



Don't Hang Up When Jeffus Rings You Up

Collector has amassed loads of memorabilia

BY GEORGIA FISHER
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Let's say your name is John Doe, and you're in your early 50s. For the sake of storytelling, we'll also pretend Doe was the married name of a former beauty queen named Jane. She lived near Davis Street in the 1930s, and eventually opened a neighborhood grocery store with her husband.

Once, in an episode of great family shame, Jane drank at work, hurled a quality turkey breast at an old romantic rival, and spent the night in jail. Otherwise, life was happy for many years, and she had children and grandchildren — including you.

Anyway. You don't know W.K. Jeffus from Adam, but one day the phone rings, and it's him. He talks fast. He's used public records to find you — doesn't hurt that he once held a job as a private investigator — and guess what? He has original news clippings of Granny Jane's pageant photos and her wedding announcement. There's an ad from her store's grand opening, and maybe a vague report about a poultry incident there.

It can all be yours — for a price.

"I've sold families stuff they've never seen before," said the 60-something Jeffus, who was the subject of a 2007 *D Magazine* profile after one of his targets happened to be a journalist. "People aren't saving this stuff. They don't know to."

The Oak Cliff native ekes



STAFF PHOTO: CHRIS MCGATHEY

An ad for an Oak Cliff appearance by "The White Mahatma of India" is part of W.K. Jeffus' collection of old newspaper clippings.

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W.K. JEFFUS



Jeffus' archiving system may be archaic, as are his use of a land line phone and his lack of a computer, but he prefers it that way.

out a living selling Dallas archives to those who can't help but buy them: relatives of long-gone story subjects and advertisers, owners of historic buildings, and anyone else whose modern life has ties to the printed past.

His office? A ramshackle, nearly century-old West 10th Street manse filled with piles and piles of yellowed relics that date to 1892 —

original papers gleaned from friends, estate sales, and Jeffus' willingness to screech to a halt when he sees someone gutting an old building.

Buyers pay him \$100 for each full newspaper page and smaller sums for single clips — around \$14,000 a year, all told.

He's proud to talk about the time Ross Perot personally shot down a sales pitch. And he said he keeps

a special file for Harlan Crow. "He's a huge history buff," said Jeffus. "And let me tell ya, sister, he ain't broke."

Jeffus, for his part, doesn't own a computer or even use one. He types invoices on a 1948 Olympia typewriter. ("This baby does me a world of good! And if it breaks, I've got five more upstairs!") And he digs the old-fashioned way. An 80-year-old city

directory might point to a housing deed, for instance, or to someone's living relatives.

"He's got a plethora of information," said Kevin Hickman of Sarofim Realty Advisors, which oversees various Knox Street properties. In 2009, when Jeffus presented him with nearly 50 vintage ads for respective clients, "I was, you know, shocked," recalled Hickman, who hopes to

compile a digital timeline. "I didn't realize some of this was still around."

Even Jeffus' day-to-day material reads like a history lesson, from an undated ordinance about the West Dallas Pike becoming Fort Worth Avenue to other, more somber things.

When a bicyclist was seriously injured on Lancaster Road, the 1937 headline screamed he was "nearly scalped." A "death car" stars in the *Times-Herald's* coverage of a gruesome 1950 accident near Lake Cliff Park. Worse, a short piece that refers namelessly to two local "negroes" is inches from one about a Mr. and Mrs. Such-and-Such — no doubt white.

Then there's "The White Mahatma of India," a campy fortune-teller whose 1932 gig at the Bishop Avenue Theater was advertised in the long-defunct *Dallas Journal*. That theater spot now holds Artisan's Collective.

A 1949 ad — one that could be from the back page of any current alt-weekly — features burlesque dancer "Sunny Knight" from a place called Pappy's Showland, in the 500 block of Fort Worth Avenue.

"People like taboo," Jeffus said with a shrug. "They look for a way to say, 'Gaw-lee.'"

Maybe they're also looking for a way to connect.

"I still go out in what we call 'the field,' and talk to people face-to-face," Jeffus said, before going on a soft rant about iPhones and disengaged youth. "If you think opposite of everybody else, you have a better chance of getting noticed and doing something different."

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