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by Joe Herring Jr.



Monday, January 27, 2014

Scotch Tape Tins and Hospital IV Bottles

Francis Swayze, my long-time friend, confirmed a story several readers had sent to me about an invention born here in Kerrville: the hummingbird feeder.

Mr. Swayze, of course, knows more Kerrville history I, and he has been kind enough to point me and this column in the right direction many times. He owned a photography studio here for many decades, and he served our community as mayor in the 1960s.

When the story came to my email box, I forwarded it on to Mr. Swayze, just to verify the tale, and he replied "Pretty much right on, Joe."

Francis Swayze's brother, Prentiss Swayze, worked at the Kerrville post office, and in the 1950s he came up with an idea for a hummingbird feeder: an inverted glass bottle attached to a round metal tin.

For materials, he used Scotch tape tins and empty I.V. bottles from Kerrville's Sid Peterson Memorial Hospital. This was convenient: the hospital was in the same block as the post office in those days, with the post office where the Kerr Arts and Cultural Center is today, and the hospital on the western corner of what is now called Peterson Plaza.

According to Fuzzy, producing the hummingbird feeders "started out a hobby but with intent of college funds for Jim, their adopted son. Used Scotch tape cans and bottles from Sid Peterson and later with arrangements with maintenance people at a San Antonio hospital for greater supply."

I'm sure you're familiar with the design Prentiss Swayze developed: I've seen these feeders hanging from people's porches my entire life, but I had no idea they were invented and produced here in Kerrville. Their bright red metal base, the red metal ring looping the glass bottle, seem as familiar as a bend in our Guadalupe River.

Prentiss Swayze eventually got out of the hummingbird feeder business.

"Finally sold his equipment and mailing list, 1600 names throughout U.S. to somebody around Vanderpool. Can't think of the Ingram machinist who rigged up the setup for mass-production but it was a neat operation, strictly one man."

Production of a similar hummingbird feeder was located in Real County for a long time, but has returned to Kerrville. The Tejas Feeder company, owned since 1995 by Harriet and Marion Lewis, has an interesting website, www.tejashummer.com, which includes videos showing how each hummingbird feeder is made.

The Lewises have made some changes to the original design, introducing a new opening base, aluminum construction, and a gasket-sealed connection, to help prevent leaks.

Viewing the videos about their construction helps me imagine Prentiss Swayze making feeders at home, his hobby-turned-business for the hours after his day at the post office.

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5 comments:

Rusty January 28, 2014 at 9:29 AM

The Kerrville Times ran a story & photo July 23, 1936 about a rehab patient at the Legion V.A. Hospital named W.R. Sullivan making hummingbird feeders. Here's a link to that archive which is behind a paywall but might give you the first view free: <http://newspaperarchive.com/kerrville-daily-times/1936-07-23/>

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Replies

Anonymous February 17, 2015 at 7:17 PM

Rusty—I am so glad I ran across your comment because WR Sullivan was my grandfather. He studied hummingbirds for years while recovering from TB in Kerrville and there are details of his work at the University of Texas. I have the original photo from 1936 which shows him with a hummingbird feeder made from an IV bottle. You brightened my day— I never got to meet my grandfather and I have been researching him for years. Cheryl

M. L. Lewis December 21, 2020 at 2:44 PM

Hello Joe...

Would you possibly know how to contact "Anonymous" (Cheryl), author of Reply shown above? I would like to contact her, and/or ask her to contact me at email hm@tejashummer.com or cell 210-602-4252 regarding her grandfather, W. R. Sullivan. Thank you very much for your assistance. Warm regards. ... MLL

M. L. Lewis
Kerrville, TX

Reply