

WeHome, Episode 8 Transcript
Treasure Hunters

Brent Coursey: I love...I love movement. I love the fact that we're growing 'cause I like seeing areas like we're in... not destroying it, but cleaning it up and making it work.

Erica Ciccarone (host): WeHome is a podcast about the Wedgewood-Houston and Chestnut Hill neighborhoods in Nashville, Tennessee where history, policy, people, business interests, and housing intersect in a way that says a lot about the future of Nashville. If you don't live here, you might find that the stories we uncover apply to your neighborhood, too. Each episode, we bring you on the ground to hear from a chorus of South Nashville voices. Then, two community members tour each other's lives and tell each other stories. I'm Erica Ciccarone.

Today's episode is called "Treasure Hunters."

So far on WeHome, we've heard from neighborhood organizers and activists, city council members, artists, high school students, a developer, and a farmer. Today we turn to a yet-unexplored aspect of the Wedgewood-Houston neighborhood. Small businesses.

Various voices:

Hi, I'm Beth Lawrence, also known as Freshie, and I make jewelry here at Freshie & Zero. We make everything with love and a hammer, and we're online at freshieandzero.com.

My name is Clay, and I'm the head distiller here at Corsair Distillery. Here we make spirits using unconventional grains, smokes, and methods.

I'm Sandra Noble. I'm one of the co-founders of Hip Hues, and we are an interactive live screen printing company that comes to events that people have hired us for, kind of like a photo booth, but instead of taking a fun picture on site, people get to print custom swag such as a t-shirt, tote bag, or anything like that the event organizer has figured out with us on the front end.

My name is Lauren Humphrey. My husband and I run Rains Avenue Market and BBQ in Wedgewood-Houston. We do beef brisket, pulled pork, nachos, fish, ribs on Fridays, chicken wings...

Hi there, I'm Fred. I work at McGraphics. We are a small family business. We've been in business for 32 years. We do custom print finishing for places all over the Southeast. We started in the neighborhood 30 years ago, and we look forward to many more years.

So my name's Doug Haveron. I'm the owner of Gabby's Burgers and Fries. We're located right behind Greer Stadium. And what we are really known for is we have really, really good grass-fed beef burgers, but more importantly, great service. We laugh, we have fun, and we listen to good music.

EC: If you do a Pinterest search for reclaimed wood, it would bring back a slew of results for DIY home décor projects. People selling reclaimed barnwood doors and barnwood framed mirrors, and even wall paper and shower curtains that are supposed to look like salvaged lumber.

Why is it so popular? There's the appeal of eco-friendly buying, of salvaging something that might otherwise end up in a landfill.

Also, older wooden structures like barns were for the most part made with wide planks of lumber—about eight inches—so barnwood offers that advantage. Other times, it's sourced from old warehouses with thick beams of timber. Each piece is uniquely weathered, with color variations and nail holes that add character. Another Pinterest search tells me how to make regular, treated two-by-eights look like reclaimed wood. They call it farmhouse style. Boho. Shabby-chic.

Here in Nashville, it fits that country music aesthetic. But the rustic look was not trending back in 1996 when a Nashville man started salvaging barnwood.

Brent Coursey: My name is Brent Coursey and my wife, Barbara, and I have Woodstock Vintage Lumber, and it's at 464 Chestnut Street, right behind the guitar at the old Sounds Stadium.

EC: Brent has a slight frame, robin's egg blue eyes and a long beard that he strokes sometimes when he talks. He has a casual look: jeans, a button-down shirt that's open at the collar, and a baseball cap. The front room of his shop is proof enough that barnwood makes a statement. One wall is paneled from floor to ceiling with different shades of brown, gray and red—all the natural colors of the wood. It adds texture and warmth: the whole room has a glow to it.

BC: We're kinda in reverse here. We're in the shop now. It's a 6500 square foot shop. I've got nine guys that work for me. The boys there are putting 585 feet to go to Chicago, we've got to wrap it up and send it to the inner city of Chicago. We used to be pretty much in this region, but now, I don't know... we get more and more calls across the country now.

EC: He takes me out into the yard, and just as I'm starting to form a question, the train horn sounds.

BC: That's the fabric of our inner city, gritty little neighborhood that I love so much. We can't change it. It's not going to be the suburbs, ever. So if you don't like trains and warehouses, you probably don't want to come to WeHo.

EC (on tape): So I have a very civilian, amateur question. When you get some wood, how do you know what it is?

BC: Well, again I'm going into my 22nd year of sourcing lumber. For the source, you can just cut the end off and you're gonna see a growth pattern that you're gonna recognize. You know, I can tell the difference between mulberry or pine or cedar or western cedar, Tennessee red cedar, heart pine, oak, red oak, you can just tell by the way it grows. And it grows, of course, from the end of it up.

EC: These days, people bring Brent trailer loads of vintage lumber that his team prepares for sale. But it didn't used to be that way. We paired Brent with another neighborhood business owner named Ann Clawson.

Ann Clawson: My name is Ann Clawson and my husband, Jens, and I own Clawson's Pub and Deli. It's on the corner of a 4th Avenue South and Chestnut right next to the water tower. We opened November 20th of 2014.

AC: So when we first came to the neighborhood to Wedgewood-Houston, we knew that's where we wanted to open a sandwich shop. We weren't exactly sure where in the neighborhood, but driving around the neighborhood when we first moved here, we lived on Humphreys Street also and immediately saw Woodstock Vintage Lumber when it was on 4th Avenue South in this little triangle lot right next to the railroad tracks. And I just thought it was really intriguing, and I want to know how you got there. Are you from Nashville?

BC: Ann, when you get my age, you've had two or three lives.

AC: What's, what's age?

BC: Sixty-three. So 21 years back—22 going on this year—I started Woodstock Vintage Lumber after a 23 year career in the restaurant business. Just been doing it a long time. The kids were starting their sports. And so I just decided I was gonna make a break, and that's when the idea of selling Volkswagens out of my garage hit me.

Her exact words were, “If you're not a restaurant man, what are you?” And I said, “I'm a Volkswagen guy.” And then two, three months later, “I'm a lumber man.” Yeah. She was worried, you know, she was worried about the kids, you know, we had two small kids. She's worried about making ends meet, but we've always been able to make 'em meet. But back then it was a bigger concern than it is now for sure.

Everyone that I had sold a Volkswagen to that summer—by the fall, they were bringing them back because they were 40 year old automobiles and they were using them daily drivers. And I thought, well this isn't gonna work even though I still love my Volkswagens and classic Volkswagen.

AC: My first four cars were classic Volkswagens.

BC: Oh I love them. Exactly. And so I was delivering a car. It wasn't a Volkswagen, it was a bug-eyed Sprite down the street near Vanderbilt is the area I'm in, and the reason I keep saying that is because the homes there were built in the '20s, and I delivered the car to my neighbor down the street, and there was a house being taken down. And the people that were taking it down with the Habitat for Humanity and they had stopped and she said there's still \$2,500 left and then they don't come back and finish it in. That was just exactly the amount of money I needed to give my wife that month. So I said, well, I'll tear it on down because my career in restoring Volkswagens was coming to an end. And so I took a sledgehammer and walked down the street and started to continue to take that building down. And a guy drove up after I was there for a couple of days and said that he would give me \$500 for the floor joists in the house. And that's the first time I'd ever heard the word heart pine.

EC: When Brent talks about heart pine, his eyes literally sparkle, and you get a sense of why he does what he does.

BC: Heart pine is what was here when we first came to America all through the South. Longleaf, Yellow Pine—Southern Yellow Pine. And it was everywhere, and it was so thick and dense that the roots could never get enough water. And the tree grew straight up looking for light next to its neighbor. And so the heart of a tree always has small growth rings because the roots are small and it doesn't get what it needs to grow rapidly. It's a baby. And so those trees had more growth when they were younger than they did when they got older because of the tree next to it asking for the same water in the same light. And so the rings just looked like the end of your fingerprint. The growth rings on a heartburn. In 1600, King Charles started sending back heart pine. He'd float cobblestone over in the bottom of a boat and send back heart pine. So they started cutting immediately when we came, when we came.

AC: So, so is his heart pine—you talked about it like it's not in existence anymore.

BC: So they clear cut it by...oh I'm going to say 1880s. They started cutting it in 1700s. But once railroads started going through and could get to and into areas where the forests were, they came up with the wonder drug and cleaning solution turpentine that came from heart pine, and when they found that they started cutting them down and they gutted the middle of them, had burn pits, the big slabs off of them. And we're talking trees that were seven feet through the middle and 300 feet tall, had lived for 700 years. They were mowing them down, cutting it, and getting turpentine out of the heart pine's core.

After the fella it are offered me \$500 for those floor joists, I realized there might be a market for older lumber, and just being a guy that had always been interested in yard sales and restoring bugs, it just kind of fit my ear. And so the guy that took those joists said, "Come out here with me to the Franklin Factory. I'm taking down some beams out here," and I did.

AC: To salvage those?

BC: To salvage those beams. And while we were there he decided not to do it any longer. And I continued. I had one customer and it was James Dunn, and James Dunn's right over the hill at Vintage Millworks. He was interested in old wood. So I would bring him whatever I would find that was being taken down. He was my first and only customer for a long time. I remember I didn't even know what a planer was when I first started.

AC: Well then how, how did you find out what a planer is?

BC: Well, I needed to get the material from a state of just being regular wood that had come out or building to being de-nailed, shaped, and turned into flooring because I knew that that was always my goal was to make flooring out of heart pine lumber. And trial and error over and over...

AC: Just self-taught in your garage?

BC: Exactly. And then I found a guy that had a shop and a planer, and I started shoving that heart pine through his planer and he would let me do it and made my first floors out there.

EC: Brent was in the Franklin Factory for a short time before he was ready to expand. He worked out Peytonsville for three years—that's about 30 minutes south of Nashville. He started going up to Clarksville to take down a five story granary. But he'd have to bring the wood back to Nashville to plane it. And he kept coming to South Nashville to do business.

BC: I was used to this side of town because James Dunn. It was an area of town that, you know, kind of for lack of a better word, shady as it was. It's still wasn't a bad place to run your business in the light of day. I could see myself, you know, having a shop there. I could see that this little company was closing down. It was a propane company and it was just, they were going, they were going away. And so I walked around and I asked the fella what was going on with the property and he said, well, they're, they're in Bloomington, Indiana. It's a company, a family owned company, and they're shutting it down. I said, well, maybe they'll sell it. He said, I have no idea. He gave me their number. I called them, and I was coaching AAU basketball for my sons and we were going to Bloomington, Indiana that weekend. So I left that weekend and closed with their lawyer that weekend and brought that property. It happened within five days of when I first saw it.

AC: That's serendipitous.

EC: You can find Woodstock lumber all over the city. The heart pine benches at the entrance of the Nashville Zoo. Tables at Five Points Pizza and Pinewood Social. A beech accent wall at Nashville Visitor's Bureau. Plus the doors, counter tops, floors, and headboards that populate Nashville homes.

While Woodstock was in that spot, Nashville started changing. Growing. And the neighborhood started changing, too. Brent moved his shop over to Chestnut Street and built condos on the 4th Avenue lot. They're called Woodstock at Chestnut Hill, and they're beautiful: custom floors and mantels, subway tiled bathrooms, lots of light. There's a waiting list to apply.

BC: This neighborhood, I remember when we first moved in and there was just—it's changed. I guess we could close your eyes and open your eyes. It was shocking. I guess it doesn't feel that way to you. You've been here and it kind of moves as it moves, but you've been here long enough to see the growth.

AC: Yeah. And having visited a couple times a year over the last, well, the 10 years prior to opening our business was really surprised to see how quickly things change.

BC: Nashville, it's kind of an economy in itself. I mean I just think kids get out of school in Kansas or Missouri and in there they're like, OK, the economy's not that great and I'm going to go to Nashville. Everybody's not so excited about the growth of Nashville, and we're displacing a lot of people that lived here in Nashville, but these older people that are selling their homes and building these tall skinny ones, I don't know where they're growing. They're taking their \$250,000 and I guess moving out to the counties. I don't know. They never dreamed they would get 250.

But, you know, as we all know, 250's not going to last as long as they may think. For that reason, I think I'm politically incorrect by saying I like the growth. I'm just the guy that likes to see things, you know, moving forward. At their expense—I don't know if I know all the ins and outs about it, but I do like to see the neighborhood growing.

AC: I read something recently that said a city is either in incline or decline. I guess I prefer the incline.

BC: Yeah, I agree. And you and I really can't afford having put all of our resources into this neighborhood to hope for anything different. The more people that come to our neighborhood, the more desirable my apartments will be and your restaurant. It'll just make things better for us as far as businesses, I'm convinced I would have never. I would have never built those apartments thinking that it was just gonna, you know, something that was in decline.

AC: Where Clawson's is now, you know, was the freezer on that building and there were no windows, doors, electricity, plumbing, HVAC. It was a freezer and pulling the handle on that 48-inch-wide door that's 10 inches deep to walk inside. And it was dark because there were no lights and what you could see what the phone light there was graffiti on all the walls and motors were hanging from the ceiling. It was a freezer. But I knew that was—

BC: That was the home.

AC: Of all the places we looked at, of course a freezer. That's perfect.

BC: Exactly.

[Fade in sound of music at Clawson's Pub and Deli]

Clawson's employee: Sandwich for Brandon!

EC: Clawson's Pub and Deli is located right next to Brent's apartments in a big brick building called Track One that houses the small businesses of artisans and artists. The Clawsons added the big windows, the door, the HVAC, the plumbing, the electricity...you get the picture. Now, it has a homey vibe, with unique salt and pepper shakers—my favorite are a shark's head and tail—succulents on the window sills, board games, and kitschy wall art—like a portrait of John Wayne. Up by the register, there are postcards with a sign that says, "Write your Ma, and we'll buy the stamp."

Clawson's customer: We wrote to our moms...Exactly. That's adorable!

EC: Clawson's most popular sandwich is the Number One. Turkey, bacon, cheddar, lettuce, tomato, and ranch on sourdough. The second most popular is the Number Twelve: Also with turkey, plus Sriracha-buffalo sauce, bacon, Swiss and ranch, toasted on a sub roll.

AC: We're almost three years—and that went by so fast—that we've been open and I can tell you this, we have sold—and this is as of like two weeks ago, so it's only higher—2.83 tons of Turkey.

BC: A ton of turkey.

AC: 2.83 tons of turkey. It's probably three tons.

BC: Yeah, that's a lot of turkey.

AC: I think maybe—

BC: Three tons?

AC: I tried to think about what that looks like.

BC: It would fill up this this room, I think.

AC: Probably. People like the bird.

BC: That's the number one, eh?

AC: Well my husband and I both had worked in restaurants for a long time, and we lived in Long Beach, California. We were actually trying to open a place out there. Our first spot was called Green Goods Mini Mart, and our kind of elevator pitch was like “the Whole Foods of 7-Elevens” was what we were like wanting to do. We found a great spot on a cool street. And uh, we were in lease negotiations when the city condemned the building because it didn't have a subfloor. It had dirt floors and the building was owned by this, some people call it a cult, some kind of like commune, a group of people. And after effort was condemned, they continued using it for a yoga studio, but we couldn't move forward with it because it was small condemned. So we took it as a sign that the universe was saying it's not time yet. And then right after that, I was managing a restaurant and the company offered me a promotion that moved us to Washington D.C. So we took that promotion and we moved sight-unseen. And uh, right after we got there, the company was sold and the new organization had what we felt were some questionable ethics, but had to ride out the contract for a year so we'd always love coming to Nashville. And I remember calling Lauren Brown, the wife of John Sewell, old friend of mine and say, Lauren, we're going to move to Nashville and we're going to open a restaurant. We don't know where, but we're coming and we'll be there in March. And she said, well, you should check out our neighborhood, which is the Wedgewood-Houston neighborhood. She said, there's not really any food here yet. So we're like, well, that's interesting. So we booked a trip and we came and we saw Gabby's and drove around the neighborhood and there was nothing else.

And John was talking to us about the houses, you know, speculating a lot. He knows a lot about the neighborhood and the momentum. And we found the freezer on Craigslist, actually, it was listed on Craigslist and it was just about what we could afford. But before that we spent the whole year writing our business plan and seeking funding. It's hard to get funding for restaurant

unless you have, you know, partners, which we didn't because we didn't know anybody in the city. We tried putting everything in my name to make it a minority woman-owned business to try and get financing that way and couldn't get it. So then we started playing the game of do I really need to buy a cup of Starbucks coffee or do I need to open a sandwich shop? And it was I need to open a sandwich shop.

So for a year we made all those decisions and saved up some money and we got a little bit of financing. Just pulled the trigger and moved here and opened a sandwich shop in a freezer crossed her fingers and hoped other people like sandwiches and beer.

BC: So you say on Craigslist. Was that something Scott had put out there?

AC: Uh huh. when he had. He had just started framing out the interior of the ground floor.

BC: Remember it well.

AC: —and there was nothing in that building yet. Well, I think one of the recording studios had been there in the very back, and then we opened as the rest of the building continued to get finished out. And we're really grateful that other people like sandwiches.

EC: And they like beer. Their list of craft brews and ciders clocks in at above forty. But they're only open during the day, and Clawson's has a family vibe to it. Like everyone is welcome.

BC: So when I came into your shop, there is this way of accessorizing that I grew up that you can do. You're able to collect things that are, seem like they're from the fifties, but yet they can kind of roll into the sixties and it's, it's interesting how you, how you accessorize your restaurant. I think it's a real talent you have.

AC: Oh, gosh. Thank you. My friends, uh, jokingly call me Granny Annie.

BC: Yeah, it wasn't granny for me. It was our home when we grew up.

AC: That's what feels comfortable. I say maybe it's some past life regression or—

BC: It's funny like that. I think me living in a house that was built in 1924, I think all of my passion for old buildings, old cars came from my grandparents' home in Anniston, Alabama. We'd go out in the backyard and he'd had his shop at the end of the yard and oh, it had such treasures back there, you know. Oh, just oil cans that you don't see anymore. And tools on the wall all arranged, you know, an outline with a magic marker. So you knew which tool to put back were. But they weren't new tools and it wasn't modern. It was ancient, old used, worn.

AC: My grandfather worked on Triumphs and was a carpenter and he built his house and my father was a carpenter and still rides motorcycles and motorcycle that he built and repaired.

BC: Oh he had Triumph motorcycles?

AC: And then my father did. The very first piece of decoration for Clawson's when you walk in the front door on the right is this Emerald Green Swag lamp and it came actually from Jen's grandparents' house. They built their house in 1955. They were the first and only owners. They died in their house, 92 and 94, of natural causes under home healthcare. We lived very close to them in Long Beach so we would visit them often, but that same damn lamp hung in the house for the duration of their ownership over the table in the den. After Grandpa Frank and Grandma Betty died, they were sorting out—you know, hey kids come over if there was, you know, anything you would like to have of Frank and Betty's let us know. And Jens and I are both like, “That green lamp!” And his mom was like, are you serious? It's like nobody else wanted it. We were like the last to get there. Like we absolutely want that lamp. And that was the very first piece. And so the whole place was built around that lamp. But also the feeling that that lamp gave us, you know, like nostalgia and good times and comfort. We wanted to make a place like that that felt like you were in our kitchen and hope other people feel that way when they come to our spot, too.

BC: Well, you're, you're an entrepreneur. Entrepreneur gets out of bed every day. Rain or shine. That's just what you're going to do. There's no other choice. There's not another way to do it. You head straight to work.

AC: I will gladly do that because of my name and gets to be on the sign.

BC: That's right.

EC: Jens Clawson is usually in the back running the kitchen. He has a shaved head, and like, Brent, a long beard. Next to Ann with her two braids, glasses, and sleeves of tattoos, they make a super cute couple. I cut in to ask Ann how they met.

AC: [laughing]Wow. I was working at a bar. I was bartending. I had seen him around. He played in a band, a live Karaoke band called Mister Mister Miyagi. And it was awesome. You got on stage with a full band of eight people to sing your favorite '80s song, you know, you had that five minutes of like rock stardom and they played at the bar. So I had seen him around and thought he was really hot, but he had a girlfriend. Then one day I was working on a Sunday and he came in with some people I know. I asked Ed Campworth, What's up with your friend over there? He had said that he was not in a relationship anymore, and they hung out and drank all afternoon. And I was closing out my cash drawer in the back office and I hear the door open. And I look up and it was Jens, and he just walked in, sat down and grabbed my face and started kissing me. And we hadn't even, we hadn't even officially met yet. He just started kissing me and then I put out my hand to shake his, like, I'm Ann, all starry-eyed. I had plans to go out to dinner that night and I was like, What are you doing later? And he's like, Well, I'm coming back for this show. I said, I'll meet you after dinner. I came back to the bar and he was still there and I took him home with me and he never left. Then six months later we got married. We eloped in Las Vegas. But then we didn't tell anybody for about two and a half years. And this past Sunday we celebrated our 10-year wedding anniversary in Niagara Falls. So that, that worked out.

BC: That's awesome.

AC: It's something,

BC: I think it's awesome.

AC: Yeah, he's a good man. You know, I don't, I don't want it to sound like I've got anything super special, but I don't know how many people could live with and work with their spouse, and we are pretty much together 24 hours a day. It's still not getting old.

EC: And that's something these two have in common. Brent's wife, Barbara, runs Woodstock with him. If you give the shop a call, she's likely to answer the phone.

BC: We do. Now, that wasn't always the case. The business grew to the point where, you know, she honestly, she said, You're having fun and I want to have fun. I said, Well come on! She's way smarter than I am. She's financial and she's very organized, and she's the only reason I ever acquired or done anything because, you know, she always kept everything in its slots in order and I was, I'm always just moving forward, you know, out there trying to forge ahead.

AC: How long have you guys been married now?

BC: I'm 31 years.

AC: I love that story...I never anticipated that opening a little sandwich shop in a freezer would bring such a great feeling of community and friendship. Like I just figured, you know, we, we opened the doors and crossed our fingers and hoped people would give us a try once, but we have like 60 percent repeat business every day. At least. Somewhere 60, 65 percent every day. We've seen our regular customers, you know, go from dating to get married, to have kids when their parents are in town, they bring them in. We've met Frank's grandma, like people. It's just never thought about that part. I don't know if that was naïve or I don't know. And that, that's just been so great.

EC: A big thanks to Ann and Brent for sharing their stories, and to all the small business owners at the top of the episode. Treasure Hunters was a joy to record. Our next episode features Humphrey's Street Coffee and Soap Company, and it will be our last. But we invite you to WeHome Day on April 14th at 1:00 in Track One. Three artists are interpreting the stories of WeHome visually. We'll have music, food, and arts engagement. Come meet the stars of WeHome and celebrate these South Nashville neighborhoods. Again, that's April 14th, 1 p.m. at 1201 4th Avenue South. We'd love to see you there.

Before we sign off, I have a quick plug for a podcast you have to hear. It's by Nashville Public Radio, and it's called The Promise. They've spent the last year reporting across the river from the city's largest public housing complex—getting to know the people who live there, the officers who police the neighborhood, and the city officials who want to give it the overhaul of a lifetime. It's a dramatic story, told in six parts. Listen to "The Promise" for free on Apple Podcasts or at wpln.org.

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Thanks for listening. I'm your producer, Erica Ciccarone, reporting from Wedgewood-Houston. See you next time.

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