

SMITHSONIAN ARCHIVIST SCOUTS DULUTHIAN'S PRIZED PUNCH BOARDS

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The Smithsonian Institution visited Duluth's Evan "Ding" Rangeloff this weekend with the hope of one day returning to Washington, D.C., with a portion of his extensive punch board collection.

Rangeloff has perhaps the largest and most valuable punch board collection in the country. And the 67-year-old Piedmont Heights resident is also a big reason for the Smithsonian's interest.

"We probably have the national expert on punch boards here in our midst in Duluth, Minnesota," said Mimi Minnick, a Smithsonian archivist who flew in from Washington on Saturday to talk to Rangeloff and examine his collection.

Minnick described her trip as a sort of "scouting mission" and a precursor to a more formal visit the Smithsonian plans in the spring when officials will likely catalog some of the boards and take them back to the national museum.

"So whatdahecksa punch board?" you ask.

Ask Rangeloff. Or maybe ask your grandparents. They might remember seeing the boards or playing on them.

Considered a gambling device and forefather of today's pull tabs, the boards were half an inch to an inch thick and had prize tickets folded or rolled up inside tiny holes covered in paper or foil. Players paid for a chance to take a punch at the board and see if they could win a prize.

Typical prizes were cigarette lighters, ballpoint pens or coins. Some of Rangeloff's boards had more valuable prizes such as guns, knives or even a new Chevrolet or Cadillac.

Many of the boards carried advertisements for automobiles, cigarettes, candy bars, liquor, snacks and sports teams.

Some of the boards Rangeloff picked up 20 years ago are now worth thousands. Virtually all of those in his collection are "virgin" punch boards -- unused with the prize tickets inside.

Rangeloff has a hard time saying just how much it's all worth.

"I have one board that just went from \$500 or so to whatever you want to pay for it," he said. "I don't really care how much it's all worth."

One of the few people who could accurately estimate the value of Rangeloff's arguably priceless collection is Rangeloff himself. And he's not really saying.

The Smithsonian doesn't really care, either. The museum can't afford to pay for the boards, and Rangeloff plans to donate many of them. Besides, Minnick said the value of Rangeloff's collection is the historical context it provides.

"It can give a little greater depth to our understanding of advertising," she said.

But to get a rough idea just how valuable the one-of-a-kind collection is, a mere fraction of it was on display at the St. Louis County Historical Society a few years ago when a curator told Rangeloff he would be crazy not to have that portion insured for less than a half-million dollars.

"It used to be that they were just everywhere," Minnick said. "It's just one of those aspects of history that's hidden."

Minnick said the Smithsonian has more recently become interested in "aspects of everyday life."

She said items like Rangeloff's punch boards are referred to by historians as "ephemera" -- objects never intended to last or have any real significance.

That makes a collection like Rangeloff's even more valuable, both historically and monetarily.

First patented in 1905, punch boards were most popular in the 1930s and 1940s, Rangeloff said. They were prevalent in bars and grocery stores.

"During the war they were just humongous," he said.

Rangeloff, who retired as a salesman for the Liggett Myers Tobacco Co. after 38 years, said he was collecting several other items when he began his punch board collection nearly 40 years ago. Part of his job as a salesman was to place the boards in bars and shops where he sold cigarettes.

That aspect also appealed to Smithsonian officials.

"The Smithsonian Institution is enormously interested in Mr. Rangeloff's collection," Minnick said. "But not just the punch boards themselves, but also the knowledge he has about them."

"It's like he's a part of the history of punch boards personally," she said.

Rangeloff said he first contacted people at the Smithsonian 15 or 20 years ago to see if they were interested in his collection. He sent them pictures and other information, but only within the past few years has the museum expressed serious interest.

Until the past decade or so, the Smithsonian has largely been opposed to collecting pop culture material, Minnick said.

Now, on the brink of a new millennium, there is a new interest in Americana and post-World War II memorabilia, Minnick said. And few historians would dispute the value of such an impeccably preserved and extensive collection as Rangeloff's.

It's interest like the Smithsonian's that has made the decades of work and thousands of dollars spent worthwhile, Rangeloff said. ``It finally gives me credibility," he said.

Rangeloff said he has plans to auction off or sell his collection after donating some of it to the Smithsonian.

``I'm getting to the age now where I better get something back for the time I've stuck into it," he said.

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