



P R E F A C E

IN OCTOBER 1966 I was drafted into the United States Army and issued a dress uniform, including a jacket that had gold-plated brass buttons with an eagle stamped on each one. When I was discharged two years later, I cut the buttons from my uniform and saved them, and eventually sewed them onto a blue civilian blazer. I still have them, on their sixth or seventh blazer. They are the origin of a collection that now exceeds twenty-five thousand pieces of art, documents, and objects, each bearing the image of an American eagle. The thirteen hundred pieces in this book are from that collection.

I wish I could say that when I began collecting I already knew that the inaugural suit of our first president had been likewise adorned with eagle buttons. In fact, my collecting commenced with no heightened sense of the bald eagle as our national symbol, nor had I seen an eagle in flight or appreciated the difference between a bald eagle and the world’s sixty other eagle species. “You can’t have too many eagles,” the impetuous Murray Burns says in *A Thousand Clowns*, a film I saw for the first time four months before I was drafted. If any philosophy guided my early collecting efforts, it was that: I searched out any and all eagle objects I could find, bought the ones I could afford, and stored them in my home and office. I’m a collector by nature – I still have a dresser purchased for one hundred dollars when I was just eighteen. But Murray Burns helped give direction to my collecting impulse. I began scouring

flea markets and antique stores for anything with an eagle on it. My first treasures were magazine covers, postcards, pins, buttons, stamps, sheet music, coins, and jewelry. As I learned more about eagles, I limited my focus to the bald eagle, native only to North America, whose symbolism has taught me not only about American history, but also about how to go about creating a serious collection. I learned how to negotiate a purchase and bid at auction; how to organize, catalog, and sometimes restore items; and then how to preserve them using museum-quality storage materials.

As my collection grew, it began to resemble a large puzzle, each new item adding to a picture of American life and the artists and craftspeople that have helped illustrate it, each piece filling a place that until then hadn’t been apparent. The most rare and valuable items in my collection have not always been my favorites; often something of little financial

worth or historical significance attracts me. However quixotically my collection began, it has since become a fairly representative collection of American eagle art and artifacts.

Over years of research I’ve discovered other eagle collectors across the United States. One had a military-related assortment of fine objects from the early nineteenth century. I took the train from California, where I lived for most of my adult life, to Boston so that I could meet the collector, and I ended up purchasing several items. After reading about an eagle exhibit



in a small Michigan town, I tracked down the collectors, flew to the Midwest, and purchased a few things from them. Twice I came across museum exhibits dedicated to the American eagle. Meanwhile, my own collection was becoming large enough to fill a small museum, along with books, magazines, papers, photographs, and other research materials that could stock a small library. That got me thinking about what I should do with it.

All collectors must eventually let go of their treasures. Some sell what they've accumulated and turn to collecting something new and different. Others leave their collections to heirs, who preserve or dispose of them as they wish. Some donate their collections to existing museums; some build a new museum altogether. I felt my collection had historical significance, so I opted for the latter choice, of creating a museum for it; and I began searching for potential sites across the country. I thought that the collection should be housed in an area where eagles actually live. I found a perfect location, the National Eagle Center

in Wabasha, Minnesota, set in the Driftless Area on the banks of the Mississippi River, along which hundreds of eagles come to roost during the winter.

In 2007 the center built a fifteen-thousand-square-foot building and staffed it with a knowledgeable team, expertly headed by Executive Director Rolf Thompson, who brought nonprofit and capital-campaign experience to the center. After fifty years of surrounding myself with eagles in my home and office, I began the process of painstakingly moving the collection from California to Wabasha in 2016, and the following year I donated it to the National Eagle Center. I hope you have a chance to go and see it. In the meantime, this book is an introduction to the collection and a tribute to the American emblem I cherish. I believe it's also a window into American life, a way of looking at our country through a symbol that has inspired artists, soldiers, public officials, and homemakers for centuries – a living symbol that continues to fly over us today.

