

DON FOSTER COSTUMES

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Staff Reporter

Don and Rita Foster aren't exactly hanging up their hats—all several hundred of 'em.

But, they are transferring them—along with a warehouseful of carefully-handcrafted costumes—to new ownership.

After nearly two decades, the Belleville couple are quitting the venture which unexpectedly wound up making their hometown the dress-up-costume capital of eastern Ontario.

It all started as a little funny business—funny in the sense it helped people enjoy themselves; little, since the Fosters didn't have intentional ambitions for it.

"It was a hobby that grew into a big business," reflects Don Foster.

The venture dates to the early 1960s when Foster, a railroad engineer, filled much spare time clad in clown costumes, supplying antic merriment for community events.

Out of that grew the fun floats and mobile amusement contraptions that became a Foster hallmark around much of southern Ontario.

And, while he and young helpers were working on the imaginative devices and routines planned to keep the public in stitches, his wife was stitching the costumes they needed.

Then came 1967—Canada's centennial year—and its multitude of local pageants, many demanding actors in historical costume and period dress. Many organizers and participants turned to the Fosters.

At the close, Rita had designed and made 250 dresses—rented out repeatedly. At the end of the celebration year "that was when we found out we'd made ourselves into a fair-sized business," she recalls.

From then, it also did little else but expand. The couple set up a costume repository full time in the backyard barn at their Emily Street home.

Their name spread. Eventually, orders were coming in from as far away as Prescott. Customers even came from Toronto—word had also circulated that the Belleville operation offered its best costumes at half the price of the cheapest outfits rented in Toronto.

Inventory swelled. It now counts about 5,000 costumes—most of them Rita's creation. There are also more than 4,000 masks and headpieces.

In recent years, however, the couple have been cutting back their activities. Foster

took an early retirement from railroading. Lately, they've only been renting from Halloween through Christmas.

Even with that, their busiest season ever closed at the end of 1981.

Foster, a city councillor since 1978, has just announced he won't run for another city hall term. But, he hasn't been around town in any costumed charade since election. The decision was deliberate. He feels it isn't fitting for a public representative.

Then, last winter, he suffered a fractured hip which still makes mobility uncomfortable, sometimes painful.

Operating the business already had become difficult—even with a shorter season. But, it wasn't easy to give up, says Rita Foster.

"I had it sold a couple of years ago—but when it came right down to the parting line, Don wouldn't let me sell it."

However, Foster recently accepted the situation.

There were several potential buyers, he says. He chose Merrit Waite, city resident with much time in janitorial and custodial operations. The transaction closed Tuesday.

Waite will transfer the costume stock to his King George Square home site. The changeover will take a couple of weeks, but he's in business and taking calls as

of now, says the new owner.

Already, he's discovered the territorial spread he'll have to service—and it's taken him aback.

"I've had calls from Peterborough and the other side of Kingston. It's just amazing to know how far people will come to Belleville for costumes," said Waite.

Meantime, Foster is waiting for spring to sell the other side of the business—his parade equipment, and its Bettes Street workshop-storehouse.

He says he's already had bids on some of the devices—

notably the 60-plus trick bicycles he assembled to enliven many parades around

southern Ontario—including four Toronto Grey Cup marchpasts.

He'll withhold a couple of treasures—two antique penny-farthing bikes, and a rare wood-frame bicycle.

While both Fosters admit relief they finally took the decision to sell, the admissions are mingled with nostalgia.

But, they'll have more than the many prizes they won around fairs and parades as mementoes.

Rita is keeping the costumes she wore as leader of many parades.

Don Foster is holding on to the clown costume with which the whole thing began.