

Hobbyist reveals antiquarian book collection

JILL ROESLER
Staff Writer

Upon stepping into Mark Iverson's Brush Creek Antiquarian Bookstore, located in southern Brush Creek Township, the aroma of old, used books stirs the senses and rekindles memories of past adventures taken through the pages of a favorite novel.

Thousands of books line the walls of a shed built specifically to house Iverson's more than 15,000 piece collection. Some volumes date back more than 100 years, and a number of his books contain the author's signature.

Rare first editions of classics such as Harper Lee's first novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird," released in 1960, fill the 'vault,' a showcase brimming with Iverson's most prized possessions.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of the Brush Creek Antiquarian Bookstore is that each title is actually up for sale—even those sought after by avid book collectors around the world.

"The quality you'll find here isn't something you'll find in your average walk-in store," Iverson says.

There is no doubt that Iverson's collection has the potential to appeal to any reader, no matter the type of book he or she seeks.

Iverson has arranged his books based on content, so if a patron is searching for a novel about Cocker Spaniels, Haitian voodoo, the Galapagos Islands or the Battle at Gettysburg, he or she will certainly find something in the book's respective category. And no matter how obscure the subject, Iverson

is bound to have at least one book covering any subject imaginable.

Iverson's fascination with reading and book collecting was bolstered by his mother who read to him as a young child. His favorite—the Uncle Wiggily books—were stories about an "old gentleman rabbit that traveled the lot."

He didn't truly begin amassing books until the mid-1980s, between his time in the Army Guard and the Air Force and while he was running his own heating and air conditioning business, Brush Creek Appliance Repair, which is still in business today.

As an earnest, hard-working man, accruing the pieces that are now part of his massive collection wasn't a chore, it was an escape—an adventure.

"You've got to travel to find books," Iverson says, smiling. "But to me, book hunting is the most fun part. I've driven thousands of miles to find books, but it's all in fun; there is no cost when you're having a good time."

Iverson is no stranger to spontaneous voyages. While in the military (Marines, 1961-64; Army, 1965-70; Army Guard, 1981-85; Air Force, 1985-95), Iverson traveled to more than 15 countries and stepped foot in all 50 of the United States.

While on active duty, he trekked through areas of the world that he had only read about in books; places such as Israel, Vietnam and the South Pacific.

Iverson regrets passing up some of the opportunities he had to purchase rare books as he journeyed around the world. But he did manage to scoop up quite an assortment

of iconic titles, including a limited edition, signed copy of "Roots," written by Alex Haley; a first edition of Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird," of which only 5,000 copies were printed; a first edition of "The Orchard Keeper," by Cormac McCarthy; a first edition of "The Maltese Falcon," by Dashiell Hammett; and many more.

Concerning the assortment of extraordinary books in Iverson's possession, he often refers to Allan and Patricia Ahearn, proprietors of the "Book Collecting: The Guide to Values," anthology, to put a price tag on the books.

"Ahearn wanted to figure out which books would stand the test of time—which books would still be read, used and referred to decades after they were written," Iverson explains. "The Ahearns have observed that of all the books printed, 90 percent are destined for oblivion and the remaining 10 percent fall into the 'keeper' category."

Iverson has taken it upon himself to recover pieces of that 90 percent to add to his collection with the hope that their stories won't be forgotten.

However, after more than two decades of accruing various texts, his home began to overflow with volumes upon volumes of antiquated novels.

Therefore, in 2002, Iverson built a store adjacent to his home where he could sell certain books to members of the public.

But his store isn't the only place for Iverson to put his books on display. For the past 20 years, he has attended the Wells Gun Show to exhibit and promote his collection. And for the past 14 years, he

has made regular trips to the annual Midwest Antiquarian Booksellers Association book fair in Minneapolis to peddle some of his more esteemed tomes.

But his time there isn't strictly reserved for selling—he also hopes to experience what he calls "the serendipitous discovery of a choice volume."

In addition to his own bookstore, it's the collector gatherings, book fairs and trade shows where Iverson feels most comfortable parting with pieces of his collection. He prefers interacting with buyers directly, which is one reason that he is not keen on the idea of selling his books online.

"The internet is great if you know exactly what you're looking for," Iverson says. "But there are 180 million books on the internet—you just cannot browse 180 million books."

The antiquarian book connoisseur believes that many of Faribault County's avid readers would enjoy perusing through shelf after shelf of classic novels, but it seems that many residents are unaware that the bookstore exists.

"Those wishing to experience what was once the birthright of the functionally literate are welcome to make an appointment to browse," Iverson says. "Sunday afternoons are ideal—people must have leisure time to browse."

For those interested in stopping by the Brush Creek Antiquarian Bookstore, call Mark Iverson at 507-653-4396 to set up an appointment.