

William P. Barlow, Jr.

## Spinning Straw into Gold: Gilding Junk through Collecting

---

I AM A COLLECTOR. I collect a lot of things, both significant and silly. I collect things related to the Birmingham printer John Baskerville; I collect antiquarian bibliography; I collect private library and book auction catalogues; I collect postal history and philatelic literature. In addition—and the reason I have been thought to have some expertise in collecting ephemera—I collect material related to the restaurants recommended from the 1930s to the 1950s by Duncan Hines.

Even though my Duncan Hines collection is the subject of this article, all of my collections involve some form of ephemera. While John Baskerville's books are the very antithesis of ephemera, having largely been issued for a collecting public and expected to last for centuries (as they have), that collection also includes type specimens, proposals, and legal documents that are distinctly ephemeral. Book auction catalogues almost define the word "ephemera." For my own collections I would define "ephemera" as "objects that are perceived by their producers and initial recipients as having no significant residual value after their original purpose has been fulfilled."

There is a tendency by both librarians and book collectors to think of ephemera in terms of printed ephemera, which is actually a subcategory. My Duncan Hines collection has printed ephemera in abundance: menus, picture postcards, photographs, documents, and matchbook covers. But it also includes more substantial items, like top-marked china, monogrammed silver, light fixtures, and restaurant signs. Ephemera need not be printed to qualify as such; it need not have the useful life of a mayfly (assuming a mayfly leads a useful life); and it need not be eligible for scrapbooking. I would, in fact, suggest that the quintessential example of modern American ephemera is the automobile.

Others have advanced the proposition that collections of ephemera are more easily created by private collectors and dealers than public collectors (also known as

“librarians”). I would emphasize that this applies to collections of ephemera, rather than collections *with* ephemera. A librarian would find no difficulty adding a related poster or sales brochure to an established author collection, or a handbill or newspaper to historical material. But developing a completely ephemeral collection from scratch is usually difficult for a librarian to justify doing, and even more difficult to accomplish. In fact, if we look at what has happened to library accumulations of newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, and auction catalogues over the years, it would appear to be easier to digitize and discard such ephemera than to acquire more of it. Yet a librarian who receives an ephemera collection from a donor is far less likely to digitize and discard it, and the scholarly world is better off for this reluctance. It took a hundred years for George Thomason’s collection of thousands of mostly otherwise nonexistent broadsides and tracts to find their way to the British Library, but there they remain to the delight of probably everyone but Donald Wing. And what librarian would not be tempted to free up valuable shelf space that has been allotted to boxes of tram tickets, were such boxes not part of the collection begun in the late 1920s by John Johnson, printer to Oxford University, at the Bodleian?

Although perhaps not quite as spectacular as the Thomason or Johnson collections, there are many other instances of ephemera collecting by libraries. One that I can recall from personal experience relates to the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley in the mid-1960s. Jim Hart, who was then head of the University’s Bancroft Library, had a staff member go out on campus to the Sather Gate daily to collect copies of everything being given away at the tables set up there by activists of all political and social persuasions. But even this collecting comes close to the one area for which librarians can generally justify collecting ephemera: that is, university archives. And even though collecting university archives has the advantage of being generally free of acquisition costs, I think we are all aware that space and processing costs are often more precious commodities than are funds for acquisitions.

The title of my article suggests that the collector of ephemera regularly buys “junk” and turns it into something more valuable. To some degree this is true. The bulk of ephemeral material is now being found on the Internet at sites like eBay (although, in reality, there *are not* any other sites quite like eBay). So, at the risk of promoting a commercial enterprise and, in the spirit of full disclosure, noting that I own a few shares of stock in that company, I would have to say simply that “the bulk of ephemeral material is now being found on eBay.” This is especially true of the “junk,” which can be appropriately gilded by being combined with previously and subsequently acquired “junk.” Librarians are generally somewhat behind the curve in using Internet auctions for acquisitions, although I think this is changing, despite the paperwork and internal control restrictions in libraries that make that

change difficult. From this perspective, collectors, accumulators, and pack rats have the distinct advantage.

When I talk about “spinning straw into gold,” what is really involved is the creation of “collection value.” The term “collection value” does not mean the total cost or financial worth of a collection, or the number of times a collection is accessed by scholars or used academically; rather, it is a term that is known to antiquarian book appraisers (even though it is not often taken into account by them): the value of a collection as a whole in excess of the sum of the value of its individual items. Many private libraries have no collection value at all. A collection of “high-spot” books, for example, has little or no value beyond the individual prices of each of the books. But in a comprehensive author collection, the presence of later editions, translations, and ephemera take on an appreciable excess value over the cost to assemble them. Even if a collection is *just* of later editions and the like, it will have a collection value, especially if going to a collector or library already in possession of the primary material. The collection value of a large group of related ephemera can be very significant indeed. And that collection value can be measured both in monetary and scholarly terms.

It should be noted that there can also be a *negative* collection value, where the whole can be worth less than its individual parts, which is to say a “breaker value.” We tend to think of “breakers” as dealing only in Audubon *Birds* or atlases, but there are more mundane examples closer to the ephemera theme: newspapers and periodicals. Suppose that a complete daily edition of a *New York Times* from the 1930s can be sold for \$20 on eBay. That would project out to \$7,300 for a full year (\$7,320 in a leap year). Are bound volumes of the *New York Times* worth more than \$7,000 a year? And any eBay watcher is constantly seeing clipped advertisements from old copies of *Life* or *Saturday Evening Post* selling for a few dollars each, with a single issue producing perhaps \$50 to \$100 of saleable material. This is even more than a single copy of such a magazine might bring if sold for what has always been thought of as its highest and best use—as a birthday gift for someone who was born during the week the magazine was dated.

Both the positive and negative collection values represent the value of time. For collectors and booksellers putting together collections, the return on their time can be highly variable. The same can be said for the breakers, which also have to take into account the unsellable remnants. Just because an edition of the *New York Times* has “all the news that’s fit to print” does not necessarily mean it contains anything fit to sell. In a collection of ephemera, the traditional measures of value do not always apply. While a book collector often imagines value in terms of rarity and condition, the ephemera collector often does not.

Individual items of ephemera are generally scarce, even if the general type of ephemera being collected is not. One of the largest segments in my collection of materials related to restaurants recommended by Duncan Hines is menus from the listed restaurants. As a class, restaurant menus are not particularly scarce: people often saved menus to commemorate a special evening. Cruise-line menus are among those most frequently encountered, since they were generally printed daily, and food was often the most memorable feature of a cruise. These menus often featured covers related to the ship or its ports of call, and there was usually plenty of time to salt them away as souvenirs. At the same time, finding a menu from a particular restaurant may represent a nearly impossible search, unless that restaurant regularly gave its menus away as part of its promotional activities (or sold souvenir menus); or the restaurant was famous or overpriced enough that people were willing to risk stealing to obtain one.

As to considering the “condition” of an item as a value factor, it simply is not. Perhaps it is a plus when the item found is deemed to be in “good condition,” but generally one is best advised to take what one can get and, in view of the modest prices such items bring, there is little harm in duplication if a better copy happens to be found, and very little incentive in trying to sell the less desirable duplicates. The real measure of value in an ephemera collection is quantity and comprehensiveness. Again using menus as an example, a few dozen menus from places where one has eaten pleasantly may be nice personal mementos, but they do not have the collection value discussed above, and they have little or no scholarly value. In a library setting, a handful of menus are nothing but a nuisance: a cataloging nuisance, a shelving nuisance, and probably a nuisance to locate should anyone ever actually ask to see one. On the other hand, a collection of 5,000 menus, even if it has no other defining characteristic, can be useful. One of the more comprehensive of such collections is at Cornell University. Its presence at a university noted for its school of hotel administration makes it particularly relevant to the curriculum, of course. But, as with most ephemera collections, the largest and best part of it was not accumulated by the hotel school or the university library: it was primarily the personal collection of Oscar Tschirky, better known as Oscar of the Waldorf, maitre d’ of the restaurant and famous for introducing to the world eggs benedict, thousand island dressing, and “Waldorf” salad. Another huge collection at the New York Public Library was the subject of an eight-month exhibit there in 2002 and 2003. Again, the basis of this wonderful exhibit was a collection of some 35,000 menus formed by Miss Frank E. Buttolph (1850–1924), whose mission in life was to collect menus between 1890 and 1910. Comprehensiveness is an improvement on mere quantity. Nearly half of the Buttolph collection, for example, consists of New York City menus. Since New York City has always been one of the restaurant capitals of America, such a collection represents a meaningful slice of culinary history, not only for New York, but for the country.

Ephemera collections are often viewed in terms of their portrayal of cultural history. Books, art, and antiques tend to represent the elite, but ephemera, almost by definition, represent the day-to-day. It could be said that the more completely the ephemera collection evokes the total experience that was created by its original use, the more useful it might be to future researchers. That is not to say, however, that a collection of transcontinental bus schedules needs to include an actual bus. But if I were collecting them, I would certainly want some posters, and ideally one of those racing Greyhounds from the side of a bus.

My own collection of Duncan Hines–related material contains much of that sort of thing. It includes postcards of restaurants, of course, since they show what the places Duncan Hines recommended looked like (maybe somewhat airbrushed, idealized, and color in a black-and-white era). There are also matchbook covers, since, until the present-day universal bans on in-house smoking, these were, along with postcards, the principal advertising media for restaurants. Ashtrays, of course, fit logically with the matchbook covers and are probably the items most frequently stolen from restaurants, which, along with the fact that I do not smoke, makes them less desirable for my own tastes. Top-marked china is another disappearing restaurant artifact—disappearing, in large part, because it has also been stolen. (Nowadays, if you see something that bears a restaurant logo, it is probably a charger that is whisked away as soon as the food is served in order for staff to count how many had been on a table.) My collection also includes the “Recommended by Duncan Hines” signs that many of the favored restaurants displayed. These were only leased to the restaurants; they were regularly replaced or reclaimed, and I thought for a long time that they no longer existed. My front hallway is graced with a chandelier that originally cast a flattering pink light on Hollywood stars at Chasen’s Restaurant in Beverly Hills, California. And my house is littered with some of the many products that Duncan Hines ended up endorsing later in his life, including the famous cake mixes that these days are the only way most people still remember his name.

A library—because it is a library and not a museum—might have a problem with a collection such as mine. Even though the librarian might willingly find room for a collected author’s writing desk, or maybe some Henry Thoreau family pencils, such items are considered enhancements to a basic library collection. While runs of the many issues of *Adventures in Good Eating*, *Lodging for a Night*, *The Vacation Guide*, and *Adventures in Good Cooking* would most likely be entirely welcome in a library (although I know of no library with any such significant runs), the vegetable shredder, the barbecue tools, and the hand-painted china (all, of course, in the original cartons) might not be. Nevertheless, if ephemera are to evoke a period, a way of life, an era, it would be desirable if all of the related objects—which, at least by my own definition, are ephemera as well—could be kept together.

Now, while I may have given the impression that the only scholarly use for ephemera collections is in some vague cultural or period research, this grossly understates what even the most mundane collections can reveal. A collection of nineteenth-century train timetables not only provide information about often short-lived companies and routes, but also indicate where depots were, the length of travel time between them, and the frequency of service. It might also provide a great deal of information to historians of specific localities on the routes. Collections of trade cards are likely to give information about local businesses not always found in the more substantial city directories, as do philatelic advertising covers and corner cards. Picture postcards were the vacation photos for the early part of the twentieth century and, rather remarkably, document even the smallest of towns in the period of the “postcard craze.” This should be of particular interest, since material such as this generally does not find its way to libraries but instead goes back into the trade. The history of pre-Prohibition wine production in the United States depends more on ephemera—such as promotional brochures, price lists, tax records, and wine labels—than it does on the existence of actual pre-Prohibition bottles of wine. Even the restaurant menus I collect can supply research data that extends beyond cultural history and culinary trends. For example, there is an ongoing study to determine what fish populations were like in various parts of the world going back 100 to 150 years that has focused on menus. I thought this was going to be a revelation until I saw that this was the lead article in *Ephemera News*.<sup>1</sup>

And all this time, I thought I was merely having fun! But all of these scholarly uses again emphasize the need for quantity and comprehensiveness. No one is likely to find much information on fish populations or railroad depots from a handful of menus or timetables. Instead, hundreds or thousands are required for statistically valid conclusions. And it is ever so much better if the hundreds or thousands are located in the same place. The numbers involved, however, can represent a real problem for librarians. While there are plenty of books out there that do not include the name of a publisher, a place of publication, or date, they are the exception rather than the rule. And for such anonymous books, there are often numerous bibliographical sources that can provide such information. But it is more the general rule that for ephemera there is a paucity of information on date and place, and the bibliographical resources to solve such mysteries are few.

So many large accumulations of important ephemera lie unused in libraries because they are un-cataloged or ill-cataloged. I receive many calls from librarians (as well as book dealers and other collectors) asking if I can provide a copy of a particular auction catalogue. I get these calls not only because I have a lot of such

1. Glenn A. Jones, “Vintage Menus Help Scientists Trade Seafood Cost and Usage,” *Ephemera News* 25:1 (Fall 2006): 1, 10–19.

catalogues but also because I generally can quickly say whether I have the requested catalogue or not and probably can easily lay my hands on it.

One of the most useful things that a private collector of ephemera can do is to use his experience to provide basic bibliographical information on the materials he is collecting. If, as private collectors, we assume that giving a collection of ephemera to a library is tantamount to making it available to the scholarly world, we are really fooling ourselves. We may even find our precious ephemeral collection rejected by the donee library because of the costs associated with making the material reasonably available. For my own part, I am trying to supply such information with my Duncan Hines material. I have developed a list of all the restaurants that were recommended over the 27 years of the guide's existence (somewhere between nine and ten thousand), which serves as something of an index to what I have, as well as a "want list" for future acquisitions. All menus are stored in separate archival bags with stiffeners, to which are affixed labels with whatever information I know about the location of the restaurant and the date of the menu. Postcards are filed by state. China is also identified by maker and dated whenever the manufacturers' codes yield such information.

I still have a ways to go in actually being able to find a menu my lists say I have, but this is the price of acquiring too much, too fast. There is more that could, and should, be done to allow other characteristics of the menus to be determined. The way in which the working menu collection at Cornell's hotel school is indexed offers some useful pointers that will enable me to identify all the menus of Chinese restaurants, or pull menus from a specific date range, which, given time, I will surely adopt. At least, when the china collections exceeded the space in my home, I identified which of the score or so of moving and storage boxes contained what pieces of china. And I have also tried to maintain information that might have been known to the seller but is not apparent from the piece itself. There are an awful lot of restaurants named The Towne House, and a restaurant named The Ranch may not be in the countryside. The Captain's Table probably serves fish, but it is just as likely to be located in Iowa as on Cape Cod. The seller of items often had inside information about where the menu or top-marked china actually came from, and to discard this information is unforgivable.

We, as collectors, by contributing our time, expertise, and possibly some connoisseurship, may well be able to spin the straw of unwanted, unappreciated, and inexpensive ephemera into the gold of a coherent, scholarly, and aesthetically valuable collection. But if that collection is embedded in an impenetrable mountain, it may be gold that is not worth the cost of its recovery.