

Poway's king of collectors

By Alan Drooz

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POWAY – The prophecy was true in the movies, and it's true in Poway: If you build it, they will come.

It, in this case, is the memorabilia collection of Jeff Figler, which may be unmatched anywhere on the West Coast outside San Diego's Hall of Champions.

It's one part Baseball Hall of Fame (with other sports sprinkled in), one part Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and one part Smithsonian West. And it's all tucked neatly in part of Figler's spacious home here.

Funny thing is, Figler never intended for it to be for anything but “my own pleasure and edification.”

But people are starting to make the pilgrimage to see his sports/entertainment/Americana collection, and plans to take a portion of it public soon. Indeed, it's too fascinating and unusual to keep hidden away among Poway's rocky outcrops and horse trails.

How fascinating? How about baseballs signed by the Beatles ... or by the cast of “The Wizard of Oz” ... or



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A bronze baseball player looks over Jeff Figler's sports collectibles.

- [Photo gallery](#)

signed papers from every president of the United States (including Confederate President Jefferson Davis) ... or the glasses John Lennon wore on the cover of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band" ... or the caped costume Christopher Reeve wore in the first "Superman" movie ... or one of the original movie scripts of "Casablanca" ... or a baseball-bat size drumstick signed by 75 members of the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. There's almost no end.

"I really started buying these things for myself," says Figler, who admits to being "one of those fortunate people whose mother didn't throw out my baseball cards and comic books." Finding himself with some "disposable income," he began acquiring rare sports, entertainment and presidential items in the mid-1990s, mostly from auction houses. "It was one of those the-difference-between-men-and-boys things," he says with a laugh.

A few years ago a friend went to his house and looked around. "He said, 'Jeff, you've really got something here.' Within a week, the president of the Baseball Hall of Fame was over, (announcer) Dick Enberg was over. Recently, Tony Gwynn's wife, Alicia, has been over," Figler says, adding that Gwynn himself is due to visit any time.

Jerry Coleman dropped in. Figler pulled out Coleman's Padres jersey from the season he managed the team in 1979. Coleman's reaction: "Burn that thing."

Figler's passion for collecting started when he was a child in St. Louis. His father had a store for big-and-tall men's clothing. One of his father's customers was NBA star Bob Pettit. The family ended up with an autographed Pettit All-Star game jersey.

Meanwhile, Figler had a cousin who sang in the 1950s vocal group the Teddy Bears, who had a No. 1 hit in 1958 with “To Know Him is to Love Him,” written by teen-aged Phil Spector, another member of the group. Figler's cousin signed the record jacket. “That was my first autograph,” he recalled.

Figler's music collectibles tend heavily to the Beatles and other '60s groups but Elvis and Sinatra are represented as well. So is Bobby Darin, because “Mack the Knife” was the favorite song of Figler's father.

His thousands of artifacts obviously mean more to him than mere acquisitions or investments. “The thing I take pride in,” Figler reflected, “is these all mean something to me. I didn't just buy (the entire collection) from somebody. I know the history behind every piece.”

Figler estimates that his rarest sports pieces are the ultra-tough 1909 Honus Wagner baseball card, of which a few dozen are thought to exist (his has been authenticated) and a Wilt Chamberlain uniform from the Stilt's rookie season. Three entertainment items he says stand out are the Lennon glasses, a superb copy of Action Comics No. 1 from 1938 (the first appearance of Superman) and an original U.S.-version poster promoting “Casablanca.”

His favorite acquisition is the original Warner Brothers movie script with the working title “Everybody Comes to Rick's.” It later became “Casablanca.” The copy Figler has belonged to Jack Warner himself. In the back behind the script is a list of addresses and phone numbers for cast members, topped by Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.

The value of Figler's presidential items is probably anyone's guess. As amazing as his sports and

entertainment stuff are, Figler notes that “more people than not” are most impressed with the presidential room. Along with presidential documents, the room also includes signed articles from Ben Franklin and Albert Einstein. There's even a signed note from Senate President Pro Tem David Atchison, who technically was president for a day in March 1849 (James Polk had already stepped down when President-elect Zachary Taylor declined to be inaugurated on a Sunday due to his religious beliefs).

Figler, who recently set up the Jeff and Linda Figler Foundation with his wife, is working with the state to take a traveling exhibit of his presidential memorabilia to fourth grades around California.

Figler also is on the board of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and is considering doing some paid tours of his collection, with proceeds going to his foundation or to Make-A-Wish. He's no longer in a serious acquiring mode (“My wife gave me a cease-and desist,” he says).

The civic-minded Figler, 55, is director of the Jefferson Corp., which compiles mailing lists for businesses. He serves on numerous boards, and is this year's chairman of the board of the Poway Chamber of Commerce. He's also connected with the San Diego Sports Council and the Poway Center for the Performing Arts.

In recent years Figler has given talks and written articles on collecting, which he finds amusing. “It was not intentional,” he says.

But he built it, and now he has a public, planned or not.