



Where others saw junk,  
one man saw giant historical  
treasures that he brought  
home to the otherwise  
obscure town of Silver Star

# THE COLLECTOR

BY JODI HAUSEN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK PETERSEN

**T**HEY CALL LLOYD HARKINS THE  
BIG WHEEL IN SILVER STAR.

Driving through his tiny Madison County town that epitomizes the adage “blink and you’ll miss it,” one is unlikely to overlook the gargantuan iron wheels that flank the roadside edge of the 89-year-old’s property.

Surrounded by mountains and ranches, Lloyd’s home, fronted by Montana Route 41 halfway between Whitehall and Twin Bridges, seems to have sprouted a crop of old mining machinery, oversized blacksmithing tools and vintage gas-station signs. There’s all manner of classic cars and trucks, restored train cars, architectural pieces and other remnants of times gone by. In fact, there’s several thousand tons of machinery scattered around his eight-acre lot.

“I just started collecting stamps and it got out of hand,” Lloyd says.

**BORN IN EASTERN MONTANA** during the Great Depression, Lloyd's mother died when he was about 4. Because his father worked for the railroad for \$1.50 a day, he couldn't care for Lloyd and his seven siblings. So Lloyd and several of his brothers and sisters were sent to an orphanage. At the time, orphanages farmed out their young charges to local ranchers for cheap labor. And thus was Lloyd's fate.

When he was about 13, the orphanage sent him to a ranch in Silver Star — the third oldest town in Montana and the first with a registered, or patented, underground mine. He was sent to the ranch partly because he was always a hard worker. But, as one might expect, life as an adolescent ranch hand was brutal.

"They never had enough to eat," said his daughter, Marilyn Dale.

Lloyd told her stories of sneaking into the ranch house basement at night with another child laborer to eat some of the canned goods stored there.

"They threw the (empty) jars in the sleuth so they wouldn't get caught," she said.



Antique gasoline pumps line the inside of Lloyd's 4,000-square-foot "shed" where he stores the bulk of his antiques.

In 1942, Lloyd joined the military. He worked in shipyards in California and Oregon, but soon returned to Silver Star where he found work in the Butte mines. He toiled underground for more than two decades. He married his wife Ann on April 16, 1944, he says, glancing over at her sitting in an easy chair in their cozy living room, an oxygen tube across her cheeks.

"I stood up pretty good," he says to her, smiling.

**A LINE OF ANTIQUE** water pumps painted in bright primary colors welcomes visitors to the Harkins' modest home. A railroad signal towers above its roof.

Despite the big-wheel moniker, Lloyd is an unassuming man who occasionally uses a cane "just for safety" to walk around his eight acres. Inside the fenced-in yard are silver-painted "cages" that formerly transported workers up and down Butte's mine-shafts. The 6-by-10-foot cages carried up to 64 miners — 32 per level. It was cramped quarters for the ride that lasted nearly an hour.

"We were in there like tin soldiers," Lloyd says. "You'd have to put your lunch pail between your legs." Standing on the metal grating on the top level was preferable than being relegated to the lower one.

"The shenanigans that would happen in the cages," Lloyd says. "Guys in the top cage would dump sand or water on the guys below."

Not far from the cages, a 1910 Caterpillar bulldozer is seemingly rusted in place. Several antique Cadillacs are parked in a timeless traffic jam. Across the yard, an ornate Art Deco iron door from a Butte hotel leans against a 75-foot timber headframe. The headframe once held the sheave wheels used to hoist cages out of Butte's West Grey Rock mine. The wooden headframe is the only remaining one of its kind, Lloyd says. Modern headframes are typically concrete or steel.

When the underground mines in Butte were shutting down in the 1960s, Lloyd scrambled to save as much of their machinery and infrastructure as he could.

"I don't remember a time when he wasn't collecting," Marilyn said of her father. "He was almost obsessed. He felt people

should actually see the thing that made the historical event rather than just read about it. And his passion was saving the history of the mining industry."

"They were junking all that stuff in Butte and he was there every weekend bringing something home," said Larry Harkins, Lloyd's son. "The bigger, the more it weighed, the more unique, the more he wanted it."

"I just didn't want to see it all junked," Lloyd says. "They junked a thousand times what I have here."



Lloyd Harkins wanders through one of his warehouses full of relic mining equipment and antiques.

He moved most of the pieces on his own.

"He was a big man and was very, very strong," Larry said.

Despite not finishing high school, Lloyd calculated the physics of moving and reconstructing massive pieces of machinery. If the pyramids of Egypt needed to be salvaged, he'd find a way to do it, Marilyn said.

Occasionally, he'd ask for help.

"If Lloyd asked Larry or my husband to help him, they knew it was something huge," Marilyn said. "He could do more with a block and tackle than a whole bunch of men with a truckload of moving equipment."

**A FEW YARDS FROM** the headframe, Lloyd's 4,000-square-foot "shed" is filled with more cast-offs of former times. A bulky, brightly painted red water pump that formerly pushed water to Butte from a reservoir near the Big Hole River fills nearly a quarter of the building. A power hammer and anvil that together weigh about 60 tons fill another area of the wood-frame, metal-sided structure that was built around the machinery.

Lloyd opens a large bay door to let natural light in, revealing a row of antique gasoline pumps lined up like vintage soldiers of the oil industry. But Lloyd's collection is not just a compilation of heavy metal. Each piece has a history and Lloyd is delighted to regale visitors for hours with the story behind just about every one.

Some of those tales are as heavy as the machinery itself.

In addition to the head-turning mining compressor wheels at the front of his property, more iron wheels stand upright in Lloyd's yard, sentries to a tragic history. They weigh between 60 and 85 tons apiece, he says. One of those wheels and its cables hauled cages up from Butte's Speculator mine in 1917 after the Granite Mountain mine fire that killed 167 men. The fire in the Granite Mountain mine was so fierce, its shaft was closed, so the bodies had to be brought up through the Speculator mine, Lloyd says. When the cage reached the surface, a whistle sounded, alerting waiting



family members that more dead miners had arrived topside.

"It was a sad deal," Lloyd says. "The women would gather round to identify the bodies."

Lloyd has that whistle too.

**THOUGH HE WAS** particularly fascinated with the huge, heavy machinery from local underground mines, Lloyd went through different stages of collecting. He started with old cars, then became fascinated with steam tractors and excavators, Larry said. It was during that period that Lloyd acquired a huge steam shovel from the cement plant in Trident.

"They were going to junk it and cut it up for scrap," Larry said.

Lloyd instead saved the excavator once used to build the Panama Canal — another rare piece of mechanical history.

"That's the only one that we're aware of in the United States," Larry said.

So rare, in fact, that when the Smithsonian Museum was creating an exhibit about the Panama Canal, they borrowed the steam shovel's bucket. Though the bucket returned to Silver Star,

the machine has never been reassembled — much to Lloyd's dismay, Larry said. But Smithsonian curators weren't alone in their interest in Lloyd's collection. Disney also knocked on his door.

Lloyd sold ore cars and other items — about nine semi-trucks worth — to Disney's "imagineers" who used them in Indiana Jones rides at Disneyland in California and Paris.

**AROUND THE SAME TIME** Lloyd was hauling tons of mining detritus to Silver Star, members of a Butte civic organization were making plans to create the World Mining Museum there.

"Lloyd was instrumental in helping to create the museum in the 1960s," curator Dolores Cooney said. He donated "a multitude of items too numerous to mention."

Among them were original ore wagons from a Cooke City mine, complete with wooden wheels and a Fordson Snow Devil — an innovative tractor built in the mid-1920s and designed to haul several-ton loads over deep snow. Only a few still exist today, Cooney said.