

Rare Little Treasures

STORY BY KRISTI RITTER • PHOTOS BY PAUL LITMAN

With two rooms in her home full of buttons, Sue Jordan is hailed as the person of knowledge when it comes to buttons, according to her fellow club members of the Lark But'ning Club in Longmont. As an active collector for more than 30 years, her collection has grown from inherited treasures from her mother and grandmother to a vast display that tells a story.

"Each button is a work of art," she said. Button collections also attract other collectors, such as those who follow Civil War or political memorabilia. "Some of the most sought-after buttons out there are those from (George) Washington's inauguration," she said.

Jordan often purchases buttons from other collectors in the area, but there are times when people find her to share their unique finds, tempting her to make them her own.

The oldest button in her collection dates back to 1665, and is made from a coin molded into a dome shape.

Most of Jordan's collection is carded for easy archiving, which means they've been placed on a card with other buttons of the same material, style, century or other similarities. Carding also keeps buttons free from damage, which is important considering the value of some can reach thousands of dollars.

But to some, the monetary value isn't as important as the story behind the button. Club member and chairwoman Janice Stutts said most collectors will turn a button over right away because that helps them learn about it. The date of a button can sometimes be determined by the type of shank, which is a metal, plastic or fabric loop on the underside of the button used to sew it to fabric.

Stories are also revealed from a button's condition. Stutts recalled a story about her grandmother, who had an old wringer washing machine where the clothes were fed through the wringer to get the excess water from it. "I always wanted to feed the clothes through the wringer, but my grandmother wouldn't let me," she said. Stutts later found out that if the clothes didn't go in with the buttons flat, they would pop off and take pieces of cotton from the clothing with them. Years later, when she would find a jar of buttons with tiny pieces of cotton attached, she knew their story.

Collectors
share stories
behind their
buttons



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Extruded celluloid buttons are made by using the material to pipe and swirl into molds. These buttons were made in the 1920s and '30s.



Blue steel buttons were blued like blue gun metal. This button card was a first place national winner.



From left: Janice Stutts, Sue Jordan and Lynn Kearney discuss and share their button collections at the Thompson Tea House in Longmont. Below: Jordan's oldest button is made from a 1665 coin that was shaped into a button.



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Stutts has always had an eye for buttons, gathering them up like rare little treasures. After years of gathering, she turned to collecting about three years ago. Among her favorite finds are Goodyear buttons, which got their name while Charles Goodyear was patenting his rubber. The buttons were made of natural tree rubber, before synthetic rubber was invented. Usually black or brown in color, the buttons are simple and often found at a low price. However, they are marked on the back with "Goodyear" and the date that refers to the patent date of the rubber. "Although most Goodyear buttons are fairly plain, it's always fun to come across one with a bird, a wasp, a woman's face or an anchor," she said.

With at least 100 cards full of buttons and more waiting to be carded, Stutts enjoys knowing the new technology of button making, as well as the many materials buttons are made from.

"Most of us don't really think beyond the normal daily uses of buttons," she said.

Fellow club member Lynn Kearney enjoys gathering buttons to turn them into jewelry,



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Connecting with Buttons

Learning and sharing is the focus of monthly meetings of the Lark But'ning Club. And with an encyclopedia of buttons more than 2 inches thick, there is always a new idea to discover.

Club chairwoman Janice Stutts said they usually choose three to four categories to discuss at meetings, allowing members to bring examples to view and share. A recent meeting allowed members to highlight moveable buttons and what classifies them as such. They've also discussed proper cleaning and drying techniques.

"A lot of our meetings seem technical, but a lot of us are new collectors," she said.

Club meetings are also a time to look ahead to competitions, such as the Colorado State Button Society show set for April 12 and 13 in Golden. This year's show will have 38 different entry categories, with specific requirements for exhibitors to meet. Stutts is working on nine different category entries this year and embraces the challenge of finding the perfect number, style and size for each category.

Many of the club members have won awards from both state and national competitions, and hope to bring more home this year.

— KRISTI RITTER

For more information about the Colorado State Button Society, visit www.coloradobuttons.com. The Lark But'ning Club meets the first Saturday of the month at the Longmont Museum. For more information, call 303-652-3099.

Right: Sue Jordan's swirl back buttons were arranged from pink to red to purple, and won a national award in 2007. Far right: Lynn Kearney gathers buttons to make jewelry.



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and sees beauty in those she imports from the Czech Republic. "There are a lot of techniques they used that have been lost, so that makes them rare," she said.

To protect the button and its value, Kearney is careful to set the button into sterling so the shank isn't damaged. "Ever since I was a kid, I liked to take things and turn it into wearable art," she said. "It's the details that make things extra special."

The study of buttons keeps these women in search of their treasures, both new and old. But it also allows for new friendships.

"The beauty of the people in the club is that everyone brings their own background," Kearney said. ❖

