





A Columbia engineer has the nation's finest collection of antique sewing machines. Along with his rare and classic models are curiosities like the handheld pocket sewing machine (above) made in 1868.

CARTER BAYS' MARVELOUS MACHINES

ARTICLE BY KATHY HENRY DOWELL ❖ PHOTOS BY GERRY LYNN HALL

When Carter Bays invites you into his living room, prepare to be speechless for a good three minutes. Then try to keep up with him, if you can, because a funny thing happened in the 1980s when he discovered the world of antique sewing machines.

He ended up owning a *lot* of sewing machines.

Most of those machines are arranged, back to back and side to side, in the massive living room of his Columbia home. Oh, you'll find an antique settee here or a glass-encased collection of insects there. But it's the sewing machines, and the stories behind them, that fill the room.

"I've been a collector all my life: coins, butterflies, furniture. When I started collecting sewing machines, I really did it because no one else was doing it." He figures he has about 200.





“I made up my mind to build the best American sewing machine collection,” he explained. “I got a toll-free telephone number and ran banner ads in antique magazines searching for anyone with a machine. Most of the machines I bought were shipped to me, or I traveled to pick them up if they weren’t too far away. I did drive out to Kansas to get a machine once. It was special—the only one of its kind that I knew about—so it was worth the trip.”

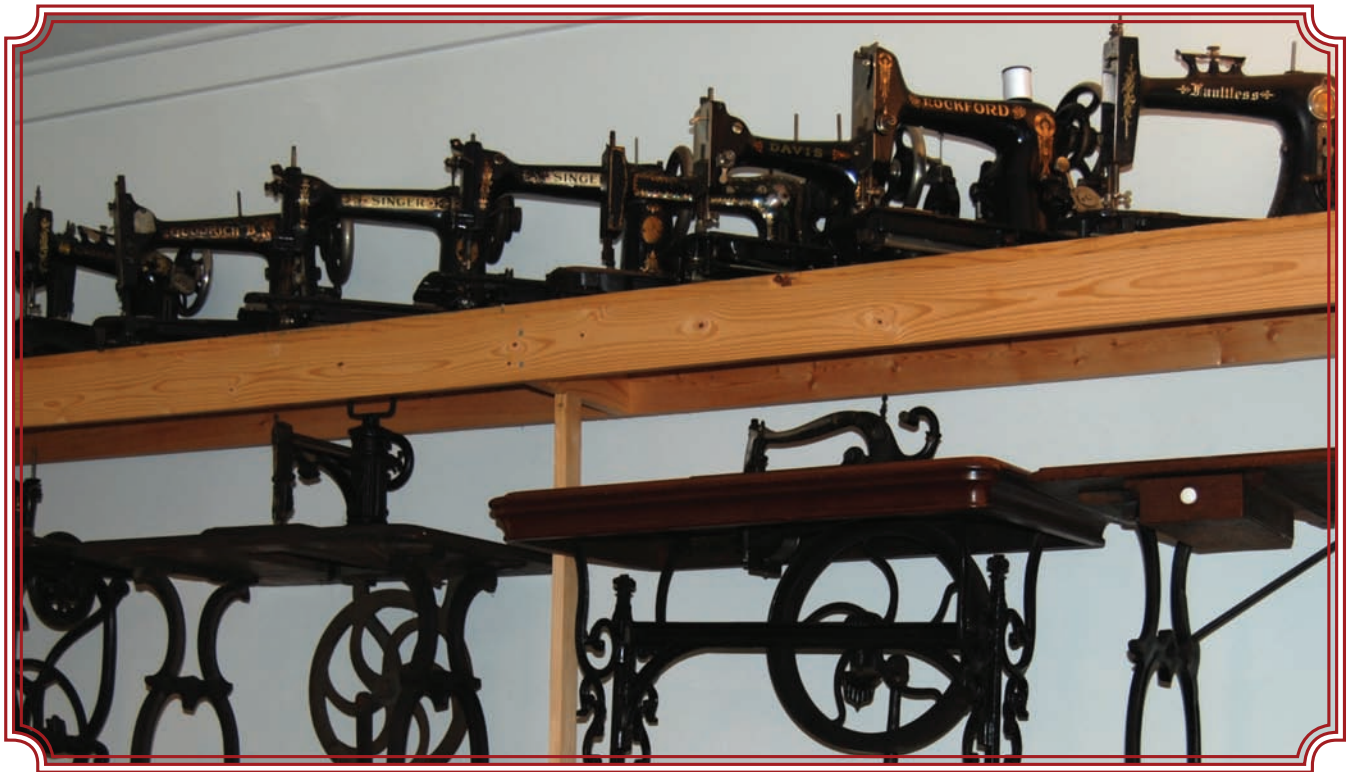
While Bays searched for the sometimes elusive antiques, he worked as an engineer and then as an engineering professor at the University of South Carolina. He and his wife raised a daughter, bred dogs and were active in the local theatre scene.

By the early 1990s, Bays had amassed the finest, most complete antique sewing machine collection in the United States. It isn’t pride so much as it is pure knowledge that shines through when he talks about his marvelous machines. “Here’s an early and rare model, made by Grover and Baker in 1859,” he said, pointing to a plain but very weathered wooden box. “See ‘Sixth Army Corps’ printed here? This machine was used on the Civil War battlefield.

“I have several patent models, including this 1851 Singer. This was included with the patent request to the U.S. Patent Office by Isaac Merrit Singer. Many people don’t know that Singer began his career as a Shakespearean actor. He later became one of many inventors and improvers of the American sewing machine, but because of shrewd business moves and some well-timed legal actions, he reaps more than his fair share of the credit.”

Most early machines were powered by a hand-turned wheel and sold with no stand or cabinet. When treadle machines evolved, sewing production went up—but so did the price of machines. “At a time





A number of early, baroque sewing machines—some with stands, some without—grace a wall in Bays’ home. He also owns the first home version of the Singer sewing machine, circa 1856; it is one of only two complete machines known to exist. Opposite page: Bays’ daughter Elizabeth with a small antique model.

when treadle machines cost a prohibitive \$100 to \$150 each, several families often pooled their money and bought one machine to share,” Bays said. “Imagine a weary mother sitting down to sew by lamplight after the children have been put to bed. If the machine was shared with other families, she would have to do the household sewing whenever she had access to the machine.”

Other finds in Bays’ collection are early Baroque devices; an 1854 Wheeler and Wilson model for manufacturing use; an 1858 machine that features brass-sculpted cherubs that hold the thread; an 1869 battery-powered machine; and early toy sewing machines that really worked, even though some of them are so small they can fit in the palm of a hand.

Several of the machines and machine cabinets Bays has acquired are works of art that were designed to appeal to well-to-do families of the time. Gold-leaf lettering, mother-of-pearl inlay, semi-

precious stone accents, artisan-carved drawers and handpainted doors make these machines lovely as well as functional. “Early in the life of my collection, I wanted to share my finds, so I put together a traveling exhibit that appeared in shopping malls and other venues across the country,” Bays said.

He shared his finds and his knowledge on a larger scale by writing a series of articles for *The Antique Trader Weekly*. Home-haven maven Martha Stewart heard about him and wanted a photograph for her *Living* magazine.

In 1993, after requests from other collectors, Bays wrote the *Encyclopedia of Early American Sewing Machines*. This definitive volume includes photographs and sketches of some 350 machines dating from 1846 to the early 1900s, many of which are in Bays’ collection. Now in its third printing and available on Amazon.com, the encyclopedia includes tips on how to determine the age of a sew-

ing machine, repair a vintage machine and price an antique.

“Determining the value of a machine isn’t easy, especially if it is the only one of its kind still in existence,” Bays said. “A few of my machines are now worth \$15,000 to \$20,000, but most aren’t. I’ve largely stopped adding to my collection, although I do still buy pre-1870s machines, if you know someone who has one.”

Ever the collector, Bays is happy to talk about 19th-Century machines with model names like the Daisy, the Boudoir, the Cute, the Dorcas and the Family Gem. But if he doesn’t seem eager to discuss stitching techniques or the quickest way to baste in a hem, you’ll have to excuse him. He doesn’t sew. ❖

Kathy Henry Dowell lives in Lexington and loves all things vintage. Gerry Lynn Hall photographed antique and reproduction rocking horses in the Winter 2008-09 Sandlapper. She lives in Columbia.