

Two for the road

The business of hunting antiques

By Tim O'Reilly

Dallas entrepreneurs Dudley and Aimee Simms have built a thriving business, dubbed Highgate House, on their two mutual interests: antiques and traveling. The couple has roamed throughout England over the last three years, haunting jumble sales and estate auctions. They've then sold their finds at brief twice-yearly sales held at various places, since Highgate House has no permanent storefront location.

"We wanted a retail business, but the overhead was just too high," says Ms. Simms. "Since our first sale two Octobers ago went over so well, we thought at the time that this might just be the way to go." The Simms' unorthodox approach to retailing has since paid off.

They credit Highgate House's continuing success to two factors: pricing (their merchandise generally sells for 30 to 40 percent less than similar items in traditional stores or showrooms) and the mix of quirky decorative accessories, antique English and Continental furniture pieces — linen presses, Windsor and ladderback chairs, barley-twist gateleg tables and Welsh dressers — and reproductions of prohibitively expensive furniture the Simmses specially commission

each year from British woodworkers.

Eschewing painted finishes for wood's natural beauty, the Simmses have gathered mostly 18th and 19th-century oak and pine pieces, but mahogany, cherry, elm and fruit woods are all represented. The couple also prefers clean, simple lines to heavily carved styles.

"We shop throughout the year and try to hit everything from church sales to the London flea markets. Our shipper warehouses everything we find until it's separated and packed onto two 40-foot-long containers," says Ms. Simms.

"Those are transported by ship to Houston, loaded on trucks, and processed through customs in Dallas. It's really great to open them up when they finally arrive because Dudley and I don't always remember everything we've found. The only thing it can be compared to is opening a wonderful Christmas present; it's really that exciting."

Prices start at \$10 for small accents like florist buckets, watering cans, scented candles and hand-thrown pots. Larger pieces — including armoirs, dining tables, oak coffers from the 1600s and a circa 1800 French refectory table —

can go for up to \$10,000 each.

"The key to Highgate House's diverse inventory is that we're willing to jump in the car on the spur of the moment and track down a lead. We do have a few places — professional auction houses, antique dealers and trade warehouses, mostly — that we go back to, but we're really open to new sources. We explore a LOT," says Ms. Simms.

"We try to have something for just about everyone. Not everything is pink and frilly," says Ms. Simms.

In keeping with their hands-on approach to selling, the Simmses will be present during their current sale to answer questions and take requests from customers searching for specific furniture pieces not available in this lot.

"We look forward to seeing familiar faces and meeting new customers," says Ms. Simms. "Our whole concept is to bring this type of furniture to the retail public in an enjoyable way. Shopping should be an adventure, not a chore."

Highgate House's spring shipment sale will run through Saturday, April 15 at 3109 Monticello Ave. Hours: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. If a private appointment is preferred, call 691-8095.

