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## Tin Toyland

You may find that rare collectible—or just a sweet reminder of childhood—at Winder Binder in Chattanooga.

David Smotherman freely admits the chances of him becoming rich seem about as likely as that of Donald Trump renouncing all his worldly goods. To the Chattanooga native, however, making a living isn't solely about a healthy bank account. Instead, David finds contentment in his feast-or-famine business as a dealer of the rare, the odd, and the playful.

David sells tin toys, antique books, and folk art. "I always joke that what's in the store is whatever I like," he says, pausing to answer a customer's question. Although much of his business comes from online sales, the entrepreneur operates this tiny but jam-packed storefront as well. A colorful window display of tin toys draws customers into Winder Binder, his brick-and-mortar location at 40 Frazier Avenue.

### A Walk on the Wild Side

David first rented space in a North Shore-area building as a student majoring in sports management at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Nearing graduation in 1994 with no job prospects, the fledgling entrepreneur noticed the vacant property on his drive to campus. "This was when the aquarium had just opened and this area was just starting to develop," he recalls. At the time, this part of town was far from a tourist draw.





**left:** David Smotherman, owner of Winder Binder, first offered tin toys such as this rare Paya taxicab. He has since expanded into books and folk art. **above:** Customers Brent and Angie Williams discuss purchasing a book.

"Most of my friends thought I was completely nuts to want to move in down here," says David. "They said, 'There's nobody over here, and it's a bad part of town.'" Despite that, he chose to open his business and relocate into an apartment upstairs. "They had just finished rehabbing the Walnut Street walking bridge," he explains. "My attitude was, sooner or later, they've got to clean up over here because you've got to have something to walk to." He has since moved to a new location just around the corner.

His assessment proved correct. Today, folks make the trek, attracted to Coolidge Park just behind Winder Binder. It's safe too. "I don't feel uncomfortable walking here at any time of night by myself now," David says.

#### What's In Store

Winder Binder began with tin toys and then gradually added folk art, mainly imported decorative masks. Next the store began to offer antiquarian books. "I've got a lot of religion, philosophy, poetry, art, and music books," David says of his 12,000-book inventory. The bulk of the eclectic mix was

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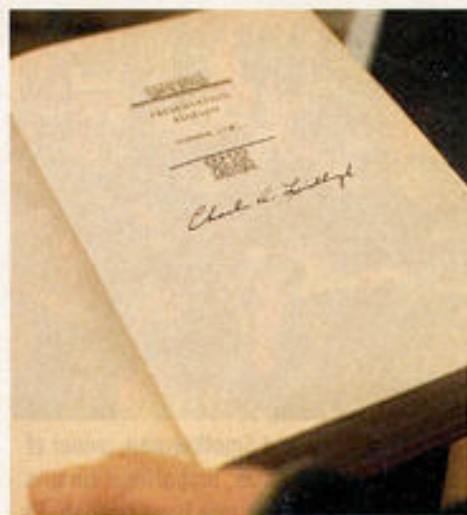
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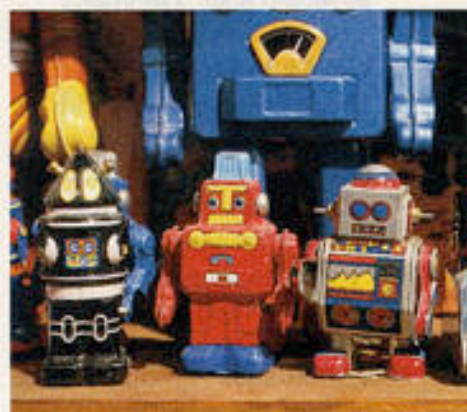


Priced at \$3,000, this volume of *Spirit of St. Louis*, signed by aviator Charles Lindbergh, is the most valuable item in the store.

acquired from the leftovers of a Greenwich Village store collection that dates back to the Cold War era and covers some fairly radical viewpoints. "The guy who owned the store probably had an FBI file," says David. The Winder Binder owner, on the other hand, takes a decidedly neutral stance.

"I'm kind of like the Switzerland of politics," the affable proprietor says. "I've got books about Newt Gingrich and Ronald Reagan right next to a Ted Kennedy biography. I keep assuming in the middle of the night the books will separate themselves." He's not quite as laid-back when it comes to the toys, however.

Space toys have proved to be a hot collectible among patrons.





**right:** David displays his personal toy collection in his apartment above the store. When a fire broke out, he had firefighters retrieve his favorite, a Ferris wheel. Fortunately, the fire was contained with minimal damage.

### Tinkering With Toys

Childhood visits to his great-grandparents' home in Tullahoma awakened a lifelong passion for the colorful metal objects engineered purely for the sake of fun. "My great-grandmother was a Depression-era person who didn't get rid of anything," David says. "I played with the same original tin toys that my grandfather and my great-uncle played with in the 1930s."

He inherited the vintage playthings and has expanded his collection through the years. The tin miniature wonders fascinated him in a way plastic and computer-chip toys did not.

"I grew up in the early days of plastic toys, video games, and *Star Wars*," says David. "But I always liked the windup toys more." The transition from collector to dealer proved to be a short leap, especially after he befriended another dealer in New Orleans who shared pointers on the unusual business.

### Toy Lore

Through his business, David finds a way to share his love for history, another career path he once considered. "I know exactly where the toys come from, and I know a lot about the factories that make them," he says.

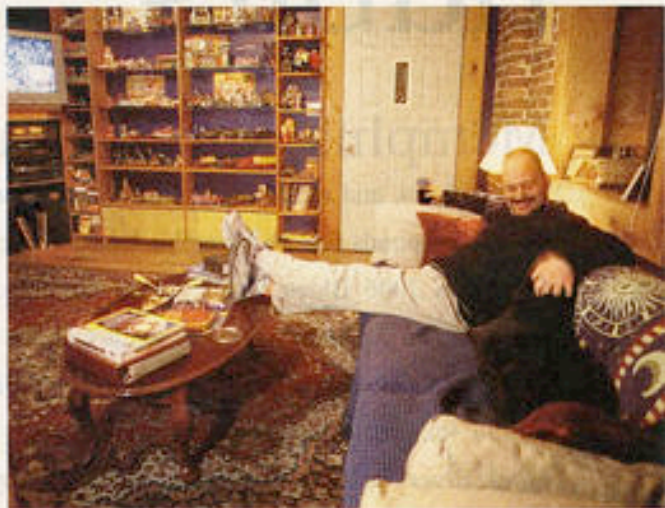
Winder Binder offers toys new and old, windup, battery-operated, and friction. They come from countries including Germany, Spain, France, Estonia, Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Ukraine, India, Thailand, China, and Korea.

David appreciated the advice. "It's not like there's a tin toy store on every corner," he says with a laugh.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

**Winder Binder:** [www.winderbinder.com](http://www.winderbinder.com) or (423) 267-3900.

**Hours:** noon-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 1-6 p.m. Sunday. If the flag is flying out front, he's open.



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