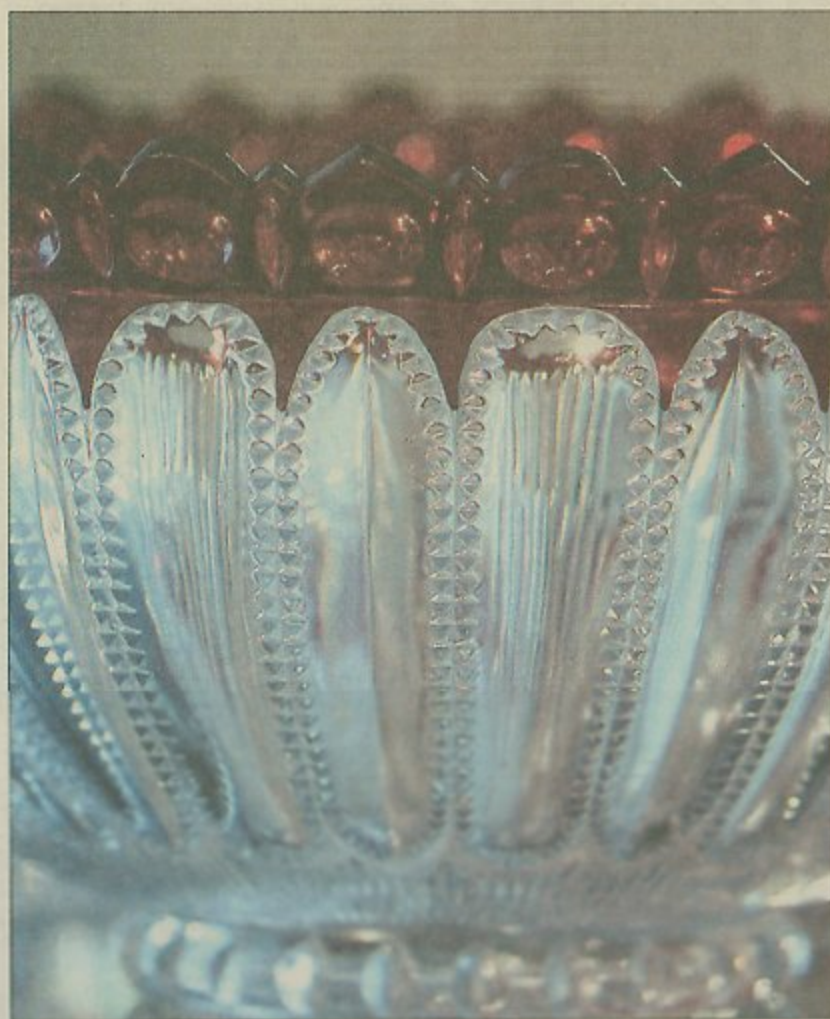




STAFF PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ZDON

Seen through one of the dozens of glass cases, Ed Kleppinger points out details in a piece of his ruby stain glass collection.



A punch bowl shows how part of the pressed glass was colored with the ruby stain. The pattern is named 'The Prize' and is supposedly so named because it won a pressed glass design prize one year.

*A collector of ruby stain glass
has filled an entire Creole cottage
with examples of everyday elegance
from the Victorian age.
But he hopes to share his treasures
with the public in a museum
someday.*

his **rose-colored** glasses



A few of the cases in the Creole cottage used to display the collection include a wide variety of forms. At the back, on top left, is a banana bowl stacked atop a cake plate in the same pattern. Both were made from the same mold.

By Judy Walker
Staff writer

In the Faubourg Marigny lives a collector of ruby stain glass, the everyman's red-decorated pressed glass of the Victorian era also known as "ruby flash." Much of it was initially sold as souvenirs, marked with the name of a city, such as this collector's little lantern-shaped candy jars marked "New Orleans."

He has examples of the pattern named "Mardi Gras" and a 30-year collection of the pattern "Louisiana" that he purchased intact from another collector. He has collections of glass named after the other states. And he has much, much more — boxes upon boxes more, a house and a half full.

The privately displayed collection of Ed Kleppinger fills a correctly humidified, light- and temperature-controlled rebuilt 1830 two-bay cottage that couldn't be saved after termites invaded it. More ruby stain glass is inventoried and boxed in the raised basement of an adjacent house. The collection in the Creole cottage takes up both floors, in glittering tall glass mirror-back cases full of long-ago

See **GLASS**, E-3

CONTINUED

Ed Kleppinger's museum of glass

GLASS, from E-1

everyday elegance.

"For many people, it was the first beautiful thing they had," said Kleppinger, who lives in a third house of the six-house compound he owns. "They might be living in a sod hut in North Dakota and trying to farm 160 acres, but they had it and they took care of it. And, if you were living in a sod hut in North Dakota, you could afford it."

A morning with Kleppinger and his glass is a look back into a fascinating slice of the Industrial Era, and he's telling his story now because he wants to find somebody else who shares his passion.

"We could build a unique and interesting museum of glass," he said. "I hope we can scare somebody up who has some vision, who can see what can be done on a much larger scale for all types of glass."

Kleppinger said the Smithsonian is willing to talk about its affiliate program for what he envisions. This cottage full of glass is not open to the public, but it's what he calls a proto-museum, what a museum could look like. If he had hit the Powerball last week, or if somebody would contribute several million dollars to the cause, an old industrial building could be purchased and converted to house his glass and that of others who want to keep their collections intact and accessible.

"If you build it," Kleppinger said, "the contents will come."

Kleppinger's vision extends to details, down to a way to accommodate the desire he always sees: People want to touch this glass, to run their fingers over the nubs and hobs and swirls pressed into it. In a museum, there could be foam-covered tables with depressions in them to hold pieces to touch. The place would be user-friendly, with viewable stacks.

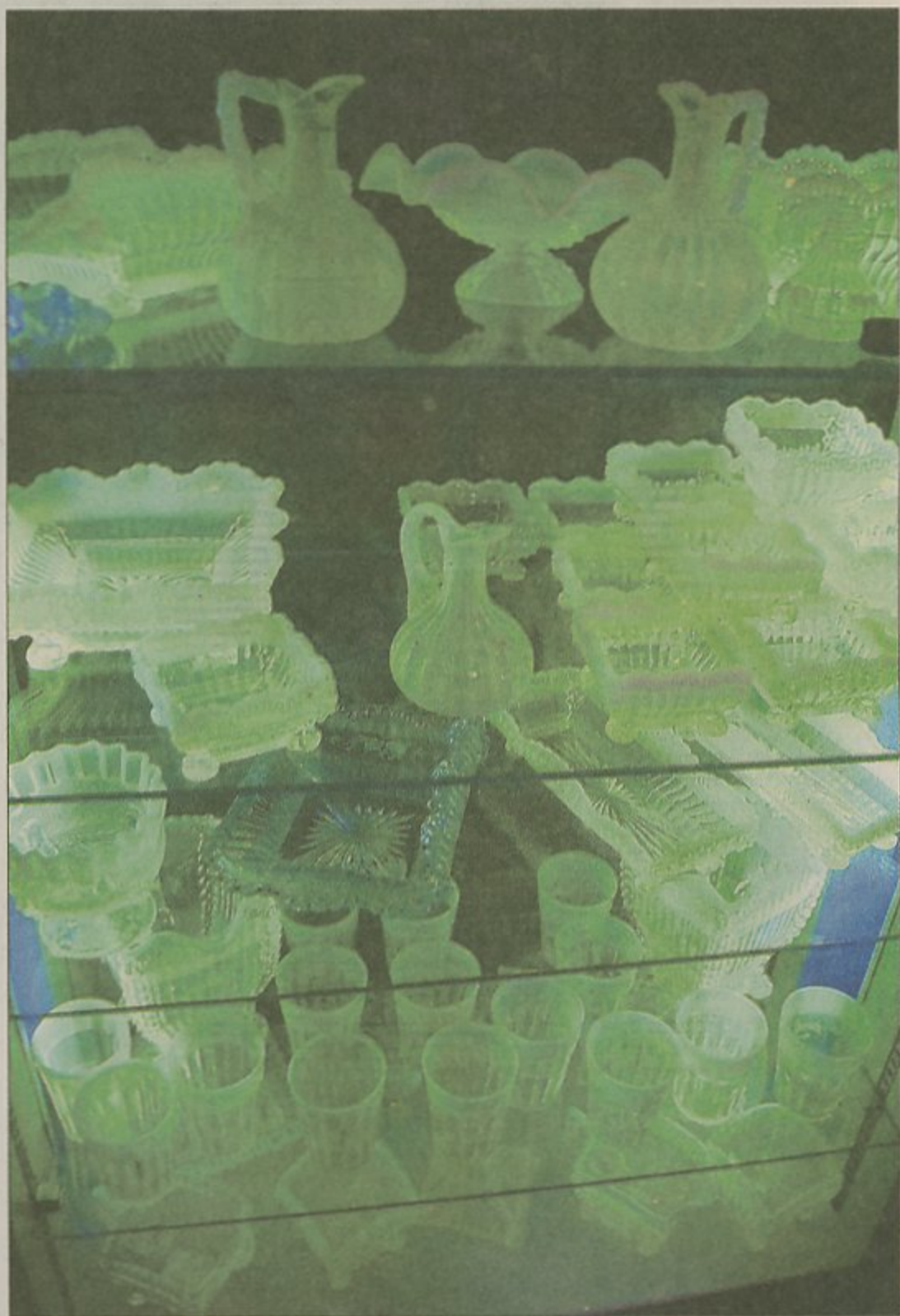
The other thing that Kleppinger plans is a definitive reference. His cottage holds a library of reference books about glass, and he owns the copyright on a classic reference bible. While in the process of updating and expanding the "Encyclopedia of Victorian Colored Pattern Glass, Book 7, Ruby-Stained Glass from A to Z," Kleppinger is documenting all of the patterns made in ruby stain. At least 50, or maybe 100, weren't in the book, he said, which listed 350 when it was published in 1986.

Literally thousands of patterns of pressed glass were made in its heyday, which was roughly the 1880s to the 1920s, when it was being made at its highest combination of industrial manufacturing and handwork. One goblet factory, Kleppinger points out, churned out 30,000 dozen goblets and tumblers every week. Melted blobs of glass were literally pressed in cast iron or steel molds. Only a few of those patterns went through the additional process that created ruby stain.

"It was made to mimic cut glass," Kleppinger said. "It was made to look expensive."

The pressing and color mimic not just cut glass but also case glass, which is one color of glass encasing a clear layer. The colored layer was cut into patterns on a wheel. To create ruby stain, a heavy paint made of molasses and copper salts was hand-applied to certain areas, and the glass refired.

Few pieces were colored all over. Most had the ruby stain applied on certain areas, even on just the rims of the round butter dishes. Amber stain is a similar process. (Of course,



STAFF PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ZDON

TOP: Ed Kleppinger also collects vaseline glass, which glows under blacklights because it was made with a small amount of uranium oxide. The glass is named after the original yellow-green color of Vaseline.



LEFT: Every little nick and imperfection in the pieces of his ruby stain glass collection speaks to Kleppinger, since they are reminders of the real people who used it.

Kleppinger has examples of the two rare patterns that used both amber and ruby stains.)

Kleppinger's parents were collectors of ruby stain glass, but that's not the only reason for his interest.

"I like glass," said Kleppinger, a chemist with an engineering background who now works as a consultant. "Physically, it's not a solid. Technically, it's a super-cooled liquid, and it will flow. Glass is such a unique material."

He likes living with the glass and trying to puzzle out the mysteries he discerns. Walking by it in the cases, he sees something new every day, something to try to understand.

"How do you think they got that shape out of a mold?" he asked about a bulbous piece that bulges at the base. He's not sure.

Kleppinger also relishes the history of glass in America.

"This was one of the major industries in the United States at the turn of the century," he said. "We dominated the world in it. And it was immigrants who built the industry."

Glassmaking ultimately was

centered in Pittsburgh, where coal and gas were available for firing and the Ohio River was accessible for shipping. "Shipload after shipload after shipload went down the Mississippi River through New Orleans," Kleppinger said.

Through his pieces, Kleppinger can demonstrate the ingenuity of the glassmakers and pieces made from the same molds. They trimmed the fancy flange off this sugar bowl mold and made the next one just like it except without the pie crust trim. Although very few plates were made in the early era, this collector can point out a rare plate in the "Navajo" pattern, made by flattening a bowl. Beside it is the same plate with the edges folded up to become a banana bowl.

Some ruby stain glass collectors won't touch pieces sold as souvenirs, but one of Kleppinger's cases holds countless pieces from places familiar and forgotten. He has 6-inch red glass shovels and hatchets, dainty shoes, baskets, pin trays, and a pair of solid-color opera glasses marked "Souvenir of Bantry, North Dakota." An ash-

tray still has the price tag, 35 cents, on the bottom.

He also has a case he calls the "What the heck is it?" group of pieces he has yet to identify. In it he keeps a reminder of a seam: He once cleaned a purported ruby stain cruet and red nail polish washed off the surface.

Although ruby stain glass is his main interest, Kleppinger and his wife, Willi, share their home with other collections, such as clowns made by glassblowers in Venice and Mexico, and German steins made for the American market.

Kleppinger also collects another pressed colored glass of the Victorian era called vaseline glass, which was made with uranium dioxide to get its yellow-green color. This is kept on glass shelves with ultraviolet lights built into the uprights of the display.

At the flick of a switch, the blacklights come on, and the vaseline glass glows an otherworldly neon green, illuminating another lost world of glass.

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