Collection includes rarities from politics, sports

By Pat Sherman
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POWAY — From Albert Einstein to Alfred E. Neuman, from Benjamin Franklin to the Beatles, Jeff Figler’s home is a collector’s paradise.

In three rooms, Figler has amassed a gallery of sports, entertainment and political memorabilia.

His archives include a framed, handwritten letter from each U.S. president. They are arranged in chronological order, each with a photo or illustration.

“It’s a family joke that we were hoping that Bush would be re-elected,” said Figler, whose presidential letters fill every available space on one wall. “We would have had to move everything if Kerry would have been president.”

During a tour of his home, the Chamber of Commerce board member delighted in sharing the history and scarcity of the items.

Though the bulk of his collection was obtained during the past five years, Figler got his start collecting during the 1960s. His father, Harry, owned a clothing store for large and tall men in St. Louis.

Bob Pettit, a customer and St. Louis Hawks basketball player, gave the young Figler his signed jersey.

Today, Figler’s sports memories include Will Chamberlain’s rookie uniform and autographed items from hockey legend Wayne Gretzky and baseball great Babe Ruth.

The most valuable item in his sports repository, Figler said, is his Honus Wagner baseball card. An eBay bidder paid $1.27 million for one of the cards in July 2000, making it the most valuable baseball card in history.

The Honus Wagner rarity was produced in 1909 by American Tobacco Co. for distribution on the back of cigarette packages. As legend goes, the shortstop did not want to be associated with smoking and demanded that the company recall the cards.

“Many people in the industry believe there are 20 to 30 that have survived,” said Figler, who is in his early 50s. “This one has been authenticated two or three times. Everybody who’s seen it feels that it’s the real thing.”

Unlike the pristine $1.27 million card, Figler said his is in fair condition.

Among Figler’s political items is an April 15, 1865, New York Herald newspaper printed the morning after President Lincoln’s assassination, making it the first coverage of the murder, Figler said. Nearby is a handwritten note by physicist Albert Einstein, pertaining to the big bang theory.

“If you could understand that, you would be a hero,” Figler said with a laugh.

A pair of pursed-lipped bobble-head dolls in a glass case resemble President John F. Kennedy and first lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy.

“There are very few of them because they first came onto the market a month before he was assassinated,” Figler said of his “kissing Kennedys.” “As soon as he was assassinated, they didn’t distribute them anymore.”

Figler said the bulk of his items have been obtained through two auction houses on the East Coast: Coaches Corner near Philadelphia and EAC in New York.

Up a flight of stairs in the entertainment room is a wall of Beatles rarities, including what Figler said are the eyeglasses worn by actor Christopher Reeve in 1978’s “Superman.”

“They’re got, in this industry, what we call ‘provenance,’” Figler said in a reverent tone. “You can trace it back.”

Figler is the owner of Jefferson Corp., which compiles mailing lists for companies. In addition to his collecting, he is involved with LEAD San Diego, the Poway Senior Center and the Poway Performing Arts Foundation.