

TOP STORY: IN SYMBOLISM

Retired Novato investor's expansive catalog exposes his deep appreciation of the national emblem



Preston Cook displays a knife handle bearing an eagle insignia (left) at his Novato home. Cook's collection American bald eagle memorabilia includes walking sticks (right).

EAGLE-EYED COLLECTOR

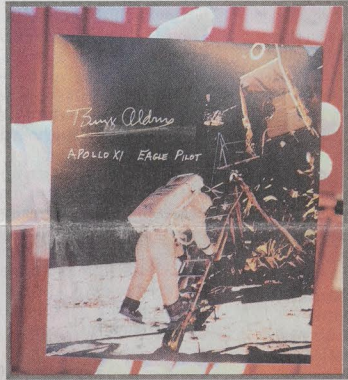
By Rob Rogers | Marin Independent Journal

PRESTON COOK'S living room stares back at the visitor with 40 pairs of eagle eyes.

One wall is dominated by a pair of watercolor prints by ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson. Another is home to a dazzling blue painted eagle by Andy Warhol. Eagles swoop everywhere — from World War I recruitment posters, Paris playbills, a Civil War drum and a Fraternal Order of Eagles flag.

Looming over everything is a massive carved eagle Cook acquired from a family in Washington state. That eagle, he explains, stood behind President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 as he celebrated his third inauguration in Washington, D.C.

"It stayed in the same family for three generations," said Cook, 65, a retired real estate investor who now devotes much of his free time



IJ photos/Frankie Frost

Preston Cook (below) has collected an autographed photograph of astronaut Buzz Aldrin on the moon with 'Eagle' lander.

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EAGLE: Novato man has vast collection of national emblem

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to maintaining and expanding his collection of eagles. The 40 or so images in his Novato living room — which Cook calls “the eagle lounge” — represent a small part of his collection, which includes about 20,000 items in 65 categories.

“I’ve been collecting for close to 40 years,” said Cook, a tall, quiet man who chooses his words carefully. “I was a student when I started. In the late ’90s, I decided to get serious about it.”

“Serious” is something of an understatement. Cook has hired a former museum employee to help him catalog his collection, which ranges from buttons, stamps and coins to tattoo art, license plates, knives and even a baseball bat belonging to former New York Giants left-fielder Monte Irvin — who began his career with the Newark Eagles of the Negro National League.

But Cook’s collection is much more than an enthusiast’s hoard. While other collectors will snap up anything with the name or image of an eagle, Cook focuses exclusively on the American bald eagle. His collection is nothing less than an attempt to understand, and document, the meaning of the eagle as symbol of the United States. The bald eagle has been the national bird since 1782, when the Continental Congress made it part of the Great Seal of the United States.

“Preston Cook has a remarkable story to tell about this country’s relationship with the bald eagle,” said David Olerud, executive director of the American Bald Eagle Foundation in Haines, Alaska, where Cook served for many years as a member of the board of directors.

“Other people look upon the bird in a different manner — for example, they’re interested in research into avian medicine,” Olerud said. “His claim to fame is his tremendous desire to put together a true story of our society through its



IJ photo/Frankie Frost

An eagle statue stands on a shelf in Preston Cook’s living room in Novato. Cook has spent years working on his collection, which is all organized and displayed throughout his home.

relationship to the bald eagle. He does so by examining what society has done, the goods and services it has produced. It isn’t junk — he’s thought through how bird and society have evolved together through multiple different categories. He’s a remarkable person.”

For Cook, it isn’t enough to collect and display depictions of eagles by the painter Louis Agassiz Fuertes, the famed naturalist John James Audubon, or the woodcarver John Haley Bellamy. His library — in addition to hundreds of ornithological volumes about eagles — also includes books about each of those artists, helping Cook to understand why they chose the eagle as their subject and what they meant to say by doing so.

He’s noted, for example, how the eagle has gradually edged out other popular symbols of America, such as Uncle Sam and “Columbia,” the woman depicted in the Statue of Liberty. And he’s observed how advertisers have pounced on eagle iconography during times of national crisis, such as both World Wars and the Sept. 11 attacks.

“It’s illegal to use the American flag in an advertisement,” Cook said. “So if you want to associate your product with patriotism, just put in an eagle.”

Cook developed a taste for collecting while growing up in Evanston, Ill. Like his father — also an avid collector — Cook haunted flea markets and antique

shops, snapping up bits of Americana that interested him.

He claims it was a statement — “You can’t have too many eagles!” by Murray Burns, a character in the 1965 film “A Thousand Clowns” — that provided a direction for his collecting. But the very first eagles in Cook’s collection suggest a more personal source of inspiration.

“I served in the army during the Vietnam era, and they issued me a uniform with brass buttons that had eagles on them,” Cook said. “I kept those buttons, and throughout my professional career, whenever I bought a new blazer, I’d have those buttons sewn on. I no longer wear a blazer, but I still have those buttons.”

Cook regularly travels throughout the world, meeting with other collectors and negotiating over new items for his eyrie. In fact, even when he’s trying to avoid eagles, Cook often finds himself drawn to his favorite subject.

“I had always wanted to go to Antarctica, and I finally took a trip, a cruise,” Cook said. “One of the fellow passengers was Buzz Aldrin. Well, a lot of people think of him as being the second person to walk on the moon. But to me, he was the pilot of the lunar landing craft — the Eagle. We had quite a talk.”

Cook’s wide-ranging interests extend far beyond birds, however. He served as a port commissioner and member of the housing authority in San Francisco,

where he lived until 2000. He has since served on the Novato Housing Commission, and has been on the boards of several nonprofit agencies, most notably the American Bald Eagle Foundation.

That association provided Cook with one of the most rewarding experiences of his life: attending the yearly gathering of eagles in Haines, when as many as 4,000 bald eagles descend on a preserve near the little Alaskan town in search of salmon.

“I had the honor and privilege of releasing a (rehabilitated) bald eagle” into the wild, said Cook, gazing at a photograph of the event with a fond smile. “They allowed me to handle the bird, which I understand they no longer let people do.”

Cook expects to continue the process of assembling his collection for many years to come. But he’s already made plans for its future; he’s placed the collection in a trust, and specified that it cannot be sold, in whole or in part, only given to the organization of his choice.

“If he puts together what he has now, it would be an unbelievable addition to any science center,” Olerud said. “He’s been a witness to society, collecting books, paintings, this and that, covering the whole broad spectrum of the bald eagle. And he’s willing to work with anybody in relation to what he has. He is an unique specimen.”

Few things surprise Cook when it comes to eagles; he’s seen every incarnation of coin, cartoon, poster and weapon with the bird’s image stamped upon it. Yet one thing continues to mystify him: the fact that, in a world of collectors, so few others have shared his unique obsession.

“There are lunchbox collecting societies. There are groups for people who collect clay pots,” said Cook, who is content to remain a *rara avis*. “But there’s nothing like that for eagle collectors.”

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