

# EVERY COLLECTOR'S DREAM

by Harvey Roehl

Every collector, regardless of whether his interest be Estamps, buttons, coins, music boxes, pianos, or steam locomotives, at one time or another dreams of that great find that he might just make some day—he'll locate a great hoard of just his favorite toys. Not many are ever able to claim such an experience, but it actually happened to me in 1957.

I'm often asked just what advice I can give for the new collector who is looking for old player pianos and nickelodeons. The best advice I can give is to canvass the old-timers in the piano tuning profession, because most of them have been at the game throughout a lifetime, and can remember their younger days when these machines were plentiful and they had to service them. While in practically all cases the machines are no longer in existence where the tuner knew of them, every once in a while there is a pot of gold to be found there, and these kinds of leads are therefore not to be taken lightly.

It was on just such a visit with an old-time tuner in Providence, R.I., that I was told of a barnful of old coin-operated machines, literally in the center of the city. Of course my ears perked up at this news, and I lost no time in looking up the owner of them! He turned out to be a man in his eighties, who operated a little junk shop (and I mean this literally) on a little side street. Yes, he had the machines, but he couldn't show them to me that day, and no amount of persuading on my part could stir him to change his mind. This is a disappointment under the best of circumstances, but 350 miles away from home it's worse because you don't know when you'll be back.

I had to wait several months before returning to Providence (in the meanwhile wondering all the time just what the barn amounted to), when I again went to see the old man. This time he was in more of a receptive mood, and sure enough we went to the barn. When we got there I could hardly believe my eyes! It was a barn perhaps 30 feet wide and 100 feet deep, literally jammed with old furniture—junk of all sorts; scores and scores of pianos, many of which were coin-operated, all in unbelievably dirty and decrepit condition. The stuff had obviously been there for many years, and it turned out that the owner had once been in the moving business. This residue was left when he sold out his trucks and moving rights.

He agreed to sell me one coin piano (a 44-note

Pianolin, built by the North Tonawanda Musical Instrument Works, and illustrated in its restored condition on page 209 of *Player Piano Treasury*), and by virtue of much moving of heavy items, getting filthy dirty, and considerable tugging and hauling, we managed to get it loaded into the back of my car. (Yes, it was a big car). Having done this, it seemed appropriate to try to see the rest of the stuff in the place.

The mess in the barn almost defied description, but I knew that many of these machines had value, if only enough effort could be made to get them out. The barn had a second floor, and it was literally impossible to get to the stairway to see what was up there, so I could only imagine what it held. The owner told me that there were "about six machines" up there.

Naturally I tried to get him to sell me all the coin machines, and after considerable prodding, he said yes, he would sell the entire lot of coin machines for XXXX dollars. So we agreed on a deal, but then I began to wonder how I was going to get the 20 machines involved back to Binghamton.

After exploring several possibilities, I finally decided to lease a 33-foot tractor-trailer rig and hire a driver. Arrangements were made through a friend in Rhode Island to hire a rigging firm to take the machines out of the barn and put them in the trailer on the following Saturday. We planned to put the pianos in loose, covered by blankets and pads, as their conditions were such that their cases wouldn't be much the worse for the experience than they already were.

So we trekked back to Providence the following Friday night to meet with the riggers and the trucker. Now, with some help at hand, I could get enough junk moved around that it was possible to get into the loft. And when I finally got up there, to say that I was flabbergasted would be the understatement of the year! Where I thought I had purchased 20 machines, there were actually 45! Twenty of them alone were North Tonawanda Pianolins, of the 44-note variety, in various case designs. One Wurlitzer Piano was in the lot, several Peerless machines of both 44-note and full-scale variety, a number of Electrova instruments, a full-scale North Tonawanda piano Model L, a whole mess of music rolls, and about a ton of dirt! And while not included in the original deal, there were six Regina Hexaphones, which I bought as an extra.

Naturally, since the deal turned out to be twice as

big as I thought it would be, I had to have the trucker make two round trips between Vestal and Providence to get them to the storage places I had rented for them. But what can you do? When such an opportunity presents itself, you just can't go for half of them—one has to strike while the iron is hot, even at 50¢ a mile!

I've often been asked if this acquisition was a profitable one. In terms of cash, the answer is no. I have sold enough of the machines to get back what it cost me to acquire them, plus the cost of transportation, but my gain is in pianos. I have retained four of them for my personal collection, and a number of others were swapped for various other machines of interest, so of course I am now way ahead in instruments.

Of the ones which were sold, quite a number have been restored to their original condition, and they are scattered all over the United States. One of these was shown in Ford Times recently, as one of two in a picture with our member Paul Eakins at his fine collection in Sikeston, Mo. Several ended up on the west coast; the last I heard one of the Peerless machines was still entertaining patrons of a Pizza Parlor in Moscow, Idaho!

To be sure, quite a number were so badly deteriorated as to be worth only the value of their parts.

But I would be inclined to say that whatever has been added to my collection in the way of tangible machines is somewhat overshadowed by being able to say, "Yes, I am the fellow who once bought 45 coin-operated pianos at one fell swoop." And this in turn is definitely overshadowed by the fun my wife and I had in acquiring the lot of them and in disposing of them, and in the process making a lot of new friends from among the collectors of this sort of memorabilia.

*Editor's Notes: This article was written by one of our long time members, Harvey Roehl. It was published in the Volume 10, Number 6 of the MBSI publications. The year was 1964.*

*Harvey and his wife, Marion had their own publishing business, Vestal Press. For many years they published books and pamphlets about mechanical music. They were the "Suppliers" of information to new collectors and members.*

*Harvey passed away in June, 2000 and Marion recently passed away. They are both remembered for their service to MBSI with an Award — Roehl Ambassador Award — given to a person or persons who consistently endeavor to introduce people to the field of mechanical music.*

