

The Ampco, by Dave Small

I met Gus about 6 or 8 years ago in a warehouse-style antique store in Putnam, Connecticut. He looked and sounded like Ross Perot, and to describe him beyond that would be redundant. For all I know he *was* Ross, but he was slumming it if he was.

I'd flown to Boston on Friday for business that started Sunday night, and had all day Saturday to bop around looking for trinkets. Preferably iron and glass trinkets that ate pennies, with original paint and decals. I'd meandered into the store, looked around, and then asked the owner if he had any old gum, candy, and peanut machines. He led me to a chrome Ford, saying that was it, and then moved on to another customer. I said "okay, thanks" as he walked away. I checked the price, chuckled, and then turned to leave.

Gus stepped in front of me. "You looking for a gumball machine?" he asked with a twang.

I said "yep."

"I got one," he said, and he said it with style. Emphasis on the 'I,' so it came out "Eyyye." He cocked his head to the right, and toward the end of his sentence swept it to the left with such pride that, judging from his action alone, he could have been telling me that Teddy Roosevelt was his grandfather. I couldn't tell if he was bragging or opening negotiations, though, so I asked if he was willing to sell it.

He said "yep" with the same proud sweep of his head, so I said, "Let's talk." That's all it took. He pulled me over to the counter, grabbed a stubby pencil and a napkin, and started talking and drawing and talking and talking some more. The man could jabber. He was born to be a salesman, and his artistry wasn't bad either. The machine he drew was one I'd never seen before, and my heart started beating faster.

"Are you *sure* there's no lid? I asked.

He stopped drawing and glared up at me. "Son," he said, "this machine sits on my dresser. I see it every day. I've seen it every day of the last 10 years when I get socks out of my drawer. If it had a lid I'd know it, and I'm telling you there's no lid." I've been at the receiving end of some fine glares, and Gus had one of the finest. Maybe he practiced, maybe he was a natural—I didn't ask. But if he says there's no lid, then there's no lid. What there *is*, though, is a sketch of a peanut or gumball machine with a round-topped globe held down by the head of a small rod straight through the top, like a National Breath Pellet but with a plainer base and a simple straight-sided domed globe. He said he'd bought it at a tag sale in Providence, Rhode Island, and I got the impression it'd been cheap. He told me it'd been made in Providence, and when I asked how he knew, he told me "it says so right on the bottom of the machine." My heart beat a little faster.

Gus suggested that we hop in his car and head to his house in Rhode Island so I could see it. I think he was toying with me, but I've never been sure. I declined for a number of reasons, but we exchanged phone numbers and I promised to call when I got back to California. That night, in the quiet of my hotel room, I picked through Silent Salesmen Too to see if I could find the machine he'd drawn. I didn't find it. I'd have to wait.

A week later I called Gus from home. Before I could start talking, he said, "You know that picture I drew?"

"Yeah," I said. "In fact, I'm looking at it."

"Throw it away," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"Throw it away," he said. "It's no good."

"Whaddaya mean?" I asked. I was confused. I remembered the glare I got when I'd hinted that possibly, maybe, perhaps his picture wasn't entirely complete.

"It's no good," he said again. "It doesn't look like that. Throw it away."

"Well, can you send me a picture?" I asked. He'd convinced me in Putnam, but now I wanted to see more than an artist's rendition.

"I mailed two Polaroids this morning. Call me when you get 'em."

"Okay," I replied, and I did. The pictures he'd sent showed a small plain machine, cast iron painted gray or silver, very Vendex-like in character, with an oval globe that bowed out at the sides and then tapered back in at the top and bottom. Oh, and a lid. Not a tiny lid, but a relatively big lid about the width of the base. Maybe Gus didn't change socks very often, but that wasn't my concern. This machine was my concern at the moment.

"Well, it's cute, and I don't have one. Whaddaya want for it?"

I could tell he's given this some thought already. He said "one hundred and fifty dollars," and the way he said it I could imagine his head sweeping right-to-left at about the "fifty." I could also hear the smirk through the phone lines as he named this ridiculously high figure.

So the ball was in my court. Let's see now: A hundred and fifty bucks for a small cast iron machine I'd never seen or heard of before. Gee, let me think about this for a couple of days and get back to you, okay, Gus? Yeah, right. But I don't want to jump on it because I thought that would disappoint him, and I wanted him to feel good about this. Maybe he'd write a story for a collector magazine someday about how he got Big Money

for this little peanut machine he'd picked up at a tag sale for \$3. About how he'd soaked a young feller from California who was naïve and willing to pay \$150 for it. So I hemmed and hawed for a minute before answering.

I finally said, "Welllllll, I guess that sounds fair. I'll send you a check," and did the next day. The machine arrived about a week later, so I knew Gus had shipped it before he got the check. I liked that token of trust, and I grew to like Gus during the few conversations we had. I think about him sometimes and wonder how he's doing. I hope he somehow parlayed that \$150 into thousands, but I doubt it. I sensed a fun and generous guy under his crusty exterior, and I hope he's still having fun with young fellers. He was unique, as is the machine he sent. It's 9 inches tall, made of cast iron, and screams 'Vendex' except that the bottom is boldly embossed "AMPCO PROV.R.I." A fair number of people have seen it or pictures of it, and none has ever seen another one like it. To the best of my knowledge it's the only one known. It's cute but isn't visually very exciting, and I once considered selling it when space was tight. I told my wife that, and she confessed to liking it and asked me not to sell it. I don't know why she likes it except that it's "cute," but that's enough for me. I still have it.

When I visit antique stores, I still ask before I leave if they have "any old gum, candy, or peanut machines tucked away," but now I ask loudly. There's no telling who else within earshot might want to know.