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Collector Steve Gilmer surrounded by some of his nostalgic items at his store, What's on Second



# THE MEMORY BROKER

STEVE GILMER'S OBSESSION WITH 20TH-CENTURY  
TOYS AND MEMORABILIA HAS RESULTED  
IN A CHARMING BIRMINGHAM SHOP BURSTING  
WITH BYGONE DELIGHTS

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**W**ALKING INTO THE MEMORABILIA shop What's on Second can be an emotional experience. You're immediately inundated with objects from days gone by: *Star Wars* Pez dispensers sit in a row, alongside a stable of Matchbox muscle cars and a stack of vinyl, Madonna's *True Blue* album on top. The Fab Four figurines from *Yellow Submarine* are carefully preserved in their shrink-wrapped box. A lava lamp here, a Bush v. Gore bumper sticker there, and thousands of postcards neatly organized in shoeboxes, some dating to 1901. The rear-corner wall is a Gen X daydream: a case holding dozens of Atari and Nintendo games and consoles refurbished and ready for action. You ogle the He-Man and Skeletor action figures you once coveted as a kid, the *Garfield* lunch box carried by your fifth-grade crush, and it all comes rushing back.

Nostalgia items are an obsession of collector Steve Gilmer, whose plucky What's on Second store in Birmingham, Alabama, has a tendency to unlock a torrent of fond memories and familiar reactions among those who come to browse the shelves.

Gilmer's shop is a true mix of rare and retro. One customer might dig through bowls of military pins, another might gravitate to the shelves of vintage lunch boxes, another to the comics. His treasures are stacked 12 feet high in some spots, easily done in the bright, airy loft. It's not quite an antique shop or a toy store. It doesn't fit the definition of a flea market. There's value in every piece, but every piece is waiting on the proper customer. That's what Gilmer knows so well—one man's trash is, indeed, another's treasure.

Born in Birmingham in 1949, Gilmer grew up in a working-class neighborhood called Wahouma, about five miles from downtown. "Gosh," he says, "my childhood was really ideal, almost out of a *Dick and Jane* book." His Southern accent has a soft cadence, the perfect voice for helping you hunt for toys you might have pined for as a child. He sports a trim white beard and mustache, and his glasses hang from his Polo shirtfront. He slips them on when customers have a question, genuinely delighting in their interest.

Those customers come in from down the road, as well as lands far, far away. "A man >



from Kuwait came in just yesterday,” he says. “It would be a slow week in here if we didn’t see customers from 15 different states. The man from the Middle East bought a camera. I’ve got a large allotment—some from the 1800s, but most from the ’20s, ’30s and ’40s.”

As a kid in the ’50s, Gilmer didn’t dream of owning a toy shop. It wasn’t until his mid 20s that he made a discovery that would shift his trajectory. “I stumbled upon a trunk that belonged to an aunt of mine who had passed,” he recalls. “It was full of correspondence and old photographs. I found a postcard that made a reference to Woodrow Wilson, and I remember thinking how ancient that postcard was at that time.”

Gilmer still has a keen eye for postcards. He has a stash of thousands, including ones

*What’s on Second offers everything from vintage lunchboxes and comic books to action figures and toy cars*

from 1918 and 1919, featuring promotions for the women’s suffrage movement. “The postcard heyday was in the early 1900s,” he continues. “I started picking up Birmingham postcards and that evolved into other types—artist-signed, holiday, ships and military.”

The trunk unleashed a fascination with collecting and selling, working with objects that felt like part of a larger story. Gilmer hit the road for the next three decades, joining a thriving antique circuit, setting up tables at different markets in Nashville and Knoxville, Tennessee, and Mobile, Alabama. He had friends on the circuit and the peripatetic life was fun and exciting. “You learn as the years go on,” he says. “That’s what keeps this business so interesting. You can research every day and discover something new.” >



## Toy Story

As the years went on, eBay and gas prices rose simultaneously. “I decided to try to reinvent the antique store,” he says. “I never cared about furniture and chandeliers. I love popular culture—those little things that spark a moment from your childhood. Maybe it’s a Ronald Reagan bumper sticker or a 7Up advertisement or a Hot Wheels still in the box.”

In 2007, he found a 5,000-square-foot space on Second Avenue in downtown Birmingham, across from a pawn shop. “Second Avenue was pretty derelict at that time,” he recalls. (Today, it’s thriving with multiple cocktail bars and coffeehouses.) “A friend came up with the name What’s on Second, as a nod to the old Abbott and Costello schtick. I worried the younger generation wouldn’t get it, but they did. My friends worried I’d go broke. But I didn’t. Even opening in the middle of a recession, my business began strong.”

In the spring of 2016, the shop moved one block away to First Avenue, but kept the name. Gilmer walks me through the aisles, pointing out favorites as we go. “I’ve got a

*Swiss Family Robinson* comic from 1947 that’s in pretty good shape,” he says. “We also have *Classics Illustrated* from the early ’50s. Back in the day, kids in school would try to avoid the actual novel by reading the comic version. But the teacher could always tell.”

As we round out our tour, Gilmer recalls a moment from several years ago, when a customer came in and started flipping through his postcard collection. “She found her grandmother’s Midwestern home pictured on one of the cards,” he says. It was a small-town scene from the early 20th century and she recognized it right away. “I’ve never seen that happen before. She became quite emotional.”

Today, Gilmer can sense something when customers walk through the door that reminds him of 2007, when he first opened. “People cannot afford much right now,” he says. “This time it’s a pandemic, rather than a mortgage crisis. But that feeling is the same. We offer something small, something meaningful. We want to tug at the heartstrings, not the purse strings. That resonates now more than ever.” **AW**

### LOST TREASURE

It’s not all fun and games. Toys can fetch serious loot



#### Star Wars & Sotheby’s

The famed auction house sold a Luke Skywalker figurine in 2015 for \$25,000. Why the out-of-this-world price? It was one of only 20 ever made. And it came with a super-cool, two-piece, telescoping lightsaber, obviously.



#### Board Game Bedazzled

You’d need more than \$2 million to purchase the 1988 gold Monopoly edition created by San Francisco jewelry designer Sidney Mobell. His dice contained 42 full-cut diamonds, the Community Chest cards are solid sheets of gold, and the hotels have ruby chimneys. The game was donated to the Smithsonian in 2003.



#### Rare Bear

In 1997, following the death of Princess Diana, Ty released a limited-edition purple bear with a white rose embroidered on the breast. A buyer purchased one of the few remaining for \$10,000 in 2019.



#### Barbie Has a Big Birthday

The iconic doll turned 60 in 2019 and the milestone marked a rise in interest and sales, particularly for collectors. If you purchased a \$3 Barbie in 1959 and left it in the box, you could grab a cool \$10,000 for it now.



#### Video Game Acclaim

Scott Amos was cleaning out his parents’ house in Reno, Nevada, when he came across a shopping bag from J.C. Penney. Inside was a receipt and an unopened Nintendo *Kid Icarus* game from 1986. The receipt read \$38.45. He wisely consulted the video-game consignment director at Heritage Auctions and scooped up a whopping \$9,000.