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POP! GOES THE MUSEUM

Springfield Township shrine to popcorn is filled with antique machines and more

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Before the taste, even before the smell, there's always the sound of popcorn. It's an intrinsic part of the popular snack, that exquisite sound of a heated kernel turning itself inside out after the moisture trapped within turns to steam and explodes.

Pop!

That familiar echo is an even greater symphony at the J.H. Fentress Antique Popcorn Museum in Springfield Township. Here, it comes with more than a pop; there's a clink and a clank and a whir as an old-time popcorn machine goes to work.

Owner Jim Fentress could use a microwave, but it's a lot more fun to watch — and listen — as kernels drop into the circa 1925 machine, spin around a popping plate, travel down a conveyor belt, and move past rotating, buttering paddles before falling into a perfect popcorn pile at the bottom.

"I love mechanical things," the 58-year-old said. "I mean, it's just so cool!"

While many are passionate about eating their popcorn, Mr. Fentress, is obsessed with the machines that made them in theaters and stores during the first half of the last century, particularly those from an Indianapolis company, Holcomb & Hoke Mfg. Co., Inc..

The former industrial education teacher and builder has about 30 popcorn machines and peanut roasters in his collection, not to mention hundreds of boxes, tins, and advertisements on display at the free museum he quietly opened on Hill Avenue last year.



Popcorn paraphernalia at the J.H. Fentress Antique Popcorn Museum. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

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MULTIMEDIA



MULTIMEDIA: View popcorn (Large)



MULTIMEDIA: View popcorn (Small)

The only larger collection of such machines that Mr. Fentress knows of is housed at the Wyandot Popcorn Museum in Marion, Ohio. Its holdings include 51 popcorn poppers and peanut roasters from a variety of manufacturers.

Brooks Brown, son of that museum's founder and a board member there, understands the allure. He compared it to watching a Rube Goldberg machine.

"You've got all these moving parts that are just fascinating to look at and actually see running," he said. "It's just an amazing thing to see the engineering that has gone into these things."

The machines may not be widely remembered today, but they were hugely popular with past generations, according to Gale Martin, executive director of the Marion County Historical Society, which runs tours at the Wyandot Popcorn Museum.

"Today, a snack for us is very easy to come by. It's a fast-food world out there. These machines were the originals," she said. "They're what started the whole snack food industry in terms of getting a snack food quickly and purchasing it off the street."



Popcorn bags and boxes are some of the items Jim Fentress began collecting 25 years ago.

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Mr. Fentress started collecting about 25 years ago when he bought a popcorn machine from a friend who'd had it in his living room. When he came across a popcorn box at a flea market soon after, things started to snowball.

Popcorn machines, about half of them in working order, are sprinkled throughout the 1,800 square feet of his museum. They are supplemented by shelves of other popcorn memorabilia, such as TNT Pop Com containers and a prototype for a Hopalong Cassidy popcorn box that never was produced.

Hanging on one wall, just around the corner from the museum's small coat room/library, there's even a framed picture of popcorn icon Orville Redenbacher and his grandson. It's signed, "To Jim — From one popcorn king to another."

Mr. Fentress is serious about his collection. When the Sylvania man went to Las Vegas last year to get married, he took two extra suitcases so he could bring back a peanut roaster.

"Everybody has their expertise," he said. "I don't have everything but I'm getting real close."

The Holy Grail that continues to elude him, though, is a Holcomb & Hoke popcorn truck. The company made six of them in Detroit and rented them out.

"To me, this would be the ultimate collectible," Mr. Fentress said.



Mr. Fentress starts his Holcomb & Hoke popcorn maker. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

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Holcomb & Hoke, which still exists as a maker of moveable walls and accordion doors, manufactured popcorn machines from 1913 until the Depression. Back then, one of its machines could have sold for as much as \$1,250, or about the cost of two automobiles, said Vince Herndon, company president.

It helped that Holcomb & Hoke was one of the first businesses to sell on credit and that vendors could make as much as \$3,000 a year selling bags of popcorn. Today, one of its fully equipped models in working condition could sell for more than \$12,000, said Mr. Herndon, whose company only has two working antique poppers and which has loaned some of its archival materials to Mr. Fentress.

"He actually knows a little bit more about this than we do," Mr. Herndon said.

Mr. Fentress opened his collection as a museum after fixing up an old general store with his son. It's open to the public by appointment only,

and he's happy to share all the information — and enthusiasm — he can. So far, a few hundred people have taken him up on the offer.

“I don't want to die with a lot of information,” said Mr. Fentress, who is semi-retired.

He'll even treat visitors to some popcom, which tends to be dry because the machines do not use oil.

“People either like this com or they hate it,” he said. “I'm afraid I like the microwave stuff.”

The J. H. Fentress Antique Popcom Museum is located at 7922 Hill Ave. Admission is free. Open by appointment only. Information: 419-308-4812 or www.antiquepopcommuseum.com.

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