

# Collector Searches for Antique Toys

By DEBORAH EDWARDS

When Joseph S. Imler bought his first antique toy - a pair of nineteenth century, clip-on ice skates - it inspired him to search for other old toys.

His search has continued for 22 years, and Imler, who lives in Hamden, now owns more than 500 antique toys, a cross-section of almost ever kind of toy imaginable, from wind-up cars to wind-up people. Toys in his collection date from 1180 to 1940.

Imler's love for toys stems from his 30-year association with American Home Toy Party Inc. (a wholesale toy distributorship, of which he is Western Massachusetts regional sales manager), and his love of antiques.

As his collection grew through the years, he realized that there was no such thing as "a new toy idea," and that the new toys on the market today are very often copies of antique models.

#### Widespread Search

"It's not unusual for my wife and I to drive a couple hundred miles to an auction that has advertised a toy that I'm interested in," Imler said. He and his wife have searched as far as the Mississippi River for toys.

Although he has no one favorite toy he is partial to dirigibles, planes, the old Buddy L and Keystone trucks of the '20s and '30s, construction equipment from the '20s, and the much older Arcade iron trucks, cars, taxis and buses.

"As a kid, I remember the day when school let out so we could go outside to watch the Hindenburg fly by overhead," he said. "Also, as a boy, I remember Lindy's historic flight in the Spirit of St. Louis. These were the beginnings of a new mode of travel."

From this interest in flight, Imler became interested in collecting toy planes and dirigibles - most often the pull type used by totlers. They were metallic and cigar-shaped, with brightly painted markings, and were pulled by a string.

#### No Dolls Please

"I don't collect them because I'm not interested in them, and I don't usually collect trains - except for special ones like my Mickey Mouse train and a couple of others," he said.

When Imler's children were small, and very young, they would often make remarks at the purchase of each toy, such as "Oh, daddy and his toys."

When Imler's oldest boy was about 16, he said one day: "Gee, Dad, if anything ever happened to you, it would take three days to get all this stuff to the dump."

"That's when I began to catalog them, keeping track of their current value as well as historical information about each toy," he said.

#### Sold First Collection

Imler sold his first collection of toys - which numbered over 800 at the time. Although he regrets to this day selling them, he said the money from the sale

allowed him to send all three of his children through college.

He began collecting again immediately after he sold his collection, and with a new fervor.

Today, his younger son is co-owner of Stanton Auctions, and as Imler puts it, "his interest and cognizance of antiques is now equal to my own."

Imler's collection of mechanical toys include: famous personalities of the '20s and '30s, cars, trucks, a Ferris Wheel, a merry-go-round, and a mock parade called "The Big Parade."

He also collects boys' fictional sports stories. He specializes in the Gary Grason and "Baseball Joe" series.

"I collected one set for each of my sons, and I'm now in the process of completing sets for my three grand-children," he said.

"As my knowledge of antique toys and their value increased, I started to set certain ground rules for a potential purchases," he said.

"I don't buy any toys made after the year 1940, and the mechanical toys have to be in good working condition, or I'm not interested in them," he said. "I don't buy plastic toys, or toys that are reproductions of antique toys."

#### \$300 Toy Pumper

"The most I've ever paid for a toy is \$300 - that was for a horse drawn Ives Pumper. - "Ives was an outstanding toy manufacturer," said Imler. "This particular pumper was one of only six made in the nineteenth century, stout the year 1880."

Imler said that a true collector does not put a dollar value on an item. He collects an item because of its scarcity, interest, and the manufacturer. "The pure collector doesn't collect toys for the money," he explained.

Imler, who is considered an authority on antique toys, often lectures and displays his toys to interested groups.

#### Other Collectors

"The interest in collecting toys is tremendous. I'm always booked far in advance, and often have to turn down requests," -e said.

His wife Janet, a retired secretary, helps catalog the toys and takes care of her husband's correspondence.

Imler belongs to the Antique Toy Collectors of America.

"We meet twice a year," Imler said. "The club researchers toy manufacturers, and reproduces old toy catalogs."

The best thing for a young person wishing to start a collection would be to collect toy robots, he said.

Someday they'll be the antiques - like the mechanical wind-up men of yesteryear.



**PLAYTHINGS OF THE PAST** - Joseph S. Imler displays some of his favorites from his antique toy collection. From left, counterclockwise, are 1930 dirigible, 1925 Buddy L. coupe, 1930 Arcade taxi bank, 1925 Buddy L. pickup truck; 1900 horse-drawn milk wagon; and Ferris wheel and carrousel, both from about 1930. (Don Treger photo)