inventories. Another eBayer who bought multiple menus from me goes by the eBay name of rkaplan5zbb. He is actually a Los Angeles lawyer named Richard Kaplan. "A lot of book dealers around the country and the world who know me also know I collect menus," said Kaplan recently. He is connected to the bibliophile network via his brother, Lee, owner of Arcana: Books on the Arts, Santa Monica, California. In fact, that's where I used to mail his menus. But eBay is the greater source than book mongers for him. "The great bulk of things I find are on eBay or from people who I come in contact with by reason of eBay," he said, estimating his completed eBay transactions for all items (menus being only a percentage) to be somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000. And his feedback number, 5684 at the time of the Lotos Club listings, would more than bear that out, since in my experience about a third of eBayers leave feedback. "I have a collector's mentality," he said. "I have collected a lot of wine, and that interest expanded into collecting wine reference materials. I have thousands and thousands of books on wine." When the wine books he didn't yet own became "absurdly expensive," he began "broadening the scope." That's when he began to collect "even more thousands of ephemeral pieces related to wine, including wine lists and, finally, menus with wine lists." Then, in the late 1990's he attended a lecture at a public library in Los Angeles given by Jim Heimann, author of May I Take Your Order: American Menu Design, 1920-1960 (1998). Heimann's 250 color reproductions included menus from Sugie's Original Tropic in Beverly Hills and the Brown Derby—places that Kaplan knew as a boy. He started adding vintage pieces to the contemporary menus he had accumulated over the years, until his focus evolved into menus of historical significance. "I collect presidential menus, royal menus, military menus; I'm a big military history buff," Kaplan said. "I have about six hundred menus from American battleships and other U.S. naval vessels. I have a 1916 menu from the Philippines. Infantry menus. **MacArthur material, [etc.]."** He also collects Lotos Club material, so he was just as anticipatory as Henry when he saw those eBay listings in late April. Kaplan, who already owned about 60 Lotos Club examples, explained their appeal. "Most of them are large"—often as large as 17" x 11"—"and were beautifully designed by T. Sindelar, who did the artwork for the club for about forty years. A lot of them are signed. People at the dinners would get the signature of the person being honored and others, everybody from Joe DiMaggio to Benny Goodman to Elihu Root." There was, in fact, a signed Elihu Root menu in the upcoming bunch, dated 1903, during the time when he was Theodore Roosevelt's secretary of war. Its minimum bid was listed, like those for the others, at \$49.99. With only 72 hours left, however, it had no contenders. Neither did about half of the rest. But as seasoned eBayers know, and as I had found out with the Coney Island menu, a lack of early action is no indication of scant interest; indeed, it may signal the contrary. "The lack of bidding screams danger," Henry wrote me. "It doesn't help that a number of people featured in these menus were connected with Roosevelt, especially considering the possible [popularizing] influence of Edmund Morris's excellent biographies, including the recent Theodore Rex." Through seller pngbvc's About Me link on eBay, I located him in the real world. He is Philip N. Grime, who has a Web site and a shop, Bay View Company, in Saco, Maine. "My specialty is anything related to New England, books, prints, photographs, paintings, and ephemera," said Grime. "About eight years ago I used eBay as a way to collect my first inventory. I actually had to go far afield to bring things home, so to speak." In the course of business he also accepts consignments, like the menus, which came from a source who wished to remain anonymous. "It's been a long week," Grime continued. "It's an unusual crowd. People who collect these are very serious buyers, I've sensed. The whole approach to eBay sales is so different from the traditional incremental situation at the old live auctions." Grime said he has experienced this kind of extreme lack of early bidding activity when listing items for one other category, high-end fine prints. "Towards the end, with just a click to refresh my computer, I would see a print price rise by five or ten thousand dollars." Grime had also noticed that his My eBay link showed the menus had "quite a few people in the wings"—i.e., watchers. Some menus had 16 watchers, he said. Still, he had "not a clue" as to what the final prices would be. Actually, there was a precedent of a sort. More than

two years ago, the same consignor had commissioned Grime to sell what he called "the Samuel Clemens," which is a Lotos Club menu commemorating a 1908 dinner in honor of the author and signed by him as Mark Twain. It sold for \$3383.33 on February 21, 2004. There were 21 bids. The buyer was twainman. "I think we can safely say he is a Twain collector and

I was able to find twainman easily enough, through his own About Me link. He is collector/dealer Robert Slotta of Admirable Books (3528 Mark Twain Drive),

Hilliard, Ohio. "It was a menu from the last great banquet ever held for Mark Twain before his death, and that added to its significance," he said. "I look at 'firsts,' 'lasts,' and 'onlys.' They're worth more than run-of-the-mill things." It's a collecting strategy he

Karanovich" (1938-2003), whose extraordinary Twain

collection realized \$1,417,400 when it was sold by

Slotta has since sold that menu at a profit to another Twain collector. "You can't use eBay too stringently as a measuring stick for assigning values," he cautioned. "My high bid was actually much more than what I got

it for. And I sold it for approximately that high bid, which is what I was willing to pay for it in the first

The first of Grime's latest multiple listings of Lotos

Kaplan took the most of anyone, an even dozen. He

honoring Whitelaw Reid, American ambassador to the Court of St. James, on May 18, 1905. Designed by Sindelar and signed by Reid and three others, it cost him \$102.50. His next most expensive purchase was a menu for a dinner honoring General Horace Porter

paid the highest price for a menu from a dinner

on November 18, 1905. Designed by Sindelar and

Jones, whose body Porter returned to the United

For single bids of \$49.99, he snagged seven others. These commemorated dinners for U.S. Supreme

Court Justice Charles H. Van Brunt, Rear Admiral Winfield Scott Schley, Associate U.S. Supreme Court

Hughes, Ambassador Jules J. Jusserand (from France to the U.S.) and U.S. Ambassador (to France) Myron

T. Herrick, New York Governor John A. Dix, and

Henry was right behind him, with 11 purchases,

Carnegie, \$599.89; William Howard Taft, \$393.88;

Wu Ting-Fang, Chinese Minister to the United States, Spain, and Peru, \$107.50; Elihu Root, \$92; New York

Ambassador to the U.S. Baron Kogoro Takahira, \$71; New York City Mayor George B. McClellan, \$62.99; and Brooklyn Daily Eagle editor St. Clair McKelway,

An eBayer named justinian95 bought 11. Three others

appropriately a menu for a dinner honoring Brigadier

went to a bidder named jhomejimbo; shift8key,

single purchase of another buyer, fffunston, was

dedmisha, and briangrant44 bought one each. The

General Frederick Funston; his bill was \$295. Only

Henry e-mailed me afterwards, "The bidding was

plan-all of the 'A' list-and, given the reasonable

list as well. I never expected such a successful

more subdued than expected and so I just stuck to the

prices, I was able to reach and go for those on the 'B'

"I was very pleased," seller Grime said by phone. "It was nice to see continued bidding by that hearty few right straight through. That's a pretty close interest."

To what did Grime attribute the fact that the Siam one went for so much? "The successful bidder was from Thailand, but there was interest in Europe as

including ones for dinners honoring Andrew

Governor Charles E. Hughes, \$90; Japanese

Ohio Governor Judson Harmon.

States from France during the time Porter served as American ambassador to France. Kaplan's price was

signed by Porter, it was illustrated with a photograph of Porter, one of Ulysses S. Grant, under whom Porter served during the Civil War, and another of John Paul

April 29. Having been timed to end two minutes apart, the whole run would take about 1½ hours to finish. We watched it unfold. Most of the action took place in the last 15 seconds. The top lot of the group, a menu for a dinner given for Maha Vajiravudh, Crown Prince of Siam (now Thailand) on October 24, 1902, went to 4everloveisuuu at \$743.33. It was his or her

Club menus was set to close at 10 a.m. EST, Saturday,

said he learned from "the late, great Nick

Sotheby's on June 19, 2003.

place."

only purchase.

\$91.

\$49.99.

outcome."

two menus failed to sell.

Justice Charles E.

not a menu collector," said Grime.

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"If you want to see some menu 'action' (or perhaps 'carnage' is a better word)," a friend who collects menus wrote to me in an e-mail on April 26, "then

succession this weekend." Attached was the link to eBay seller pngbvc's listings for 47 menus from the

famed Lotos Club of New York City, a private, social, literary, and arts association founded in 1870, one of

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, its tradition was to give dinners two to four times a year honoring persons of celebrity in the arts, politics, business, and

menus dating from 1895 to 1917 that commemorated dinners for Andrew Carnegie, William Howard Taft,

ambassadors, writers, military men, and royalty of

cull one of the zebras out of the herd!"

"Frankly, this is somewhat overwhelming," the e-mail from my friend, Henry Voigt, went on. "Now I know what the lions must feel like when they are trying to

When Henry and I met on eBay in 1999, he was buyer fred1946, and I was seller shadowbands. My listings were a collection of approximately 340 menus, dated 1879 to 1882, which I had been commissioned to sell one by one for a general antiques dealer. Although a few felt a little gritty, most were in excellent condition, having come directly from the family who had eaten

the meals that the menus described at city hotels, summer resorts, railroad depot cafés, ice cream parlors, and elsewhere in New York City, Boston,

Poughkeepsie, Providence, Newport, Rochester, Albany, Syracuse, and many other places in the

Northeast, as well as Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis,

I realized, of course, that these items would interest culinary historians and others outside of academia who study food history and culture. What I didn't immediately grasp was who else would want them—regionalists and graphics historians among them. And

until people started bidding, neither I nor my

clams prepared six ways, potatoes nine ways.

competitors emerged. The high bidder, from

Brooklyn, paid \$238.50.

dealer/friend could guess what the menus would

My first listing was from the West Brighton Beach

Hotel, Coney Island, New York, a simple, single sheet folded to measure 11" x 7" and printed in black and white. Inside, there was a litany of dishes, including

"Reports of any Inattention on the part of the Waiters

Over the next 18 months I sold the rest, getting prices that ranged between \$250 and \$20 and, in the process, learning a lot about the dynamics of the menu market.

Henry, a DuPont executive who lives in Wilmington, Delaware, has told me he was sorry that the collection I sold was broken up. "Its value was in its totality," he

said. "It was a book sold page by page. It was not a rare book, but as a historical unit, it was unique."

fiduciary responsibility to the dealer who owned them

approval of my acumen in his wry comment about my marketing methods. "It was like the Vietnam War," he said, a battle of indeterminate length that was

"draining [him] financially. I didn't know how many of these Goddamn things there were, whether the best or the worst were being saved for last." When I finally did get to the end of the run, Henry had bought about a third of them for prices ranging from \$12 to \$162, the most expensive one being a menu from the Lake

Champlain and Lake George steamer *Vermont*.

keep in touch with Henry and hear tales of his

hands in the country. (The article appeared in Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture,

Press, Fall 2005 issue.)

continued hunt. I have also visited and written for another publication about his collection, which is counted among the most significant ones in private

published quarterly by the University of California

collecting in earnest until the advent of eBay in 1995.

something one couldn't easily find otherwise," he said.

(economic progress, identity, and class, among others), would have taken decades to cull by hand from those

Like many menus collectors, Henry didn't start

"It was eBay that began to supply the market for

Ephemera and antiquarian book dealers have long sold menus at shops and shows, usually filing them according to locale, the better for regionalists to find them. But the collection that Henry has assembled, which is focused on historical and cultural themes

I haven't had another opportunity to sell menus, but I

Still, as a businessman, he understood that my

was to maximize profits. And I detected some

will be thankfully received at the Office" was set in type at the bottom. I opened the bidding at \$5, where it stayed for a week. Then, in the final minutes, nine

Philadelphia, Saratoga Springs, Worcester,

St. Paul, and Council Bluffs, Iowa.

other endeavors. In the batch on eBay there were

check out these menus, all coming up in rapid

whose early members was Samuel Langhorne

Vintage Menus: A Feeding Frenzy

by Jeanne Schinto

Clemens.

the period.

bring.

well," he said. "I think it's more the Thailand aspect than the menu aspect." Its winner had a feedback rating of -1, but Grime wasn't worried. "That's just one of the risks of the business," he said. "If he doesn't come through, I already have a promise for the same price from another bidder." It's tempting to see the prices as a gauge of the relative celebrity of the people commemorated by these menus, but the reality is, as always, much more complicated. For example, Grime said he thought the Carnegie menu went so high because three markets converged there: the one for Carnegie material, the one for menus, and the one for Lotos Club material. "Carnegie was being honored that night because of his status as a business person but also because he had given the club its new home within months of being so honored. So I think that people who have an affiliation with the club were a strong part of the bidding process." William Woys Weaver of Devon, Pennsylvania, a noted food historian, author of 12 books, an adjunct professor of food studies at Drexel University in Philadelphia, and a contributing editor of *Gourmet*, began collecting menus in the 1970's. He bought them "at flea markets, antique shows, and from dealers who know of my interest in culinaria," he said. The number of menus in his collection, he believes, is "probably" 10,000, "maybe more." (He's never made a count.) Despite the quantity, he is a quality seeker, self-described as picky in more ways than one. Weaver did not participate in the Lotos Club auctions. "I wasn't interested in them," he said. "I collect menus that show important patterns in American eating habits, so the food listed inside is much more important to me than the fame of the eatery"—or of the person who ate the meal, for that matter. "There are collectors who look for signatures of movie stars, baseball players, and so on. Let's face it, the signature makes the item special, not the cover design, and certainly in many cases, not the food. I almost totally ignore those menus. They belong under autographs not culinaria. Of course, I do have menus from the Stork Club and the like. Certain eateries were seminal in changing American cuisine." Weaver collects American and foreign examples. His French menu collection is "huge" and mostly signed by Michelin three-star chefs. "Those menus will be hugely important down the road because of the shifts in cookery they record," he said. "The autographs and messages from chefs are just add-ons to me, even though several of the guys are quite famous." Weaver also has a significant collection of Pennsylvania menus and ones from Philadelphia within it. Regional menus are his current interest, "because I am writing books about regional cookery," and the menus will be used as illustrations. Acknowledging the difficulty of weighing the influence of cross collectibles, signed pieces, and the like, I asked Weaver for his overview of the value hierarchy. How did scarcity play into it? What about graphics? What about culinary values themselves? Finally, how did market values differ from those he assigned to the material? He replied via e-mail that the market often made no sense. "A menu from the Hindenburg came up for sale on line recently and went to another bidder for a very large sum. I suppose the value of the menu was its connection with the Hindenburg, since the food wasn't too interesting. But this same menu, or one like it, came up another time for nearly half the price. And I managed to get an even rarer one, for the flight from Brazil to New York, for near to nothing. It was in Portuguese and German. Not even the Hindenburg Museum has that one. A lot of American buyers tend to spend their money on myths rather than on things of true historical importance." **Near nothing is also what Weaver has paid for some of** his rarest menus "mainly because culinary history is not a subject well known to a lot of people." He described winning a menu on eBay for 99¢ and sending the dealer \$15 instead, "because that is what I thought it was worth." He recounted being outbid on eBay for a menu that went at \$451. "It was an extremely rare Philadelphia menu, and I lost by a dollar. But it went to a descendant of the hotel owner, so he or she needed it more than I did. On the other hand, the food was not that interesting. It was just a hotel restaurant I had never before seen any menus for. I think on the whole hotel menus are overrated; the important menus come from restaurants. I have a collection from Cafe Finelli in Philadelphia (1880's-1890's). These are priceless. Every one of those menus has something on it not found in cookbooks. That was cutting edge cuisine of the period. Menus like that are the real gold standard of menu collecting." Whether hunting vintage menus or other quarry, the price that a true collector is willing to pay for an item is, of course, governed by emotion as much as anything else. "When I saw a menu in a Paris

bookshop for a dinner held in the 1970's in honor of

Saddam Hussein at Versailles Palace," Weaver recalled, "I just knew then and there it would be

mine. Too bad I had to spend my entire travel

allowance for room and board to get it! You find

will have to find a Versailles menu for a dinner in

honor of President Bush, so I can display them

something like that once in a lifetime. Now of course, I

together. But Bush doesn't like the French, does he?"

In conclusion Weaver stated that "money is the least important part of it," as far as he is concerned. "You do realize that by publishing a price for an item, we suddenly create a market price whether reasonable or

not. I may be odd or ultimately right: I live above

how I live. Call it by its real name: Freedom."

money. Price does not define in any way what I do or

JoAnn Clevenger, owner of Upperline, a restaurant in New Orleans, is another menu collector I came across while I was selling on eBay. Through the ages many of our greatest restaurateurs collected menus, if only to

keep their eye on the competition, so she's in good

Louisiana and of New Orleans itself. (Her eBay

Katrina.

company. Her special interests are the restaurants of

namesake, sweetolives, is a fragrant southern tree.) So

Club contest, and I didn't. But I gave her a call to see if she is still collecting after the upheaval of Hurricane

I didn't expect to see her participating in the Lotos

Yes, she is. She prefers menus with prices, which is another reason she wasn't among the contenders of

nineteenth century," she said. "A lot of times hotel

What Clevenger finds most interesting are menus

"that have the personal touch of management. They give me insights into the similarities between what

from special events don't have them, either."

they did and I do and the contrasts," she said.

The Victorian-era menus I sold to her and others

often revealed that kind of information in the form of

alert, "Cigars Sold in Dining Rooms will be delivered

receive no others." From the Concord Railroad Depot restaurant in Nashua, New Hampshire, there was this

instructions, warnings, and advice. From the Hotel Brighton, Brighton Beach, there was this flimflam

in sealed envelopes with prices marked on them—

come-on, "Twenty percent discount to Railroad

Men." From Fleischmann's Vienna Model Bakery, Broadway and 10th Street, New York City, came this ambiguous announcement, "Separate Smoking and Reading Rooms." And, expectably, from many places

there were boasts including this testy one from A.J.

collectors in few other categories can say they have.

"There seem to be more and more young people

involved," she said. "I am especially noticing young chefs, which is very exciting, really. That seems to be a

Institutional collecting is growing too, a sure sign of health in a market. There are already significant

public collections at the New York Public Library; Johnson and Wales University, Providence, Rhode Island; the City College of San Francisco; the Los Angeles Public Library; and Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Now others are starting to build

One is the Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Six years ago, Jan Longone became its

curator of American culinary history. The choice was right. In 1972 Longone founded the Wine and Food

antiquarian bookshops in the country. She also was and is a collector herself. And when she joined the library staff (unpaid), she donated her world-class personal collection of culinary books, menus, and other ephemera to it. That became the Clements Library's culinary core. She has since received donations of menu collections of well-known

personages from the food world, including Jeremiah

"No one cared for so long," Longone recalled. "There

those menus could easily go for a couple of thousand

common menus were collected and valued only by a

were always, in the European book catalogs, very exotic menus of princes and kings and popes, and

dollars. Early menus from Delmonico's could be worth a thousand, if in good shape." But more

few individuals and even fewer institutions.

Library in Ann Arbor, one of the first culinary

Lately, Clevenger has noticed something that

growing thing."

collections of their own.

Tower.

Aldrich's Ladies' and Gents' Dining & Lunch Rooms, Cheshire Rail Road Depot, Keene, New Hampshire, "I warrant my Bread and Pastry First-Class and made from the best material. For references try the goods."

club menus. "And those are hard to come by from the

menus have no prices. They were probably charging a flat fee for room and board. Banquet menus or ones

"Libraries like the Clements collected political, economic, military history. Women didn't exist, ethnic groups didn't exist, and that's just the way it was. Now many more libraries would like to have great culinary collections. The competition is terrible." California and the South, notable for their cuisines, are especially active, she said. "And they hate to have their items leave." Jeffrey Carr of Oakland, California, a painter who has been an ephemera dealer for 35 years, is in the process of selling a big menu hoard that once belonged to Camille Mailhebuau, chef and part owner of the Old Poodle Dog restaurant. The place was founded in San Francisco by two Frenchmen in 1849 and called Le Poulet d'Or, which became anglicized to sound-alike Poodle Dog. The gold rush was on, and those who struck it rich needed a place to spend their money. Mailhebuau became a partner in approximately 1900; by then, it had become known as the Old Poodle Dog. "Someone brought me trunks full of stuff," said Carr. "I don't really know where they got them." It was Mailhebuau's entire archives. "All the letters, handwritten recipes, photos of the restaurant interior—all that went to the California State Library in Sacramento," said Carr. "The curator of special collections, Gary Kurutz, has a lot of interest in the early restaurants of California." Another heavy buyer of archival material has been the family of Mailhebuau's partner, whose surname was Bergez. "His family had nothing. They heard I had the stuff. They came and bought a ton of it," said Carr. As for the menus, those from the Old Poodle Dog and those that Mailhebuau collected from all over the world, they are being sold individually by Carr at shows, at his studio (by appointment), and on eBay. (His name there is paperoak.) His price range has been \$35 to \$100, depending on "the graphics, the rarity, and condition," he said. The Old Poodle Dog closed in 1922. "I really didn't realize how large a part of the business the wine and drinks were," said Carr. "Alcohol was really where they made their money. The wine cellar was unbelievable. Some of the wine lists were twenty pages long. That's why when Prohibition came in, it sank a lot of fancy restaurants, and the Old Poodle Dog was one." © 2006 by Maine Antique Digest Search M.A.D. | Comment | M.A.D. Home Page | Search Auction Prices Database | Subscribe |