COLLECTING POLITICAL MEMORABILIA

An interview with collector, Chick Harris,
As given to Pamela Ambrose, former director
The Historic Samuel Cupples House.

Your collection of presidential campaign material is quite amazing in its scope and the type of material you have focused on. I know it to be one of the larger collections of its kind in the United States. What prompted you to start collecting in this field?

My grandfather was a small town politician and had a small accumulation of political pins, tie clips, and miscellaneous items that he kept on a cloth doll that my mother had received as a Christmas present. It was on his dresser and quite colorful to look at. I had always liked the “pin” doll, and upon his death in 1936, I asked my grandmother if I could have the doll as a keepsake. I kept the doll in a man’s shoebox and added a pin or two from every election. I began collecting in earnest in 1952 after my aunt had given me a subscription to Hobbies Magazine. I placed an ad in the magazine to buy political memorabilia. From then on, the mailman started bringing small and large packages of political stuff, and I was “hooked.”

Has collecting this type of material become more difficult over the years? Is it still possible to seriously collect or begin to build a collection from scratch? I would think that with the advent of collectors’ Web sites and online auctions, the material would have become increasingly scarce.

I heard of the American Political Items Collectors organization and joined as “member number 139.” The general membership was about 35 members, and each year we paid our $2 dues and received a membership roster. The roster was great, as my wife and I, on our vacations, always included a stop at a collector’s house. In the early days, there was no information available. In the early days there was no information available about the items, (their) rarity or variety. Many antique shops stated that they didn’t sell such junk. Times have changed and the Internet is now attracting material that some dealers had put aside because they were afraid to put a price on their unappreciated treasures. The Internet is great for unusual items, but many bargains are available in the more common memorabilia. So, to answer your question, if this is a field that interests you, collecting political Americana is still possible for the newcomer.

The material in the collection seems to fall into several obvious categories of original intent. First, we have the commemorative objects, such as the many ceramic pieces with images of the presidents and mottos; other categories are the “party platform” material that is really an early form of advertising; the anti-issue platform material; and finally, the convention delegate material of buttons, badges, banners, etc. When you put it all together, I think one has a fairly good overview of each election and
the candidates. Is there any particular election that stands out in your mind for either the quantity or sheer creativity of material that was produced?

The early items were commemorative because up to 1824, people did not cast a popular vote. Initially, only six states passed legislation to begin the popular vote, followed in 1828 when the remainder of the states started. The state legislatures selected the presidential electors. Today we actually do not vote for the president and the vice-president. We vote for electors who cast the votes by states. Once the popular vote began, the early memorabilia consisted of political tokens with images and slogans, silk ribbons and literature and newspapers with strong political bias.

With the advent of photography we finally saw real images of the candidates. With Lincoln, Douglas, Bell, and Breckinridge (there were four major parties in 1860) being the first to have their images photographically reproduced. There were albumen images in the 1860s to 1870s. They were made obsolete by celluloid buttons in 1886, cheaper to produce, thereby changing the way politicians were packaged and represented to the public.

While I was researching the organization of the exhibition, I came to realize that the emphasis and scrutiny on the candidates’ personal lives that we have come to accept in the last 20 years is not peculiar to contemporary times. Especially in the mean-spirited (manner) we see in campaigning today. Am I correct that winning by any means was always the case and that campaigning today is no different than it was 150 years ago?

It seems to me that campaigning has never been clean — especially so in the elections of 1870 to the 1880s. An example is the 1884 campaign of Grover Cleveland versus James G. Blaine, with Cleveland’s illegitimate child at issue against Blaine’s money and railroad scandals. Cleveland was pictured as a pig, and Blaine as a man full of tattoos. The opposition reviled Cleveland so much that a backlash against Blaine occurred. Apparently Cleveland’s youthful indiscretions did hurt him in this closely contested race, and he won by only 23,000 votes of the 10 million votes cast. A popular chant after the election was “Hurray for Maria! Hurray for the kid! I voted for Cleveland, and I’m damn glad I did.”

Building a collection of this type has certainly made you a visual student of American history. What are some of the issues that keep cropping up throughout our country’s 200 years of presidential elections?

Economics has ruled the outcome of elections more than any other factor. Scandals have hurt candidates but most have won in spite of problems. Party splits could be devastating; as in 1912, when Teddy Roosevelt ran as a Bull Moose candidate, splitting the William Taft Republican vote. The Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, won the presidency.
All collectors, once focused on their subject and bitten by the collecting “bug” have a favorite piece or object that was either difficult to acquire, or perhaps an unexpected find. Do you have a favorite piece?

My favorite item would be a small, home-spun ribbon with a wood-cut image of George Washington, an eagle and a flag with a motto that reads, “Fostered under thy wings, we die in they defense.” Undoubtedly, a colonial period item. Also, a clothing button from Washington’s inauguration in 1789. The new 13 states are linked around the outside with the motto, “Long Live the President” the initials, “G.W.” in the center. As there is so little material from this time, having the pieces in the collection is amazing.

In 1997 Cupples House organized an exhibition of American and British suffrage material from your collection that was equally extraordinary. Was that collection an offshoot of your main interest in campaign memorabilia?

The suffrage material that you exhibited in the exhibition, “A Voice of their Own” was started with my presidential campaign collection, but my wife, Ceil, took an interest in the struggle women had to vote, and she was encouraged by a Rochester, New York collector, Agnes T. Gay, who was a real suffragette. She had marched in suffrage parades while a college student and said that if her father had known, he would have disowned her. She sold her marvelous collection before she died and Ceil was able to obtain much of the collection.

Finally, is there any advice you would give to young collectors today (who) are interested in American history who might wish to start collecting?

I’ve always thought that this has to be one of the greatest hobbies. It is historical, educational, (and) renewable (with every election there is new material and new excitement). There are many specialties in which to concentrate, such as a single candidate, political party, causes, war and peace, the environment, suffrage, prohibition, alternative parties and so on. The APIC (American Political Items Collectors) has a specialty chapter which focuses on, and encourages such interest. I would encourage anyone interested in collecting and preserving Americana to join this 3,000-member organization. The organization sends out their monthly publication, The Keynoter, and also offers a newsletter, collecting information and a roster of collectors. They can be contacted at http://www.collectors.org/apic.

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ABOUT CECELIA AND U.I. “CHICK” HARRIS
Cecelia and “Chick” Harris have been lifelong St. Louis residents and supporters of the Historic Samuel Cupples House on the campus of Saint Louis University. Their gracious donation allowed the complete renovation of the conservatory of the mansion and included the installation of a wheelchair lift as well as computer stations for patrons to enjoy various programs that highlight the Cupples House and the Cupples family.
Cecelia passed away in June 2008, leaving Chick and many friends to mourn her. It was a privilege to have known Ceil and our thoughts and prayers are with the one who loved her most of all: her beloved husband and companion, Chick.