

John Daniel, Collector Extraordinaire

Over the years I have formed relationships with many, many collectors. In most cases I've had the opportunity to visit them in their homes and see their fantastic collections. Advanced collectors - especially those that have been collecting for 20 or 30 plus years, have developed a keen eye for quality and often had the opportunity to acquire the best examples. In some cases, they were simply at the right place at the right time and lucked onto a cool piece- before prices sky-rocketed. In most cases, these collectors built a stellar collection on guts, gritty and gumption! They exhibited a healthy dose of hard work, tenacity, elbow grease, traveling and passion of the hunt. Accumulating a first class collection encompasses longevity, not to mention experience, knowledge, strong relationships and financial wherewithal.

A small handful of collectors have not only built super terrific collections, but become what I call "impact players". John Daniel was one such individual. John almost single handedly built the market for Barangers- as a collectible. Keep in mind, that before Burton Burton and John got involved, they were not for sale. The Baranger Studios rented these window displays on a monthly basis to jewelry stores across the United States. When one was returned another would take its place.

After the company closed, and John took over, he became the "Market-Maker". Few have had the impact he had in the fascinating world of Baranger Motions.

If one is a collector of Barangers, his book: *Baranger, Window Displays in Motion* is a "must read". After I had bought my first two barangers from Bob McCord (a story in itself, to be described later), I knew I had to meet John Daniel - especially since his house and business operation in Pasadena, California was less than an hour drive from my place. In fact, when John bought a huge amount of barangers, equipment and materials from Burton Burton, owner of Casablanca Fan, he kept the base of operations at his house and studio across the street from the Baranger Company. The building still exists today and is a land mark. What's interesting is that John had no idea that the place he drove by all the time was filled with these unique little wonders-that is until Burton Burton asked him to work on these baranger displays. It was actually John and Burton's love of trains- real trains and toy trains that got them together- introduced by Ward Kimball, one of the very original animators for Disney company, part of the group labeled "Disney's "nine old men"!

John became the top Baranger collector/dealer in the United States. He had a collection of more than 200 barangers- and some prototypes. On occasion he sold, but some thought his prices were high and he sold duplicates or triplicates. Timing is everything. When I met him- later on in life, he had already sold many- and keeping his private collection. I was not top of his rolodex and I figured he had a well developed client base. While I was an advanced collector of vintage coin-operated penny arcade machines and other automatons, I was a no-body in the baranger world. Since I was a newbie, he was a bit skeptical of my true interest or ability in stepping up to the plate and pay his prices. Alas, I never had a chance.

But, it was not just barangers that John collected. He had accumulated many many different types of collectibles including- African art, chalk figures from amusement parks and carnivals, Carousel animals, magic devices, paraphernalia, books, posters and early American toy trains, orchestrions and player pianos, automations such as the De-Camp and Barangers. And that's just the stuff I saw- in his studio, not at his personal residence. He kept most of his collection- especially the larger items in his warehouse - a block from his house. He did a lot of work on the barangers, but also had two fellows who he really relied on- primarily Dan Horenberger. Dan and John were very close- and over 20 years almost like father and son!

About five years ago, my wife Sumi and I visited John at his studio and spent a couple hours with him. He was exceptionally gracious and allowed me to take many pictures of him and his collection. Somehow I misplaced the digital chip and hope to find it since some of the photos were priceless!

As a bit of a historian myself, John was a treasure-trove of knowledge. In fact, he was a true pioneer and played an enormous role in expanding interest in barangers. I decided I must get to know this extremely colorful, engaging and enthusiastic fellow better. I reached out to him with the invitation to take him and his wife Cathy to dinner at their favorite restaurant. I promised I would not get pushy or give a sales pitch on his barangers. Quite frankly, I truly was interested in his fascinating story - as a famous magician to collector extraordinaire. Even his involvement with the Magic Castle was legendary.

Since I write a lot and was researching a book about collectors, I was interested in establishing a dialog with he and Cathy. I found their love story quite fascinating as well as John's influence on this hobby. I sent him three letters (one with a bunch of two dollar

bills), left messages, but could not set up anything. What I did not know is that his health had deteriorated and died several months later. Not getting to know John and his wife Cathy better and developing a relationship with this unusual one of a kind guy, was a major regret. While he was the collector, Cathy was the other half of the team. Before they married, she was a beauty queen, became his assistant in his magic act- and ultimately a real team. Over the years Cathy was extremely involved in the collection much more than people realized. In fact, I personally believe that the wives are often the unsung heroes- and get very little credit for the role they play in the building of great collections!

As a postscript, when we visited John, I noticed a nicely displayed and exceptionally cool looking automaton called "The Mesmerizer". John had acquired the French 1910 DeCamp automaton and then built a 5' glass box around it surrounded by Red Velvet which had come from his Magic Act. He added lights and music to accommodate the various movements of The Mesmerizer. The magician moves his arms, head, eye lashes and his mesmerized subject breathes, moves her eyes, her forehead and pivots - all to eerie music- complete with breathing. When I saw it in the back of his "museum" I told John that I thought it was awesome and if he was ever thinking of passing it on, I would be very interested. I think I suggested to him that David Copperfield was not the only guy who collected magician related stuff.

Ironically, a couple of years after John Daniel had died, Dan Horenberger called me and let me know that he was working on a very cool automaton and since he knew I liked that stuff would let me know if and when Cathy Daniel would sell it. Several months later he called me and said: "OK, I have "The Mesmerizer", it's working great and am going to sell it. If you're interested, lemme know." He told me he had also recently mentioned it to a couple others who buy automatons but no-one jumped on it. I figured no rush, and could visit him in the next few days.

Unfortunately, I didn't realize that stuff like this does not last long- and that evening someone he had done business with called him said: "I'll take it". - sight unseen. You could say I was a bit dismayed when I got the email that evening that The Mesmerizer was no longer available. That lesson taught me that often times one has to make up their mind quickly- and not dilly-dally!

A couple of days later, on a wild hunch, I called Dennis Boses, owner and founder of "*Off The Wall*", a Los Angeles antique store of unusual collectibles that I had purchased automatons from in the past. I asked if he had by any chance bought Daniel's "Mesmerizer". "Sandy" he said, "the ink is hardly dry, but yes, I bought it. How

did you find out so quick?" But he also told me, if he decided to sell, he'd let me know. Three weeks later, he called, gave me his price- and the rest is history. Needless to say, the price had gone up, but I was happy that I was able to purchase The Mesmerizer- and became part of John's history! So that's how I acquired one of John Daniel's prize possessions!

Sandy Lechtick is a collector of mechanical advertising window displays, baranger motions, vintage coin-operated penny arcade machines and player pianos. He and his wife live in So. California. Sandy, a former California State table tennis champion competes in national table tennis and paddle tennis tournaments.