

Hop on the bandwagon and stock up early with election memorabilia

February 11, 2007

As we learned in elementary school, February is the month we celebrate the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. To collectors of political memorabilia, any items from those two presidents are real treasures.

In fact, materials pertaining to any president hold some value beyond sentiment, although winning the right to live in the White House doesn't automatically mean that campaign buttons or a presidential signature will become the most sought-after by collectors. In this field, the also-rans can come in first.

Now is a good time to jump on the bandwagon, as the 2008 presidential contest heats up early with a slew of announced candidates. There's even a local connection.

Who can say where Rep. Duncan Hunter of Alpine may wind up as he seeks the GOP nomination? If you start receiving letters from Hunter's campaign, or have items signed by him, save them.

With so much political material to choose from, my advice for those starting out is to pick a certain president, campaign or period to concentrate on.

Which president's memorabilia is the toughest to obtain, and the most desirable? Serious collectors know the answer is William Henry Harrison.

Harrison was the ninth president, but served in office for only 30 days starting on March 4, 1841. During his inaugural address, he chose not to



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
Collector Jeff Figler displays rare bobble-head kissing figures of John and Jackie Kennedy in the museum in his Poway home.

wear a topcoat. For that reason, he is believed to have caught a cold that led to a fatal case of pneumonia. He became the first president to die in office.

Only 14 pieces that Harrison signed as president are known to exist. Most are in public offices or museums, but a few remain in the hands of private collectors.

Through the years, the most popular form of political memorabilia has been pins and buttons made from metal disks. Buttons grew in popularity in the 1880s, with slogans or names printed on paper covered by a piece of celluloid. Many were produced by Whitehead and Hoag of Newark, N.J.

Small and easy to display, buttons and pins are quite plentiful. Their value rarely has to do with visual appeal or the slogans, but rather almost always on rarity and condition.

Among presidential collectors, Lincoln, Harry Truman and John Kennedy buttons and pins are the most desirable, with prices ranging from \$25 to several hundred dollars or more.

But the real money goes to two buttons depicting losing candidates that stand out as the most valuable and, not coincidentally, the toughest to obtain.

The first is a 1920 button for the Democratic ticket of James Cox and Franklin Roosevelt, with FDR running as vice president. The button is seven-eighths inch in diameter and bears the slogan "Americanize America."

Cox was governor of Ohio and founded what would become today's Cox Enterprises media firm while FDR was assistant secretary of the Navy. They were soundly beaten by Republicans Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, a setback that certainly did not deter FDR from running in the future. The scarce Cox-Roosevelt button is worth more than \$100,000.

A second very pricey button is of the 1924 Democratic team of John Davis and William Jennings Bryan. One Davis-Bryan button also sold several years ago for more than \$100,000.

Candidates who drop out also are popular. For example, Democrat George McGovern's choice for his running mate in 1972 was Sen. Thomas Eagleton of Missouri. After press inquiries, Eagleton disclosed he had undergone electroshock therapy while being treated for depression. That explosive news forced him off the ballot, but a McGovern-Eagleton button nevertheless remains a strong collectible.

One piece of memorabilia remains a puzzle. In 1932 the U.S. Caramel Co. produced 31 presidential cards called the R114 set that were printed on boxes of chocolates. As a promotion, the company offered a free box of candy to anyone sending in all 31 cards.

There was one problem. Only a handful of William McKinley cards were issued. So it was nearly impossible to assemble a complete set.

However, legend has it that there is still one McKinley card that was never returned to the company to claim the gift, meaning it lacks a proof of redemption, or cancellation, mark. (The cards, along with the prize, were returned to consumers.)

For those who've caught Potomac fever, an excellent reference is "The Official Price Guide to American Patriotic Memorabilia" by Michael Polak. In addition, you may wish to subscribe to *The Political Bandwagon*, a monthly publication. The telephone number is (717) 656-7855 or see www.thepoliticalbandwagon.com.