

March 1979

"These Things We Treasure"

Things That Collectors News Readers Collect

By Vonna L. Yoder

"Pass the salt and pepper, please."

When that request is voiced at the Rasmussen home in Traer, Iowa, watch out! Ruth Rasmussen has 11,977 sets of salt and pepper shakers on hand to fulfill that request.

What category would you prefer? Travel? Sports? Nursery rhymes? Hats? Presidents? You name it, she'll have it. "Come on out back to my buildings and I'll show you what I have," invites Ruth to visitors to her home in the rural community of 1,700. "I don't have any set hours. If I'm home and someone stops by, I'm more than happy to open up for them."

The two small buildings constructed behind her home are the end result of one pair of salt and pepper shakers purchased at the

Brookfield Zoo in Chicago in 1946. The hobby literally outgrew her home and the first small building was constructed in 1968 to house the 4,872 sets she had by then accumulated.

Neatly arranged three to four deep on shelves from ceiling to floor is a collection that staggers the imagination. Vegetables, vegetable people, Christmas, Thanksgiving, gas pumps, animals, nuts. No two are alike.

What is the value of such an extensive collection?

"I have no idea," Ruth muses. "There is no way to really put a price on this, but it is insured."

Ruth's most treasured sets are kept in her home. These are salt and pepper shakers that once belonged to grandparents.

Word of mouth is the main source of advertising for the Rasmussens, along with a small sign in front of the house at 706 2nd St. (Hiway 8) in Traer. There is no admission charge, no collection box inside the door. You will only find a friendly welcome, a sincere joy of sharing, and a lot of fun.

How does she keep track of them all in order not to duplicate?

"Each one is number coded on the bottom and I keep them categorized in a recipe file box." Ruth simply knows what she has, but double checks. Picking up an Old King Cole shaker from the "to be shelved" box, she points out a difference from the similar shaker on the shelf.

"I thought for certain I had this one, but when I compared, one was sitting down and one was standing. That is what I need to watch for."

Ceramic, wood, plaster of Paris, metal, plastic. They come in every material. Red, blue, green, yellow — all different colors and hues. Old, new, large, small.

The collection of commemoratives of American presidents even contains a replica of John F. Kennedy in a rocking chair. She has one of Jimmy Carter, but not Rosalynn. One presidential set she was not able to obtain was that of Harry Truman (who sent her dollar bill back with regrets that none existed). So Ruth decoupage his picture onto a wooden shaker to keep the set complete.

Twenty-two years as a collector have given Ruth the know-how to find shakers. She watches for sales



This pair of salt and pepper shakers from Chicago's Brookfield Zoo started it all in 1946.

of other collections, farm sales, garage sales, antique sales. She orders them through gift catalogs such as Helen Gallagher and Miles Kimball. Friends watch for special ones. One friend brought her a treasured pair from Russia. Pen pals in Northern Ireland, Greece, and Belgium are sources of supply. (Even the author of this article caught the spirit and brought a set to the interview).

Silver, gold, copper, bronze, crystal — the smallest sets would hold only a few grains of salt or pepper, the largest an entire box.

"The one set I want but can't get is of the Little Brown Church in Nashua, Iowa. I know two or three people who have sets but they won't part with them," Ruth explains. She erected another building in 1970 and set a goal of 10,000 pairs for the 1974 Traer Centennial Celebration. She made her goal. Now she's aiming for 12,000 and is almost there.

Shakers for each month, shakers for each day of the week, Ruth has sought out all sources she can. Some communities celebrating centennials will have commemorative sets made, so Ruth watches the newspapers and writes to the organizing committees; collector/hobbyists often advertise.



The smallest shakers will hold only a few grains of salt.



Ruth Rasmussen holds one of the almost 12,000 pair of salt and pepper shakers she has collected in the past 22 years. Only a small part of her collection is shown here.

SALT AND PEPPER

1981
TRAER, Iowa (AP) — Ruth Rasmussen, 59, has collected salt and pepper shakers for nearly four decades. She says she now has 12,470 sets.

"I don't know how much money I've got invested," she says, pulling the padlock off the door of an old mobile home annex converted to a salt and pepper shaker shed. "If I didn't do this, I wouldn't have the money anyway."

She says she never spends more than \$10 for a pair. She doesn't believe in expensive antiques. But here in this "shanty," as she calls it, are rows and rows of exquisite ceramic fish, pigs, cows, dogs, cats, giraffes, ears of corn, tomatoes and human feet.

What kinds of shakers does she use in her everyday life?

"Just plain little white ones like these," she says pulling a pair of ordinary 1950s-style prism glass shakers from the wall. "That's what we have on our table. The salt comes out better."