

A Closet Collector

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Have you ever wondered about the apparently large number of carnival glass collectors who are not publicly known? Sometimes referred to as 'closet collectors'. Why are they not visible members of clubs attending meetings, conventions, and auctions? What motivates them to collect in solitude? What do they collect? Why not join in and share their glass passion and knowledge with other collectors?

A few years ago I came across one of these collectors through an eBay sale. With a few notes back and forth a visit occurred. This collector had not heard of clubs, had not attended a convention, didn't know of the carnival auctioneers, and had over six hundred pieces of old carnival. Truly amazing. More recently a local collector made contact through the Texas club website wishing to sell over one hundred pieces of old carnival, no knowledge of clubs, auctioneers, etc. And now eBay has led me to a nearby collector with a very large and impressive collection. Truly a closet collector. This closet collector has agreed to share part of his story...

My awareness of this collector started when I noticed an eBay listing that was evidently nearby. After sending a note requesting an opportunity to view the glass listed on eBay a visit was arranged. What a shock when I arrived to find a house full of carnival glass. Carnival in literally every room. Surely more than a thousand pieces. All of the glass is old, pretty, and in great condition. It was a little like walking into a gold mine. For the purposes of this story let's call this collector 'Tom'.



Figure 1 - Aqua Opal Powder Jar

First, like the rest of us, this collector has a starting point. In Tom's case it came in the form of a gift from his mother-in-law. A blue Fenton Orange Tree fruit bowl. Tom received this gift nearly fifteen years ago. It was a time of significant change in his life.

Health issues had recently forced him to stop working. Without work his days were not fulfilling, he needed more to do. The carnival glass gift was something new and different, he knew nothing about this glass. To fill some time he set about educating himself on carnival glass using the internet as a resource. The more research he did, the more interested he became. Like many of us he ended up finding eBay. Hundreds of carnival pieces exchanging hands daily. He thought there might be something to this carnival glass thing, and Tom started looking for more carnival glass. He and his wife searched through antique malls. They bought off of eBay. One of Tom's eBay purchases put him in contact with a collector, Roger Henry in Plant City, Florida. Over time Tom and his wife visited Roger during trips to Florida. Roger shared his carnival knowledge with Tom regarding makers, colors, iridescence, shapes, auctioneers, and so on. Roger became Tom's long distance tutor on carnival glass. Through Roger Tom's admiration of carnival glass grew and grew.

Within a couple years Tom had decided to focus on specific carnival pieces dresser sets. Northwood Grape and Cable became the center of his new carnival glass world. He has spent the last dozen years chasing and collecting dresser set components....and looking through his house you would find him to have been very successful.



Figure 2 - White G&C Dresser Set

Dresser sets are interesting. Long ago auctioneers figured out that complete sets don't draw as much as the sum of the components so pieces are always sold individually. That is exactly how Tom has gathered his dresser set collection. One piece at a time.

It is really not possible to include pictures of all of his sets, but the one picture of the large display case gives you a pretty good feel for his collection. I think he has 34 complete sets together at this time, and could probably put 5 or 6 more sets together. Standard, stippled, banded, banded and stippled ... dresser sets of all colors and variations. In addition to the complete sets a very large number of individual components have been gathered ... hatpin holders, powder jars, cologne bottles, pin trays, dresser trays. Dresser set components are stored everywhere. The fact is ... Tom collects carnival glass dresser sets.

OK, so why dresser sets? Perhaps 40 complete sets with lots and lots of extra components. Again, why dresser sets? Tom answers that question by simply explaining the challenge involved. You buy dresser sets one component at a time. It takes research, time and effort to find the pieces required for a matching set. The different colors, banding, stippling all present a challenge that gave him something to do with his time. And what a job he has done putting sets together. 40 or more sets? Of course some of what he has gathered are rare or at least scarce ... the Ice Blue set, the White set, the Emerald green set, the aqua opal powder jar, some of the custard pieces.



Figure 3 - Ice Blue and Custard G&C Dresser Sets

The quantity of dresser set components is really amazing but along the way Tom has also gathered many other pieces. Water sets, punch sets, fruit bowls, plates, bowls, aqua opals, reds, interesting pieces of all shapes and sizes fill every niche available. Northwood, Fenton, Imperial, Dugan, European ... glass of all sorts just sort of crept in and filled the house while Tom was putting together dresser sets. All this time Tom has never attended an actual carnival glass meeting or sale. Without reservation you can conclude that the local postman knows Tom's address really well.

So the question is ... how did Tom get so deep into carnival glass without ever getting involved in clubs, conventions or auctions? Interesting question, probably best answered by understanding two issues affecting Tom: rather restrictive health and mobility conditions and a natural characteristic of not being particularly social. Together these issues make the privacy of his collecting efforts understandable. But such a large collection and no direct contact with carnival organizations. How is it possible? Simply put, he could not have gathered what he has without the emergence of the internet. With the availability of the internet he linked up to eBay. He searched around and found the major independent sellers, he found Jim Seeck, Jim Wroda, Tom Burns, and other auction or estate sale opportunities. He just could not have gathered the wonderful carnival collection he has without the internet. That's interesting when you think about the many known collectors who stay away from the internet. For Tom the internet was and is his connection to the carnival glass world.

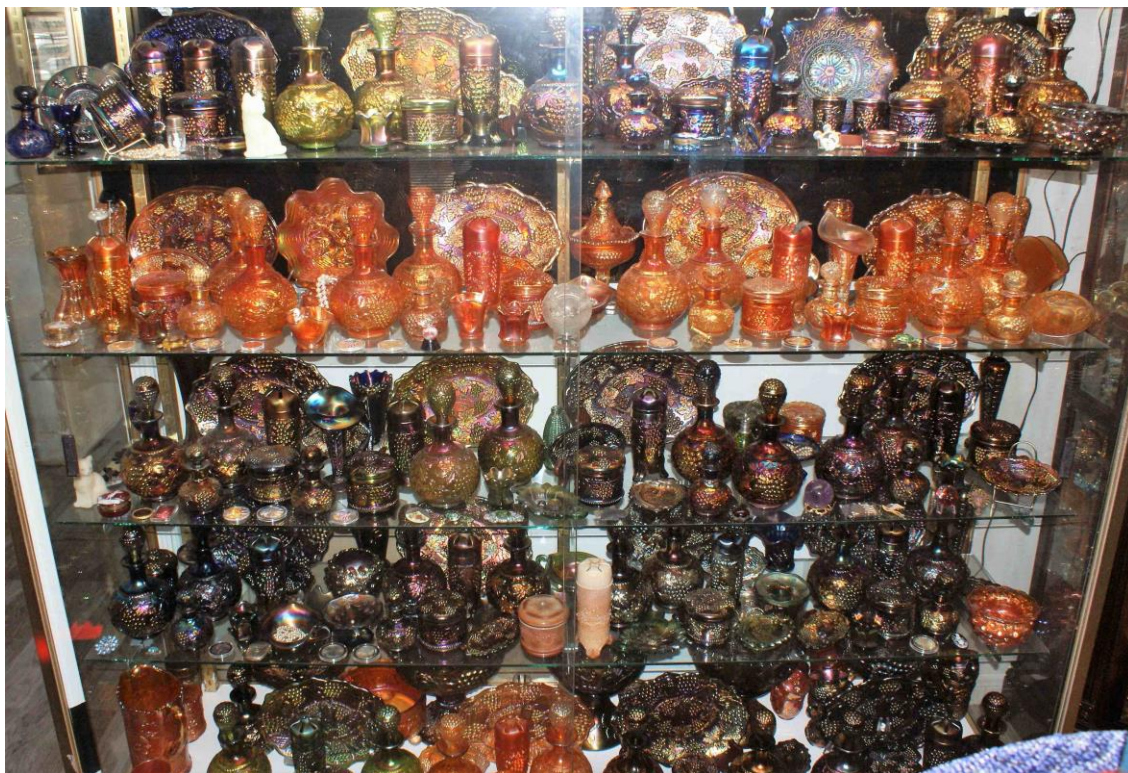


Figure 4 - Many dresser sets and components

Tom has gotten a real sense of satisfaction out of his collecting activity, and like most of us his collecting interests are broader than just carnival glass. With time, effort and persistence he has found and gathered many very scarce pieces. He feels well rewarded for his effort and has not spent much time dwelling on medical issues over which he has no control. When things get bad he turns his attention to his carnival glass, staying busy doing something he likes. If you were visiting with him early any morning you would find him in his glass room having a cup of coffee and getting his day started in the right frame of mind.

Tom now has a house full and has decided it is time to let a few things go. If you watch eBay perhaps you will run across some of Tom's items once in a while under the eBay name 'AUSTEXTOMCAT'. Take a good look at what he has for sale. He won't be giving things away, but you might just find something of interest. Perhaps even a complete dresser set once in a while.

Perhaps this little story gives you some feel for this one closet collector. He's not concerned about security. He's not hiding from anyone. He's not concerned that his glass doesn't measure up. His situation is just not conducive to personal interaction on a large scale. So he collects privately and loves and enjoys his glass just as much as any other carnival collector.

It has been a privilege to visit with Tom and his wife and see their truly remarkable collection. It is my hope that they might find themselves able to attend a convention and auction sometime in the near future. Perhaps the exposure this article provides 'Tom' might be the encouragement needed. With his passion for glass I know it would be a rewarding experience.

Walt Robinson
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