



‘I’m just a Fort Payne person’

Collector Gilbert Santiago is on the search for all things made in Fort Payne

By Bradley Roberts



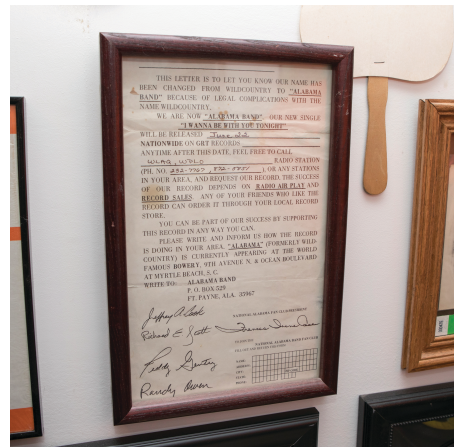
Gilbert Santiago bustles around the living room in his home a few blocks from downtown Fort Payne, a Yorkshire terrier named “Nicky” follows closely behind him nipping at his heels. “I hope you don’t mind a little bit of a mess,” the 61-year-old Santiago says, looking over his shoulder as he opens a door to a bedroom off the kitchen. “You can’t go in very far.”



The bedroom is taken over by Santiago’s “stuff.” He’s got all kinds of Alabama band memorabilia, board games, albums, bottles and books.

“I’ve got all kinds of stuff,” he says with a grin.

Santiago is a huge collector, and he has been for most of his life. He’s the type of person who lives for a good yard sale. If you’ve got it, he wants it. He wants it all, and in most cases, it doesn’t even matter what it is.



But he does have a specialty, something he’s looking for more than anything else.



'I go and visit my sister in Hawaii all the time, but after a few days, I'm out of there. Fort Payne is home'

"I'll take anything, but I love things that are Fort Payne related," Santiago said.

He loves Fort Payne. In fact, it's probably hard to find a person that loves Fort Payne more than Santiago.

He moved to Fort Payne with his family in the 70s.

"It's a long story," he said with a smile. "Basically, my family, they just knew different people that came here and so we moved to Fort Payne."

He moved with his mother, father and brothers and sisters, of which there are three sets of twins, he said — his sister, Gail, is his fraternal twin.

He loves it here. He loves the area, and he knows everybody.

"I don't have an enemy," Santiago said. "I'm just a Fort Payne person. It's unreal. I go and visit my sister in Hawaii all the time, but after a few days, I'm out of there. Fort Payne is home."

He always loves to come home — to Fort Payne. He just doesn't like being away for too long. He doesn't want to be away from his "stuff" either.

And there's plenty of stuff.

Santiago said his infatuation with collecting began in the mid 1980s, not long after he moved to Fort Payne. He said, at first, he started to collect coins.

"That was in 1985 or 1986," he said. "I collected coins, and then it kind of exploded."

Santiago said he began collecting baseball cards from there. It was the next logical step for him. He said in a shed out back he "had about 1 million trading cards" at one point — it's hard to tell if he's serious or not. Next to the shed he has about 30 bricks stacked up in a neat pile. They were,

of course, all made in Fort Payne.

He started collecting anything and everything that had "Fort Payne" written on it. He loved the hunt and being able to find unique items with that tag from his home on it.

That was part of the reason he loved the band Alabama so much. They loved Fort Payne just as much as he did.

"When they started doing the 'June Jams' like that and helping people, you know, that was when I knew they were really somebody," he says. "That was when I really started following them."

Much of his stuff is in storage, in boxes or plastic, covered up and kept safe from the weather.

But he set aside one entire wall in his house for his dedication to Alabama.

He's got pictures of himself with former drummer, Mark Herndon, and a drum head from when the band was first called, "Wildcountry" — he even has a document framed in glass on the wall that marked the band's official name change from Wildcountry to Alabama.

"That's from the first of the first of everything," he said. "This is the ultimate for country music and Alabama stuff. That's a letter from when they officially changed the name to Alabama."

He's got pictures with Randy Owen, Jeff Cook and Teddy Gentry. He has a photo his son, Toog, drew that they all signed.

There's even what may be the earliest recording from Cook.

"His dad took him to Chattanooga and made a 45 when he was about 13 years old. There it is," Santiago said, motioning to a vinyl record affixed to the wood paneling.



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He has so many rare pieces, but he isn't just looking for rarity. He'll "take anything." He just wants it to be from Fort Payne. He loves picking up books, looking at the photos and seeing their names and faces. He holds up a trophy that reads "Miss Fort Payne 1931."

"I don't even know who that was," he says, putting the trophy back in a box on the floor. "Maybe somebody does, though."

He has hundreds of bottles, thousands of records, dozens of boxes filled with knick-knacks and trinkets from a time long ago — in his living room he has license plates, all of which have a "28" as the prefix.

"That's DeKalb County," he said. "This one is from 1944. I have this, and then I have 1949 until today."

Santiago loves showing off his favorite pieces. In the kitchen, he has Coca-Cola bottles with an "FP" and date on the back. He has a massive cast-iron stove that is one of his earliest pieces, too. He said he bought it when was a young man working at Fort Payne Automotive Center.

"You know, that oven's never even been used," he said.

It's hard for him to pick a favorite item. There's just so much. That's why he had to buy a place to store it. He bought an entire house.

It just so happened the house next door from his came available for sale. He said he rented from a woman for a long time. She got older, she started to get sick and eventually she passed.

He said her son came to manage the estate. He said the bank wanted to sell the house for "what [he] could purchase in Terrapin Hills," but the son undercut that

original price tag.

"He said, 'What do you want to give?'" Santiago said. "I told him, and he said, 'You can have it.'"

"He said his mother really enjoyed renting to [me], and she'd be proud to give you that place."

So, he started staging one of the houses with his new stuff. He's got walls lined with display cases — each case and its drawers are filled with Fort Payne artifacts.

He lives in the main house with his wife, Betty, and then Nicky, of course.

He said she loves his collections, too. You have to be because it's his passion.

He said his first wife, Jeri, passed away six years ago, and she loved his passion as much as he did. He said when he and Jeri first got married, "They didn't have nothing."

Soon Jeri became pregnant with his son, Toog — he works with Toog at Wright Electrical Supply in Fort Payne. He said he's got no plans to retire anytime soon.

Gilbert said he would do anything to help his family.

"When I had Toog, I walked up and down the street collecting cans so that I could pay the hospital bills," he said.

It was on those walks that he found some of those early items. Santiago now has five grandkids — they belong to the one son and a couple of step-children. He said they haven't gone with him on any his scavenging trips yet, though. But there's still time.

He said he'll go out most weekends to different yard sales, but he'll come home with something "most days."



A lot of that comes from the friends he makes, though. He said he's good friends with Tony Walls of Relics, a record and collectibles store downtown on Gault Avenue.

"He knows what I want, and we trade things with each other," he said. "People will call me, and I walk around. I go to yard sales and I come back with trucks full of stuff, man. Zac Stallings is another one. He's got stuff from me that I wouldn't even sell.

"I always say, if I've got two of something then Zac's going to get one."

He said he doesn't hold back either, and he doesn't haggle with people on certain items. He doesn't want people to think he's a "rip off."

"I'll trade around and stuff like that," he said. "But if I know it's good, then I'm getting it."

Santiago isn't a picker in the traditional sense. He's not looking to make a quick dollar finding an item, fixing it and flipping it around for a profit. He will sell some things, but that's not his purpose. Honestly, he says he just "enjoys it."

He loves being around all of his stuff.

He said he gets a rush every time that he picks something up and sees that it says it was made in Fort Payne. That's what keeps him going and keeps him looking.

He loves the things he's collected. Each of them hold a

special place in his heart. His eyes light up and his lip up- turns in a smile as he looks over each piece.

"It's like Christmas all the time," he said.

But, there's one item he said he would never part with.

"It ain't worth much either," Santiago said.

He loves country music, but to him Elvis will always reign supreme. He said years ago for his birthday he was sitting at dinner with Jeri when she reached into her purse and slid a postcard from across the table to him. Gilbert said Walls had actually helped Jeri find the item for her husband's birthday.

On the postcard was Elvis. He was dressed in a floral shirt and lei, and it was made in Hawaii. The gift from his wife was a special one.

"Elvis was the best. He's the King, you know," Santiago said, pausing. He's fighting back tears. "That I would never sell."

Everything he's got — all of his albums, cards, bottles, pictures — remind him, he says, of that time in his life when he was just starting his family with Jeri and Toog. When he would spend half the day walking up and down the street collecting cans to help pay his bills.

"I think that's why I love this stuff," he said. "I think, you know, when you start out and you come from having nothing, that's when stuff really starts to mean something."

