

The Art of Gun Collecting

by: Gene E. Miller

Thank you Mr. President. Fellow members, good afternoon. My talk this afternoon will be brief and my subject will be one that is close to the hearts of us all as collectors, and that is "Gun Collecting." To be more specific, I prefer to call it the "Art of Gun Collecting," because I feel gun collecting can be an art as well as a hobby.

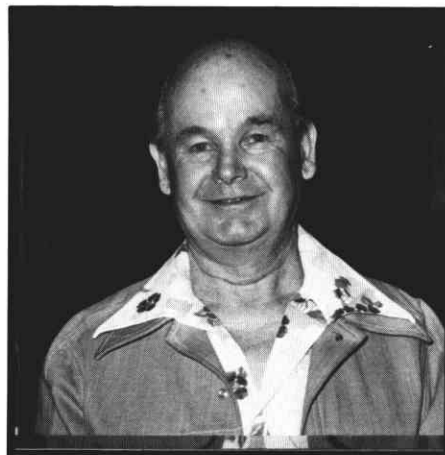
A question that has often been asked is how and why I became interested in antique weapons and I feel that the only answer would be to say that a man's interest in guns may come through to him in many ways. I believe my basic interest in guns plus an intensive curiosity about American history brought me into the hobby of collecting. I felt I had to know more and more about the beginnings of the North American settlers and the guns they brought with them to the new world.

One gun led to another, one textbook led to a library and finally (at least this is my feeling) one becomes sort of an authority on the guns that played such an important part in the early history of this great land of ours. You see, one cannot tell the history of America without constant reference to the history of the gun.

I know that as far as my collecting is concerned it was in 1941 that I bought my first antique gun from Stephen Van Rennesseler of Morristown, New Jersey and that was the beginning.

One gun led to another and then still another. Along this collecting trail, I passed through all the pitfalls as well as minor and major triumphs of purchases, trades, and sales. To become a successful collector, one must be a constant researcher, and as I acquired good, really good, historical and specialized reference material, this careful choosing, hunting and studying slowly resulted in a highly selective collection and I now have what has been declared historically and under private ownership, one of the finest collections in the country. (I say this not boastfully, but proudly.) This, I feel is the finer art of gun collecting.

Since the end of World War II a considerable number of Americans have added new zest to their lives by pursuing various hobbies. Of the many fascinating fields to be found in the hobby growing line, very few, if any, have become more popular than the collecting of antique firearms. Prior to 1940 there were about 5,000 active gun collectors in the U.S. Today this number has increased to about 500,000. What made this hobby rise so quickly in popularity? Was it a fad, or was it that antique firearms were inexpensive? Perhaps a gun collection was the ideal thing needed to fill wall space in the den of the new home. None of these simple answers are correct. The precise answer lies within one word . . . *motivation*. Modern man living in this complex age of nuclear bombs and NASA



space flights is constantly seeking new ways to relax during his leisure hours, and man being somewhat of a romanticist, seeks a hobby that will fill his thoughts with pleasure, one in which lunar missions and computerized living have no place. One hobby which affords all the glamour and greatness of an era long past is collecting antique firearms. Guns are one of the few tangible remnants of a bygone age that can be acquired, studied and appreciated. Each gun holds its own story of high adventure, romance and possibly danger that no commonplace thing of life can offer. Briefly, let me explain just what makes a firearms collection fine and historical.

A firearms collection is made fine and historical by what the collector himself puts into the building of that collection besides money. The collector's enthusiasm and intent are most important as well as the discriminating selection of each specimen, based on the collector's application of a yardstick of comparative arms value, and above all his insistence that each item be fully authentic in its antiquity as well as its historical association. Only if the collector himself displays enthusiasm, discrimination and the all important demand for authenticity, can a truly fine and historical collection be built.

Gun collectors are organized into clubs and associations. We have our periodicals and publications, we go to conventions and buy many of our collection pieces from professional dealers.

Like the coin collector, for example, many gun collectors specialize. They limit their interests to a specific type of weapon, or to arms of a certain historical period, and as with other types of collecting, there can be significant financial rewards, if wise judgment is applied. The combination of knowledge and wise judgment are two of the most important assets a collector must possess if he wants to be successful in his chosen field. Although there is no

denying that a good collection of antique guns is a fine financial investment, just as the right collection of paintings would be, I think most advanced collectors that are mainly interested in the deeper rewards of collecting, are those collectors who make it an art instead of a hobby, and this is where I feel we have the edge on other types of collectors.

It is undeniable that no other item of memorabilia passed down from one generation to another is more deeply rooted in the history of our nation. The great conflicts that our forefathers faced, from the struggles against the elements of cold, disease, hunger in the first settlements. Through the great wars for independence and unity, to the final thrust across the western frontier, can all be unfolded and documented through a study of the weapons used in facing and conquering those conflicts. Yes, our guns are truly a cherished part of our American heritage, and recognizing this, collectors accept the responsibility for preserving and passing on this segment of Americana.

While the overwhelming majority of our finest guns are in private collections, and not in museums, I'm proud that in my small way I am helping to preserve for posterity the fine guns in my collection and prouder still to be able to share some of my collection pieces with the public through displays and exhibits throughout the country. This brings another, deeper reward for the artful collector. For no matter how fine a collection may be, it is of little value to the public locked up in the collector's gun room. Like myself, there are many collectors who not only exhibit in museums and historical societies but they also cooperate with magazine editors in preparing interesting photo stories. Some even display and discuss their collections on TV programs. I personally feel that if a collector has a valuable assemblage of significant items representing our American heritage, then it is the obligation of that collector to present these historical pieces in as many ways as possible so that Americans can observe and absorb the past history of their country through these many historically significant weapons and tools of the forefathers and founders of the America we call home today.

As an ardent collector, I hold strong obligations toward my country and have exhausted great effort in guiding the young people through straight and solid thinking channels where weapons and firearms are concerned.

I feel our strongest point to work from is in educating the youth of today. Instead of more gun legislation and rejection of the rights of citizens, it would be more beneficial to enlighten and guide the public on the subject. For example, by itself, alone in a display case or resting on a wall, a musket looks pretty cold and insignificant. But take that same musket and tell the story behind it, to whom it belonged, where and when it was used, taking the unknown and finding out the known facts about things is the point where we as collectors make history come alive, interesting and fascinating for the viewer at all times. Collectors and those interested in firearms often make the statement, "What stories guns could tell if only they could

talk." In fact, they could tell us many interesting things of the past, such as the places they have been, the people they have known, the events they have witnessed, and the deeds, both good and bad which they have performed. However, since this cannot be, the logical approach is to form a definite association between the guns and their owners. An inscribed gun or object often provides the necessary data which associates it with a certain person or event in history. The term historical gun, means a firearm which is associated with some particular person, group of persons or event in history.

Once the association has been established through an inscription found on the gun or through some form of written documentary evidence, this proves the claimed association. The written evidence should be of a period contemporary with the association as claimed. It may consist of a bill of sale, an affidavit, a letter of testimonial, newspaper article, etc. May I say here that it is a privilege to own a fine or rare firearm, but it is even more satisfying if one can associate this same weapon with some important person or event in history. Many guns or associated items undoubtedly have interesting historical background, but it is only when such arms or objects are inscribed or there is documentary evidence available to prove the direct association, that we are able to pierce the veil which separates the past from the present. Few people have the privilege of preserving these items of Americana which represent the early struggles of our forefathers for this country. But it is through these bits of history that arms collectors can consider themselves fortunate indeed to be able to protect and bequeath such vital fragments of antiquity for posterity. And through this, further the education of future generations of Americans. Every time you handle a gun, or an item associated with our history, you are actually holding history in your hands and that is indeed a rare feeling to experience.

My real pleasure comes in speaking and exhibiting to school groups because I feel this is where we must concentrate our effort. When I exhibit and lecture within a school auditorium, I see before me a mass of impressionable faces. Our youth is interested, they want to know and if we can discuss weapons and firearms openly and sensibly this enables them to become aware that a gun is not only a tool to kill and destroy with, but it really is a treasured bit of Americana descending down from their forefathers who founded and built the country they now live in. This presents a different light on weapons and their place and value in society today.

While exhibiting at a community historical society some time ago, I was privileged to receive full cooperation from school officials who chose to make a visit to the society while my collection pieces were there and upon seeing the display and the spirited as well as highly educational way in which it was presented, these same school officials voted to include periodic visits of all students in groups as an inter-curricular activity for all classes. It was most gratifying to find that these school officials, who are in effect, leader images to our children within the school, were

encouraging the boys and girls to view, study and report on the historical significance of my exhibit on firearms.

Personal weapons as well as weapons of war have played and will continue to play a romantic, important, and yes, even a necessary role in our American way of life. Realizing this truth, our forefathers sought with their Second Amendment in our Bill of Rights, to retain and make secure our inalienable right to keep and bear arms, which was one of the fundamental freedoms enjoyed by the American people from the very earliest days of the republic. It is a part of our heritage which is so deeply engrained in our people that it was written into the guarantees carried in the Constitution. More than any other avocation, collecting fine firearms furnishes the hobbyist with an insight into history as it truly happened. Rare military pieces illustrate climaxes in every nation's tradition. Gun collecting is not a random activity. It is not a sometime thing that can casually be dipped into, abandoned for years and then picked up again. The firearm enthusiast must strive to bring order in logical explanation to a great variety of specimens. It is a constant drive of study and research. But as a collector, I know my interest in antique weapons has given me an insight into the magnificent history of this land of ours and I am happy to share just a small portion of that insight with fellow collectors and other members of the public who are deeply interested in the art of collecting.

But most important is the task of accomplishing a solid understanding of the subject among all citizens. It is not only the adults who we must enlighten, but it is the youth of this great nation. These young boys and girls of today are going to be the survivors of tomorrow and the leaders of this country, so why not let them in on the rich background it holds for them. I like to think that the things I hold closest to my heart such as the heritage of this country and my collection which it represents, will in some manner help to exemplify my love for all things which stand for the high ideals and background of a country now celebrating its bicentennial year of growth. These are the things I consider to be important in life and I have been rewarded many times over for telling about, and standing by the things I feel we should all be loyal to. But we do not all share the same likes and dislikes, indeed we are all individuals and as such, we have our own unique and different viewpoints and thoughts concerning issues currently facing us today. But for me, it is through my collection that I feel I show my loyalty to this country as this collection in itself seems to serve as a strong example of one of the freedoms of our Constitution: namely the right to keep and bear arms. At this point I must admire the wisdom of a great individual who shared my thoughts, understood, and supported the true meaning of the 2nd Amendment. I quote:

"By calling attention to a well regulated militia, the security of the nation, and right of each citizen to keep and bear arms, our founding fathers recognized the essentially civilian nature of our economy.

Although it is extremely unlikely that the fears of political tyranny which gave rise to the second amendment will ever be a major danger to the nation, the amendment still remains an important declaration of our basic civilian-military relationships, in which every citizen must be ready to participate in the defense of his country. For that reason I believe the second amendment will always be important."

Those were the words of our late President John F. Kennedy, and I am proud to say I share in those thoughts and hope many of my fellow Americans feel the same as I do about this important issue which certainly is one of the chief guarantees of freedom under any government. These are thoughts which demand sincere consideration if we are to protect the rights which were granted to us by our founding fathers so many many years ago. It is our duty to fight for the preservation of the gifts they gave us, and one of these gifts was the second amendment. I hope you agree! All gun clubs around our nation must recognize the fact that if they don't exhaust every effort possible to encourage our young people of today, not only to own and collect fine weapons, but to participate as well in one of the most challenging collectible fields in the world today, there is no doubt in my mind that the upcoming generation could very well destroy and prohibit the operation of any and all gun fraternities.

It is time we stopped worrying about whether we can continue to shoot and own guns . . . we must make an all-out effort to invite these young people to participate in our collecting circle before they vote us out of existence. As I said before, the youth of today are going to be the survivors of tomorrow, and the leaders of this great country, so why not let them in on the rich background it holds for them. Our efforts must go towards encouraging them to preserve our heritage or else we shall have no heritage! Think about that for a moment because it's a serious matter and demands serious thought.

