Ken Mummert sits in the small room on the third floor of his Wake Forest house. A pronghorn shoulder mount stares down from one wall. A body mount gray fox is on the other side of the room, while a mounted crappie and a drake mallard hang on other walls. There’s a gun cabinet against a wall with mostly shotguns in it. There’s even a turkey call CD on a boom box. It definitely qualifies as a man’s man cave.

Against one wall there’s a display with a couple of dozen box calls on the shelves and next to it stacks of cartons and boxes. A visitor asks why they’re seemingly on display.

“Overflow,” Mummert says with a laugh, and points to the cartons and boxes, all filled with various turkey calls.

Mummert has been an avid turkey hunter since his teenage years in Pennsylvania. Today, the tools of his hunting passion, simple wood and bone instruments, have turned into a new passion all together. The possessions became an obsession and Mummert is one of the stalwarts in the world of turkey call collecting, having been in the game since the late 1970s. Mummert “gets it honest,” as we say in the South.

His father was the president of the local gun club. One uncle served in the Pennsylvania Game Commission. His father also owned a turkey hunting specialty wholesale business in Pennsylvania, LM Sporting Goods, distributing camouflage socks, hooded t-shirts, handkerchiefs and calls, as well as region-specific shirts, hats and patches. He also sold calls handmade by his brother and a rebranded slate call made by the famous Neil Cost. A big seller was a patented ‘make your own’ diaphragm call kit.

Mummert was introduced to turkey hunting by his uncle Lee Mummert, who Ken credits as his greatest influence in turkey hunting, instilling such basics as full concealment, not over-calling and patience.

In his youth Mummert spent hours upon hours in his basement assembling Uncle Lee’s Diaphragm Call kits after school. It was his after-school job. “Dad died when he was 49,” Mummert says wistfully. “He was living the dream.”

Mummert, 51, who works in commercial printing, and two other men, Craig Koefler, 66, of Raleigh and Jason Booser, 36, of Franklinton, originally “met” on Internet forums and eventually met in real life. Mummert (whose board “handle” is NCBigShot) and Booser (Turkeyfanatic) discovered on the forums that they had a lot in common and eventually met and developed a friendship, while Mummert and Koefler (Longbox) had been friends for a while after connecting on eBay and meeting at a local gun show.

Booser, an elementary school teacher, got into trumpet calls through some hunting friends who piqued his interest in them. He differs from the others in that he collects from one maker and one type—the trumpet call. A native of Brookville, Pa., he moved to North Carolina in 2004. His first custom call was a $65 call made by Ted “Pete” Peters of Ohio.

“I was looking for a call that took a little more effort and dedication,” he said. “It’s a challenge. It was frustrating at first but I stuck with it.”

Eventually, Booser got bit by the collecting bug and discovered trumpet call-maker Herb Horsnra of Eugene, Ore.

“Resale value, artistry is phenomenal, everything is handmade—not machine made,” says Booser when asked what drew him to Horsnra’s calls. “The playability. With a trumpet you have to draw air in. With a mouth call you push air out. It was the easiest call when I put it to my mouth to perform all of the vocalizations of the wild turkey. I can take them to the woods, hunt turkeys with them and get them made in just about any material you want to have them made in. I have nine of his calls.”

Some turkey hunters have turned collecting calls into a passion all its own.
According to one reference book, the Hornstra calls can start at a couple of hundred dollars each. Does Booser fear hunting with them? “I'm very careful,” he says. “I have some custom-made leather cases that go around my neck, and it's going to take a pretty good fall or something for them to break. I'm not going to lie; there's a few that I wouldn't take into the woods. It doesn't matter what they're made of or the price behind them, they'll all kill turkeys and they will all speak the turkey language. I use these Hornstra calls probably 80 percent of the time.”

Richard Koefler, of Raleigh, is retired from Delta Consolidated Industries and now spreads time between a gig at N.C. Hunter Supply, cooking for his wife, helping run a burn club and a bass club, and collecting calls. He has about 15 years of “serious” collecting. But his story has a Mustang in it. “Back in the '80s and '90s I had the notion to restore a '69 Mustang,” he recalls. “I went to every pole barn in eastern North Carolina to find one. I knew how much money I was going to put into it. Then I found calls and redirected from the Mustang to calls. I’ve ended up spending more on calls.”

His start was like many others. “I bought a turkey call on eBay and that's how it started,” he says. “It was a Roy Wilson wingbone for $20. I used eBay as my learning tool to see what people were buying and what people were paying. Then I met people like Ken Mummet and Tony Gallo in Memphis. Then I found an online forum, Custom Calls Online.”

Later, Koefler helped spin off some forum readers to form the Custom Call Collector Guild that “met” on conference calls. Since then he's become disillusioned with the message boards due to the “backstabbing and anti-social behavior.”

Koefler collects all types of calls, but has more box calls than other types. He’s not in it to make money, rarely sells a call and has about 600 at any one time. At first he collected production calls from Olt, Lehman and Quaker Boy. Now he tries to collect good examples of individual custom calls.

Koefler buys both playability and aesthetics, but says that some pretty calls “sound like crap.”

His advice for newbies: “Read some reference books. Check eBay,” he says. “The National Wild Turkey Federation Convention in Nashville is probably the best place to see current call makers and purchase calls. It's not a cheap proposition. It can run anywhere from $75 to $5,000. I know of one $35,000 private transaction.”

Koefler’s most cherished call is one made by Archibald Rutledge, former poet laureate of South Carolina and prolific author. He found it online and paid $30 for it. Rutledge signed all of his calls and this box call was “Delila,” signed A. R. It’s been appraised at $5,000. Is it for sale? “Hell no, I won't sell it!” Koefler scoffs.

He picks a Neil Cost box call as another favorite, one worth about $1,300. Mummet classifies calls into loose categories such as antique, investment, decorative or type specific.

In his view, an antique call is probably at least 50 years old and is often a production call made with the use of machines. Lehman, Herter’s, and Penn’s Woods are examples of call companies, many of which are no longer in business.

Mummet said that when he moved away he wanted to reconnect with his hunting heritage in Pennsylvania. To that end, he started collecting calls he grew up hunting with, like the Penn’s Woods and the Lynch calls. Eventually, he says, he learned that these were not just pieces of nostalgia, but investments as well. He then bought the Earl Milled book and learned more about the makers. He spent most of the '90s buying calls and started to sell some in the 2000s.

When asked about North Carolina makers, Mummet mentions Fred Cox of Reidsville (Grand Slam Turkey Calls) as one of the finest. One of his specialties is a custom three-bone yelper crafted from a wing you provide, complete with your bird's stats. Another is Jonathan Payne of Asheville, a violin maker by trade whose push-pin calls are “deadly in function and beautiful in appearance,” Mummet said.

Michael Buckner of Forest City makes trumpet calls and crow calls and is a National Wild Turkey Federation call contest judge as well. Mike Bately (aka the Call Dr.) of Pineville owns Wildtalker Calls and is also known for innovative components that large companies utilize in their calls.

Mummet says Dave Hagerman of Rolesville isn’t as well known as some but will be sooner rather than later for his friction and box calls.

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Mummett doesn’t mention it, but he himself makes pretty nice cane yelpers and sells them.

Investment calls are just that. There’s money in calls if you want to play that game. The day after interviewing Mummett and Booser, a Gibson box call sold on eBay for $25,000. That’s a good bit of scratch. Neither Mummett nor Booser has ever lost money on a call they have sold. “You have to be savvy and you have to know what you’re buying,” Mummett says. By his own estimate he’s bought about 1,000 calls over the years and sold about 300 or so. Personally, Mummett doesn’t consider himself a trader. He has 600 to 700 in his collection.

Sentimental calls, for Mummett, are calls made by his family members and old Lync box calls. He picks up an old Lync Fool Proof as an example of a sentimental favorite. His Uncle Lee copied the design for one of his calls. “He likes to think he improved it,” Mummett says with a chuckle. He pulls one from a drawer and shows an example with nicer wood—curly walnut—than the Lync.

Decorative calls are often beautiful and functional, but not always. Box turtle shells are an example of a slant call component that can be painted. Mummett reaches in to one drawer and pulls out a round fricton call with the top of a turkey tail feather under the clear surface. Painted on the feather is a gobbler in full strut. It seems too pretty to hunt with, but it’s fully functional.

Every collector seems to have a favorite story about a call, and Mummett is no different. “My favorite turkey call is a small wood and horn yelper made in the late 1800s by a company called the Bridgeport Gun Implement Company (BGI) of Bridgeport, Conn.,” he remembers. “This particular call is highly valued in the world of collectors for its age and scarcity. I happened to be cruzing eBay one evening and noticed one for sale by a fellow who must have what it was for a vintage cigarette holder. I ended up purchasing that call for a whopping $10 plus shipping. On average these BGI yelpers (when properly identified) will sell on eBay for anywhere between $400 to $600, depending on variation and condition. So, yes, I was thrilled at the purchase and the luck I had finding this treasure.”

In the collecting world, Mummett says many shy away from production calls and concentrate on custom calls. He doesn’t. “I think many of the older mass-produced calls are iconic,” he says. “There are such a variety of calls from makers who are no longer in business. These Herter’s calls, they quit making them years ago but they’re highly collectible.”

Getting a call in the original box with instructions can sometimes double the value of the call, no matter how bad the condition of the box is. Provenance calls—those that have a letter of authenticity—are highly collectible.

“Age, packaging, graphics on the call, things that make it look special, those add value,” says Mummett.

Like anything else, call collecting has a learning curve. Mummett has some advice for the inexperienced collector.

“Many newbie collectors start out by collecting every call in sight,” he says. “That may be a good way to start building a collection, but eventually many collectors start to focus their sights on a particular type of call—box calls, trumpet, etc. or calls from a specific source, a favorite maker, production company, or region of origin. In any event, when buying to collect, try to buy calls in the best condition possible, and preferably with original packaging or maker’s provenance.”

Mummett says his many older calls were never signed by the original maker, making it difficult to validate their authenticity. These unknown (or no-name) calls are often diamonds in the rough that could be significantly more valuable if you were able to trace their origins and obtain some actual documentation of authenticity.

When starting to build a collection Mummett highly recommends creating an inventory sheet spread documenting crucial information such as maker, model, vintage, special notes, date of purchase and purchase price. “I have kept a running inventory in this manner for about the last 10 years and it has come to be a valuable resource in determining values, dates and place of manufacture for a variety of calls,” he says. “It’s through this method I’ve been able to discover an array of variations particularly in vintage production calls. Believe me, it is better to start one of these when you’re starting to collect, as opposed to going back and documenting a couple hundred calls and guessing how much money you put into the collection.”

Mummett says to not be afraid to contact a call maker or call company to ask questions.

“I have gleaned a lot of information over the years by personally calling or emailing companies such as M.L. Lynch, Quaker Boy or Primos to ask about obsolete makes of calls,” he says. “By doing this I’ve been able to learn what years an older call was produced and the number of calls produced. You may not get all the answers, but for the most part everyone I have dealt with over the years gets a kick out of talking about the older calls.”

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“Turkey Callmakers Past and Present: Mick’s Picks” (1994), Earl Mikels: In 1994 Pennsylvania-native Earl Mikels published his first book on call makers and arguably caused the greatest boom in the call-collecting world. A bible, if you will, covering the history and details of the bulk of the greatest names in the call-making world. Since this book is only available in its original printing it is now considered rare and highly collectable.

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