

DULUTH MAN DONATES PLETHORA OF PUNCH BOARDS TO SMITHSONIAN COLLECTION OF PRIZE GAMES IMPRESSES MUSEUM

Jason Skog/News Tribune staff writer

For Duluth's Evan "Ding" Rangeloff, Thursday's visit from a Smithsonian Institute official meant his inevitable immortalization.

Rangeloff, arguably the world's pre-eminent collector of punch boards -- prize games once widely popular in bars and drugstores -- donated two dozen boards to the museum. The sampling of boards, worth thousands of dollars, will be known forever as the "Rangeloff Collection."

"That part makes you feel as though you've done something, and you're doing it for history," the 67-year-old retired Piedmont Heights resident said.

David Shayt, a historian with the Smithsonian, spent Thursday morning at Rangeloff's home examining the variety of boards.

"Both the depth and the breadth of his collecting is truly amazing," Shayt said. "It's national in scope, very broad-based over time, and it's extremely colorful."

Though Rangeloff's donation represents a mere fraction of his entire collection, it includes a broad cross-section across several decades.

"I gave him some very good boards because, after all, they are going to the Smithsonian," Rangeloff said. "They're good, clean boards."

Known as "virgin boards," they are unpunched and still contain the tickets players would redeem for prizes. Those prizes could range from candy bars, cigarettes, pens, knives and watches to cash and automobiles.

The collection helps fill a gap in historical artifacts from the 20th Century at the Smithsonian, Shayt said.

"It's low-brow," Shayt said of the punch boards. "Traditionally museums have gone high-brow, collecting fine art from noble callings -- the best and the brightest.

"In this case, though, we are trying to look more and more at the everyday American," he said, adding that such work is as important, if not more so, than collecting works of fine art.

For the Smithsonian, Rangeloff's collection represents the rarest of finds. Once commonplace, the boards were disposable and few thought to collect them.

"It's kind of a hoot," Shayt said. "It gives you a sense of delight when you see these. Here we have cheap thrills. Put in a penny, get a nickel. Put in five cents, get a quarter."

Rangeloff's entire collection is probably worth millions. He said he may put his other boards up for sale or auction some day, but he's not interested in making money off the Smithsonian.

"When I first contacted the Smithsonian, I was more or less finding out what kind of market there was for (punch boards)," Rangeloff said. "And when I found out they didn't have even one

board, I was surprised. And now it's kind of piqued their interest."

While the Smithsonian is interested in the boards, it is also interested in Rangeloff.

In his 38 years as a Liggett-Myers cigarette salesman, Rangeloff regularly placed boards in Northland bars, taverns and grocery stores during sales calls. That gave him access to a bevy of untouched boards and started him on a hobby that has lasted more than 40 years.

Rangeloff said punch boards fell out of favor as a gambling device in the 1960s because they were not very efficient at making money.

"They were too slow," he said. "A guy could spend 15 minutes punching out 10 holes," he said. "Now you can grab pull tabs and make 25 bucks in five seconds. Speed is what killed the punch boards."

A Smithsonian archivist first visited Rangeloff and his collection in October. It didn't take long before she recognized she had a real find.

Shayt said Rangeloff's boards will be carefully catalogued, measured and photographed before being available for public inspection.

"They'll be accessible to researchers coming in at a scheduled time, and they'll be under a lot of scrutiny," Shayt said.

Rangeloff said giving some of his boards to the Smithsonian was an easy choice.

"I know that they're going to a good cause," Rangeloff said.

Illustration:PHOTO: Charles Curtis/News Tribune

Evan "Ding" Rangeloff of Duluth (right) goes over his punch board collection with David Shayt, a historian with the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. Rangeloff is donating about two dozen of his punch boards to the national museum.

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