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## Eyes on the pies



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A pie safe is on display at the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley in Winchester. The safe, originally from Rockingham County, is one of many made in the valley when pie safes were in almost every home. Now more difficult to find, pie safes have become trendy to own. Dennis Grundman/Daily

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### Local researcher to memorialize popular old furniture piece

By M.K. Luther -- [mkluther@nvdaily.com](mailto:mkluther@nvdaily.com)

FRONT ROYAL -- While almost every household was once graced with a pie safe, the cabinets and cupboards have become a vanishing yet prized item in recent decades.

A Mount Crawford researcher is starting a project to memorialize the heritage of the cherished Shenandoah Valley pie safe.

Jeffrey Evans, owner of Jeffrey Evans and Associates auctions, and Lexington-based scholar Kurt Russ are working to create a catalog of pie safes through the Virginia Safe Project. The expansive research and historical detection undertaking will include the Northern Shenandoah Valley region, concentrating on locating safes from and in Shenandoah County, Evans said.

"There will be a tremendous amount of research in Shenandoah County," he said. "It is one of the prime focus counties."

The researchers are looking for a wide assortment of the pie safes and plan to begin field work through the counties. The majority of the safes have been traced to families in Shenandoah and Rockingham counties, Evans said.

The distinctive Shenandoah Valley pie safe is characterized by the punch-hole work in tin panels and painted decorative elements handcrafted by artisans, Evans said.

The pie safes have become harder and harder to find as collectors and antiques dealers have scarfed them up, he said. "Unfortunately, a lot of the pie safes have left the area."

Evans said the catalog will ensure the pie safes' permanence and build a record that will never be lost.

"We are trying to record these before they leave, because once they are gone they lose their provenance," Evans said.

The safes reflect the region's Germanic roots and are fine examples of Shenandoah Valley furniture making, he said.

"[The cabinetry] is a wide range of forms, but the pie safe is the most recognizable," Evans said.

The valley pie safes were originally used to store baked goods, with the tin and punch holes allowing for cooling and ventilation. However, as Shenandoah Valley furniture making evolved,

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cabinetmakers became more creative with the form, Evans said. The pie safe became less of a utilitarian kitchen piece and more of a distinguished and elegant part of dining room decor.

The cabinet form, which can be traced to Pennsylvania, moved into Virginia by the 1820s to 1830s, Evans said.

The safes become prevalent in the Shenandoah Valley by the 1850s, with cabinetmakers often working with tinsmiths to craft pieces that are now considered art.

"It is an interesting collaboration between two artisans," Evans said. "That is what really puts some of these pieces into the folk

art category -- these are artists expressing themselves with these flourishes."

The catalog and research project could end with a traveling exhibit, Evans said, and might include the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, which keeps one pie safe on permanent display in the decorative arts gallery.

Arleen Narron, owner of Arleen Brown's Antiques in Front Royal, said the pie safes are the best examples of "exquisite" German craftsmanship and furniture making, but to find one now in a shop or through an antique dealer can be a challenge.

"Any Virginia country antique is rare by definition because the Civil War destroyed a lot of furniture," Narron said. "Anything built in the valley is relatively rare and highly cherished."

Narron, who has been in the antiques business for more than 30 years, said the "humbler safes" are painted, while some are more ornate, with decorative patterns in the tin.

Burt Long, of Burt Long Antiques in New Market, has made the much-sought-after safes his specialty. Long said the safes are constructed in a "finer way" of cabinetmaking, with turned or tapered legs, making them prized valley antiques.

Long said he started building his collection in the 1980s from private family sales.

"[The pie safes] were quite abundant then," Long said. "Families then did not keep as many family heirlooms as they do now. It wasn't as trendy to keep them as it is now."

### Project contact

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