



David Morrison photo

CHINA STEPS EMPORIUM

One Man's Trash is Another Man's Treasure

by David Morrison

How is your Christmas shopping going? Nearly done, or are you floundering for gift ideas for those perennially 'difficult-to-buy-for' people? If that is the case, I know of a store that may hold all the answers. Then again, I guess that would depend on whether the folks in question might appreciate pulling from their stockings such as a strange antique medical device, a dreadful velvet painting, or a preserved puffer fish. If not, perhaps they may enjoy an old rice sack, or a pair of 1930s boxing gloves?

This stuff and more – oh, so much more! – is on sale at the extraordinary China Steps Emporium. A classic 'Olde Curiosity Shoppe,' it is stuffed to bursting point with surely the craziest range of 'stock' to be found anywhere on Vancouver Island. Meaning simply, "a retail store, especially one selling a great variety of articles," the word 'emporium' can rarely have been more accurately applied than to this store at the bottom of downtown Nanaimo's China Steps.

It could feasibly take hours to have a good, deep look around this place, examining the inventory in detail. It is difficult to know where

to begin, and I would not wish to spoil the fun of your visit, but here amongst the standard vintage collectables like comics, magazines, toys, video games, records and so forth, one can find, in no particular order, military gear, early Canadian varsity items, Polynesian memorabilia, curious quackery, old vehicle manuals, puppets, antique bottles, nautical paraphernalia, previously enjoyed sports equipment, trapper hats, licence plates, jigsaw puzzles... and on and on, and endlessly on.

While the China Steps Emporium is far from unique in concept, its proprietor is most certainly a one-off. Standing well over six-foot tall, Jake Niddrie is one of the funniest men I have met in recent times. A wisecracking, super-friendly live-wire who just loves to talk, 'Trader Jake,' as he is known locally, is also the only storekeeper one could meet who routinely and frequently (though affectionately) refers to much of his merchandise as "random junk that no one on earth could ever possibly need." Indeed, his incongruously modern business card proclaims the

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emporium as purveying collectibles, antiques, oddities and, yup, old junk!

I am standing in Niddrie's overwhelming emporium, aware that (at least) two other pairs of eyes are trained on me. Down to my right, poking out from a box of hundreds of postcards and photographs, Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, is smiling at me. And just over my right shoulder, a little too close for comfort, I am almost nose-to-nose with a stuffed wallaby. "He likes you," chuckles Niddrie, "because you know he's a wallaby, not a kangaroo."

Open for six months now, 34-year old Niddrie's wonderful store is a natural conclusion of over two decades of collecting, well, just about anything and everything. "I've been collecting since I was a kid," he begins. "I'd go with dad to the Cedar landfill with a truck full of garbage, but we'd come home with it three-quarters full of garbage, and have to sneak it up the driveway when mom was out back gardening! My dad loved old motorcycle parts and bicycles and, as he was a sign-writer, anything to do with advertising and signage. We'd find all sorts of junk all over the place."

"There were people close to where I lived that would fire guns, so I'd go and collect ammunition cartridges, looking for different ones and realizing, that as people had been shooting there for years, the more I dug the earlier and stranger cartridges I would find. It all stemmed from there; I started collecting marbles, sports cards, comics, mini-bikes, bicycles, car parts, broken skateboards, and stuff that has no use at all to anyone on earth! I would do the flea markets selling sports cards and comics, and then with the money buy something else,

so week after week it would be a revolving door of ridiculous impulse buys. Even if it was broken, if it was affordable and I could see the potential in something, I'd buy it."

There is, however, a touching and very human motivation behind Niddrie's seemingly compulsive packrat mentality. "Selling certain things is hard," he says. "I have an emotional connection to everything. It's not the object itself, but the story it holds; the story of me finding it, the information I got off the person I purchased it from. I buy the story; I want to know who, what, when, where, why, and even after I get it I entertain my own story. Say it's an early motorcycle helmet: has it been across the country? Was it under the arm of a guy as he proposed to his wife out of a window? It may have been worn a few times and then put in a closet, so holds no real story, but my mind races, you know? And when something is more tactile, it has more value in a sense: does the object have an initial or a name or a number written or carved on it? What do they mean? All this stuff fascinates me."

Born and raised in Nanaimo, Niddrie is particularly enthralled by historical local items that find their way to him, and for which he receives plenty of inquiries. From within the farrago of miscellany cramming the China Steps Emporium he showed me some examples in the forms of a pair of bellows, apparently from Cumberland's No. 5 Mine; some old souvenir Nanaimo Clippers postcards, and a 1920s mounted bear head from Victoria.

How Niddrie came to open his store is perhaps not unsurprising: rather than intent on pursuing a commercial venture, he simply needed more space for his stuff! "I never intended to amass such a collection,"

he explains. "I go through phases of collecting certain things, and it can get to a level of obsession, I guess! My house got filled; my parents' basement got filled; other places I had access to got filled, so opening the store was actually a necessity! I was a collector that became a hoarder, and I had too much stuff to display, enjoy or absorb, so although opening the emporium was not a dream or intentional, it was the answer!"

Nonetheless, the former plumber, bartender and chef is attracting a lot of attention for what was initially intended to serve as overspill storage, but rightly so, as his emporium is a blast. Most satisfying of all is Niddrie's obvious joy at how he now makes a modest wage. "I've always thought that if I could do it for a living, surrounding myself daily in what I enjoy, I might end up poor, but I'd be happy," he says. "So I put the rent in my left pocket, and everything in the right pocket gets spent on more junk I don't need!"

Trader Jake might comically term his inventory junk, but in my humble opinion the real junk is the generic trash stacked high for sale in the soulless corporate chain stores of this world. How lovely it would be, would it not, to receive a truly unique gift this Christmas, like a piece of local history, or something yielding a fascinating story?

HAVE A WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS EVERYBODY!

The China Steps Emporium is located at # 4 China Steps, Nanaimo. For more information, please call Trader Jake Niddrie on (250) 741 6429.