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In the *American Pickers* episode "Back Breakers," Mike Wolfe is donning a bright-red T T Motor Home Club jacket with the name "Louise" embroidered on the front.

The jacket is an "ice-breaker," a term that Wolfe and picking partner Frank Fritz use to describe an item that they don't really want but buy anyway as a way to warm up a reticent person to the idea of selling their old stuff.

It's a charming bit in the History channel's first-season reality-series hit, because it shows that Wolfe and Fritz aren't afraid to look foolish or silly. And Wolfe seems to *enjoy* wearing that jacket.

But it also works because it teaches viewers about how picking works. We learn the nuances of scavenging, and how they get people to part with the objects they've collected over decades. "We're like psychologists for people and their stuff," Fritz said on the show.

Pickers has myriad appeals. On the funny side, Wolfe buys a long-unworn leather coat that has condoms in the pocket and shares a laugh with the previous owner.

The negotiation game can be both enjoyable and instructive. One seller has such a keen sense of what his collectibles might fetch that Wolfe and Fritz try to offer him a single price for all the stuff they want; he keeps track of their piles, though, and outsmarts them.

And then there are times when the pickers screw up and learn something themselves. The pair spends so long rummaging through the barn of a 92-year-old man that he loses any interest in selling to them; the two immediately recognize that they were so excited about what was in the barn that they didn't respect their host's time.

"The show is about modern-day treasure hunting, that you can still do it," Wolfe said. "And the show is about ... looking at things with a different eye." And it's informative about the histories of the featured objects, in the form of commentary by Wolfe and Fritz, and facts that pop up on the screen.

There's also a human-interest angle to *American Pickers*. Some people might like the easy rapport between Wolfe and Fritz, who have known each other since eighth grade.

But Wolfe thinks the fundamental appeal is the people they meet and the objects they've collected. While buying is the thrust of the show, *American Pickers* spends plenty of time on the interactions between the picking pair and the folks they encounter, many of whom talk about their families and their histories. One woman shows a car that her husband bought to teach her to drive; she never learned, she said, and the car sat untouched in a barn for four decades. Talking about the show's debut, Wolfe discussed 88-year-old World War II veteran Leland rather than what they bought from him: "He was the treasure. He was the star of the show."

He added: "I wanted to tell the story of these people that had the items, and I actually wanted the item to have a voice, too, in some ways." And as he says in the closing of the show's introduction, "We make a living telling the history of America one piece at a time."

When *American Pickers* debuted on January 18, it got a lot of press in the Quad Cities, with Wolfe and Antique Archeology office manager Danielle Colby-Cushman living in LeClaire and Fritz based in Davenport.

But at the time, nobody had any idea that it would be a monster Monday hit for History when paired with *Pawn Stars*. *American Pickers* debuted with more than 3 million viewers and this month has approached 4 million, placing it among the 20 top-rated shows on cable. Those two

shows and *Ax Men* pushed History to a stellar February. "This is the first time in history the network has ranked top-five in all four adult and men 18-49 and 25-54 demo[graphic]s in any given month," History said in a press release.

In the past few weeks -- as the show wound down its 10-episode initial run and approached shooting its 26-episode second season -- the three stars of *American Pickers* talked with the *River Cities' Reader* about the show's success, history, and controversy.

Five Years in the Making

Like *Pawn Stars*, *American Pickers* mines the drama of bartering, seeing if buyers and sellers can find common ground. But while *Pawn Stars* by its nature focuses on people who want or need the money, *Pickers* deals with people who are often hesitant to sell. The dynamics are different.

"This is really one of the sides of the [bartering] business that no one's seen," Wolfe said. "The pickers' story's never been told."

The episode "Super Scooter" shows how the pair works together. Wolfe is nearly drooling over a Vespa Ape scooter. The owner wants $5,000 for it, and Wolfe offers $4,500 -- which is rejected. Fritz halfheartedly offers $150 for a bike but quickly rolls over for the $200 the owner is asking; he's trying to soften him up for Wolfe. But then Wolfe's offer of $4,800 is turned down, and he gives in to the $5,000 asking price. The tactic wasn't successful, but it shows the process. Wolfe offsets the transaction by selling the Vespa owner a sidecar frame for $600; he had paid $400.

Some "picks" are arranged in advance, and other times Fritz and Wolfe "freestyle," driving around the countryside looking for promising homes, yards, and barns. They bypass places where the grass is cut too frequently, or where there are new cars. Experience tells them those properties aren't worth their time.

Few people realize the amount of work that goes into the show. For the first season's 10 episodes, the pickers were on the road for more than five months, covering 20 states. Each 44-minute episode had 13 scheduled days of shooting, Wolfe said.

"I had no idea what I was getting into," he said. "We had no idea the grind it would be."

That sounds like complaining, but the reality is that Wolfe has been working toward this for five years, when he first bought a video camera and began recording his picks.

"Five years is a long time to work on something," Fritz said. "And without Mike's drive, we probably still wouldn't have it on there. He's a pretty persistent guy."

Colby-Cushman, who said she's known Wolfe for a decade, said she was skeptical of the show's prospects when she first heard the idea five years ago. "Because of the whole small-town mentality, I kind of thought, 'There's no way. There's just no way it could happen.'" I asked whether she thought Wolfe had his head in the clouds, and she replied, "He always does, but that's why he gets so far. He did it."

Wolfe can (and will) talk for half an hour on the winding road that *American Pickers* has taken from idea to hit series. The short version is that production companies and television networks were interested in the show but never pulled the trigger on it until History snatched it up last August and began shooting in early September.

"I had ideas, and ... I had all these great tapes ... ," Wolfe said, but he didn't have a concept. "It's like I had all these leaves but I had no tree."

Wolfe said he initially approached the young filmmakers of Bluebox Limited about editing his material, but they were too busy. They sent him to Justin Anderson, proprietor of Crazy Eyes Productions. Anderson said they met in 2006 and worked together for several years. "I was never interested in antiques, but I thought the idea of a modern-day American treasure hunter was very cool, and the piece we put together from the footage was so grungy and real -- like Indiana Jones meets *Sanford & Son*," Anderson wrote in an e-mail.

Wolfe would post the videos he and Anderson made on his Web site while working with various production companies and pitching it to cable outlets. Executives from Discovery, TLC, and Smithsonian all seemed game, but the closest the show got to airing was a development deal with Discovery. "That's for a network to throw a little bit of money at you, so they can sit on it for a long time so no one else can get it," Wolfe said.

He eventually gave the videos to Plum TV, a lifestyle channel shown in tony vacation spots.

Wolfe said that Anderson hated the Plum TV situation, but he said he wanted to get the videos in front of these wealthy, influential vacationers -- the type of people who could do something with it if they liked it. "Someone's seeing it," he said. "Who gives a shit if it's lying in a can on my desk?"

But then a TLC exec hooked Wolfe up with the Cineflix production company, which pitched (and sold) it to History.

Fritz's involvement is critical to the show's success, Wolfe said: "I always knew that no one was going to watch a show with just me sitting there talking to myself. So it was great that he and I [already] had the chemistry."

While Wolfe wanted to tell the stories of collectors and objects, reality television thrives on relationships with familiar faces. The key is to balance each episode's stand-alone stories with the main characters.

And the personalities of Wolfe and Fritz -- who are both in their mid-40s -- are balanced by

Colby-Cushman, who is 34 and owns the Burlesque Le Moustache troupe. ("She's a really cool chick," Wolfe said. "And that's what I want people to see in here.")

"We're very real people," said Colby-Cushman, who began working for Wolfe when production of the show started. "We're just down-home folks. And we don't hide that. ... All of us have very strong personalities that are not easily contained. They have to do a lot of editing. They have to bleep out a lot."

Picking on Pickers

American Pickers has drawn its share of criticism. Comments on one blog dubbed the show *Pric ks Rob Hicks*
and
American Predators
, based largely on the debut episode in which a saddle was "picked" for $75 and was later appraised at $5,000.

Critics accuse the pickers on preying on older people.

Fritz and Colby-Cushman are dismissive of the criticism. Fritz says the complaints come from "armchair quarterbacks," "naysayers," and "haters," and said that he doesn't pay attention to them.

"You cannot please everybody," Colby-Cushman said. "Jesus, they killed Martin Luther King. And Mike's not Martin Luther King."

But Wolfe seems to take it more personally. "Sometimes I wonder if people are watching the same show that we made," he said.

Much of the criticism ignores the realities of the business, Wolfe said.

For one thing, he said, the pair isn't targeting senior citizens; they are simply more likely to own the objects that Fritz and Wolfe want. "I'm not looking for someone in their 80s; I'm looking for old stuff," Wolfe said. "When you drive down these roads, that's who has the stuff -- older people."

More importantly, an appraisal doesn't necessarily reflect a realistic sale price. Wolfe said his aim is to turn items around quickly, not to earn top dollar.

"When you get into this business, you need to sell," Fritz said. "Being able to flip your stuff is very, very important. I probably keep too much. ... We all want to keep stuff. ... [But] if you get stuff and flip it quick, you don't get an emotional attachment with it."

That saddle *might* be worth $5,000 if it's at an auction with multiple bidders trying to get it, Wolfe said. But nobody bit with a starting bid of $199 on eBay. Wolfe said he ended up selling it for $175. "If I can't make 100 bucks on something ... then I need to get out of the business," he said.

A 1948 Rock-Ola jukebox bought on *Pickers* was estimated on the show to be worth $5,000. "I sold it for $1,900." Wolfe said. "I paid $1,300; I drove to Ohio to get it.

"The only thing that's ever gotten us in trouble on the show is these appraisals," he added. "The appraisals are way off-chart. ... We are not going to be guinea pigs to appraisals any more."

Generally speaking, Wolfe and Fritz said, they pay half of what they think they can sell an item for. But even for that to work, they have to sell a lot of items because of their costs.

"I've got a mortgage," Wolfe said. "I've got all this overhead" -- including travel, lodging, food, storefront, and employee costs.

There are times, of course, when the pickers sell for far more than they expected. Wolfe said he bought a moving-company sign for $75, thinking he could only get $200 for it because it was warped and plastic, and because subject matter dictates the sale prices for signs. "When I put it on eBay, it went for $1,200," he said.

That speaks to the nature of the business. The stars of *American Pickers* stress that they aren't antique experts. ("We're professionals at finding things," Fritz said.) They have areas of expertise, but outside of those, it's a guessing game. When they bought the jukebox on the show, Wolfe said: "1,300 bucks for us is a lot of money to gamble."

Both Wolfe and Fritz know their motorcycles; Wolfe knows bikes and signs; and Fritz is a toy collector. Outside of those areas, Colby-Cushman said, "all he can do is guess at what it's going to sell for. That is where the trouble lies."

And she said viewers often don't get the full story. "I can tell you of several situations where Mike has found out that something he has picked for $20 is worth way more than he thought, and he's gone back and given more money to the person he's picked from," she said. "It happens more often than you think."

And, she added, "we have to eat it on so many items. ... That stuff is just what happens."

"You need to make sure you make more right decisions than wrong ones," Fritz said.

Still, there's an element of the show that's unsavory because the sellers are often at an

information disadvantage. In the History-channel forums, one user wrote that "the pickers know what they are buying, and how much it's worth, but keep it secretive to those who they are buying it from. That's taking advantage."

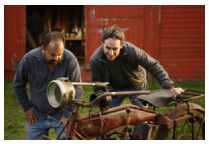
But the stars of the show emphasized that they're dealing with willing buyers, and noted that they get shut down a lot. Wolfe said that if he visits 20 farms in a day, he might come away empty-handed 15 times.

"A lot of people turn us away," Fritz said. "We've been turned away hundreds of times."

But *American Pickers* doesn't emphasize that. "Would you watch a fishing show if the guy never caught anything?" Wolfe said.

And it's wise to keep in mind the perspective offered by another History-channel forum poster: "Given all the people that actually prey on the elderly, the energy spent griping about this show on this board kind of makes me ill."

The Future



Wolfe said it was only a matter of time before somebody made a show like *American Pickers*. He was just first. "I took being a picker and put it in a bottle and stuck a label on it," he said.

He doesn't make any effort to hide his glee at *American Pickers*' success, and it's clear that he's interested in the business end of television. "We own the frickin' airwaves on Monday night," Wolfe said, noting 5 million viewers for recent episodes of
Pawn Stars
and nearly 3.9 million for the March 1
Pickers

. "That's insane numbers for cable."

He noted that his show's debut drew 3.1 million people, and he added that History hoped for 1.5 million "There was only one show *ever* that beat us on a premiere, and that was *Ice Road Truckers* in 2007, and they only got 3.2. So they barely beat us." (*Ice Road Truckers* was *History* 's best premiere, not cable's. The debut of *The Closer* , for instance, drew more than 7 million viewers.)

Wolfe wouldn't discuss the show's budget or how much he's being paid, but he said that the first season isn't about money; to a television network, the advertising revenue is theoretical until the show airs. "You're nobody; the show is nothing ... ," he said.

The second season is bringing with it more money for its three stars, but he said the *real* money lies in endorsements -- which he said wouldn't even be realistic until a third season.

"We're all making a little bit more money," he said of the second season. "Are we going to retire anytime soon? No."

The success has its own burdens. Colby-Cushman said she's now getting 1,200 e-mail messages a day through the e-mail address on Wolfe's Web site. "We're just learning how to deal with something that has exploded," she said. "We were not ready at all for it to be as big as it is. We thought it would be a fun little show."

Fritz said he's not surprised by the show's success. He said he thinks a lot of viewers get to have adventures through him and Wolfe: "A lot of people would love to be pickers, would love to be junkers. But they got five kids, they got a wife, they got this, they got that. They can't physically or financially do it." He and Wolfe, he added, aren't married and don't have children: "Not too many people are able to do this job later in life like we are."

Wolfe said he hopes the show inspires young people to do what he's done since he was a kid: pick. "It takes that one person to plant that seed," he said. "That's what some old guy did with me. I would walk down the alley and this old guy had a bunch of stuff in his garage and he would sit and talk with me for hours. And I remember that he gave me a cigar box one time, and that was huge. ... I remember that guy."

Still, the degree of success has been a surprise. "Obviously we didn't know how big it was going to be," Fritz said. "We're very fortunate to have what we have going, and we're going to keep riding this bus as long as it keeps running. The main thing is we're hoping to spark some interest in the antique trade," especially among young people. "I am embracing this with the most pleasure I can. I'm very, very happy that mother is still alive to be able to see my 15 minutes of fame."

That's the diplomatic, gracious way to look at the success of *American Pickers*. And Fritz sounded realistic about the long-term prospects of the show. Although PBS' *Antiques Roadshow* has been around in the United States since 1997 -- the British version started in 1979 -- it's likely the exception. "Reality shows are good for three or four years," he said.

But Wolfe isn't above talking some smack, saying that his show is responsible for an impending glut of shows focused on buying and selling. "You won't believe all the stuff all the networks are working on now," he said. "Now that us and *Pawn Stars* are spanking the shit out of everybody ... it's all going to come at you like a fucking tsunami now. ... Give it about a year."

New episodes of American Pickers *air Mondays at 8 p.m. on History. The first season concludes its run on March 29.*

For more information on American Pickers*, visit* History.com/shows/american-pickers *. Antique Archeology's Web site is* AntiqueArcheology.com *; Frank Fritz's Web site is* FrankFritzFinds.com *.*