



COLLECTOR AND HIS COLLECTION—S. P. Stevens, 239 Windsor Dr., holds up an early American rifle, one of several hundred he owns. Revolutionary period guns and powder kegs hanging on the wall of his den are part of Stevens' collection of more than 2,000 early American and early Texas items.—Staff Photo.

Old Kentucky Rifle Sparks An Interest in Collecting

By SYLVIA SPRINGER

When S.P. Stevens was a small boy growing up in Merkel, Tex., somebody gave him an old Kentucky rifle to play with.

That was how he got his start at collecting.

Today, Stevens owns more than 2,000 early American and Texas items that span everything from guns to old Indian flint pieces to Civil War swords and tin-type photographs.

With cowboy spurs, powder kegs that were used in the Revolutionary War, Bowie knives, and rifles of all sizes and shapes propped up against the wall, he has transformed the den of his home at 239 Windsor Dr. into a world that existed hundreds of years ago.

"THIS ISN'T ALL the stuff I've got by any means," Stevens said airily, lighting his pipe. "There's an attic full. Every few weeks I bring out some different guns, knives, or pictures and change things around a bit."

"I also collect early American coins, antique steam engines, and steam-engine operated pop-corn wagons," he continued. "They quit making the pop-corn wagons about the turn of century."

"I've got branding irons, advertisements for gun shops dating back to before the 1900s, plus all kinds of Civil War equipment," Stevens said proudly, reaching for a worn bronze bugle. "Look, here's something they used to play taps with back then."

Tall, with graying hair, and a booming voice, 53-year-old Stevens describes himself as a businessman who has always been interested in "this history of our country."

"YOU HAVE TO KNOW how to trade if you're going to keep your collection going," he said flatly. "I see something I want and I set out to get it."

"Take this Tom Mix hat I bought at the Gun Collector's convention here recently," Stevens stated. "Its original, and it fits me."

"The owner, a man from Eagle Pass, didn't want to sell," he reminisced, "even tried to get away without seeing me, but I cornered him and here it is. I don't go for anything that's not early American or Texas though," he said.

"This is the part of our history that really fascinates me, where men and women lived in action and had to have courage in what they did."

It was 15 years ago that Stevens built his den.

"Women don't get in here very often he said adamantly. "This is a man's room."

"When I fixed this up, that's when my collection really got going," Stevens recalled. "I still have that Kentucky rifle I got when I was a kid."

"IT BEGAN WITH GUNS and branched off into these other things because they're all related to each other in some way," he said. "The Kentucky rifles for example, were used by the frontiersmen and by soldiers in Washington's Revolutionary army. Powder horns were needed at the same time."

"With my civil war stuff, see that original oil painting of Robert E. Lee?" he said, "it goes right along with the water canteens and cannon balls I have."

Where does it all come from? "I get my stuff from three sources," Stevens said, "antique dealers, other collectors, and descendants of the people who owned them."

"At these conventions I run into a lot of things," he said. "Like the time I saw these two civil war pistols owned by one of Lee's generals. It was at a Dallas gun convention and I eventually got them. It turned into me tracing them all the way to the general's great-granddaughter living in Washington, D.C. It was worth it to me to go up there and meet her."

Collecting isn't the only thing that occupies his time.

IN BUSINESS for himself, Stevens operates "Stevens Advertising," which makes outdoor signs, with company crews operating in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

"Being in the sign business makes it perfect for my other hobby, color photography," Stevens stated. "This summer when my wife and 15-year-old son, Larry, went to Europe, I took over 1,000 slides and will blow them up to 16 by 20 inches."

"I do all the developing myself," he said. "This goes back to when I was a

kid too. I always liked to get a camera in my hand and take a few shots."

Along with his photography, Stevens is an amateur artist, painting western scenes, plus portraits of men who lived in that age, and faces of women.

Visitors in his den are apt to see cowboys chasing horses and loading guns, or Indians off to battle, portrayed in vivid color.

"I NEVER TOOK a lesson, but I love to draw," he said thoughtfully. "Sometimes, I'll paint something to change the mood of the room."

"None of these are to sell though," Stevens stated. "It's just my gun and things of that type."

"Sometimes you have to give something away though," he said. "I had this European sword going all the way back to the 18th Century and I let a friend have it. You do this with future trading in mind."

A man who never went further than an eighth grade education and whose son wants to be a chemist, Stevens has made his hobbies into valuable lessons for his life.

"It's given me more appreciation for our country and certainly more knowledge of it," he said. "Everytime I get a new rifle or some other object, I research it right down to its creation. I feel I have to."

"ALL OF THESE rifles and pistols I have are in working order," he said. "My boy and I try them out."

"I'm always in the market for a way to improve my collection," he said. "At some conventions I just go and look and see what they have. If I want to sell anything, then I wait until the big ones."

"Actually anyone can collect guns or anything else for that matter," he said. "To start you should purchase books on collecting which give you the right kind of advice. As far as money's concerned, you know what you can spend and you don't go beyond it."

"I never worry about getting robbed," Stevens said flatly. "What good does it do? And worrying takes all the fun out of it."