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42,000 Miles a Year on the Antiques Track

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SOMEWHERE on Interstate 75 between Lake City, Fla., and Valdosta, Ga., just past midnight, Jimmy Allen, folk-art scout extraordinaire, pulled into his fifth McDonald's of the day, ordered coffee and a cherry pie, and opened his diary -- a scribbled, somewhat chaotic compendium of unusual Southern antiques and their beguiling owners or makers.

On a desk builder in Sapelo Island, Ga.: "Goes to bed early, as soon as the chickens do."

On an undiscovered folk artist in north Florida: "Worried I was going to copy his work and make a million dollars. Wife left him because he didn't have time for her. He told her she was right."

Mr. Allen, 41, has been a "picker" for 20 years, one of the great no-see-ums of the antiques world, scouring the countryside for rare objects like a vacuum cleaner seeking a dust ball.

Mr. Allen drives roughly 42,000 miles each year, despite a tendency to lose his car keys with some frequency, in his pursuit of forgotten Southern rural material culture -- backcountry quilts, jugs, Civil War-era wedding garments, family albums and, especially, African-American furniture and art, the best of which he sold to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center in Williamsburg, Va.

He has had his driver's license revoked twice -- and counting. To get to a great find, he explained, speeding past a chorus line of billboards, "95 isn't too fast to go."

His destinations are everyday depositories of wonder: the cupboards, smokehouses, porches, attics, gardens, garages and family graveyards, sometimes rattlesnake-infested, that, with luck and cajoling, can yield the stuff of history.

Great objects do not advertise. Mr. Allen has eyes that can size up junk the way bass size up crawfish, looking for "a texture, a glint, something on which to rest my attention." He once discovered a rare 1820's pine Georgian grave marker on a porch in Moreland, Ga., where it had been turned upside down and was being used as a coffee table. ("I was dumbstruck!") It is now in the Atlanta History Center.

The High Museum of Art in Atlanta now proudly displays the 1860 ash-glazed "Alabama" figural jug, a male torso resplendent in earrings and ruffled shirt. Mr. Allen found it by eavesdropping on a conversation at a Waffle House.

After years of peeking under mattresses ("because most quilts in African-American houses are under mattresses"), he has learned the major rules of a picker's life: 1) "Always say you have to go the bathroom" (no one ever

refuses you entry) and 2) There is no such thing as a sweet little old lady.

"Only about one in every 500 objects is interesting," he was saying en route to Macon, Ga., to check out a hall tree, one stop on a two-and-a-half-day, 800-mile picking marathon through Georgia and northern Florida. It was so early in the morning that the flatbed trucks on the interstate were shrouded in mist. "For an object to be beautiful, someone had the intent to make it that way," he continued. "Great objects reaffirm the fact that there were great people. They were just people, but they strove to be more, and that's exhilarating."

Mr. Allen is an anomaly among pickers. The term picker is somewhat pejorative because of its use for Victorian pickers, who scavenged rags or subsisted on pickings from household trash. Pickers have traditionally been the bottom-feeders of the antiques world, "taking things from people, like you were out hunting deer," in Mr. Allen's words.

"When you say picker, connoisseurship is not a word that leaps to mind," said Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, a curator at the National Museum of Art in Washington. She credits Mr. Allen with having helped "legitimize" Southern pottery and objects, including a magnificent African-American button-quilt. "Unlike most pickers, Jimmy's been able to make some extraordinary marriages between the objects he's found and where they best belong," she added.

In Vienna, Ga. -- which he confused with nearby Cordele, driving down Main Street awhile until he realized he was in the wrong town -- Mr. Allen called on Debby Orrick, one of his spies, who reserves the most distinctive and eccentric of her finds for him. He paid \$75 for an African-American 30-star flag quilt top ("as rare as can be"), which he would probably sell to a quilt dealer for \$250, who in turn might resell it to a collector for \$1,000 to \$1,200.

At Newton Couch's warehouse in Griffin, he wielded a flashlight like a crazed arthroscopic surgeon to inspect furniture and African masks. ("You have to look at every piece of furniture for what's wrong -- 90 percent of the time there's plenty.") Mr. Couch led him to a wooden decoy of a flamingo he said was carved in middle Tennessee. "I mean, that was something," Mr. Allen said bemusedly, "telling me a flamingo was from Tennessee!"

The fantasy of the million-dollar find, of never-before-seen objects hoisted on a museum pedestal, contrasts with the monotony and loneliness of the road. Courting an object can take years -- years of hearing "everything's up to my daughter" (the mother) and "everything's up to mama" (the daughter).

"You knock on doors for two days without finding anything and then someone shows you a table with a square nail in it," he said. "That nail is the most beautiful thing in the world. It doesn't mean you should buy the table."

Mr. Allen shuns conventional avenues for dealers. Auctions he dismisses as "theater," and estate sales, he said, are often "salted" with the dealer's own merchandise. His voluminous network of local scouts include postmen (some antiques owners, like Caroline Camp of Decatur, Ga., call him).

But unlike many in his trade, he does not buy aerial maps of a county and systemically go door-knocking. Or answer pennysaver advertisements for used wheelchairs just to get into an elderly person's house. And he said he would never consider a ploy like the one used by a teacher in north Georgia who "draws a picture of a face jug on the blackboard on the first day of school and says, 'I want you to go home and look for this.'"

Among the most significant of Mr. Allen's "pickings" has been the eloquent work of the late Ulysses Davis, a black Savannah wood carver, now considered a leading folk artist, who carved busts of United States Presidents and others using a pocketknife, glitter, rhinestones and golf tees.

Mr. Allen can be fiercely competitive -- even in a bad year he earns \$50,000, and he has made \$100,000 on a single sale. Out of each 10 things he buys, Mr. Allen explained on the road to Fitzgerald, Ulysses Davis's birthplace, "one, I make a really good deal on; three, a little bit of money; four, I'll break even, and I will lose my shirt on two out of every 10 every single time."

Unlike a museum curator, a picker assumes a financial risk, Mr. Allen said. "You can't really understand an object until you've handled it, put your own money into it, picked it out and picked it up."

It requires diplomacy and a suitor's ardor. Seven years ago, Mr. Allen stumbled across a vast intact "chronicle of a whole life" -- a collection dating from 1780 of a woman named Loula Kendall Rogers, who saved more than 3,000 belongings, including her wedding-cake candles and her husband's silk wedding vest. Trying to buy the collection -- "I was about to split I was so excited" -- took Mr. Allen two years of taking her great-granddaughter, "a little bitty old lady," out to lunch. "I mean she was 65 pounds with her walker," he said.

The lady accepted the cocktails, but sold the collection to her lawyer. "Inside, I was really hurt," Mr. Allen said. "I was thinking of all those lunches, you know."

Eventually, the lady wrangled the collection back and sold it to Mr. Allen for \$20,000. He sold much of it to Emory University for \$100,000. It is his most prized discovery, though others, including sculptures from Howard Finster's Paradise Garden, have brought greater financial rewards. "Never in my life," he said, "have I felt that I owned a whole family."

Ironically, perhaps, an itinerant profession has provided Mr. Allen, who studied briefly to be a priest, with rootedness and a sense of family. "Being a picker gave me a sense of place, a way to identify with people," he said. "It really made me feel I had a home."

Mr. Allen grew up in Winter Park, Fla., one of 11 children. His father is a doctor. As a boy, he collected miniature cloisonne vases. "I thought a genie was going to pop out," he recalled over coffee and grits in Cordele. "I'd hypnotize myself to sleep with the exoticness of them."

When Mr. Allen returned home as a college student and announced he was gay, his family asked him to leave; he didn't talk to his father for 15 years. This may account somewhat for Mr. Allen's affinity for outsiders. After a series of odd jobs, including zoo keeper, he moved to Atlanta, where he bought a van for \$250 and began selling antiques, including mixing bowls. "I got so attached to those mixing bowls," he said. "I mean, you get a great big batter bowl and it feels like home. It just radiates goodness!"

Mr. Allen prefers to remain within a day's drive of his home in Atlanta, which he shares with his companion and 13 tropical birds.

Though he feels born to be a picker, "as if there were an engine inside," there is always a conflict inherent in getting people to part with their possessions. He still finds it painful to talk about the death of Ulysses Davis. "Ulysses was an incredible gentleman," he said. "The whole atmosphere changed when he walked into a room. But there's always a conflict. I love this man, but I'm still trying to make a profit on him. He hated to sell his work. So you never really feel good on that level."

But there can also be a redemptive quality to what he does. When Mr. Davis died, Mr. Allen explained, his voice quavering, family demons visited. One son pawned his father's sculptures to buy crack. Mr. Allen went into the crack houses in Savannah to repurchase them.

"I think the things I save wouldn't be saved otherwise," he said, behind the wheel again, "so that spurs me on. It's people's history."

He remains in awe of people like Emmett Walker, a Lake City pulp and paper hauler who constructs intensely detailed scrap-metal trucks -- four-foot-tall Macks, Peterbilts and Western Stars -- recreating his daily life in art. Mr. Walker, 41, sets up lifelike logging tableaux in the woods on his property, behind a fence peppered with KEEP OUT signs and guarded by a ferocious dog.

Mr. Allen's diary entry from their first meeting in 1991: "Suspicious. Told me I had to look from the road. Sometimes pulls machines out to the highway for people to see. Loves reaction and praise from community."

Though Mr. Walker does not sell his work -- yet -- Mr. Allen likes to keep tabs on him, even if it means waiting until midnight to visit him after the late shift.

"I mean, my juices just start, seeing those trucks," Mr. Allen said. "The man makes me humble. Talk about following your bliss."