



Ruth Rasmussen of Traer holds an antique car and gas pump, just two of the salt and pepper shaker sets from her collection of more than 12,000.

RAMBLIN' WITH RASDAL

Salt and pepper, anyone?

TRAER — If antique collectors are the salt of the earth then salt and pepper shaker collectors must be the pepper.

"Ahhh chuuuu."

"Gesundheit," says Ruth Rasmussen, a 59-year-old fireball from Traer who has collected shaker sets for nearly four decades.

The sign in her front yard invites anyone in to see her collection, proclaiming that she has 10,000 sets. The sign is a few years old; she now has 12,470 pairs of salt and pepper shakers, give or take one or two.

"I don't know how much money I've got invested," Ruth said, pulling the padlock off the door of an old mobile home annex out back converted to a salt and pepper shaker shed. "If I didn't do this, I wouldn't have the money anyway."

There is no admission charge. You just have to be lucky enough to find her at home, instead of sacking groceries at the local Jack and Jill.

Ruth has never spent more than \$10 for a pair, she doesn't believe in expensive antiques. And most of the valuable shakers, the ones that were passed on as heirlooms, are safely tucked behind the glass of a china cabinet in her home.

But there, in this "shanty" as she calls it, are rows and rows of ceramic fish, pigs, cows, dogs, cats, giraffes, ears of corn, tomatoes and human feet. To walk inside is to surround yourself with a menagerie of animals and the pages of history. All 50 of the United States and their symbols are here, the potato for Idaho, Hiawatha's boat for Minnesota, corn for Iowa. They are flanked by shakers of every president of our country. And this is less than half her collection.

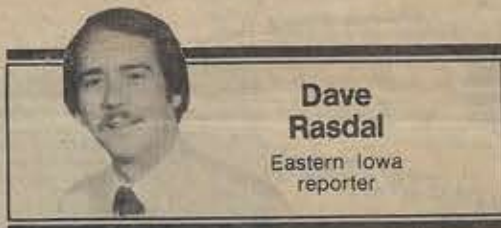
In an old milk shed next door are the rest: antique automobiles and gas pumps, silver-like service sets, toilets with lids that lift, Harvestore silos, a nude Adam and Eve, the Pillsbury Dough Boy . . .

As you walk past the rows, from floor to ceiling, you circle around to where you started. But you hardly notice. There are so many new ones to see the second time around. And the third time.

"I just wanted them all," Ruth said, scurrying around to make sure you don't miss the highlights of her collection. "In 1946 I went to the zoo and picked up a pair and that's what started it all. I never dreamt this would happen or I'd have never started."

That was the zoo in Brookfield, Ill. And they are just plain, ordinary aluminum souvenir shakers. Quite a contrast from the shiny silver pair commemorating the Royal Wedding of Charlie and Di.

"I've got them insured," she said, as I dropped a



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plastic gas pump back into place. "But you'd never get them replaced. I'd get the money, but what good is the money."

"Would she sell them?" I asked.

"No," Ruth said emphatically shaking her head. "No. Somebody came in and wanted one of these greens ones. They had dishes to match. But I told them 'No way.'"

"Somebody wanted some little beer bottles. No. Why should they have them. They were mine first," she said, grinning.

"People ask me what I'm going to do with them when I die. I tell them I'm going to crush them all up and crash them on the tombstone."

Then she thought a moment. "No, they'll probably sell them and somebody will get rich."

What they'd also get is a filing system. Each shaker is numbered and its historical facts are engraved on recipe cards. The collection isn't growing so fast any more. For one thing, Ruth doesn't buy any one elses collection. And for another, she just buys the ones she really wants.

"I'm still looking for my Little Brown Church, together. It's two pieces that fit together. I know two collectors who have 'em but they're just like me. When people went up there (to Nashua) and got married they used to give them to 'em.

"I don't have favorites. There're just too many."

If she is forced to make a choice, she points to a pair of cats sunning themselves beside intricate blue and purple flowers. She can also show you some shakers so small a grain of salt probably wouldn't fit inside.

The collection is exquisite. But the idea, and I can't get it out of my head, is to use these contraptions to salt and pepper my eggs in the morning.

"Just plain little white ones like these," she said, pulling a pair of ordinary 1950s style prism glass shakers from the wall. "That's what we have on our table. The salt comes out better."