

Zap Props: Peeking Inside Chicago's Hidden Prop House

A working traffic light. Dozens of faux Greek busts. An old IV drip with fake blood still lining the bag. Glass pharmaceutical bottles, caskets, carousel horses, clown heads, taxidermied foxes, birds, deer, and two giant pineapples.

And this is just the second floor.

From the outside, Zap Props seems unostentatious, even drab--just one of many monochromatic warehouses lining South Loomis Place, a dead-end street in Chicago's South Side. But nested inside the faded red brick is a 36,000-square-foot array of vintage and antique oddities, treasures that have appeared in movies as varied as "Home Alone 2" and "Public Enemies."

Founder and owner William "Bill" Rawski, a nearly-bald, bespectacled man of 62, officially founded Zap Props in 1987. He started his career working with his father as a route operator, installing jukeboxes and games in establishments like bars and grocery stores. After he bought a gumball route, however, he began collecting old gumball machines and other coin-operated equipment, and subsequently began a side business of restoring and selling old machines. When he started attracting attention from European customers looking for old items of Americana such as jukeboxes and radios--"they love that stuff out there," Rawski said--he sold the route business and dedicated himself full-time to collecting.

Rawski explains how he then received a phone call from Universal Studios in the pragmatic, invariable tone that is his signature: the studio needed to rent a vintage jukebox and bowling machine for a little movie called "A League of Their Own." "So we rented that to them," Rawski said, running his hand over the few speckles of hair on his scalp, "and once some of the people had seen me and heard about me and heard about my place...they started comin' in."

With some research, he learned that often movie props are rare and sell quickly, so he decided to rent instead of sell. Most of the items in Zap Props' warehouse have been there for years, hand-picked by Rawski from flea markets--only the "good" antique flea markets, as he puts it, because at the "regular little places, you got to look through tons and tons of garbage." Now Rawski has so many items he doesn't do much picking anymore: mostly just categorizing and organizing deliveries to ensure rented items come home safely. His phlegmatic demeanor only breaks when the safety of his props comes up, as he explains that he can't understand how some customers can show up to pick up a piece without blankets and rope. "I probably watch everything that goes out more than anything to make sure that it comes back okay," he says, shaking his head. "I just don't want to see them get wrecked up,"

The warehouse is more than simply a home for Rawski's treasures, however--it also serves as a semi-studio. Zap Props designs and creates pieces for local restaurants, like Madison Public House, a bar that recently commissioned a collage from Rawski's 31-year-old employee and daughter, Simone. She describes her job as working with clients to figure out what they want artistically, both for restaurant designs and props. "Every day, somebody has a weird request," she said. "One person called up and asked if we had a rose in a bell jar, that the petals would fall off remote-controlled. You know, like in *Beauty and the Beast*."

Although Zap Props does not, in fact, have a remote-controlled rose with stripping petals, Simone said the problem is usually the opposite: Zap Props has so many items, spanning decades, that customers often don't understand just how specific they need to be when looking for a prop perfect for them. "They're like 'What do you mean, what era? Like, I just want a cup,'" she said.

Yet, at the end of the day, the items that inspire awe in most casual gawkers are just business for Rawski. "I've been doing this so long, you get blasé about stuff," he says. "People are all amazed at it, but I'm sort of like, eh. You know, I've been around it all this time."

