

# Let's Be Unique!

By Davin Vanatta  
and  
Cendi Smythe

Have you ever walked into the Sunshine Square and seen the cobblers bench? To your left you see a clothing store and to your right there is a shop full of very unique items. Strolling through the **Unique Shop** you see all sorts of antiques, handmade clothes, quilts, toys, jewelry and hand painted plates. Behind a desk sits an elderly woman tending the store. Even this fact is unique, because all the women who tend the store are retired and/or elderly women. Amazingly enough, all items are made or brought in by elderly people. Handmade items and antiques are sold in the store. All the women working in the store enjoy what they are doing, because they get out into the world of Steamboat and into a situation where everyone is working together. The women tend the store for half a day at a time and get no salary. They think talking with people and tending the store is payment enough. This wonderful shop is designed to give elderly and retired people a chance to use their wonderful talents at clerking as well as hand-crafts.



Virginia Andrew, local insurance agent and entrepreneur, was one of the original founders, along with the late Ruth Carver. We (Cendi and Davin) talked with her about founding and establishing the **Unique Shop**.



"It was unusual, so we called it **The Unique Shop**. When Mrs. Carver and I were little girls, we played store and wanted to grow up to have one. But as it ended up, Ruth was a school teacher and after I was a school teacher I had an insurance business and we weren't interested in merchandising as a living. But we got to thinking seriously about a store in '71 mostly because



**Ruth Carver**

Ruth wanted something to do with her time, like bookkeeping, to keep her busy, and I was interested also. She first thought of a used clothing business, and while there has always been a need for it, it's not a paying proposition. A great deal of good can be done, but you don't make enough money. We are a pure cooperative and we have a



board of Directors. Mrs. Vivian Church and Mrs. Dorothy Todd assist me in the store management, but it has always been a loosely structured business. There's nothing in writing."

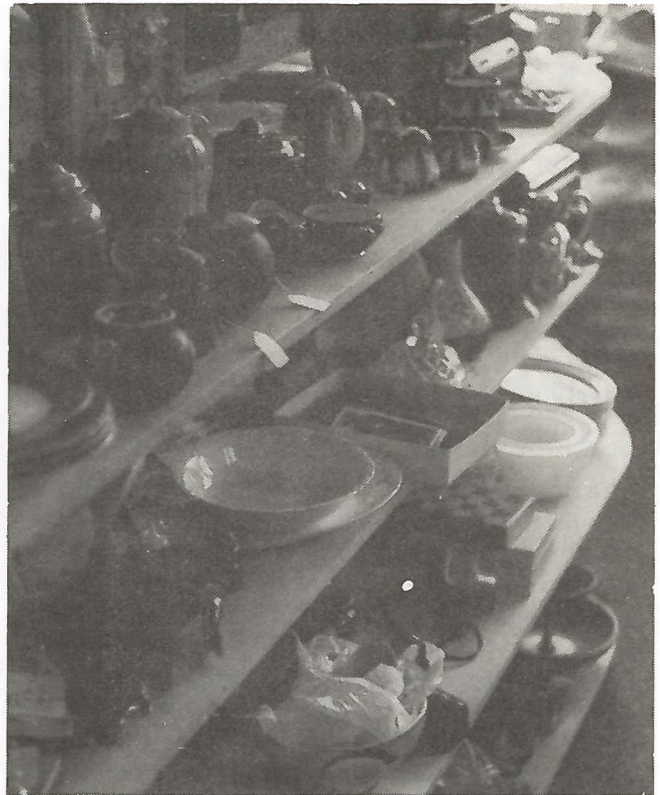
With this loosely structured organization and the dedicated clerks, the pricing often becomes a consensus of those involved. "We price by the book particularly in the antique field, where my expertise lies. We don't try to undercut the other shops, but we do price just as high as others. With our handcrafts we are lower than the shops at the mountain. We have to adjust the prices upward fairly regularly. Our workers are paying for their materials, and they don't get paid much for their work. For most, they are just happy to be busy.

"Another thing that motivated Mrs. Carver and I, was finding out, from a friend, about this elderly lady who made beautiful knit sweaters. Her daughter and family couldn't find out what she did with the sweaters. It was the family's big mystery. They thought she must smuggle them out and give them away. Nobody had ever been observant enough to notice that everything was the same color. One night about two in the morning, the daughter happened to see a light under her mother's door and went to see if anything was wrong. She was unraveling a knitted piece. What she needed was an avenue to sell that one thing so she could get money enough to make something else. (She unraveled the things she made and then remade them.)

"Many a long hour has been spent making articles for the **Unique Shop**. Even though the shopping customers come from all ages, the contributors of goods made are limited to these older people who actually deserve a much higher hourly wage. We have a lot of people who are interested that we can't accommodate; we take consignments from the retired and disabled. If these people priced their labor in proportion to what labor is now, people couldn't afford to buy the goods. Those quilts and afghans and other handmade articles take hours of labor. It's unbelievable how many! The elders only really want to get back the money that they have invested in materials. They hope in this way they can keep making things. That's what they really want to do.

"We were afraid there might not be enough support, so we kept experimenting. I was interested in antiques and appraisal. We ended up getting a shop with antiques and handmade items, made by elderly women.

"We had 17 consigners our first month, six of whom are still with us. I would assume that Mrs. Carver and I put some of our own things in the first minute we opened the doors. Among those who are still living here who have had consignments are Vivian Church, and the Nelsons



### Many different antiques

who sell handmade jewelry, and the Bopeeps who are the Women's Organization of Wool Growers. (We have also sold sheepskin rugs for them.) Lucy Rider and Wilma Marshall still sell handwork too. The handcraft was crochet and knitted work, embroidered things like pillow cases, sun bonnets and that kind of thing. The Nelsons have always made their own hand-polished and hand-mounted jewelry (stoneset). My things have always been antiques. I haven't had time to make handicrafts."

Being in a small town, the new shop opening spread like hometown gossip often does. "Word got around that we were going to do this and how we were going to operate. Most of these people had been in the need of an outlet for their things. They were delighted to have a place where they could get back 85 cents on the dollar.

"With the 15 percent return we help defray the cost of the business. I have funded one-fourth of the rent since the business began, out of my own pocket. At this point we have about a \$600.00 cash equity in the business. If anything disabled me temporarily and I couldn't pay part of the rent that \$600 could be used to pay expenses until some other avenue could be found. I don't think that the shop will ever get big enough under our conceivable management at 15 percent so that we can pay all expenses. We wouldn't do nearly as well as we do if it weren't for the fact that Mrs. Hogue, our landlady, is very sympathetic to our particular problems, and she has never increased our rent. We still pay \$137.00 amonth for the space.



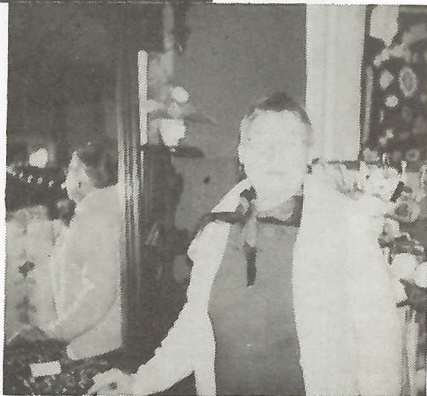
"I will go on with the **Unique Shop** as long as it's feasible because it's a way to sell our things, and a way to dispose of antiques. I have an agreement with Jack Sprengle at the bank since Mrs. Carver's death last year. I felt the need to find someone for ongoing management if anything happened to me, so Jack will assume responsibility if I can no longer do it.

"We have no articles of incorporation and no written agreement. We have customers from all over the U.S. We have people who come back year after year in connection with skiing or hunting who come in to buy gifts to take home. A lot of men are interested in antiques. We do no advertising. It's entirely by word of mouth. We attract a lot of young people. An enormous amount of our antiques are sold to young people and a lot of handcrafts goes to young people. Our very expensive things often go to young people. We had one girl who informed us that she was buying her trousseau. She was going to another state to get married and she said his family had lots of keepsake things and she had none. So she came up here and spent several hundred dollars.



**Hazel  
Henson**

**Myrtle  
Smith**



"We have consigners from all over Colorado and one as far away as California. She lived in Hayden and moved to California.

"One thing that makes the **Unique Shop** so unique is the ladies who work there. All the employees are volunteers and about half of them consign to the shop. Many have never sold a thing; they just do it for the fun of it. They have a good time and get out to see the public. They say they have a reason to get up in the morning. We



**Leslie  
Yount**



**Lucy  
Temple**

older people appreciate attention, and just like anybody else enjoy feeling needed. The shop couldn't function without their work, so it gives them a feeling of being very much needed. They realize just how much they're needed, because when they want to go somewhere and we can't find someone else to tend shop, they must come in. It's doing a great deal of good.

"As far as handcrafts are concerned there is no limit. (We get nothing in art.) I'd like someone who makes wooden toys but I can't find anyone. Mostly crocheted, knitted and embroidered items are consigned. We sell an enormous amount of baby things. Quilts, afghans, pillow cases, embroidered table cloths and antique table cloths. Our antique linens attract young women just like you had hung out honey in front of bees. Occasionally we sell furniture. We don't take cut glass because of the climate and breakage, exposure to heat and cold. We have silverware. We have no leather goods, they don't sell well enough.

"We celebrated our 8th anniversary at the end of October, 1979. We have had an annual luncheon ever since we started. We sometimes get together more often than that. The last couple of years we haven't managed anymore than that because of Mrs. Carver's illness and my being away a good deal. But we see each other a lot and, of course, now that the Senior Citizens Center is down here, most of the people who clerk here are in and out of the Center. It has made it nice for us that the two operations are this close.



"We now have ladies standing in line, waiting for a day to work. Some of them are quite surprised because we have to take them in order and another lady has been here longer. We don't have anyone who is ready to give up their day, so we have these people substituting while they wait. We have two younger clerks, women who are in their 50's who came to help us at a time when we did not have older women to take regular days and neither one of them is willing to surrender their days now. The women like working down here because they can bring their sewing or their books and if they don't have many customers they can keep themselves busy.



**Gertrude  
Campbell**



**Althea  
McNabb  
—board  
member**

**Mina  
Schmidt  
—senior  
clerk**



**Grace  
Luekens  
—senior  
clerk**



"Since the **Unique Shop** opened there have been several different locations and a great variation in prices. The shop has been in three different locations. For its first year it was in a small shop in back of the Sunshine Square. For its second year it was where the leather shop is now in the Sunshine Square. For the last six years it has been right here.

Most of the time they have to watch because we have some shoplifting, but not very much. I think the people in this category are compulsive thieves or professionals. We got hit this summer with a group of older women who were in town. One store figured they'd lost about \$150.00 (wholesale value) in shirts, blouses and dresses. Shoplifters aren't necessarily young kids or long haired people.



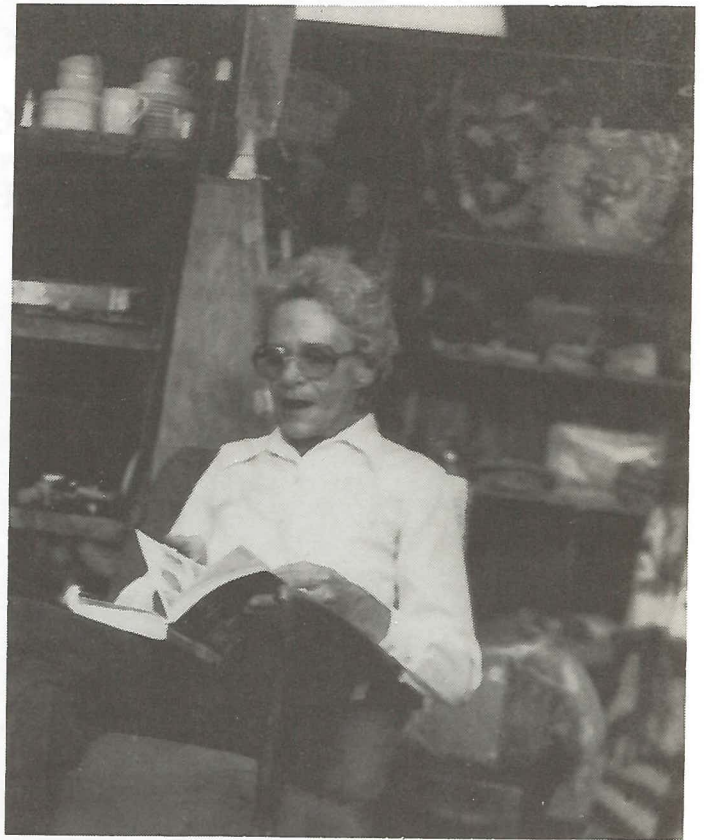
**Vivian Churches  
board member**

Over the last eight years inflation has caused some price changes. We started selling baby afghans at six and seven dollars and now they run 14.00 to 20.00 dollars. Pillowcases have doubled in price. Now the really nice ones are



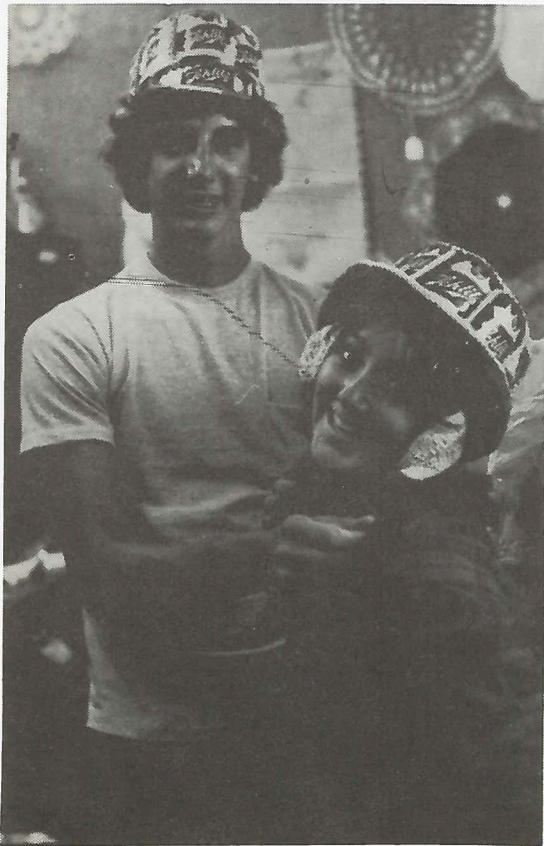


fifteen dollars. Antiques, I don't think you could consider their increased price as inflation. It's a steady upward push because of the decreasing amount of antiques that are available. One thing that I really boast about is an irritated comment made to me by an antique dealer on the Eastern slope who said I had really fowled up the market over here for cheap antiques. And I told him I was complimented, that's exactly what I intended to do. People come here with pickups and offer to haul away all this junk. Sometimes we don't know and take nominal amounts for things that are extremely valuable. I've got people now, who are scared to take stuff to the dump without letting me look at it. You'd be surprised how many people want to consign things to the shop that they have picked up at the dump, because it's a paying business. Some of these people go out to the city dump at house cleaning time and find some fantastic stuff that's just been tossed out. Our major upward price push is reflected by inflation in materials, not getting more for the time spent, but having to pay double, for thread, kits and materials.



## Esther Norris bookkeeping and pricing

Virginia Andrew, sponsor of the **Unique Shop**, has had several careers in her lifetime. She has been a school teacher, homemaker, foster mother, writer for the **Pilot** and an insurance broker. For many people in the community who have worked with Virginia in the **Unique Shop** she stands as a true representative of what the elders of Yampa Valley can produce. Go in and browse around sometime -- you'll be amazed at what you'll find that's unique!



**The Mad Hatters Cendi and Davin**

I am very pleased with your patience and persistence. Trying to put together something like this involving a large group must be especially difficult. Best Wishes,

Virginia Andrews

