

Have you seen this pirate downtown?

Toymaker's 'treasure hunts' an attempt to increase traffic on Main Street Independence

By Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-Observer

INDEPENDENCE — There be pirates in downtown Independence, matey, and if you find one, you could get access to Capt. Billy's treasure chest.

Ron "Dutch" Smith, manager of 2EZ Café, is the clue master for the game, said Billy Wild, toymaker.

"Last time, he set his pirate down at Ladies of Liberty's shop," Wild, 70, said. "I walked past it a number of times and didn't even see it."

About five shops in downtown participate in his pirate hunt, including 2EZ and Ovenbird.

At those shops, people can find out about the game and get the first clue, Wild said.

"If you find the pirate, you open the chest," he said. "On the lid is the phone number for Capt. Billy and you have to tell me the name of the pirate."

The last one took six weeks to find, Wild said, and then the person who called him tried to tell him the pirate was a captain.

"It's not a captain, it's a pirate," Wild said. Being Capt. Billy himself, all the other pirates would be starting a mutiny if they were captains as well.

Wild has lived in Independence since 2005, and said he loves all the shops in downtown. This pirate treasure hunt is his contribution to economic development.

"I'm a cheerleader for downtown Independence," he said. "And, I am the little ol' toymaker."

Having a game to play will help drive people to downtown and get them to explore the shops there, Wild said.

But his antics don't stop there. Wild plants little toys all over Independence — in the parks, in trees, on benches — to brighten the day of whoever finds them.

At Christmastime, Wild



Capt. Billy Wild makes toys of all shapes, whittling down pieces of wood he receives or re-using scraps of cloth and wood.

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was on his way to breakfast and coffee at the Golden Horse Café when he left a toy car wrapped in a toilet paper tube — like a little burrito — on a bench near the Arena Sports Bar and Grill. On his way back, it was gone.

He reached in his bag to replace it with another when a man in his 30s stopped him.

"He says, 'you're the one leaving these toys out. I took the one you left earlier. There was a Hot Wheels car in there that was exactly like the one I had when I was 7 years old,'" Wild recalled. "It was just a few days before Christmas. I said, 'I'm happy you're happy, because that's what my purpose is.'"

It wasn't always like that. Wild went through some tough times and battled with being chronically unhappy and in pain from diabetic neuropathy.



This pirate was found hiding in town among the merchandise at a shop. If you find a pirate, pay close attention to his title — Capt. Billy the Toymaker doesn't like mutiny.

EMILY MENTZER/Itemizer-Observer

Smith could see his friend struggling and suggested he find something to make himself happy.

Wild said he's been building models and whittling toys since he was a young

boy. "One of the things that makes me happy is making toys," he said. "You give me a piece of wood and I get kind of carried away."

Wild has memories of his

grandfather sitting on the front porch, whittling away at a black walnut stick, telling cowboy stories about living in Oklahoma.

"I've always wanted to be a cowboy," he said.

While sitting at a coffee shop in downtown Independence, Wild said he'd whittle something into a toy and give it to passing children.

He has been known to put boats by the Independence fountain or tuck toys in downtown trees.

"People aren't finding them," Wild said about the toys in trees. "I keep checking them like a squirrel to see if my stash is still there. When I glue (the packaging) together, they look like a burrito. You walk by and there's this thing in the tree. Nobody's taking them. I'm still leaving them in trees."

Wild continues to work on pirates, cowboys, wagons and other toys to leave for people to discover or to donate to good causes. He is working on some donations for the Relay for Life of Polk County.

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