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COLUMN ONE

A Trove of Teapots to the Rescue

■ A small town needs a lifeline and a unique L.A. collection needs a home. The solution brews hope in what was an economic black hole.

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SPARTA, N.C. — Patrick Woodie had a lot on his mind that day in April 2003 when his telephone rang. But the caller got his attention.

The authoritative voice at the other end of the line said: "I've got one word for you: teapots."

Back then, Woodie was trying to help things get better in his tiny hometown — population 1,818 — where most of the stores on Main Street were closed and way too many people were out of work.

As head of New River Community Partners, a nonprofit redevelopment association headquartered in a recycled sewing machine factory, Woodie was working with the town's leaders to find a way to nurture the few remaining businesses, capitalize on the region's natural beauty and entice travelers on the Blue Ridge Parkway to take a five-mile detour and stay a while.

But teapots?

"I thought it was the dumbest thing I ever heard of," said Frances Huber, a



CARLOS CHAVEZ *Los Angeles Times*

'A SCARY TEAM': Collectors Gloria and Sonny Kamm have amassed a vast collection of teapots, or "containers of ideas."

community-minded citizen who lives in the hills near Sparta.

Bob Bamberg, director of the Alleghany Chamber of Commerce, was dumbfounded: "I visualized the old teapot that sits on a shelf in my kitchen and thought, people are going to come to see that?"

Even Mayor John Miller, who had heard just about everything during his 21-year tenure, judged the idea "somewhat way out."

But Sparta had a problem that called for a creative solution.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, so did Sonny and Gloria Kamm.

antiques and historic mass-production models, accompanied by a big batch of related items that the Kamms call "teapot paraphernalia."

"Anything worth doing is worth overdoing," as Sonny Kamm puts it.

But the time had come for an exit strategy. The Kamms wanted to maintain the objects of their obsession without burdening their children. The challenge was to find a place that wanted all those teapots and would make good use of them.

As the Kamms tell their story, Sonny has "the collecting gene." Gloria, a longtime docent at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, aids and abets his mania. "Together we are a scary team," she said.

They began buying contemporary glass and became partners in Kurland/Summers, a glass art gallery that operated on Melrose Avenue from 1981 to 1993. In 1985, they moved into a new house, put a few teapots on shelves behind the bar and saw the beginning of another collection.

They snapped up ready-made teapots at art galleries, student shows, antique stores, swap meets, garage sales and on the Internet. They also commissioned one-of-a-kind works from artists. Along with mass-produced teapots in the shape of cars, planes, ships, fruits, vegetables, cartoon characters and heads of state, they acquired unique pieces with surprising themes worked out in unorthodox materials.

"We think of them as sculptures," Gloria Kamm said. "They are also containers of ideas."

When they counted their blessings, it came to this: A tidy income from Sonny's earnings as a personal estate planning attorney. A lovely multilevel house in the Encino hills. Three children, all happily married and gainfully employed. Five grandchildren.

And a trove of who knows how many teapots, amassed over two decades. Yet to be inventoried or appraised but definitely in the multimillion-dollar category, it's reputedly the world's largest collection of its kind, consisting of somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 teapots. There are wildly inventive contemporary artworks, rare



Kamm Teapot Collection

TOWERING: Ron Baron's "Dear Mother," 56 inches tall, has its own plates and cups.

Peter Grieve's "Armadillo Teapot," for example, interprets the armor-plated animal in recycled tin. Michael Lucero's "Female Roman Statue," a plaster and ceramic number, has a classical Roman body and a teapot head. Ron Baron's "Dear Mother" is a 56-inch-tall tower of ceramic teacups and plates, metal trays, solidified sugar, polyurethane and plastic clay. Joyce J. Scott's "Testicular Teapot," an organic structure of beaded cloth, neither holds water nor aims to be anatomically correct.

When the collection filled every available shelf and drawer of their home, the Kamms bought a nearby condominium, dubbed it "teapot central" and stocked it with boxes of teapots. They also shared their passion, welcoming hundreds of visitors to their home and lending 250 pieces to "The Artful Teapot," an exhibition of their collection that appeared at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 2003 and is at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis through Sept. 17.

As years passed and the teapots multiplied, the Kamms discussed the



Kamm Teapot Collection

SHELL COVERED: Pieter Grieve used recycled tin for his "Armadillo Teapot," one of the treasures collected by the Kamms.

possibility of donating their collection to a museum.

"We came to the conclusion fairly early on that no single museum was going to take this collection," Sonny Kamm said. "Small museums can't handle big collections and big general art museums don't want to; they have an obligation to show a variety of material. Museums nowadays are not willing to commit to what and how much they will display unless you self-fund it. If you self-fund it, why not just build your own? If there's a National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., and a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, why not a hall of fame for teapots?"

The next question was: where?

They dismissed large cities because of prohibitive costs and competition from other attractions. Los Angeles had another strike against it because it's in earthquake territory. Aware of museum projects that have revived derelict towns — such as MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, and Dia:Beacon in upstate New York — the Kamms hoped to find a community where an unusual museum could make a difference.

Then visitors from Penland, N.C., came to call.

Jean McLaughlin, director of the Penland School of Crafts, and ceramic artist

Cynthia Bringle suggested their home state, where crafts have prominent billing on cultural and tourist circuits. They also mentioned that if philanthropist and art patron R. Philip Hanes liked the idea, it was a done deal.

Hanes, who made a fortune in textiles, has a huge presence on North Carolina's cultural scene, partly detailed in his book, "How to Get Anyone to Do Anything." He is also a force in Sparta. Although he and his wife, Charlotte, live in Winston-Salem, they have a second home in Roaring Gap, just south of Sparta, and own a ranch that straddles the North Carolina-Virginia state line.

In a coincidence that Sonny Kamm calls serendipity and Hanes deems destiny, Bringle sat next to Hanes on the last leg of her flight from California to North Carolina. The next day, Hanes made the phone call to Woodie that planted the idea of a teapot museum. Then Hanes called Sonny Kamm, saying that he had the right town and the right building for the museum.

"Three weeks to the day," Woodie said, "Sonny and Gloria walked through my door."

Sparta wasn't what the Kamms had in mind. "This is a bad omen," Gloria told Sonny on their first trip, noting that their destination was not on the map supplied



Kamm Teapot Collection

CLASSIC: Michael Lucero's "Female Roman Statue" combines plaster and ceramics.

by the rental car agency at the Charlotte airport. Alleghany County, of which Sparta is the county seat, was an economic black hole. It had recently lost four of its five largest employers and 1,500 jobs, stranding about 25% of the workforce.

The building — an antiquated brick structure on Main Street left vacant when Sparta's economic woes caused the closure of Smithey's department store — didn't look promising either, and it turned out to be too expensive to refurbish.

But a soon-to-be abandoned industrial site on Whitehead Street downtown was available at the right price. Today a shiny chartreuse and white sign proclaims: "Future home of the Sparta Teapot Museum." It provides a ray of cockeyed hope in what might appear to be a town of low expectations.

The project has come a long way in three years.

A \$10-million fundraising campaign that will promote statewide benefits from tourism and will target wealthy people with second homes in the verdant hills near Sparta has yet to begin. But supporters have about \$3 million in hand from public

Town Brews Its Hope in Teapots



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and private sources. Jenkins Peer Architects of Charlotte is developing plans for a roughly 30,000-square-foot structure, including 12,000 square feet of gallery space, a multipurpose room and a shop, and its backers hope to open the museum in 2008.

The Kamms, who are transferring ownership of their collection to a foundation that will lend works to the museum in perpetuity, will finance a study center and storage facility to be erected in a separate building on the museum site. Curator Mary Douglas, whose salary is paid by the Kamms, is unpacking the first two 50-foot truckloads of teapots to arrive at New River Community Partners' facility and bracing for more.

None of this would have happened if early doubters hadn't become believers. A timely appearance of "The Artful Teapot" exhibit in spring 2004 in Charlotte heightened interest and won support for the museum.

"The more we got into it, the better it sounded," Mayor Miller said.

"This isn't your grandmother's teapot," the Chamber of Commerce's Bamberg said, echoing thoughts expressed by several converts. Noting that the Kamm collection embraces a wide swath of history and popular culture as well as fine art, museum backers envision lively exhibitions and

educational programs in a place that will encourage community involvement and return visits from tourists.

"I know that we can do this," said Wendell White, a retired city manager of Charlotte, North Carolina's most populous city, who has moved to Sparta and joined the cause. "So far it's been kind of like training for a race. It's time to get out there and run."

The training part hasn't been easy.

Despite an economic impact study projecting an annual attendance of 61,000 visitors who will spend \$7.5 million a year in the area, the museum project has been the object of skepticism and ridicule. Many residents have a wait-and-see attitude, and some outsiders have expressed outrage over the museum's receipt of government seed money.

Some legislators cried "Pork!" last year in response to the adoption of a \$17-billion state budget that included \$400,000 for the museum. A \$500,000 federal allocation to the museum is cited in "The Congressional Pig Book," a compilation of pork-barrel projects published by Citizens Against Government Waste, a public interest group. The book lists \$29 billion of fiscal 2006 expenditures deemed wasteful, including multimillion-dollar spending for defense, agriculture, transportation, homeland security and education.

"We got \$500,000 out of \$29 billion," Miller said. "We don't think we broke anybody. The museum will bring more people to town. It will be a big boon if we can get it going."

That will be a challenge.

"Being a small county," said Sandy Carter, an Alleghany County commissioner, "we are either going to

have to yell louder or more often to get people to realize that this is a serious event." Even many of those who don't think it's a joke, she said, "don't think we can pull this off. Until they see something tangible, it's just not going to be a reality for them."

Buzz about the museum has helped fill previously shuttered storefronts on Main Street. A promotional exhibition, to be installed in one of the few remaining empty spaces, is expected to generate more interest. Groundbreaking will offer concrete proof that the museum is actually in process, but that won't happen immediately. The current tenant can't move to a new location until some roadwork is done, probably in July. Then existing buildings on the museum site must be removed and the land graded.

Sparta's leaders know how to handle that sort of work. Raising millions of dollars for a museum and shifting their focus from manufacturing to tourism is far less familiar work.

"This is new territory for us," said Bryan Edwards, town manager and president of the museum's board of directors.

"We also have a huge responsibility to support the industries that are here," he said. "The whole point is networking and being comprehensive, figuring out how one business helps another. The teapot museum can be central to all that."

As for the matchmaker, Hanes has no doubt. "I know it will happen," he said. "You can't kill a good idea." ■