

# Harvesting history

*Jeff Nelson salvages classic architectural parts for reuse*

By Jennifer Schmidt

Give Jeff Nelson his tools and an old church, barn or commercial building, and you'll find him in his element.

Even aging, dilapidated, soon-to-be-demolished buildings have hidden gems — 100-year-old hardwood floors or “killer” beveled doors, for example — that Nelson can't wait to uncover.

“Sometimes, if we've got something really fun, I can't wait to go to bed at night to get up in the morning and get going,” said Nelson, 61, of Eau Claire.

Nelson, a carpenter by trade and owner of Dell's Architectural Antiques, harvests old building parts like stained glass, tin ceilings and lighting fixtures for use in new construction and remodels.

Although modern-day homes are beautiful, Nelson argues that they lack the character that ones from yesteryear possessed.

“It's all sheetrock and all plastic floors, all carpet,” he said of new homes.

A couple hundred 2-by-4s, so many sheets of plywood, X number of shingles — day after day, the routine is always the same.

“They're getting way too boring,” he said.

Nelson prefers to challenge himself and “see if you can get things to work out, make it look like it did in the old days — you know, fit it all in, make it look cool.” Additionally, he said he admires the craftsmen of previous generations and marvels at how they built log homes by hand with broad axes and



Staff photos by Dan Reiland

Jeff Nelson, left, owner of Dell's Architectural Antiques, and John Reedy of Stanley salvaged the old tin ceiling from Nelson's Barstow Tap in Eau Claire before the building is demolished. The bar was once the Eau Claire Savings Bank until the 1920s.

other tools considered primitive by today's standards.

Nelson's Maple Street shop — a 9,000-square-foot former horse barn from the 1870s — is stacked from floor to ceiling with an eclectic mix of items he's collected. Pieces are generally from about 1850 to 1920.

"We try not to get anything newer; otherwise the barn would be fuller than it is right now," he laughed, mentioning how he rents a building down the road from his shop to store more items.

Nelson's daughter, Erin Wilson of Chippewa Falls, works part time at Dell's Architectural Antiques and said her father has "gotten the most amazing pieces over the last few years." Among other items, his inventory includes clawfoot tubs, kitchen sinks, door hardware, window casing, sconces, chandeliers and fireplace mantels.

"We get a lot of people that come in who are restoring old homes. We get a lot of people in who are just trying to put that unique character into their newly built homes," said Wilson, 25. "Plus, we get the crafty people in. People come in all the time and just go 'Oh, I could do this and this.'"

Melinda Daubitz, 43, of Eau Claire, co-owner of the business Damselflies, buys both antiques and architectural pieces, then transforms them. She and her business partner make crafts such as snowmen from old porch posts, birdhouse roofs from ceiling tin and photo holders from doorknobs.

"Weekly we go in and see the new things that he's acquired — and sit on the floor and think about what we can do with it or where we could hang it," Daubitz said.

Nelson is constantly picking up "new" items. A local demolition contractor recently contacted him about a cluster of buildings on North Barstow Street he was scheduled to tear down. Before he did, the contractor asked if Nelson would be interested in any of the contents.

He was.

Nelson always looks at prospective sites first, to see if they contain items of value. He's walked away from soon-to-be-leveled structures before because they don't meet his criteria — but when they're right, he and a crew take all they can get their hands on. In the case of the Barstow

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**Left:** Nelson salvaged hardwood flooring from a building scheduled for demolition.

**Bottom left:** Stained glass windows are part of the offerings at Nelson's business.

**Below:** Salvaged hardwood flooring takes up a lot of space in the old barn that serves as Nelson's headquarters.





Staff photo by Dan Reiland

Not even doorknobs are overlooked by Nelson as he salvages architectural antiques.

## Salvager sees beauty in old handiwork

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Street properties, Nelson took floors, doors, tin ceilings, sinks and more.

"Once we get a house, we work day and night. We work all night long just to get everything we can out of there," Nelson said, adding that whatever he doesn't take will likely end up in a landfill, which he hates to see happen.

"Even hardwood floors, some 100 years old, can be reused again someplace," he said.

Nelson typically pays a fee for contents he takes. Rather than buying items separately, he pays one amount for everything. Over the years, he's gotten entire houses for free, and, in other cases, he's paid up to \$2,500 for them.

His work is usually done under tight time constraints. He and his helpers — he doesn't have formal employees — have to be in and out before the wrecking ball comes swinging, which can be just a few days in some cases.

"Then we get lots of help, and we just start ripping and tearing," Nelson said. "Somebody likes tearing out hardwood floors. Somebody likes taking stained glass windows out. I just let 'em go at it."

Nelson salvages materials mainly from the Chippewa Valley but has traveled to three other states for items.

In addition to selling the harvested items in his shop, he also sells them to his carpentry customers.

"I'm one of my best customers. I keep saying 'Well, if you need that, I've got that at the shop,'" Nelson said.

Daubitz describes Dell's as a unique business that keeps a part of the past alive.

"People are so easy to tear things down and put up brand spanking new, but there's just the handiwork that went into old homes," she said. "It was passionate. It was hard work. It was creative. (Nelson) has a passion for that — to preserve the past."

*Schmidt is a freelance writer based in Tilden.*

### Learn more

**What:** Dell's Architectural Antiques.

**Where:** 121 Maple St.

**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

**Phone:** 834-8872.

**E-mail:** dellsaa@yahoo.com.

**More information:** Go to [www.constructioncrossroads.com](http://www.constructioncrossroads.com), then click on "Service Providers" and "Architectural Antiques."

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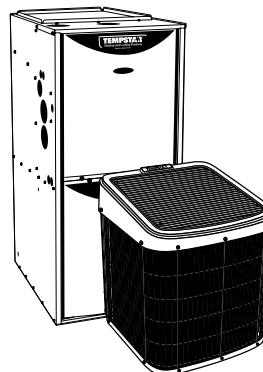
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