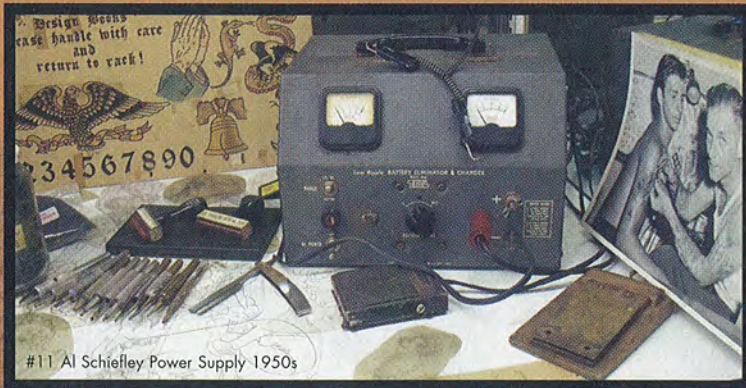
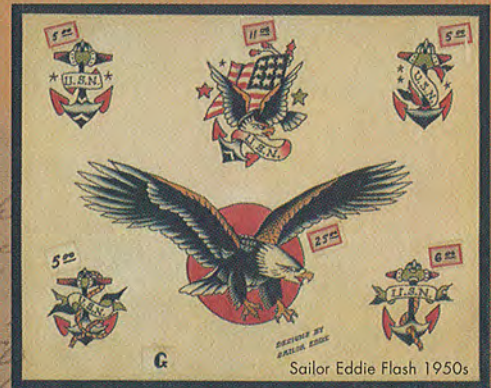




#6 Schiefley shop 1950s



#11 Al Schiefley Power Supply 1950s



Sailor Eddie Flash 1950s

Tattoo Traditions

Ohio Tattoo History Museum keeps early days of tattooing alive

By Darin Burt

If you have more than three of anything, it's considered a collection. If you have more than 300 of anything, you're well on your way to having a museum.

Just ask Rich T., curator of the Ohio Tattoo History Museum located in Coalton, Ohio; he's been collecting tattoo memorabilia since the 1980s, long before he ever became a working tattoo artist himself.

The big break for the museum came in 1999 when Rich happened across a collection of 200+ panels of original flash by Al Cooke on eBay.

"It seemed too good to be true, but I was the high bidder and we came to an agreement contingent on it being the real deal," Rich says, adding that the seller had bought the pieces at an auction in Cleveland and used some of them to decorate a restaurant. "They had no idea what they had. It turned out they had stuff that was as good or better than what was in the auction."

At the time, Rich decided to open a small museum in the back of his shop to display his treasures. "That set off an explosion of collecting," he says. "Anyone who says collecting is not a disease is mistaken. . . there should be a 12 step program for it."

Rich, 48, started getting tattoos as soon as he was old enough, and he naturally gravitated towards the "traditional" style. He's kept that as the overwhelming theme of the museum, which now showcases more than 300 panels of original flash dating from the turn of the century through the present. The majority of pieces on display are from the 1900s through the 1970s.

As the collection has grown, Rich moved the museum to a larger space adjoining Bicknee Tattoo Supply Company, which he also owns. Some of the vintage pieces (most on 11x14 sheets of paper, which was the norm in those early days) were so old and brittle that they had to be professionally encapsulated in special frames to protect them from the elements.

"A lot of things come to me now that people know I have the museum. I'm often surprised how gracious people can be," Rich says. "Baba from Vintage Tattoo in Los Angeles, for instance, gave me 10 sheets of Sailor Barney flash just to keep Sailor Barney's name alive."

Among the legendary artists represented in the collection are Sailor Wes, Ed Smith, Frank Harrington, Ralph Ashwell, Ace Harlyn, Sailor Ned, Sutton & Lewis, Leroy Minugh, Stoney St. Clair and William Grimshaw.

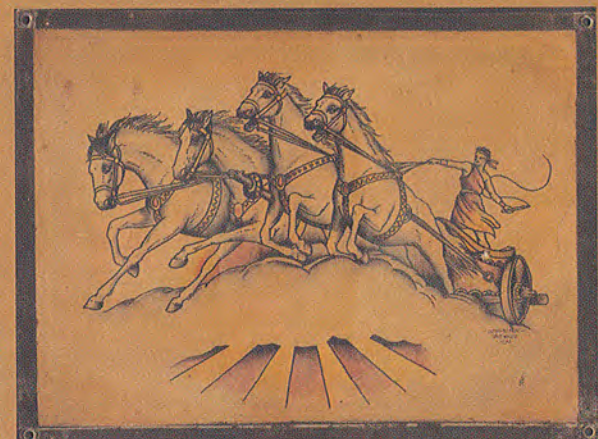
Most traditional tattoo flash was designed for rapid tattooing, and was either drawn by the individual artist for display and use in his own shop, or traded and sold among artists. Signed or not, Rich says it's easy to tell one artist's work from another's.

Rich points out a flash sheet drawn by Diamond Joe Rivers, circa 1944. "He's a mystery to me," Rich says, "but you cannot mistake his flash – it's crazy looking with wild borders."

A sheet of eagles by Frank Harrington is basic, but lasting with a real outline, graduated shading and minimal colors. "It was designed so that even if all the color fell out of it, it would still look good as a tattoo," Rich explains. "In 40 years you'll still know what it is."

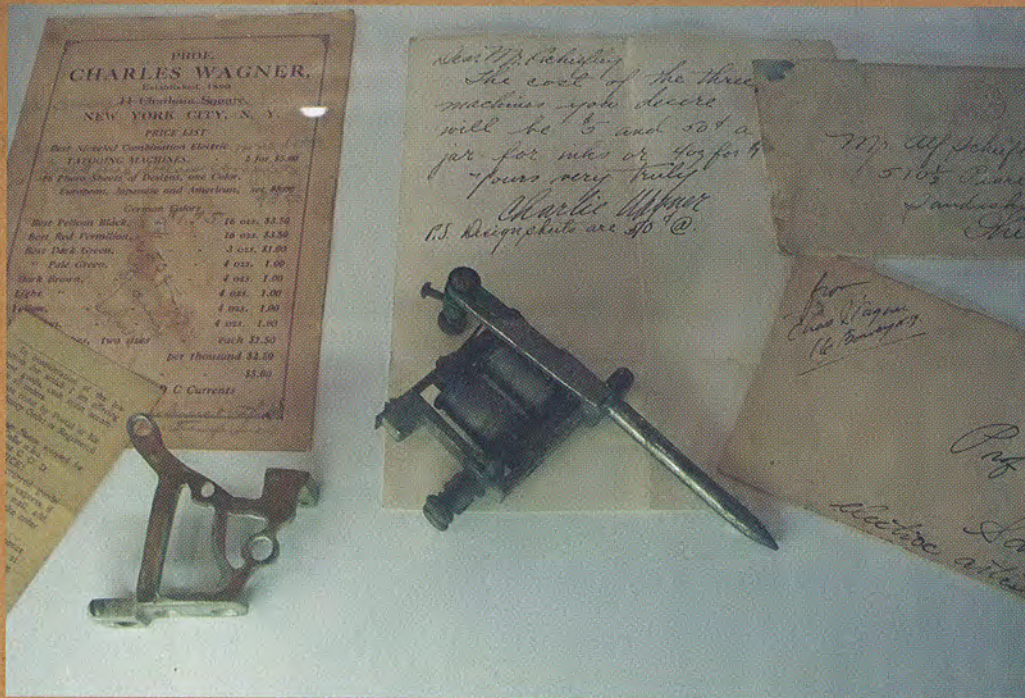
Does he have a favorite piece among his collection? "That's kind of like asking a musician if he has a favorite song," Rich says, "I could give you one today and it would change tomorrow."

He thinks it over for a second and then alludes to a Bobby Wicks sheet that includes a Homeward Bound sailing ship tattoo, a "wonderful example of Coleman style tattooing" on a perfect Sailor Eddie Evans sheet, and a sheet by Rich Mengins, who was known for doing souvenir sheets for people and writing personal messages on the back; "he was an English tattooer and better than most for his time."



Continued on page 32

Flash from the 1930's, 40's, 50's, and 60's



No collection of tattoo memorabilia would be complete without machines, and the Ohio Tattoo History Museum has plenty of examples of early models on display. Looking over the collection, you notice that tattoo machines haven't really changed all that much over the years. "A fancy doorbell" is how Rich describes them.

One of the rarest machines is a Barber's Star made by J.F. Barber in Cincinnati in the 1920s. "I've heard Lyle Tuttle refer to them as 'over the top machines'," Rich says, "The frame goes up over the top and there's no sidearm. . . it probably didn't tattoo worth a shit."

Another showcase houses an early example of an animal marker machine. "Lots of guys sold animal marker outfits," Rich says, "There's a tube switch so that you don't have a foot pedal. Guys would use them to tattoo horses and dogs on the inside of their lip to show ownership."

In another showcase is a Percy Waters portable tattoo studio, dating from 1920-1930. Coming from the suitcase are five tattoo machines on cords looking like some strange octopus.

Rich has also been lucky to acquire many, now vintage, machines including a Percy Waters Model 8, Spaulding & Rogers Malleable Iron, and a Les Skuse frame, owned and used by Al Schiefley, founder of the Sandusky Tattoo Club in the 1950s. Rich even has the counter cabinets rescued from Schiefley's actual shop.

Unlike most collectors, who keep their treasures hidden away for their own enjoyment, Rich T. wants to share his passion with the world.

"I don't want to be the guy who hoards his collection," he says. "For me, it's not a money making venture; it's a labor of love. I just dig it." ★

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