

## Mercantile Heroes (as Seen on TV)

LAS VEGAS

CROWDS are a fact of life here, oozing down the sidewalk as you try to make a right turn into your hotel or blocking your access to the \$10 blackjack tables. At 10 a.m. on a recent weekday, though, things were pretty quiet — except at the Gold and Silver Pawn Shop on Las Vegas Boulevard, about a mile north of the Strip. Inside the low-slung, khaki-colored building, unremarkable save for the large “As Seen on TV” sign by the front door, so many people were milling about that it was hard to get a close look at the Rolexes, the Super Bowl rings or the Confederate currency.

They had come to this drab area near downtown Las Vegas because the Gold and Silver is the setting of “Pawn Stars,” a hit show for the History channel that has turned three generations of the Harrison family, the store’s owners, into mercantile folk heroes. In its second season, which ended in early May, “Pawn Stars” was History’s highest-rated series ever, averaging four million viewers an episode (an 82 percent increase over Season 1). In some weeks it reached five million, enough to push it into the cable Top 10.

Work was now in progress on Season 3 (it begins Monday at 10 p.m.), and suddenly the word went out to clear the spacious showroom, with its large display cases salvaged from remodeled or defunct department stores like Dillard’s, Mervyn’s and Saks Fifth Avenue. The gawkers and browsers were herded to the sidewalk so that 45-year-old Rick Harrison, the bald, stocky, self-taught history nut who has been running the store since 1986, could be filmed doing his thing: part seminar and part transaction, a cross between “Antiques Roadshow” and “Let’s Make a Deal.”

Shelby Tashlin of Las Vegas walked to the counter clutching a boxed edition of “Alice in Wonderland” containing an etching and 12 lithographs by Salvador Dalí. Ms. Tashlin’s opening thrust: the Dalí prints were limited in number. Mr. Harrison’s parry: “He’s pretty well known for fudging numbers.” Mr. Harrison spoke about etching versus lithography and allowed that Dalí and Lewis Carroll were a “wonderful combination.” Then it was time for business. Ms. Tashlin wanted \$10,000. Mr. Har-

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rison asked if she had taken a little blue pill, and offered \$5,000.

She politely declined and walked away still clutching “Alice in Wonderland.” “I was hoping it would go the other way, but I’m not surprised,” she would tell a reporter later. The outcome was not unusual for “Pawn Stars.” Mr. Harrison is as interested in his profit margin as he is in the histo-

ry of the items he buys, and his on-camera affability rarely shades into sentimentality. “I’m perfectly honest with them,” he said in an interview in a cluttered office down a hallway from the showroom floor. “I have the means to sell this, you don’t, and I deserve a decent profit.”

The scene illustrated another truth about “Pawn Stars”: While the Gold and Silver is primarily in the pawn business, the transactions on the show are mostly straight sales. “People who pawn don’t want to be on TV,” Mr. Harrison said.

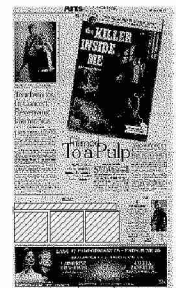
Changing the back-alley image of the pawn business was one of Mr. Harrison’s goals when he began pitching the idea of a reality show set at the Gold and Silver — a utilitarian but clean and well-lighted place — about five years ago. The picture of the pawnshop as seedy hangout for small-time crooks and desperate junkies had been reinforced by every 1970s and ’80s television cop show; even Sidney Lumet’s 1964 film “The Pawnbroker,” with Rod Steiger’s Oscar-nominated performance in the title role, was, according to Mr. Harrison, “such a negative movie.”

To make his case Mr. Harrison will talk about pawning as the oldest form of banking, with roots in Mesopotamia and Rome. He’ll expound on the surprisingly large number of American households with no bank accounts and how the 10 percent interest he charges per month must be weighed against the small sizes of the loans. And he’ll point out the ease with which he grants those loans (no credit reports) and that the collateral he holds means that they don’t need to be paid back. “I don’t sue you,” he said.

Over the years Mr. Harrison’s unusually large and successful shop had been featured in local newscasts and included in the Comedy Central show “Insomniac With Dave Attell.” Eventually he signed to do a series with HBO, but the results were not encouraging.

“They tried to do the ‘Taxicab Confessions’ thing,” Mr. Harrison said, referring to the HBO reality show in which hidden cameras record people talking dirty, and occasionally having sex, in the back seats of cabs. “The problem was there were no taxicab confessions. So we had this hideous pilot.”

After his contract with HBO expired, he was approached by the production company Leftfield Pictures with the idea of doing a show for History, one that would allow him to make use of his autodidactic mastery of a huge body of knowledge regarding the origins of both everyday and highly



eccentric objects. Or, as he would put it himself, his geekiness. For 30 years, Mr. Harrison said — until the birth of his third son, who is now 7 — he could not go to sleep at night without reading for three to four hours. He hasn't completely dropped the habit: "I literally just read a book on the history of batteries." Mr. Harrison's disquisitions on why Ormolu clocks are known as "death clocks" or on the importance of the thermos to the value of a "Rat Patrol" lunchbox help to earn him and his show constant comparisons with "Antiques Roadshow." He has watched that PBS series but complained that its large cast of appraisers placed unrealistic values on the heirlooms they assessed.

"If we put this in an auction, and all the stars were aligned, and the five biggest collectors that collect this item were there," he said, giving his version of the thought process of the "Roadshow" appraisers, "and three of them just hit the lottery and they were mad at each other — it could go for this."

"That's what drives me nuts with that show," he continued. "I mean, I really try and say, 'Hey look, this is the deal.'"

Marsha Bemko, executive producer of "Antiques Roadshow," said in a telephone interview that the experts her show employed were actually conservative in their estimates. "They never, ever overinflate because, No. 1, their friends are watching, and No. 2, they don't want to be stuck by someone in the audience calling and trying to get that price."

Meanwhile, she added, "Pawn Stars" was a show that could never appear on PBS because the Harrisons actively buy and sell, occasionally buying an item for much less than it turns out to be worth. (The experts on "Antiques Roadshow," mostly dealers and auctioneers, are not supposed to give specific advice on buying and selling objects at the time of the appraisal.) "I watch some of these people," she said, "and I think, ooh, ask somebody else."

But that queasiness aside, Ms. Bemko professed to enjoy the show. "They're very likable people," she said.

Mr. Harrison speculated that viewers were drawn to "Pawn Stars" because it was several shows in one: in addition to education and salesmanship, it offers domestic comedy in the byplay among his father, Richard ("All the blue-hairs love him"); his son Corey, known as Big Hoss; and their employee Chumlee (real name Austin Russell), whose idiot-savant persona has made him a cult favorite. "One week it's 'Pimp Your Ride,' one week it's 'American Choppers,' one week it's 'An-

tiques Roadshow,'" Mr. Harrison said.

David McKillop, a senior vice president for programming and development at History, said that when "Pawn Stars" was pitched to him, he saw it as being "along the lines" of "Antiques Roadshow" but with some important differences: "It was the characters, the location, and the idea that we could really pump the history into this one."

The increased attention "Pawn Stars" has brought to the Gold and Silver has been good for Mr. Harrison's business — he estimated that sales, which average \$750,000 a month, were up 20 percent to 30 percent since the series began last summer — but he did not seem entirely happy with other changes that have accompanied television success.


There was a hint of derision when he referred to the shelf space now devoted to "Pawn Stars" and Chumlee T-shirts. And walking into the crowded showroom, where middle-aged women clamored to have their pictures taken with him and middle-aged men tried to show off their superior knowledge regarding, say, samurai swords, did not appear to thrill him. "Sometimes it gets a little irritating when I have business to do," he said, "and I get, 'Wait, take your picture?' Picture, picture, picture."

He was most animated when showing visitors the storeroom where pawned items are kept until they are redeemed or placed on sale. There he could simply riff on the Atmos clocks, Bourget motorcycles and vintage sound-mixing boards as he walked by. A question about the most common items brought in for sale or pawn (which turned out to be jewelry, watches and construction tools) led to a detailed explanation of how to make a convincing fake of a \$30,000 Rolex for \$5,000.

Back in the showroom he surveyed a wall of paintings and prints and let his business side overtake his professorial side for a moment.

"I hate to buy living artists," he said, shaking his head. "Every day they paint stuff."

#### ONLINE: VIDEO

 An excerpt from "Pawn Stars":  
[nytimes.com/television](http://nytimes.com/television)

*'Sometimes it gets a little irritating when I have business to do and I get, 'Wait, take your picture?'*



Three generations of the Harrison family, from left, Richard, Corey and Rick, whose pawnshop is the setting of the hit show "Pawn Stars."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ISAAC BREKKEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top, customers and gawkers wait outside the Gold and Silver pawnshop in Las Vegas, while inside, Rick Harrison and his son Corey, above, were being filmed for an episode of "Pawn Stars."