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Construction crews work recently in expanding the size of the current Et Cetera Shop in Liberal. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

By RACHEL COLEMAN

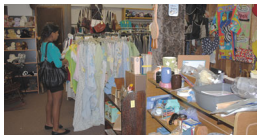
• Leader & Times

It's a Friday afternoon, payday for many people, and the Red Barn is bustling. The two-story structure at 748 S. Kansas Ave., formally known as the Et Cetera Shop, bursts with resale merchandise and thrifty shoppers. To the right of the entrance, a rocking chair nestles among a maze of crowded bookshelves. To the left, a crib, a twin-sized mattress and an assortment of small tables threaten to fill the narrow aisle.

Throughout the rest of the two-story shop, toasters shine next to racks of cleaned-up shoes of all sizes, and clothing spills from bins and racks. In short, the Et Cetera Shop is bursting at the seams.

Outside, workers from Wolters Construction of Hugoton, wrap up their work for the week. The Red Barn will soon expand with the addition of a large, one-story shop to the north, though construction is expected to take two months, maybe longer.

Everyone — workers, managers, volunteers and the seven supporting churches that created the shop — is excited to gain space, said clothing manager Nancy Inmon.



“We’re always trying to clear out merchandise,” she said, listing nearly 10 storage facilities that currently hold the overflow. People bring items, sometimes truckloads and trailers full, every day, said Inmon, and the shop scrambles to keep up.

“We always have people working in the back, cleaning, processing, pricing,” she said. “When our new facility is finished, this building will be used just for that. Maybe it’s just a dream, but it would be nice to have an area for us to work on the electric and electronic items that are donated, another area for shoes, even a washing machine and a sewing station.”

Inmon’s wishes are not unreasonable in light of the shop’s history. According to Lilian Quiring, chair of the directing board, the Et Cetera Shop’s nearly 30-year history is one of big visions applied to small, everyday matters.

“The history alone is worth a story by itself,” said Quiring. In affiliation with the Mennonite Central Committee, seven area churches in three states joined to establish a shop in Liberal in 1978. Those founding members, from Liberal and Meade; Adams, Balko and Turpin, Okla.; and

Perryton, Texas, opened the original shop at 319 N. Kansas, now the location of Goldilocks Pawn Shop.

Known as a “10,000 Villages” shop, the original venture offered hand-made craftwork from artisans living in poverty in Third-World Countries.

“Mary Franz, from the Turpin Mennonite Church, had seen these beautiful crafts at the store in Newton,” Quiring said. “She was approached to see if there might be interest among the Mennonites in Southwest Kansas and the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles to open such a shop. The answer was ‘Yes!’”

Five years later, in 1983, the Et Cetera Shop moved to its current location. By this time, volunteer workers, mostly farm wives, had established a store that blended the mission of social justice with practical needs close to home. The thrift store operated on the second level of the Red Barn, while the main floor offered Third World crafts. Over time, said Inmon, the shop responded to local preferences and switched to a completely resale business.

As an exchange point for used items, the shop filled two needs in the community, noted a history of the Et Cetera Shop prepared by committee member Naomi Plett.

“It provides a place for customers to purchase good, used, clean clothing and other house wares at a reasonable price,” she noted, “and it provides a place for people to bring the items they no longer need or want, rather than take them to the dump.”

Very little is discarded from the Et Cetera Shop. Clothing and shoes that are not salable go to a processing center in Newton, where MCC volunteers repair and sort items for other use. Some are baled and shipped to Third World countries, where the poorest inhabitants have little access to inexpensive clothing. Some, such as rubber-soled shoes unfit for wear, are recycled.

In all its efforts, said Inmon, “MCC is careful to really help people. We don’t ship the bales of clothing to places where that would end up putting people out of work. There’s a lot of research and care that goes into the process.”

Locally, the shop also seeks to fill the gaps that often cause problems for low-income people, new arrivals, refugees and families in crisis.

“We have a wide variety of customers,” Inmon said. “Some people really come for clothing and the bare necessities. Some are collectors, some resell items on the Internet. We’ve had a lot of people come in lately who are helping build the ethanol plant in Hugoton, and they furnish their rented apartments reasonably by buying used items here.”

Inmon sees the shop as a valuable component in the local economy.

“It does so much good for so many different people,” she said. “When I was raising my boys, it helped make that money stretch from paycheck to paycheck.”

The Et Cetera Shop, true to its Mennonite ethos, often helps families in need. Over the past year, the store stepped in to provide clothing and household supplies for a family whose home burned to the ground, and donated items to relief efforts in tornado-ravaged Moore, Okla.

“Sometimes a person will come in who’s just been released from prison, and who needs everything,” Inmon said. “It’s great to be able to help.”

Then there are the recreational shoppers, like customer Nettie James, who stopped in on her way home from work.

“I’ve been coming here since 1987,” she said. “You really do find nice things here, at a good price. I go to all the stores in town, too, but I always stop in at the Red Barn.” James had found two attractive tops, a sundress and a necklace and bracelet. “This is a great place to shop,” she said as she headed out the door.

James wasn't the only satisfied customer. While mothers sorted through clothing, children looked at games and toys, including a collectible Barbie doll. Inmon said that as parents scramble to prepare for another school year, volunteers at the store make a greater effort to stock the racks with items that will appeal. A bin of backpacks occupies a prominent spot on the main floor, and the shoe racks upstairs are "constantly being refilled," said Inmon. "We've had someone working all day, just cleaning and pricing shoes." An alcove beneath the staircase offers children's books, including teaching supplies.

"One lady came in yesterday, a new first-grade teacher, and she bought everything we had for younger students," Inmon said. "She was pretty excited to find those things."

Treasure-hunters can also unearth unexpected items in the Red Barn. A rack of piano music stands near freshly-laundered curtains and comforters, board games and puzzles fill two shelves, and fabric remnants, neatly rolled, occupy a large bin.

"We have something for everyone," said Inmon. "Hopefully, soon, we will have even more merchandise out."

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