A *Very* Young Collector

by Jeanne Schinto

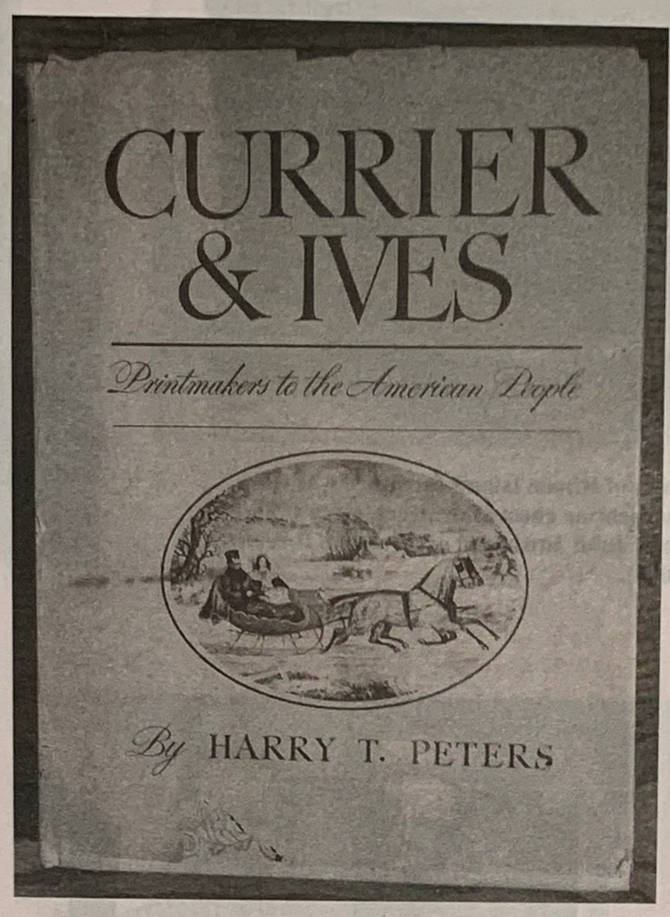
She was a Chicagoan, who lived with her mother, great-grandmother, and a reddish-orange Pomeranian dog named Tiny Tim. Her name was Susan Parker, and in the spring of 1941 she developed a passion for Currier & Ives. She was ten years old.

While looking at material in an archive housed at the Museum of the City of New York, I came across a couple of charming letters that Susan wrote that season in a neat, rounded hand. She was not my research subject. It was her correspondent, Harry Twyford Peters, a New Yorker born in 1881, who became one of the nation's preeminent Currier & Ives collectors and authorities. His opus, *Currier & Ives: Printmakers to the American People*, first published in two volumes in 1929 and 1931, was reprinted in a special edition by the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1942 and sold over half a million copies. The original two-volume set was for many years considered the catalogue raisonné of the prolific American printmaking firm that operated out of New York from its founding by Nathaniel Currier in 1834 until its liquidation in 1907 by descendants of Currier's partner, James Merritt Ives. (The actual current catalogue raisonné was published in 1984 by Gale Research.)

Susan had stumbled across a copy of *Life* magazine that featured an article about Peters and his collection—a panorama of ice skaters, politicians, boxers, courting couples, clipper ships, maple sugarers, fishermen, baseball players, whalers, wood ducks, and all manner of other characters engaged in various aspects of mid- to late 19th-century life. I don't know how she got his address nor exactly what address she used, since there were no envelopes filed with her letters in the Peters papers. In any case, in her innocent way, her purpose in writing, she told him, was to ask if he would agree to an exchange. What Susan wanted from Peters was, simply, a Currier & Ives print. What she was willing to send him in return was another unspecified, "old-fashioned" print. *It was going to be supplied by her great-grandmother,* who at 87 years old was then almost exactly the age that Susan would be today.

Trades were common in collectibles circles in the mid-20th-century period. I know in the stereograph-collector world, for example, that packets of the photographs that were designed to be viewed three-dimensionally would be mailed to one person, who would make his or her selections, add some to fill the gap, then send the packet on to the next person in the group. The collectors did not exchange money with each other. It was the way things were often done before the prices for collectibles starting climbing in the 1960s.

When Peters started collecting Currier & Ives, the prints were virtually valueless, sold in large bunches at secondhand bookshops. (Of course, they'd been cheap when new—that was the point. In the 1870s, when the distribution network had stretched not only across the country but across the Atlantic, the small prints at wholesale were 6¢ apiece, $6 for a hundred, and $60 for a thousand. The large folios, which were hand-colored, were $1.50 to $3 retail.) By the time Susan got interested in them, Peters had helped make the market. Still, to judge from certain socioeconomic details that Susan's letters reveal about herself, she probably could have bought one on her own. It must have been that she wanted the special provenance that Peters could provide.



The jacket of the 1942 special edition of Peters's *Currier & Ives*. The book contains nearly 200 Currier & Ives plates, including many of the most iconic, e.g., *Home To Thanksgiving*, *The 'Lightning Express' Trains*, *Life on the Prairie*, *Central Park in Winter*, and *The American Fireman*, and some of the most infamous, i.e., the Darktown series. Schinto photo.

Ten-year-old Susan Parker and her unnamed mother. They are posed by the lily pond in their garden at home, Chicago, May 1941. Photo courtesy the Harry T. Peters papers, 1790-1988, Museum of the City of New York.

"I love things of long ago," Susan offered by way of her bona fides to this 60-year-old man whose family had made a fortune in the coal business and who, when his father died in 1921, had inherited the equivalent of $6 million, allowing him the leisure to pursue his personal interests. "My room is like a small museum," she told him. "I do not allow any one to touch my treasures. I have two whale ears and teeth, a stuffed seal, small pieces of jade all the way from China, autographed photos of the Emperor of French Indo-China, and other world rulers. I do so want a Currier and Ives print to keep always and always. Please do answer. I like folks who like things of 'long ago.'" She signed it "Your sincere friend."

At the top of this letter's first page, Peters wrote a curt but efficient instruction to an assistant, identified only as "K." It says: "You answer this one & send her a dupe of some girl."

"K" did indeed send the duplicate print about three weeks later. It was an excellent choice, one of the firm's "Susan" prints. *The Chicagoan Susan had it framed,* placed it over the fireplace mantel in her bedroom (close to her framed picture of Peters, taken from the *Life* magazine spread), and penned her effusive thank-you letter—all on the day in late May when the print arrived.

"Dear friend Mr. Peters," she wrote. "I think I am the happiest little girl in the world.... Hundreds of times today I have stood before the picture and touched it gently with loving hands. I am just a tiny girl but 'lovely old things' seem to speak deep into my soul."

She proceeded to tell him more about her life, which included daily practice on her great-grandmother's big rosewood grand piano and frequent trips to the Art Institute of Chicago, where she hoped to study to become an artist one day. She also described what else she had put on display in her bedroom, perhaps all of it the result of sending letters like the one she had written to Peters. Those items included autographed photos of "only people I like," who were, besides the Emperor of French Indo-China, U.S. Army General John J. Pershing, David Lloyd George, Franz Lehár ("He wrote The Merry

Widow," Susan helpfully explained), the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the King of Iraq. If she is to be believed—and why not?—she also had a rug made from the skin of a tiger that had been shot by the Sultan of Johor and sent to her by the same. It was on the floor in front of her bedroom's fireplace.

Susan enclosed with that second letter a snapshot of herself and her mother. It had been taken a week earlier, in the garden of their house, which she said was built in 1872. The date jibes with what little I could learn about her former address, 317 Armitage Avenue, situated along the western edge of Lincoln Park. The streets in that neighborhood were reconfigured with the coming of highways and the buildings transformed or demolished by other forms of radical cultural change. Back then, though, water lilies covered the pond in Susan's garden—they can be seen in the photo—and, as she wrote in the letter, each morning she went out there at dawn to feed the birds, who started singing early.

Neither letter she sent to Peters mentioned a resident father or siblings, although her grandmother, age 69, lived next door. She must have been one of those girls, like myself when young, who spent many hours happily alone writing letters and reading the ones that, with luck, their own letters had elicited. (Now I read other people's mail in library archives, and it's nearly as enjoyable.)

In closing she offered Peters an invitation: "Some day I hope you will come to visit here. I would show you my treasures and just about talk you speechless." She also thanked him again "a million times for this grand treasure," adding in a touchingly naive aside, "I did not know girls were named Susan so long ago."

There were no more letters from Susan to Peters, at least not in the Peters papers that I researched in New York. It's a good guess that their correspondence ended there. He was a busy man. In addition to being a collector and author, he lectured widely. He was also a sportsman who rode horses, hunted foxes, and bred dogs. In 1938, he was named chairman of the Westminster Kennel Club. In the 1920s, he was painted in watercolor in his scarlet riding coat and black riding helmet as co-master of foxhounds at the Meadow Brook Hunt Club on Long Island—a title he held into the 1940s. In fact, he claimed to have started his Currier & Ives collection as a result of finding a tattered print of Lady Suffolk, issued by the firm in 1852, tacked to the door of the late mare's old stall.

Unknown is whether Peters sent this *Susan*, published by Currier & Ives in 1848, or another of the same title that was published by the firm two years earlier. A similar looking woman, pictured with an amorous sailor, is featured in a couple of other Currier & Ives prints, each titled *Black-Eyed Susan*.

As for Susan, I imagine she went on to write to other celebrities, minor and major, in search of autographs and more quarry for her collections. I hope that she became the artist that she envisioned herself being. Susan, are you out there? If so, tell us what became of you and if you retained your love of "things of long ago" and the "folks" who liked them.

Jeanne Schinto (www.jeanneschinto.com) has been writing for *M.A.D.* since 2003. She is currently taking a break to write an expanded version of "Good Fellows," her five-part series on the Walpole Society that appeared in these pages from November 2015 through March 2016. Harry Twyford Peters was a Walpolean from 1945 through 1947, when he resigned. He died the following year, having been ill for the last two years of his life. For more information about him, see the Museum of the City of New York's blog (https://blog.mcny.org/2015/10/13/the-sporting-life-a-look-at-harry-t-peters-as-huntsman/), where a head shot shows him in his riding helmet. His estate donated nearly 2300 Currier & Ives prints to the museum in the early 1950s. The quotes from Susan's letters are to be found in the Harry T. Peters papers, 1790-1988, Series III: Correspondence: 1910-1941, Box 65. They were used by permission of the museum.