

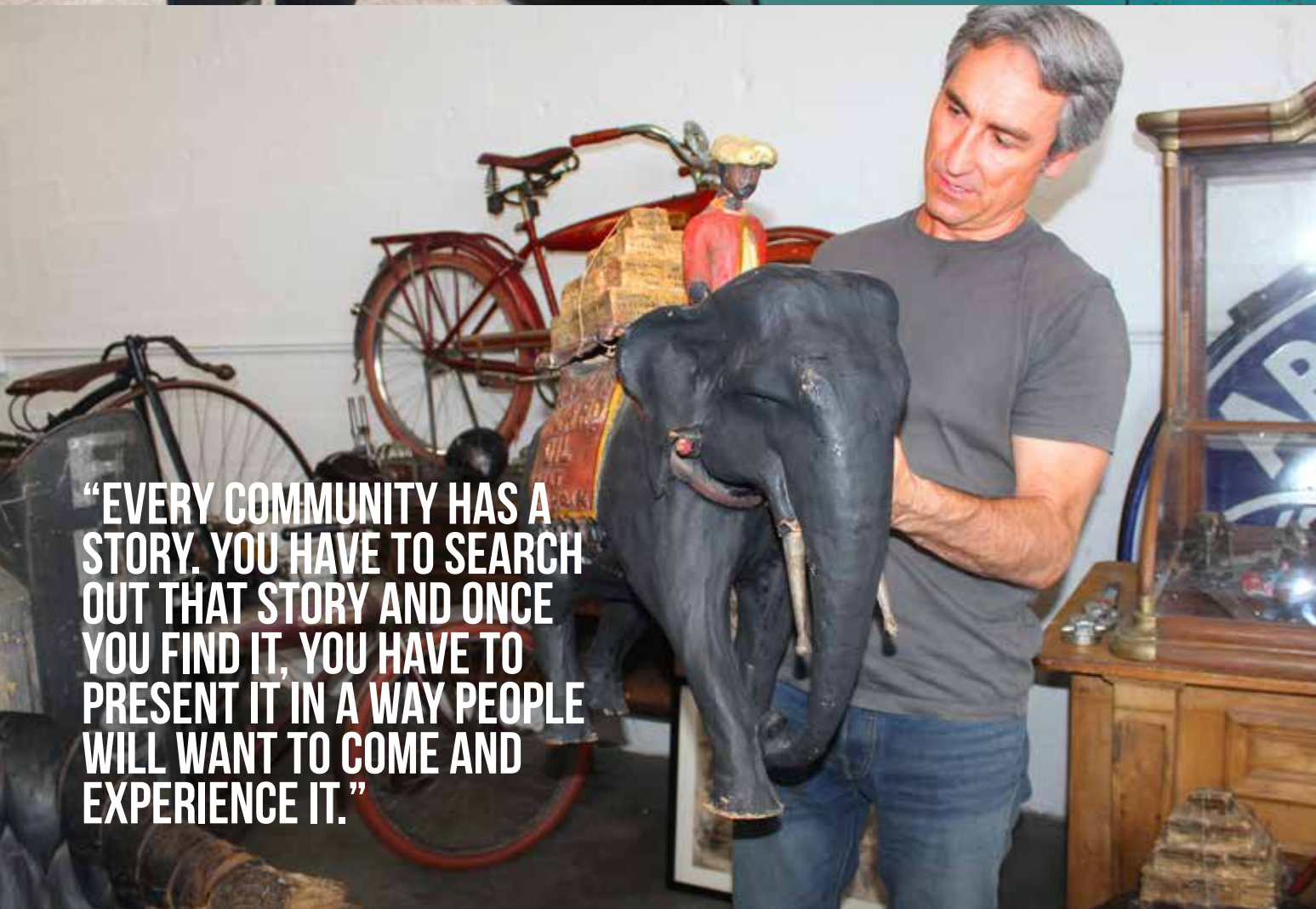


Fans of “American Pickers” tune in every Monday night to watch Mike Wolfe and Frank Fritz set off across the country in search of hidden treasure. As the show nears the 10-year mark, Wolfe says he’s grateful their travels have allowed him to see much of rural America up-close because it’s slowly slipping away. Despite what some experts say, he believes it’s not too late to save small-town America, and he’s proving it in Columbia, Tennessee.

# FINDING TREASURES IN SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

Story and photography by Pam Windsor





**“EVERY COMMUNITY HAS A STORY. YOU HAVE TO SEARCH OUT THAT STORY AND ONCE YOU FIND IT, YOU HAVE TO PRESENT IT IN A WAY PEOPLE WILL WANT TO COME AND EXPERIENCE IT.”**

Mike Wolfe spends much of his time traveling the back roads of America. For nearly a decade, he and co-star Frank Fritz, have taken television viewers into some of the most remote places in the country. They search through junkyards, old barns, houses, basements, then sift through shelves, boxes and drawers as they look for antiques and collectibles. “American Pickers” debuted in 2010, but Wolfe was crisscrossing the country long before the TV show.

“I’ve been in the antique industry for 30 years,” he says. “I would literally drive for hours on gravel roads. There are no street signs on gravel and you often don’t know where you are, but you just keep going. I knew when I was close to a town because I’d see a water tower. I’d drive towards the water tower, go into a town, look around in alleys, and talk to people.”

He loved exploring lesser-known parts of America and soon began looking for a way to share his experiences with others.

“I found myself with this burning, uncontrollable desire to tell these people’s stories. The places I would go, the people and things I would experience in the middle of nowhere. So, I bought a camera and just started filming myself.”

Wolfe, who was living in Iowa, began gravitating toward Nashville. It was there he got the guidance he needed to pitch a TV show.

“I learned a lot from my friends here in Nashville who were in music production and video. They told me what a ‘treatment’ was. They said if you’re going to pitch a show, you need to write a ‘treatment.’ They helped me with a ‘sizzle reel’ and what it needed to look like. That was our connection and why we ended up moving to Nashville. And also, a lot of our really close friends back home were moving away.”

Wolfe now calls Tennessee home. He and his family live in Leiper’s Fork and he has an Antique Archaeology store in Nashville that sells many of the items he “picks” for his TV show. (He also has a store in Le Claire, Iowa).

“American Pickers” keeps Wolfe on the road about two weeks out of every month. When he’s home, he often pops into the Nashville store where he approves every item on display. Antique Archaeology has become quite a tourist attraction.

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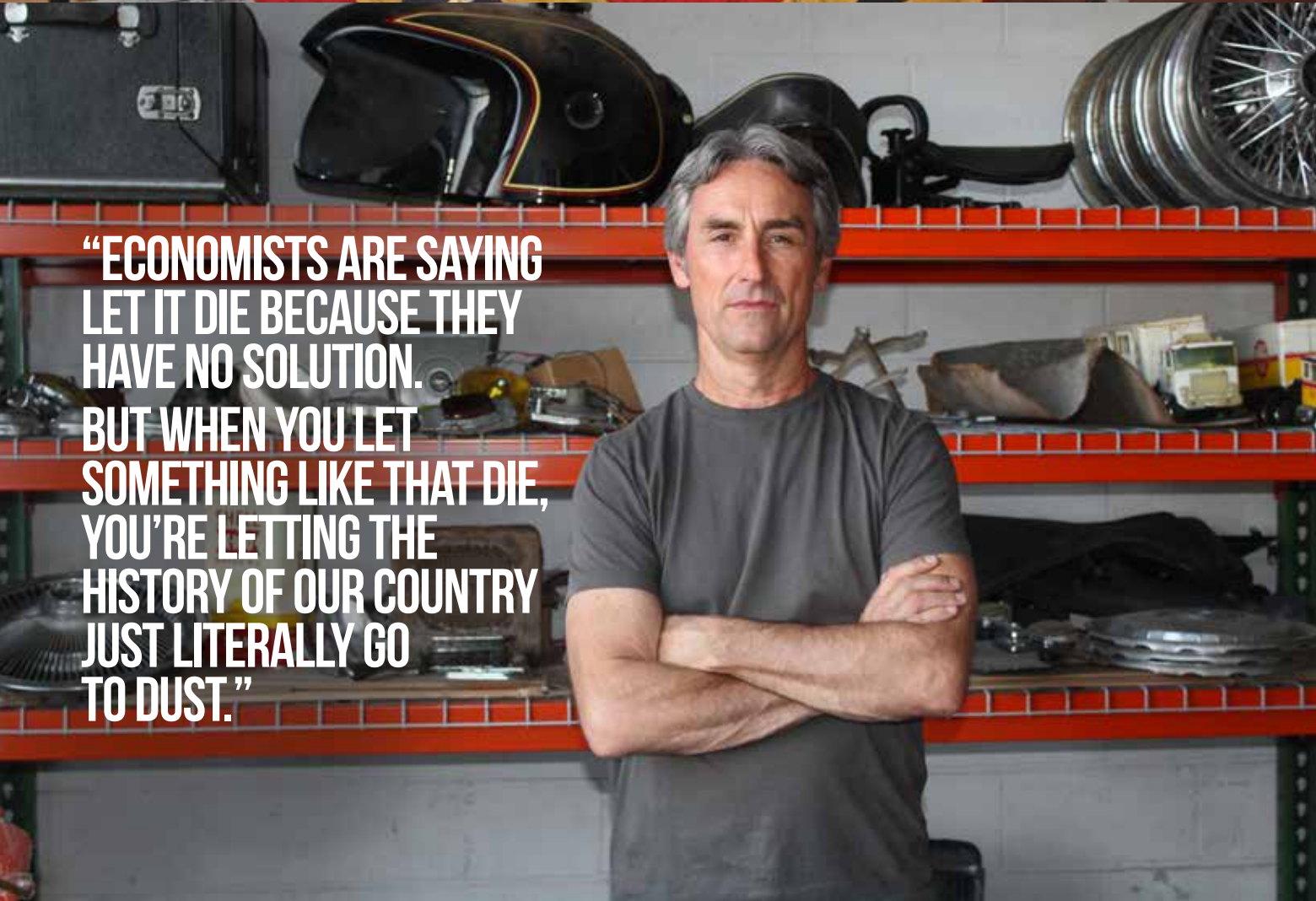
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**“ECONOMISTS ARE SAYING LET IT DIE BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO SOLUTION. BUT WHEN YOU LET SOMETHING LIKE THAT DIE, YOU’RE LETTING THE HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY JUST LITERALLY GO TO DUST.”**

“People come here from all over the world,” says Manager Lauren Wray Grisham, “And I often hear them say they’re on their second or third visit because we always have new stuff. I don’t know of many places where you can come in and find something you saw on television. It’s kind of a like a hands-on museum/TV set.”

While the store in Nashville draws big crowds, that’s also true of the Antique Archaeology in Le Claire. Grisham says people who watch “American Pickers” feel a special connection to Wolfe and the people and items they see on the show.

“Everybody has something they collect, something they love. And Mike is such a great storyteller. I think people can really relate to him and how he presents things and values the collectors and people selling them.”

Wolfe’s relatability has a lot to do with his deep appreciation for rural America. He grew up in a small town and through his travels has been able to explore so many of the places that once helped build this country. Sadly, though, they’re slipping away.

“They’re all literally disappearing,” he says. “Rural America is getting smaller and there’s no middle class anymore. I spoke at the Los Angeles Travel Show about five years ago and I told everybody, ‘If you want to see small town America and visit these places, you’d better get out and experience them now because they’re quickly going away.’”

Many of those towns were once thriving manufacturing communities, but as businesses and jobs moved on, so did the people living there.”

“Economists are saying let it die because they have no solution. But when you let something like that die, you’re letting the history of our country just literally go to dust,” he says.

Wolfe believes saving small town America will require a different way of thinking.

“If there’s no industry, whether it’s because the job has been replaced by a robot or the job has been replaced by going overseas to China, what brings these people back into these communities?

He believes the answer is to build a future on the past.

“Every community has a story,” he explains. “You have to search out that story and once you find it, you have to present it



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in a way people will want to come and experience it. People are interested in exploring their country and learning about it.”

Wolfe has seen it work. He helped the small town of Le Claire successfully showcase its past and he’s working to do the same in Columbia, Tennessee. (Columbia is about 45 miles outside Nashville.) While the two vary in size, Wolfe says – like so many small towns – they each have unique stories.

“For example, in LeClair, Iowa, Buffalo Bill lived there. The riverboat industry was there, the clam fisheries were there, they had button factories there. Great stories to tell!” he says with enthusiasm. “It’s the same with Columbia. It has great architecture, it was the county seat, the (President James) Polk house is here, there were shirt factories, the phosphate industry was here, but it was also Muletown. The breeding of mules in this community was above and beyond anywhere else in the United States. Look at the old photographs of mule auctions, they would pack the town square.”

To honor that part of its heritage, Columbia hosts an annual Mule Day festival every April.

Wolfe currently owns four buildings in downtown Columbia. He’s restoring them to house retail stores and Airbnbs. He’s using his own collectibles to personally decorate his Two Lane Guest Houses set to open later this year. One of his structures is a former auto dealership built just after the end of World War II. Wolfe plans to bring it back to the way

it looked in old photos, complete with curved glass windows. It currently houses the automotive shop where many of the vehicles he finds for “American Pickers” are repaired or brought back to their former glory.

He’s part of a dedicated group working to revitalize the downtown area.

“We formed a marketing alliance similar to one we had in Iowa,” he says. “It’s called Grow Columbia where people are working to promote this corridor.”

During a walking tour of the downtown area, Wolfe pointed out the growing number of attractions for both locals and tourists.

“We have great places for food including a Thai restaurant, we have music venues, an antique mall, a record store, a bookstore, a bicycle shop, a health food store, a sporting goods store, we’ve got Taps on Main, and more. We’ve got a children’s museum and the Duck River for canoeing and kayaking.”

He says small towns can also offer business opportunities young entrepreneurs could never afford in bigger cities.

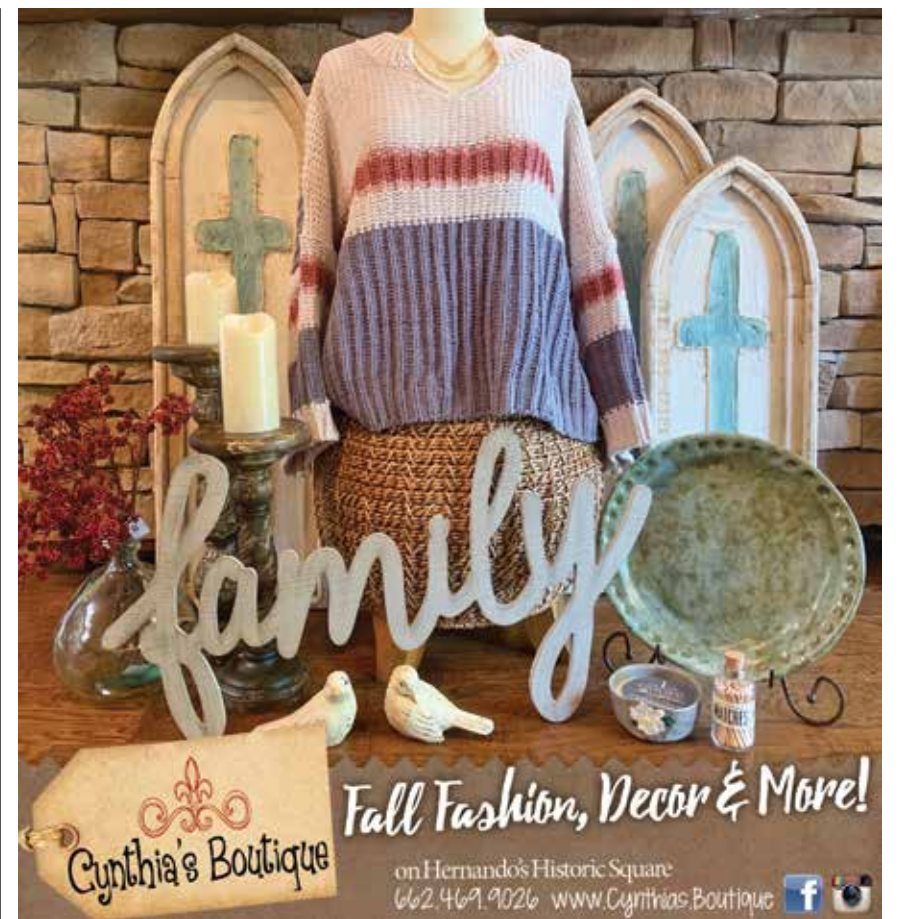
“We did a show with a guy in Kansas who had just graduated from a college that was teaching him automotive restoration for antique cars. He needed like 50,000 square feet because he was going to sell antique car parts, but he

also needed to work there. He chose this small town in Kansas where he could buy this 50,000 square foot building for around \$30,000. And since 90 percent of his sales were online, he didn’t need foot traffic.”

Wolfe says he’s drawn to Columbia, in part, because it reminds him of his hometown, and so many other small towns across the country. He sees a lot of potential here.

“Columbia’s got everything going for it. The flame was always there, it was just people fanning the flame, feeding it, and giving it fuel.”

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Pam Windsor is a full-time freelance writer based in Nashville.



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