

Political Americana

By Joan Paris

Wilbraham Police Sergeant Glen Clark will discuss our nation's presidential forefathers and reveal his historic election campaign memorabilia at the Old Meeting House on Sunday October 5th at 2:30 P.M. The collection will be displayed at the Old Meeting House from 2-4 P.M. and the admission is free.

Campaign memorabilia can be traced to 1789, when clothing buttons of engraved metal - not souvenir pins- were issued for George Washington's inauguration. By the 1820s, political candidates routinely used them to promote their campaigns. Over the years, political-collectible souvenirs have included: hats, bumper stickers, posters, key chains, jewelry, dinner plates, playing cards, records, socks, cigarette lighters and license plates.

Originally these souvenirs were designed as time-sensitive to an election year and were considered disposable when the election was over. Over time, election memorabilia has not only retained its value but also a niche market. Antique shops, flea markets, tag sales, collector's shows, auctions, collectibles clubs and specialty publications trade with hobbyists fueled by annual price guides.

Sergeant Clark explains that his love of presidential election memorabilia began with his interest in US history and with our nation's presidents. "I got my first piece from my father, a die-hard Republican when I was 10 years old. He bought a wooden crate [in 1968] filled with odd sized nuts and bolts and as we sorted out the pieces we unearthed a blue 1932 Roosevelt metal campaign pin. FDR was my hero and I really wanted the pin. My father said: 'You'll get this someday'."

Glen's dad passed away when he was 16 and by age 17 he began to visit auctions with \$30-40 to purchase political collectibles. He traveled to Kentucky, Vermont, New Hampshire and met with local dealers. He is the youngest in a clan of 6 sons raised from first generation Americans and he is fiercely proud of his Irish heritage, his family and his country. He credits our nation's governing success to its three-tier form of government. "Other nations have been less successful in attempts to govern as well as we do because they don't have the legislative body, executive and judicial branches of government."

"The key to collecting," he says, "is to hold onto America's past." He has an 1862 Abraham Lincoln print on rag paper of "The Great Emancipator". Lincoln is pictured by artist Thomas Nast with an American Eagle and encircling slaves. He bought the picture for fifty dollars when he was 19 years old.

He also has a 1956 JFK campaign button that he bought for \$20 when he was 18 and over 200 original presidential campaign posters in mint condition including President Taft in a 1908 poster and Woodrow Wilson in 1912. He owns thousands of campaign ribbons and buttons from President McKinley in 1896 up to present time.

In the memorabilia market, a dual-portrait button of Reagan and Bush showing the pair staring into the headlights of an oncoming vehicle, with the motto "Made in Detroit," sells for about \$400. Rare buttons from Teddy Roosevelt's 1912 campaign are valued at more than \$6,000 each.

For devoted JFK collectors, the ultra rare "Kennedy Election Night Press" pin is the Holy Grail. Designed with a single word (no photo), this simple pin is set in black lettering on a light green-beige background. Only several examples are known to exist, with one pin bringing \$3,107 at a 2007 auction.

What's Glen's presidential formula for the ideal president? He would promote a candidate with the combined leadership styles of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan. "In many ways history can teach us how to lead for tomorrow. We should exclude prejudice and remember the American Constitution is stronger than the convictions of any single person."

As a 35-year collector, Glen says his hobby reflects "the positive aspects of what government can do. Leadership is the most simple form of government."

Whether it's *brummagem* (flashy but worthless counterfeit objects), *ephemera* (paper collectibles) or *jugates* (items where images of both presidential and vice presidential candidates appear together), political collecting comes with its own vernacular, according to the American Political Items Collectors, or APIC, a non-profit group of 2,000 collectors. Ronald Reagan gave away cuff links and Jimmy Carter's campaign distributed plastic peanut banks with a wide white-toothed smile on the front.

Today, Senators John McCain and Barack Obama offer buttons *for sale* instead of the traditional giveaway. The money paid for the buttons - \$2 for a one-inch Obama button, and \$10 for a pack of 10 McCain one-inch buttons - provides campaign contributions. Most collectors will wait out the election and buy the merchandise without contributing to the campaign.

In sharp contrast to historic campaigns, electronic and digital campaign messages are online in blogs, web news and daily news message boards for instant messages. Television campaigns blast rhetoric in high definition, and once the broadcast is over - so is the message. The printed word lives a little longer on your nightstand, but a campaign collectible lives forever. Win or lose, your candidate's campaign memorabilia will be worth something--someday.

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