jerseyville, Illinois, and now holds balls of string of varied types and sizes. The massive mortar and pestle is an early Indiana piece for grinding corn into meal.

Above: The early Missouri hutch displays a number of treen plates, wire baskets, and some of Vernon’s ironstone he’s gathered in St. Louis antique shops.



Above: The large island in the kitchen is an old lab counter from a St. Louis high school. Vernon replaced its worn-out top with concrete paving stones for a work surface. The chimney cupboard is a mid-1800s piece from Farmington, Missouri. The Windsor chair in the background is a late 1700s, high comb-back from Rhode Island.



Left: The kitchen has plenty of sunlight, enhanced by the wood-bead wainscoting Vernon installed to replace tiled walls. The hanging shelf displays some of his ironstone pitcher collection.



Below: Vernon ingeniously fashioned this black ceramic farm-style kitchen sink from a laboratory sink he found in a salvage yard.

suitable backdrop for his several vintage kitchen cupboards, including a former restaurant servers' station with its many drawers for holding linens, silverware, bread loaves, and a water pitcher. Similarly, in the living room stands a well-worn cupboard that he hauled from the basement of an old warehouse near the Mississippi. Part of the cupboard was fire-damaged, so he sawed off the charred end and reworked the rest into a striking piece that now stands near the front door.

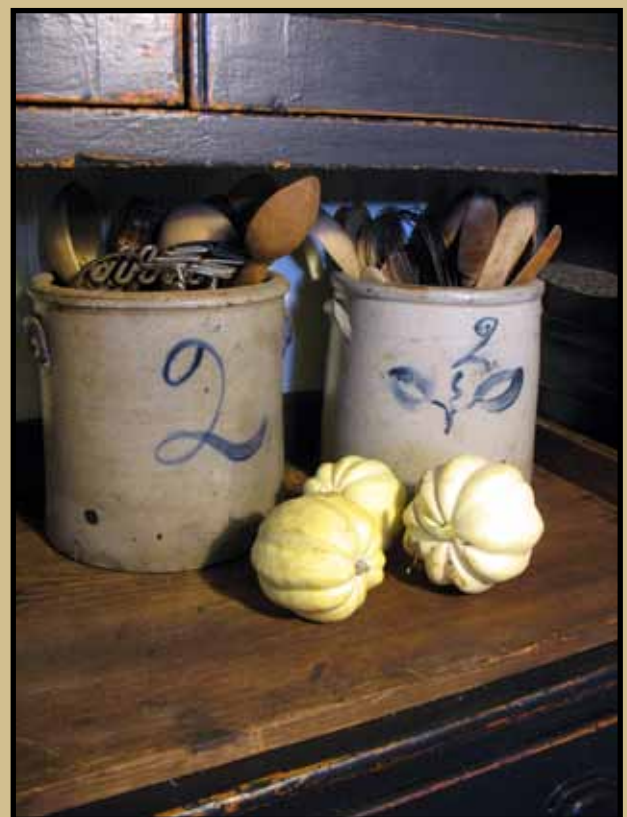
His creativity has also found expression in wall treatments. Through the years, Vernon has enjoyed neutral shades of white on the walls of his houses, but he departed in the master bedroom of this house, where he rag-painted the walls to create a subdued and mildly distressed look. He used a beige base, then ragged on some dark brown and covered it with a wash of pale gray to achieve the attractive mottled effect.

Selective Collecting

Antiques dealers across the Midwest and into New England have known Vernon for years, many welcoming his periodic prowls through their shops, where he loves to dig into dusty boxes and keep a lookout for well-worn primitive furniture with great patina. He still favors attic finish – “where the finish is dry and

Below left: The long cupboard in the kitchen originally was a server's station in an old restaurant, designed to accommodate the needs of diners. One drawer is lined with tin for bread, and another is to hold pitchers of water. Other drawers are for silverware, serving utensils, and linen. The top displays various wooden boxes and early jars, while beneath it rests a wooden water keg on top of an early wooden trunk.

Below right: A couple of Vernon's #2 crocks hold wooden kitchen utensils. The crock on the left is an early St. Louis find, while the other one was rolling around in the car trunk of the mother of one of Vernon's friends from Decatur, Illinois, years ago. "I asked her about it," Vernon recalls, "and she said, 'You want that old thing?' And I said sure!"





Top: The master bedroom is actually the one room that faces the street in Vernon's "side-winder" house. The bed is a four-poster from the 1920s "with a great look and great finish." An early sawbuck table is beneath the window. The Windsor chair is a reproduction.

Above: A wooden document box from the late 1700s sits on the bedroom's wooden trunk, along with a number of battered leather-bound books and a hog-scraper candlestick. The early glasses on top of the books have tin frames and are in their case also made of tin.

Right: The tall cupboard is an early Illinois piece made of walnut. Its body has an attic-finish patina and the doors are decorated with gray milk paint. On top of it are a wooden trunk, a black leather trunk, and a hide-covered trunk. Next to the walnut cupboard is a German immigrant's wooden trunk with old hardware and rope handles. The name "J.H. Fahrenberg" is stenciled on its front.





Both photos are of the only room on the second floor. At left are an early 1800s bannister-back chair from Illinois and a small table from St. Louis. At right, the chairs are late 1700s New England pieces. Vernon found the little hanging cupboard at a local yard sale, and he recovered the large cupboard from the alley near his house.

crazed like it's been sitting for years in the heat and dust of an attic or barn" – and pieces still displaying their early original paint. "But these days, I'm not buying so much furniture and bigger items," he says. "Now I'm finding more smalls."

Close to home, Vernon is a familiar figure along St. Louis's renowned Cherokee Street Antiques Row and in many other shops where he counts the dealers among his friends. For example, a cupboard in his dining room holds a collection of German putz animal figures from a shop on Meramec Street. "I'd take pieces that I no longer wanted into the shop and donate the stuff to the owners because they're really great people," he explains. "One day I was there and found this box full of these little animals. They wouldn't let me pay for any of them, but just gave me the whole box of them, which I thought was great."

"I really enjoy having this many shops nearby," he adds. "I find that I go more often, which means creating closer friendships with the shop owners, and that means they know better what I'm looking for. It's a good rapport."

In his urban surroundings, he's expanded his searches to include charity thrift shops, salvage yards, and even "alley shopping" in the lanes crisscrossing older St. Louis neighborhoods. For example, the mirror above the mantel in his living room was once a piece of exterior trim for a round window on a Victorian home.



Left: Vernon has developed several garden areas behind his house, this one featuring a stone birdbath he found in Illinois. The hedge is boxwood, and the plants include lavender and an ornamental kale.

Below: Henny Penny is a Rhode Island Red hen. She's one of two hens Vernon keeps in a backyard coop, the other is Little Edie.

Below left: A weathered wooden bench sets up this vignette in the back yard.



I was alley shopping in the Benton Park neighborhood and I spotted this old window piece in a guy's backyard," he recalls. "I figured he was going to throw it away so I went back a few weeks later and it was still lying there. This time the guy was there so I asked him what he was going to do with it and he said, 'Here, you can have it.' I said thank you." He repaired the weathered frame and put mirror glass in it to create a unique and striking focal point for the room.

"I guess I've become a lot more relaxed about using different things in different ways," he says.

And the little sidwinder on Chippewa Street is a fine display of Vernon's ingenuity."



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Top: Vernon has divided his back yard into several small garden areas, including vegetables, herbs and ornamental plants.

Above: Brit is a Brittany Spaniel that Vernon rescued while living in High Ridge.

Above right: Two white pumpkins enjoy the afternoon sun near the sundial in Vernon's back yard.