



# Tourism in a Teapot

BY DREW RUBLE

What started as  
a thank-you gift for  
a doctor becomes  
a world-class  
collection in  
Trenton, Tenn.

**G**ibson County, home to 10 distinct communities, knows how to party. A tourist would be hard-pressed to identify another Tennessee county that hosts as many annual festivals as Gibson County does—first and foremost among them the West Tennessee Strawberry Festival in Humboldt, which attracts over 100,000 people.

Other festivals include the Davy Crockett Days Celebration in Rutherford (Gibson County was Crockett's last residence before he headed off to the Alamo), the Doodle Soup Festival in Bradford, the White Squirrel Homecoming in Kenton, the Fall Folklore Jamboree and the No-Till Day in Milan, the Skullbone Music Festival in Skullbone, and even the Washer Pitchin' Contest in Yorkville. Getting the picture?

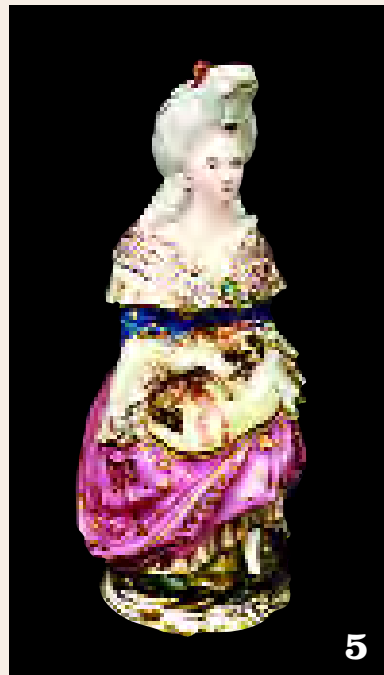
The economic effect of all that festivity is more than just a steady flow of tourism dollars. Local economic development officials can also boast a charm and quality of life in Gibson County's cadre of quaint towns/cities that can serve as a tipping point for relocating businesses. It's hardly a colorless no man's land in the middle of West Tennessee.

Amidst this bevy of local festivals, the Teapot Festival that takes place each year in the Gibson County seat of Trenton can boast global distinction. The 27-year-old event built around the largest,

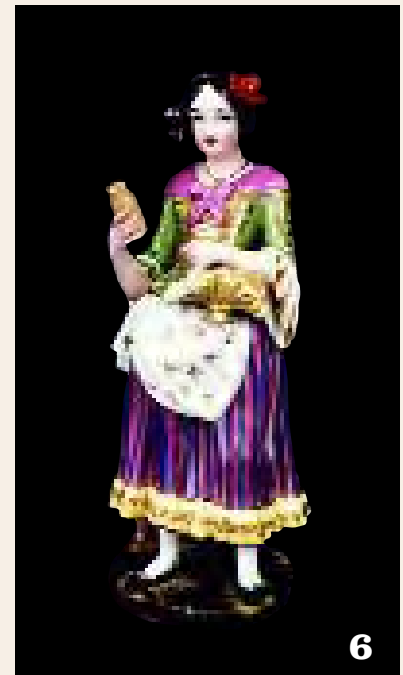
PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRENTON CITY HALL  
RARE PORCELAIN VEILLEUSE COLLECTION



4



5



6

1 and 2 ▶ Teapot #507 and #508 | Companion pieces "Sultan Lady" & "Sultan" by Jacque Petit (Dr. Freed's favorite artist)  
 3 ▶ Teapot #245 | Dutch Lady

4 ▶ Teapot #112 | No name (purchased at Arles)  
 5 ▶ Teapot #505 | Duchess  
 6 ▶ Teapot #511 | Peasant Girl

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**With more than 600 teapots from 40 different countries, all of them dated between 1750 to 1860, the collection is valued at between \$8 million and \$11 million and is the largest collection in the world.**

most unique and most valuable collection of teapots (read: business assets) in the world.

It all started with a difficult birth in the early 1900s in New York City. That's where Trenton-born OBGYN Dr. Frederick C. Freed delivered a child to a woman from France. So thankful was the new mother for Freed's care that she determined to bring him a gift on her next trip home. Thinking it appropriate given his profession, she gave Freed a Porcelain Veilleuse-Theieres, which translates literally to "night-light teapots." Made of three distinct operating parts, the "teapots" were used in their day as medicinal vaporizers for new mothers and newborn babies and to brew tea for babies as well as for attending nurses during long nights as they cared for mother and child.

They also helped to light up a room. How decorative the teapot was depended on the level of affluence a family had achieved.

That appropriate gift for Freed quickly became a collection obsession. The physician, born in Trenton in 1889, was also a world traveler, and immediately began seeking out new teapots to purchase on his trips. Over the next 35 years, Freed collected over 600 teapots from 40 different countries, all of them dated between 1750 to 1860. According to collection curator Dent Partee, five belonged to Napoleon and one to King Louis XVI. Greater Gibson County Chamber of Commerce executive director Vickie McConnell says the collection is valued at between \$8 million and \$11 million, "depending on whom you talk to. They're

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irreplaceable.” Other worthy collections exist, including one in Switzerland comprised of about 200 teapots. “But this is definitely the biggest in the world,” Partee says.

All of the teapots in the collection have a handle and spout, though many are well camouflaged. Each also has a godet, or small cup that holds fuel. Some look like standard teapots while others resemble architectural structures, animals or even grotesque forms. The end result, says Partee, is “something for everybody.”

“Sometimes when I have a group come in, the men all look so bored,” she says. “They have a look of, ‘What has my wife dragged me to today?’ When I have that, I always start with the teapot depicting a wife leading her inebriated husband to the house. That sort of whets their appetite, and they think, ‘Well, maybe this isn’t so bad after all.’”

How did the teapots end up in West Tennessee? Freed’s brother, Sylvane, the president of a Trenton bank, was visiting New York one time and asked his brother what he planned to do with his collection. Freed informed him that the Metropolitan Museum of Art wanted it. Sylvane suggested that his brother instead donate the collection to his hometown. And so the collection was slowly relocated to Trenton and put on display at Peabody High School. Then in 1962,

when a new Trenton city hall was constructed, a room was designated as the collection’s permanent home. Freed’s stipulations were that the entire collection be shown together, not in portions, and that the city never charge an admission fee.

“So it’s one of the few museums you can go to where there is no charge,” Partee says.

Every year, around 3,000 people do come to see the teapots, including during the city’s week-long Teapot Festival and parade, an event designed to draw attention to the collection. Former Gibson County General Hospital administrator John W. Melton started the festival, which is carried on to this day by local doctors with the support of Trenton’s business community.

Chamber director McConnell, a Dallas, Texas, native, marvels at how the town of Trenton, with its population of approximately 5,000 people, swells into a street-lined, crowded area during the festival each May. But even with the influx of tourists, she describes Trenton as a “sweet little town” located in a county where it is “as if you stepped back in time.”

Viewing Trenton’s teapots is indeed a step back in time. **tn**

► *feedback: ruble@businessstn.com*

# Explore Gibson County

Last Home of Davy Crockett  
West Tennessee Art Museum  
Home of the White Squirrel  
Washer Pitchin' Contest  
600 Acre Lake  
West Tennessee Agricultural Museum



Teapot Museum  
Doodle Soup Capital  
Dyer Station  
Haunted Farm  
Painted Wall Mural  
Music Fest

## Davy Crockett Did!!!

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#### Chamber of Commerce

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### Greater Gibson County Area

#### Chamber of Commerce

200 East Eaton Street • Trenton, TN 38382  
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### Milan

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