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CHARTER MEMBER

It was August of 1975 and I was a collector of nothing. An ad had appeared in the paper advertising an antiques show to be held at San Francisco's Palace Hotel. Since I had never been to an antiques show and I always wanted to have lunch at the hotel's Garden Court, I decided I had two good reasons to go. At lunch time I discovered the Garden Court was closed for renovations, so had lunch in a nice but less historic dining room. The antiques show was awesome, for I felt I was at a museum with buying privileges. There were thick rugs on the floors and heavy drapes at the windows which kept the noise level subdued. I was treated to an array of needlework tools that I had never seen before.



It was here that I discovered that thimbles could be exquisite pieces of jewelry. I saw the Waite Thresher 'Dogwood Blossoms' (Fig. 1) and succumbed. When I returned home, I went through my sewing things and discovered that I was the owner of two gold and five silver thimbles. All the women in my family excelled at some form of needlework; all had lovely but simple silver or gold thimbles. Since I was always losing mine, they were the 3 for 99 cent ones from Woolworths. I went to bed that night convinced that I was the first to discover thimble collecting and was pleased that I had a unique hobby. However, it took me several months to recover from the shock of paying \$35.00 for a thimble.

Figure 1. Waite Thresher 'Dogwood Blossoms.'

Months later, I attended the next antiques show at the Palace Hotel (still no Garden Court) and as I was leaving, Trudy Dobson, a San Francisco collector, introduced herself. She quickly disabused me about my being the only thimble collector in the world. She asked Lorraine Crosby to send me a copy of THIMBLETTER, and that is where I first learned about the world of thimble collecting.

It took Bette Gourd, a Connecticut collector, to gather together the thimblers of central California. Her husband's barber shop quartet was attending their National Convention in San Francisco and she invited us to lunch at their hotel. If you have never tried to navigate across a hotel lobby with fifty or so quartets warming up, all in different keys with different songs, you have missed an interesting and challenging experience. The luncheon was so successful we agreed to meet next at Grace Blackburn's home, then mine. At the meeting at my home, when I returned from making a fresh pot of coffee, I discovered that the Bay Area Thimble Society (BATS) had been born and I had been elected president.

As most new collectors do, I bought many thimbles because I was attracted to them, but I soon learned to be more discriminating. During this time, I also learned to occasionally be adventuresome. I had the opportunity to buy a thimble the dealer and I knew nothing about.(Fig. 2) Both of us felt it was important for it was beautifully made by Simons Bros. with a most unusual transportation motif.



Figure 2. American, sterling silver. Three views of the Simons Bros. 100th Anniversary thimble, circa 1939.

Mary Keyser later identified it as a Simons Bros. 100th anniversary thimble made in 1939. The design with automobile, airplane and diesel train was chosen to complete the history of transportation in America. The first transportation theme was depicted on the 1904 St. Louis Exposition thimble which we refer to erroneously as the 'Golden Spike.' I took another chance with an unmarked English thimble with a motor sailing yacht on the band (Fig. 3).



My British collectors friends identified the ship as the Victoria and Albert No. II royal launch. There were three Victoria and Albert launches, and they speculated that the thimble could be a memento of the launching. Does anyone have any ideas?

Figure 3. English, sterling silver. Victoria and Albert No. II Royal launch.

Several years into collecting, competition for those thimbles I really wanted became so keen I decided to look for other needlework tools. Eileen Schwall had introduced me to sewing clamps, Patty Caras to knitting needle guards and Ruth Mann to everything. I ventured into the world of needle cases and over the years found a sterling one with two birds on the top and baskets of fruit as finials (Fig. 4), an English beaded case (Fig. 5) and a French, Dieppe ivory one in the shape of a small girl (Fig. 6).



Figure 4. French, sterling silver needle case with two birds.



Figure 5. English, beaded needle case.



Figure 6. French, ivory needle case.

Avery needle cases followed and over a long period of time an umbrella, guitar, lion and railroad luggage cart were acquired (Fig. 7, 8, 9). When their prices increased to a point I thought excessive (\$75.00), I stopped buying them. Big mistake. Ten or twelve years later when the guitar was available I bought it, but not before I asked "You want HOW MUCH!!!" Five or so years ago the wonderful Invalid Chair commanded a \$4,000.00 price tag. Several collectors were bidding. I was not one of them.



Figure 7. English, brass umbrella Avery.



Figure 8. English, brass guitar Avery.



Figure 9. English, brass Avery, lion on plinth.



Figure 10. English, brass railroad luggage Avery.

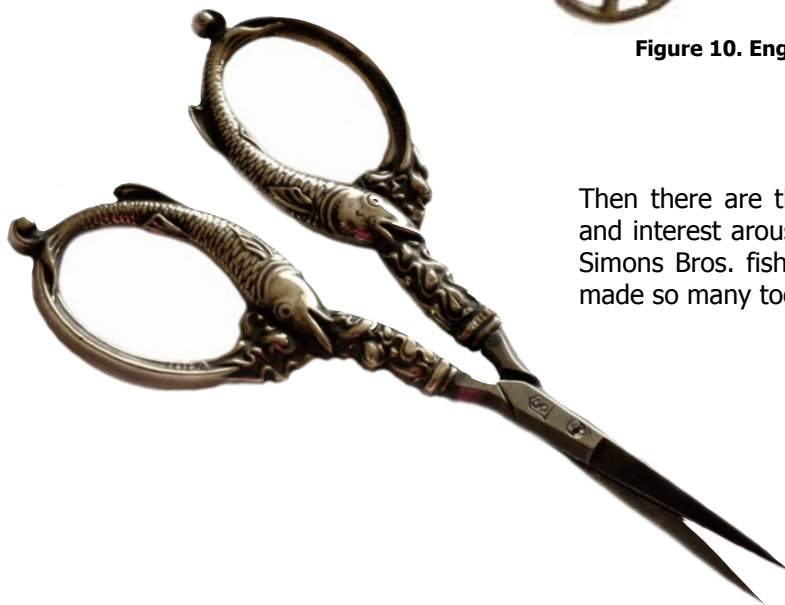


Figure 11. American, Simons Bros. sterling silver fish scissors.

Then there are the scissors: beautiful, wonderful, awesome and interest arousing. I was really pleased when I found the Simons Bros. fish (Fig. 11). Does anyone know why Simons made so many tools with fish, but not a thimble?

Here are a few more of the scissors that are special to me. The Dragon (Fig. 12), the French sewing ladies (Fig. 13) and the volunteer German soldier holding a two-handed sword (Fig. 14).



Figure 12. Sterling silver dragon scissors.



Figure 13. French, gilded. The Sewing Ladies.



Figure 14. German soldier holding a two-handed sword.

Few thimbles find their way to my house now. When I go antiquing I look for bodkins and half dolls. My first bodkins were the gold washed snakes (Fig. 15), then the Simons Bros. sterling fish. The Athletic (Fig.16) and the Equestrian (Fig. 17) sets, both in sterling silver, followed years later. Now the hunt is on to find the Dachshunds. I know they exist for a friend of mine has them and I covet them.



Figure 15. Bodkins. Gold washed snakes.



Figure 16. Bodkins. Sterling silver Athletic set. Baseball bat, football and rowing oar.



Figure 17. Bodkins. Sterling silver Equestrian set. The case is not original. Riding crop, buggy whip and stirrup.

Playing with dolls is even more enjoyable the second time around. Ten or so years ago I was given two half dolls. Over the years their numbers have grown, each one different, each one adding something special to the collection. These half dolls, or pin cushion dolls, were especially popular between 1900 and the 1930s and were made by many of the best porcelain houses of Europe. Even Meissen made a few but admit it reluctantly, as if they were ashamed for having done so. Japan produced hundreds of dolls, copying the German molds. The dolls in the pictures are German and are some of my loveliest ladies. (Fig. 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22)



Figure 18. Court lady with mandolin.



Figure 19. Hungarian Gypsy.



Figure 20. Tennis player.



Figure 21. Flapper with Pulcinella.



Figure 22. Girl with fruit basket.

The year is now 2012, my collection has grown, and I have enjoyed lunch several times in the Palace Hotel's Pump Room, originally created for men only. I have yet to have lunch in the Garden Court!