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May 13, 2006

antiques & collectibles: Lynn hopper

Hoosier cabinet info elusive

Of course we Hoosiers are famous! For a lot of things, but in the world of antiques, there is one item so well-known, so highly sought-after that "Hoosier" has become a generic term as well as referring to a specific firm. (Kind of like "Kleenex" or "Coke" for all tissues or colas.)

That is, of course, the "Hoosier" cabinet. These kitchen conveniences, which were actually rather innovative around 1900, flourished in the early part of the last century, faded out starting in the late 1920s, but popped back into popularity in more recent years starting in, say, the late 1970s.

One might say they started when people had very little storage space, and returned when people discovered you never can have too much storage space.

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Picture a kitchen with no cabinets. Just some open shelves, storage bins and a worktable. That's about what our ancestors had to work with prior to the 1800s, but in the latter part of that century, "baker's cabinets" evolved. This was a one-unit workstation with closed shelves above a bit of workspace and flour and sugar bins below.

The Hoosier cabinet, made in New Castle, was really just a refinement of the baker's cabinet, but its combination of efficient features and an aggressive sales force caused it to sweep the country in popularity, and spawned a number of similar firms, many in Indiana.

Those other firms include Sellers of Elwood, Nappanee (well, guess where), McDougall of Indianapolis and Frankfort, and Boone of Lebanon, as well as several lesser-known makers.

While each had its individual variations, they all became generically, in the public's mind, "Hoosier" cabinets, and since all are from Indiana, perhaps that's not entirely untrue.

The features that set Hoosier cabinets apart from baker's cabinets are less bulky lines for a start, but it's what's inside that counts. Open the doors to a Hoosier cabinet and it's a cook's wonderland. There's a place for everything, including spice and condiment racks complete with jars, racks for pots and pans, and -- outstandingly -- a built-in flour sifter!

Times changed, however, and as the 20th century progressed, houses became more compact and efficient in themselves, including built-in cupboards, sinks, countertops, etc. There really wasn't room in the kitchen for the stand-alone Hoosier cabinets any more.

One company, Sellers, at least tried to adapt in later years by creating its own line of built-in cabinets, as well as a line of free-standing cabinets with a more modern, almost Art Deco appearance.

Reader J.D. of Noblesville has a set of the latter, later Sellers cabinets, and is trying to find a value. He is right in assuming they came near the end of the Sellers line starting in the 1930s. They were never as popular as the earlier ones, and during World War II, production slowed drastically as the company lost both materials and workers to the war effort. It closed in 1950.

J.D. can't find any reference to these cabinets in price guides, and frankly, neither can I -- nor on the Internet. These later ones, though rare, are not as avidly sought as the earlier ones, but in my opinion, that sort-of Art Deco look makes them really neat! Some of them include matching breakfast sets, but finding a whole outfit would be a challenge indeed.

Since I can't find any price guidelines, I can only advise him to start high (at least \$1,000) and, if necessary, work down.

In 1989, Philip D. Kennedy of Indianapolis independently published an exhaustively researched book, "Hoosier Cabinets," and it remains the definitive work on the subject. Copies can be found on the Internet, as can replacements for lost accessories for Hoosier cabinets, such as spice jars, flour sifters, etc. Go to www.hoosiercabinet.com or www.furnitureknowledge.com. You might also try www.abebooks.com.

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