

Hooray for the Collector!

My eldest son often kids me about my penchant for collecting stuff, at one time dubbing our house “The House of eBay,” and I admit it: I’m a collector!

Now, before you bring up mental images of some doddering old geezer (I may qualify as a geezer, but I don’t dodder ... yet), who will someday be found under a pile of old newspapers and magazines, I’m not that far gone. What I collect, I organize (I call it my “library gene”) and it must be in serviceable shape. Recently, I saw a small collection of a friend that consisted of antique outboard motors, of all things, all neatly lined up on a rack for display. I’m not talking about some honking, 250-hp beasts, but mostly small, trolling motors of the gasoline variety. He had organized his collection and proudly explained each example to me. That collection represented a labor of love and, being somewhat of a gear-head, I found it fascinating. All of them work, by the way. Oh, and his wife collects dollhouses, which she showed me. My kind of people!

I’m going to go so far as to say that, *without collectors, we wouldn’t have history ...* at least history we can touch. What do I mean by that? Well, if people didn’t collect what many term “junk,” we would only have descriptions of things that people remember, perhaps a photograph, but noting more tangible than that (heck, antique photos are collectibles in themselves). Think of all the history that dwells at the bottom of all those landfills!



People collect the darndest things, from cars to string. Remember the POG craze that got kids all hepped-up to collect inch-and-a-half sized, round, waxed, cardboard discs with a pop-up tab for removal? Also called TAZOS and TROVS, milk companies originally used them to seal (more or less) the tops of milk bottles. POG came from the company in Hawaii that made a drink called Passion, Orange Guava juice in the 1980s. The

name stuck and kids collected them. Actually, the craze goes back farther than that. 600 years ago, the Japanese played a game with wood or clay discs, called Menkos. Immigrants to Hawaii brought the game with them and, from the early 1900s to the 1960s and kids used the waxed, milk company tops to play a modern version of the Menkos game. A California entrepreneur (who else?) bought the POG trademark name and founded the World POG Federation (WPF), creating an acronym from another acronym. Go figure.

My passions include cars and lighthouses (among other, lesser things like postcards, first day and matchbook covers and some other random stuff), all neatly organized and displayed (when room permits). Since I don’t own a fifty-car bay, nor do I have a multi-million dollar inheritance to fuel my passion, I collect 1:24-scale model cars (called images by aficionados) and lighthouse sculptures. Since moving into our most recent (small!) home, I’ve painfully had to pare down my collections (at least eBay allows me to sell them to recoup some cash) and I’ve displayed the rest. I also have an art figurine collection, which I’ve also had to pare down.

We are in the debt of those millionaires who had the cash to collect the stuff most of us only dream about. Who doesn't look at a fantastic example of automotive excellence, like a big, beautiful Duesenberg, and wish we owned it? Yet, that car may have ended up in some metals drive from WWII had said rich guy not kept it, polished and tuned, in his twelve-car garage. Millionaires also pass down things like fine art, grand pianos, fine-art sculpture and other expensive things. Yet, we also have the things that folks of more humble means collected, from jelly jars to bottle openers. Without them, history would be so much dimmer and go away with the passing of our forebears. Think of the treasure trove of stuff that has come from—and still may exist in—the attics of houses all over the world! My pulse races at the thought.

Without belaboring the point, one of the biggest collections in the world—one man's (Otto C. Lightner) huge, eclectic menagerie of just about everything—turned into one of the most fascinating museums I know of, the Lightner Museum in St. Augustine. Walking through its galleries in the former Alcazar Hotel, built by Henry Flagler, you'll find collections of paintings, statues, sculpture, china, glassware, clocks, dolls, oddities and musical instruments. The variety staggers the imagination. It's a glimpse into the Victorian Era. In fact, every afternoon, a docent gives a lecture on all the mechanical musical devices Victorians could purchase to play music in a time before Edison figured out how to make sound from wax cylinders. It's a fascinating show and alone worth the price of admission.

Without people like Mr. Lightner, history would be far less cluttered, but also far less interesting. Heck, archeologists dig in the dirt and, if they find somebody's discarded junk from a bygone era, they rejoice. Face it: our history is largely based on our "stuff." Museums all over the world contain collections that other people once owned, from cars to headboards. They provide us with an idea of what life might have been like in the dim past, with tangible artifacts for us to ogle (and sometimes touch) and they're all there for us to see because some collector collected it.

So, the next time you want to rag on your collector friend, remember what you just read. Check out his "stuff" sometime. You might find it interesting and informative. And, yeah, you may be around when that pile of books falls on him, so you can pull him out and save his life.