



## Collecting the Past

*'If I had a bigger house, there  
would be more Christmas'*

BY JANINE TOMS  
PHOTOGRAPHY • DWIGHT STORRING

**T**om Reitz believes everyone is a collector at heart.

"I don't care who you are, you're collecting something," says Reitz, former curator of Doon Heritage Village. "I believe there's something in people's psyche, a need to collect."

For Reitz, that "need" revolves around Christmas ornaments.

Even in childhood, he was fascinated with the decorations on his family's Christmas tree, especially those passed down from his grandparents.

Tom Reitz's collection of ornaments is predominantly made up of bells of all shapes and sizes.







**ABOVE:** Tom Reitz poses with one of his decorated Christmas trees in his home in Cambridge.

**RIGHT:** Among Tom Reitz's Christmas ornaments is this glass decoration, part of a collection from the early to mid-20th century.

"They were so delicate and special. To me, it was a grand occasion each year when they came out of storage."

Another layer of beautiful imagery was added while he was attending graduate school at Eastern Illinois University. Reitz and his classmates were invited to a professor's home at Christmas where the tree was covered with antique ornaments.

"It was just stunningly beautiful, with all these tiny blue lights," he recalls. "I couldn't take my eyes off it. I had never seen anything like it."

Reitz earned a master's degree in historical administration and became curator of Doon Heritage Crossroads, now known as Doon Heritage Village and part of the Waterloo

Region Museums. He was at the helm 31 years, retiring in 2016.

A large part of the museum's programming has always been based around Christmas, and Reitz's personal interest was also growing.

In his early days on the job, Reitz became acquainted with Bob and Edith Lenz, the owners of a holiday-inspired storefront at Sawmill Antiques in Roseville, Ont.

"Everywhere was Christmas, things that I will never see again, beautiful things," says Reitz, 59.

As a fledgling collector, he credits the Lenzes with teaching him what to look for. "Both Bob and Edith were very generous with their knowledge."







**ABOVE:** Santa Claus figures cluster beneath one of the trees.

**RIGHT:** Reitz's interests are piqued by more than the trappings of Christmas. This miniature table and chairs match those in his dining room, so he uses them to recreate a tableau of his home atop the china cabinet.



The Lenzes were also members of the Golden Glow of Christmas Past, an American-based collectors' organization. Now 1,600-members strong, with more than 10,000 followers on Facebook, the group meets each year for a four-day convention that includes keynote speakers and exhibits of the members' finest collections.

Reitz joined in 2012, when he felt his collection was sizable enough – and he knew that he needed to learn more. He soon befriended like-minded enthusiasts from around the world.

Members support one another in their search for specific items, share historical information, as well as give advice on how to tell reproductions from originals, and how to care for and store collections.

“These collectors come from all types of backgrounds and what ties them together is their love of Christmas,” Reitz says.

Reitz's focus is on glass ornaments from the 1930s to the 1960s, and last year he had them smartly displayed on 10 “trees” made from dyed goose feathers twisted on wire. They reflect artificial trees that would have been available from the 1880s to the early 1900s, and they make a great backdrop for his fantastic collection.

“I assure you, if I had a bigger house, there would be more Christmas,” Reitz notes as he showed a visitor around his Cambridge home.

The trees vary in heights; one is even a novelty half-tree that hangs flush against the wall. Each tree is a different colour, in shades of green, red, purple, white and blue.

Each tree is themed. One table-top variety is laden with glass candy canes made in the 1940s in New York. “I just like them. I thought they were so neat so I went a little nuts and started buying them whenever I saw them.”

The world of glass Christmas decorations started in Germany in the late 1800s, Reitz says. During the Second World War, ornament production shifted to the U.S.,

# Clarity

Marketing  
Branding  
Communications

The lost art in a content-saturated world®

- Communications, branding & marketing that lack clarity are confusing.
- Clear writing is powerful, influences decisions and encourages action.
- Since 1974 we've crafted clear, informative, compelling messages.

Send us your challenges. Our first concept for you is **FREE**

Clarity | Cambridge, Ontario, 800-808-8802  
www.clarity.mobi clarity@plainlanguage.ca

**STARTUPS:** Have a Fabulous Concept? We may take shares as payment

## Overwhelmed by Clutter?



We'll fix that!

Your privacy is important and we're discreet.  
Satisfaction **GUARANTEED.**

Call us before you call a REALTOR®  
Orderly homes always list for more.

The DeClutter Crew specializes in getting homes ready to sell for the highest price.

That's why smart sellers call us first.

We especially enjoy working with Seniors as they downsize, transition or require other assistance in their lives.

The  
**DeClutter  
CREW**

519-729-4279

www.decluttercrew.ca  
thedecluttercrew@gmail.com

The REALTOR® mark is owned by REALTOR® Canada Inc.

Celebrate your Festive Event  
at Delta Waterloo!



519.514.0412

wat.sales.sm@deltahotels.com

www.Marriott.com/YKFDW

**DELTA**  
HOTELS  
MARRIOTT  
WATERLOO





A small tree, decorated with a selection of bells, cozies into a setting of clear glass containers – another of Reitz's collecting hobbies.

before later spreading around the world. Reitz has an entire tree decorated with ornaments from the 1940s when metal caps and hooks were replaced with paper, and ornaments' interiors went unsilvered because the metal and silvering compounds were needed for the Allied war effort. But many of Reitz's prized ornaments are from Germany. Even the tinsel adorning his trees is shipped from Europe. Its thicker,

heavier form is the same lead-foil variety commonly used in North America from the 1920s through the 1960s.

With each tree draped in silver or gold tinsel, at least five are packed with glass Christmas bells. Each bell has its own tiny clapper, giving them a chance to ring out. A few of these smaller trees can be found in the living room and dining room of the 1,000-square-foot bungalow.

Not every ornament is antique or vintage. "Some of this is just for fun," he says. One example is a minty green feather tree in the front room of the house, its modern green glass decorations a far cry from his vintage ornaments.

The largest tree in his collection stands prominently in the living room at about 2½ metres tall. It is laden with antique ornaments, and small wax candles are attached to the tree in decorative metal clips.

"I can't imagine lighting the candles but 100 years ago people did," Reitz says. "No doubt with a bucket of water nearby."

Each tree features a different, brightly painted glass tree topper with a pointed tip. It's the quintessential finishing touch.

**R**eitz purchased his home 27 years ago from the family of the original owners. The handsome house, a 1923 craftsman-style American bungalow, has remained largely true to its original vintage.

It boasts dark rich wood baseboards, trim, doors and oak flooring, but the rarest feature of all is the ornate 1930s hand-painted borders in the living and dining rooms. The design displays urns of flowers and songbirds with garlands of roses and ribbon, painted by the grandfather of the previous homeowners.

"The house was so well preserved and so well cared for by the people that came before me," Reitz says. The homestead has been featured in the annual Heritage Cambridge Historic House Tour.

Reitz has complemented the painted

borders in the dining room with wallpaper with an appropriate period design by William Morris. The paper, entitled "Strawberry Thief," brims with vines, birds and berries.

On the dining room table and sideboard sits a sizable collection of antique glass candy jars from the late 1800s, one of which is half-full of brightly coloured gum drops. Reitz was enchanted by these jars as a child and has sought them out ever since. Another Christmas garland hangs just above the entrance to the room. Perched upon it are a number of antique and reproduction glass bird Christmas ornaments, each with a white spun-glass tail.

It's the attention to detail that gives the house a look and feel of times gone by. Lighting throughout has been retrofitted with period-appropriate fixtures. And furnishings are antique or well-made reproductions of quarter sawn oak, reflecting the Arts and Crafts period. On the walls hang countless original paintings of familiar local landscapes.

As a child, Reitz was influenced by his parents' art collection, but his house wasn't always as well outfitted as it is today. When he moved in, Reitz admits, the dining room furniture consisted of two Ikea chairs and a ratty old table.

Living in a house filled with beautiful things, it can be hard to know whether to make use of these items or merely admire them. Reitz's approach is to enjoy them.

"You've got to live with your antiques, it's not a museum. I can't live in a place where I can't kick up my heels and relax."

Adding to his collection on an ongoing basis, Reitz buys from a number of places including estate sales, thrift stores, auctions and online. While the ultimate goal is to own originals, he has no qualms about buying reproductions. He cautions, however, that you need to know what you're buying.

"If you aren't paying attention, you can get taken, and end up paying the price of an



...And to top it off, they finished right on schedule!

YOU DON'T SAY.

### Our apologies.

Slotegraaf work may not make for the most entertaining dinner party stories. Our renovation projects tend to be a little "uneventful" that way. No outlandish incidents or bizarre delays. But then, we're hoping you'll prefer a smooth project flow instead, with things like meticulous planning and responsive client care. And hey, you can always amaze your friends by just showing them around.

519.620.2299 | [slotegraafconstruction.com](http://slotegraafconstruction.com)



Built right. On time. **Slotegraaf**





Three small trees line one wall of the dining room.

original for something that was made last year.”

Trees and their shiny decor take centre stage throughout the house, but another intriguing collection awaits in a cabinet – more than 300 vintage postcards from about 1905 to 1920, all featuring Christmas trees. Reitz purchased the cards, which originate from throughout North America and Europe, online and at antique shows.

Reitz explains that in the early 1900s, families would take holiday photos with their Brownie camera. One option they could choose for processing was to have the image printed on a postcard backing.

“These weren’t mass produced for sale. They were customized Christmas cards of their day. Just seeing these images is wonderful.”

A retirement goal of Reitz’s is to publish a

historical reference book of the postcards from his collection. His plan is to carefully research each image and to explore how each Christmas tree and room is decorated.

“If you took the Christmas tree out of the picture, what does the room say about the time period?”

He realizes that a book of this nature isn’t for everyone.

“It’s a limited market,” he says, but Reitz certainly has peers who would have an interest in this type of publication.

There are many of us who feel the warmth and wonderment of the season, but Reitz has the ability to experience Christmas joy throughout the year as he hunts for these visual records of the holiday. It’s a childhood captivation that has spurred him on.

There’s an undeniable thrill at finding these dainty and delightful time capsules of the holidays, bringing with them a glimpse into the magic of Christmas past. 📖

## GIFT CARDS • UNFORGETTABLE SPA EXPERIENCE



SPA PACKAGES • EUROPEAN FACIALS • LASER • FRACTIONAL • HAIR REMOVAL • MICRONEEDLING • MAKE-UP  
MEDICAL PEELS • SKIN GROWTH REMOVAL • AROMATHERAPY AND RMT MESSAGES • CELLUMA LED



**GIFT CERTIFICATES AVAILABLE ONLINE**

[www.JolantasSpa.com](http://www.JolantasSpa.com) | 519.725.9999  
646 Erb Street West, Unit 105, Waterloo

Purchase products at [www.MySkinCareClub.com](http://www.MySkinCareClub.com)

