

Cover story



Shows tap into recession-fueled fantasies that our old stuff is worth a small fortune

By Gary Strauss
 USA TODAY

There's a lot of trash on TV these days. Not just the normal fare. Trash TV, "mantiquing," goodwill-store hunting or whatever you may call it is quietly gaining momentum among viewers captivated by secondhand merchandise, garage-sale finds, forgotten memorabilia and relics from attic stashes.

After only five episodes, *American Pickers* — which follows two guys trolling rural barnyards and back rooms for cool stuff with a potential market — is History Channel's No. 2 series, averaging 3.3 million viewers. Back-to-back episodes of History's *Pawn Stars* — which focuses on pawn-shop operators matching wits with cash-strapped gamblers and fortune-seekers — averaged 4.6 million viewers last week, both among cable's top 10 shows.

There's no buying, selling or haggling on PBS' *Antiques Roadshow*, which features expert appraisals on everything from Craigslist collectibles to Aunt Martha's antiques. Yet so far this season, *Roadshow*, PBS' most-watched series since 1998, is averaging nearly 10% more viewers than in 2009, its largest audience since 2007.

Historical significance and story lines aside, the lingering effects of the recession and unemployment angst appear to be behind the growing interest in salvaging treasure from castoffs and clutter, giving waste management a whole new meaning.

"Not all of us are going to hit the lottery, but all of us have something laying around the house," says independent media analyst Shari Anne Brill. "The beauty of these shows is they can help you assess if the junk you have is actually worth something."

John Sencio noted a shift in sentiment from those participating in HGTV's *Cash in the Attic*, which, like

PBS' *Roadshow*, is an adaptation of a British hit. As *Attic*'s host from 2005-2008, Sencio crisscrossed the USA helping families raise cash.

"Before the recession, it was about families raising money for luxury items like hot tubs," Sencio says. "But that morphed into something more practical — like raising money for a new stove."

Attic has been on hiatus since 2008, though early weekday repeats continue to lure viewers. "We haven't worn the rubber off it and we still love the concept," says Freddy James, head of HGTV program development. "But instead of a single show, we're incorporating the theme across other shows — designers uncovering unusual items at salvage yards and other venues" instead of buying new.

Other trash-centric series are in the can or close to it. HGTV is considering a docu-reality show about a salvage yard operator. TLC just aired *Trashmen*, a pilot about entrepreneur Sidney Torres' New Orleans refuse business. TLC also is planning a 2010 series centered on the nation's biggest auction house.

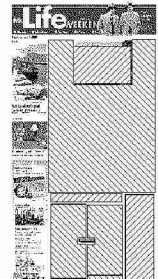
Reality show kingpin Thom Beers (*Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*) is developing the tentatively titled *Storage Wars*, which tracks entrepreneurs who snap up abandoned stashes at self-storage centers, sight unseen, for potential resale.

"Why is this in the zeitgeist? People have been on a shopping spree for years," says Beers, a longtime *Roadshow* aficionado. "Now they're saying: 'What can I sell? What's this worth?'"

Though trash TV's success may be a result in part to economic misfortune and cash-strapped viewers, programming also provides something unique.

"At the heart of these shows, there are compelling stories everyone can relate to, but there's also a window to a different world," says TLC programmer Nancy Daniels.

Pawn Stars and *Pickers* follow the formula of oth-



er successful reality shows highlighting dynamic and quirky characters. Says History Channel programmer Nancy Dubuc, "At the end of the day, these shows tell a great story, inform and entertain."

Roots: Mike Wolfe is a life-long "picker" who has combed through junkyards since he was 4 and has been making a living off picking for nearly 20 years: "Everybody has a little bit of picker in them." He has known co-picker Frank Fritz since eighth grade.

Concept: Wolfe, 45, and Fritz, 46, comb farms, flea markets and backwaters for collectibles ranging from vintage Vespas to rusted Coca-Cola signs. Most wind up at Wolfe's Antique Archaeology shop in rural Le Claire, Iowa, near the banks of the Mississippi River. "We've been all over the country.

Pawn Stars

Mondays, 10 ET/PT, History Channel

Concept: Richard Harrison, son Rick and grandson Corey hold court at the Gold & Silver Pawn Shop, which was started by the elder Harrison in Las Vegas in 1988. Gruff, fast on their feet and able to spot a fake Picasso or find value in an antique piccolo, the three are always on the lookout for scammers — and for items they can buy on the cheap and flip.

Roots: The Harrisons almost went to pay cable, which wanted a *Taxicab Confessions*-style series. The format eventually evolved into the family-focused business that viewers now see, dubbed *Pawning History* until History gave it a catchier title before last year's launch.

Oeuvre: The threesome's bickering can be alternately amusing and grating. So, too, are the steady streams of customers who drop by to deal. Still, there's a surprising amount of knowledge imparted by the Harrisons and their coterie of local experts, who specialize in authenticating memorabilia, determining an object's value or estimating repair costs.

Hitting the jackpot: *Pawn Stars*' success has spawned a boom in the Harrisons' business. The shop is undergoing a \$400,000 expansion that will boost space by more than 60%. "We've gone from seeing 70 people a day to over 1,000 — many are tourists who just want to buy T-shirts," says Rick Harrison, 45. "But we're getting a lot more stuff in and doing a lot more business. It's been a game-changer." Harrison says he doesn't watch himself on TV, though he is aware of the ratings success. History Channel has already greenlighted a third season. "We're bigger than Leno," he boasts.

I've pulled a lot of stuff out of Long Beach, but my favorite place to pick is the East Coast," says Wolfe, who makes about \$50,000 a year.

Oeuvre: The Odd Couple hits the road, meeting quirky people holding quirky stuff. "We try to give the (seller) a voice, and the pieces we come across a voice," Wolfe says. "There's no script. This is truly what we do."

Hitting the jackpot: Before the series, Wolfe's business was strictly Internet-based, with clients including decorators, art directors and movie prop houses. He now receives 500 e-mails a day from fans, potential sellers and others dreaming of doing some picking for profit themselves. "With the economy so rough, people are looking for different ways to make a living," says Wolfe, who last month expanded his shop to accommodate walk-in customers.

Behind the show: *Pickers* evolved from an Internet video that Wolfe assembled from his picking adventures, which eventually drew interest from cable TV channels. Wolfe and Fritz traveled for five months through 20 states for History's inaugural 10-episode season. "We knew they were good, so we took a leap of faith and didn't (order) a pilot," History Channel programming exec Nancy Dubuc says. "We spent an enormous amount of time trying to change the title, because we were worried viewers wouldn't know what they do. But sometimes, simple and obvious works best."

Antiques Roadshow

Mondays, 8 ET/PT, PBS, check local listings for other times

Concept: Schlep your antiques, heirlooms, collectibles or estate-sale finds for expert appraisals.

Roots: Based on the British hit — which has aired since 1978 — *Roadshow* is in its 14th season.

Oeuvre: Quiet anticipation.

Hitting the jackpot: Last season, a collection of 18th-century Chinese carved jade was valued at up to \$1.07 million, which was *Roadshow's* first seven-figure appraisal.

Behind the show: Demand for free tickets, which gain access to the series' expert appraisers, is soaring. A summer *Roadshow* event in Raleigh, N.C., attracted 33,000 requests for 3,000 pairs of tickets. "People are looking for value in their basements and attics. We started seeing it in the turnout and people's stories that coincided with the dip in the economy," says longtime producer Marsha Bemko. Though *Roadshow* offers only appraisals, "everyone hopes they'll walk out richer, no matter if they're 8 or 80," she says.

Golden guys: Corey, left, Rick and Richard Harrison of Gold & Silver Pawn Shop host *Pawn Stars* on the History Channel.





By Joey L, AETN

Cycle of stuff: Mike Wolfe, left, and Frank Fritz comb farms, flea markets and backwaters as *American Pickers*.



By Jeff Dunn, WGBH

High note: This guest's 1941 Martin guitar — which was played on the radio by his great-uncle, Cowboy Slim — was valued at \$65,000 to \$75,000.