

# Young collector specializes in small treasures

Story: CORINNE ABATT  
Photos: DICK KELLEY

The first place Stuart Sterling of Bloomfield Hills went when he received his driver's license was to an antique show. That was eight years ago. Now, at 24, he's still chasing after antiques at every opportunity.

He has passed through furniture and furniture refinishing to smaller collectibles. The furniture had to go when the family home became so crowded there was no room for the residents.

That overcrowding was the impetus for the present collections. These include tobacco-oriented items such as snuff boxes, match safes which not only are pocket-sized, but frequently budget wallet size. In the larger size category, Sterling collects Springfield rifles, miner's lanterns, plus an assortment of the daily life items of past eras.

Gradually this young electronics executive is turning his apartment in the family home into a personal museum complete with display cases.

With his pet parrot, Kelo, perched contentedly on his shoulder, he said quietly, "These simple things are beginning to be worth something."

Explaining that he has hunted for collectibles in every country of Europe and about 40 of the 50 states, he said, "People are used to seeing me at every show. At the Ann Arbor shows I'm there by 6 a.m."

He likes to talk with the dealers, watch the action, and in the process add to his own collections.

"COLLECTING IS LIKE perpetual motion—once you start, you can't stop. If you look for a month and find one good thing, it's worth the month," he said.

All of this hunting has resulted in a variety that ranges from a rather ingenious, screened fly trap which lures flies with bait to watches, tiny metal purses, a cure-all machine and a carnival coin separator.

When asked how much a person would need to start collecting early American trivia, Sterling said, "Five, 10, maybe 20 bucks." He paused. "You can spend \$8 and get a neat bottle, stopper and everything."

He picked up a small, glass jelly mold with a metal lid. "Look at this, isn't it pretty? Two dollars. This can, \$5."

He opened a U.S. government issue

snuff box from 1860 and said simply, "Three dollars."

From a corner of the room he produced a long metal rod, crooked at the end with a long wooden handle.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked. Getting no answer he said with a grin, "A chicken catcher."

In seconds he was back with another long pole with moveable pincers on the end. These were used by store clerks who wanted to pull out a particular perfume bottle from a full case. He also has poles of various lengths with moveable pincers used in grocery stores to retrieve boxes and cans from high shelves.

Boxes, all kinds, intrigue this collector. He has everything from elaborate wood inlay boxes used to hold valuables to the small ones for snuff and matches. The metal ones are generally decorated, the tortoise shell ones frequently trimmed with silver. Some have inlaid mother of pearl. Many of the snuff boxes are paper mache which looks and feels like painted wood.

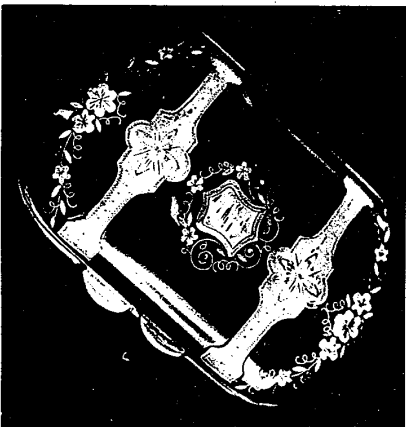
SNUFF BOXES CARRIED by coal miners had to be on nonferrous metals so there was no chance of a spark to set off a mine explosion. One 18th century match safe is a carefully worked chestnut.

The earliest coal mine inspector's lantern burned whale oil. The presence of gas in the mine could be detected by a change in the color of the flame.

Sterling has many of the items pictured in his collection of books on antiques. He is presently working on one with a collaborator on small collectibles.

When he had antique furniture, Sterling estimates it would have taken several trucks to move the collection.

"Now," he said, "I could pack all of this stuff in a couple of big boxes." Even before graduating from Seaboard High School, Sterling was working in his father's electronics firm.



Small purse is tortoise shell inlaid with mother of pearl and trimmed with silver.

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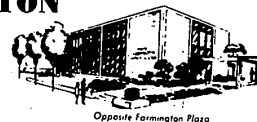
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