

Finders, keepers

The joy of having something to show off

By Theresa Wulf

What's so appealing about a stamp or a thimble or a swan or an angel that makes people want to gather a whole bunch of them and put them on display?

Psychologists don't have much of an answer. Most don't endorse Freud's theory that people collect things because they're anal retentive, says Dr. John Hensley, professor of psychology at Midwestern State University. And non-collectors don't lack personality traits that collectors have, he says.

But whether you call it love or fanaticism, collectors are obsessed with whatever it is they have a lot of. And they'll tell anyone who shows even the slightest glimmer of interest about their treasures.

Two collectors — the Rev. Ron Hill and Carter McGregor Jr. — started small, one with a single light and the other with a piece of cardboard. But they've taken two simple items and turned them into priceless gatherings of love and memories.

When he was a boy, Hill loved two things more than anything else in the world. One was baseball and the other was his dog, Susie. Susie was run over by a car and killed during Hill's senior year in high school, and he buried her in his baseball uniform.

Later another great love came into Hill's life — his wife, Kathy. Before they were married six years ago, Hill warned her that she wasn't just marrying a man — she was marrying a collection, too. That collection, among other things, included 15,000 to 20,000 baseball cards.

At their wedding rehearsal dinner, Hill proved his love. "In a very weak moment," he says, he let some of his precious cards be used as coasters. He even gave some of them to her relatives.

It was true love. Between Hill and his wife. Between Hill and his baseball cards.

Hill says he started his collection when he was about 9 years old. There wasn't any place to buy them in his hometown of Floydada, Texas, population 2,000, so he had to wait until his family went to visit his aunt in Iowa Park. He and his brother would sneak out the back of church on Sunday mornings with the money intended for the collection plate and buy cards. They knew they had to be home when the noon whistle blew, signaling the end of church services.

The boys never got caught by their parents. "I know that they always knew," Hill says, "but that didn't stop me from doing it."

The more cards he collected, the more difficult it became to keep up with chewing all the rock-hard gum that came with them. So Hill saved it for special occasions. "We had concrete slabs in the backyard," he says. "I'd put that gum in my mouth like a plug of tobacco and throw golf balls at the slabs."

Spitting was as far as his major-league dreams got. Hill had a tryout in 1968 with the St. Louis Cardinals — and bombed. "They told me how rotten I was. They said I couldn't run, couldn't field, couldn't hit." Because of their assessment, the Cardinals have the distinction of being Hill's "most hated team."

Hate or love, Hill has a photo album of cards for every major league ball club. The most important cards are kept in the middle row of the page, where they're preserved the best. Duplicates, unless they're special, are kept in stacks and stacks and rows and rows of boxes in the closet.

Hill doesn't know how much his collection is worth, and he doesn't care. He bought a pricing guide in 1980 simply to be used as a checklist.

"I collected baseball cards because I love the cards. I've never sold a card."

In fact, he hates it when cards are sold. "If there's anything that makes me mad, it's how they've prostituted the hobby of baseball cards," he says. Dealers' evaluations and prices "make it nearly impossible to get the cards we want for our collections."

He also laments the loss of the days when cards were difficult to come by. "Years ago you used to spend all the money you had and chew the gum to get a Mickey Mantle," Hill says. Now, he says, it's big business, and collectors can fill holes simply by mail-ordering what they need.

Hill's collection doesn't stop with cards, though. No sirree. Just as a baseball game wouldn't be a baseball game without hot dogs and beer, Hill's collection wouldn't be complete without the rest of his memorabilia. In one corner of the Hills' living room is a cabinet with a lid that lifts. It holds the most treasured of the treasures: baseball Coke cans from the Los Angeles Olympics; commemorative soda pop bottles, including one with Bear Bryant; and five baseballs Hill caught at major league games.

Another treasure in the cabinet is a Houston Astros flag signed by team members. The Hills held it up on national television during one of the three games they went to on their honeymoon.

Most of Hill's memorabilia is autographed, and hanging around with the stars keeps him dreaming. He recalls a time when he and some children went to an airport to pick up a friend, and had some extra time to kill. Hill

Clockwise from top left, some of Ron Hill's collection; Hill with memorabilia; and MSU-Burns Fantasy of Lights.



Harry Tomemah



Harry Tomemah



Harry Tomemah

was wearing a Dodgers hat.

He told the kids to walk a few paces away, then come running at him and beg for his autograph. When the kids started the riot, everyone else in the airport started gathering around the "baseball star," too, trying to get his signature.

Pretty soon a beautiful woman emerged from the crowd, and Hill was stunned. Finally she worked up enough nerve to ask him for his autograph.

But alas, Hill wasn't enough of a celebrity to handle his fame. She handed him a piece of paper, and he asked her name so he could write a personalized message and sign it. But, Hill says, "I was so rattled I gave her her own name back."

•••

It started with a light on a tree in a young couple's front yard. Now it takes a university campus to show off the more than 18,000 lights and 30 displays in the MSU-Burns Fantasy of Lights, one of the best-known collections in North Texas.

Mr. and Mrs. L.T. Burns were a young couple in their 30s when they decided they wanted Christmas decorations in their yard, says Carter McGregor Jr., Mrs. Burns' nephew. Times were tough back in the late 1920s, and all the couple could afford was a single light on a single tree. But that one light gave them so much pleasure, McGregor says, that "they decided each year thereafter to add one more light or decoration of some kind."

In about 1931 or 1932 the Burnses moved to 2025 Clarinda in Country Club Estates, and they started making their yard displays larger and more elaborate. "Mr. Burns was in the drilling contract business, and in the winter and off-seasons, his employees would build new displays and refurbish the old ones every year," McGregor says.

"By adding one display each year, they built up quite a collection," McGregor continues. "In the late 1960s, they had a yard filled with them."

Burns was killed in a car accident in the late 1960s, but Mrs. Burns tried to carry on the tradition. "It got to be a

chore for her to pick up the new displays every year, and she began asking her family and other children what they recommended for a new tradition," recalls McGregor. Traffic was as heavy on Clarinda Street as it is now in front of Midwestern State University, he says, but "Mrs. Burns thoroughly enjoyed having the visitors. She would have cookies and Cokes for the visitors who would come and walk through."

Mrs. Burns died in the spring 1971, and she specified in her will that the display go to her son, Bobby. If he chose not to use it, the display then was to be given to the city of Archer City, Texas. "She chose Archer City because all the Burns employees lived in Archer City, and that's where the warehouse was and the display was kept," McGregor explains.

"For three years, the display was dark," he continues. "Bobby did not want it, and the city of Archer City felt it did not have the proper facilities or funds to re-create the display." So in 1974, McGregor went to the MSU Board of Regents. The year before, MSU had outlined its buildings with lights, and McGregor told the regents that Mrs. Burns' displays would make "a wonderful addition" to those lights. The board asked him to negotiate with Archer City officials to obtain Mrs. Burns' display, and "Archer City was enthusiastic that again the lights would be displayed," McGregor says. "So in 1974, the lights were turned on for the first time at Midwestern."

Mrs. Burns specified in her will that the display never be commercialized and that no one ever be charged admission to see the displays, McGregor says. Since they were combined with the MSU building lights in 1974, the university and the family have relied on community contributions to maintain and renew them.

McGregor believes his aunt would be happy with the MSUBurns Fantasy of Lights. "I think she'd be delighted — most pleased we're carrying on the tradition she established," he says. "This display of lights was one of her greatest pleasures in life, and she looked forward to Christmas when the lights could be turned on again."

City