

COMIC KING

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Henry Smith Jr. lives in a fantasy world and that's just the way he likes it. He's a Milwaukee man who sells comic books and related merchandise for a living.

by Larry Widen

The Amazing Spider-Man comic book #39 came out in August 1966. It was a landmark issue because it's the one where Peter Parker learns that the evil Green Goblin is actually his best friend's father. Spider-Man #39 is also the issue that turned Henry Smith Jr. from a fairly normal nine-year-old into a comic book collector and then dealer. Forty years later, Smith is one of a handful of local comic book experts and the owner of The Toy Dimension, a shop at 59th and North. The store interior is loaded with hundreds of comic books and action figures in the likenesses of Luke Skywalker, Batman, The Incredible Hulk, and any other character you can think of.

Smith says action figures based on comic book characters have been around for a long time, but it was the "Star Wars" explosion in 1977 that jump-started the market for them. "There are nearly 100 action figures of Luke Skywalker alone," Smith says. "There's at least one figure for every costume he wears in the first three films." Before long speculators began buying the comics and toys and putting them away in boxes, hoping to cash in after demand for the items went up. "Sometimes that works, and sometimes it doesn't," Smith says. "This business goes in cycles, just like everything else." Smith notes that investors who bought merchandise from Tim Burton's "Batman" film in 1989 are out of luck unless they bought it cheap. "Right now all the stuff from the Burton films is stone cold. You can buy it for a song," he says. "That's why I always tell people to buy what they like, not what they think is a good investment." Amazing Fantasy #15, the 1963 comic book with the very first appearance of Spider-Man has been appraised at \$42,000 in near-mint condition. "The trouble is, not many people have that kind of money to spend on one comic book," Smith says. "In the end, these things are only worth what someone will pay for it."

And the Spider-Man #39 that started him on the road to his life's work? Smith says the issue that cost twelve cents in 1966 now goes for about \$200 when you can find one. "I wish I still had that one," he says with a smile. In addition to operating his store, Smith runs a comic and toy show six times a year at a bowling alley near 60th and Burnham. The show features about 25 regional dealers who bring a total of 200,000 comics plus movie memorabilia, action figures and more. "I don't do any of this to get rich," he says. "I do it because I love it."

