

Rag Clippings

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Sowing the Seeds of New Collectors

At nearly every militaria show I attend nowadays, I get involved in a discussion about how to get younger people interested in our hobby. These discussions usually involve two or more grey-haired collectors standing there talking about how almost everyone at the show has grey hair. No one likes to see something they love die out and that is the concern we have as the average age of our membership increases. (1) While I feel fairly confident that our hobby won't die completely, I am concerned enough about its general health that I feel that I must do more to encourage new and younger collectors. This article is an attempt to provide a methodology to my fellow grey-headed collectors for passing the torch to a new generation.

I am a member of the local American Legion post and our post sponsors a Boy Scout troop. Boy Scouts are prime candidates to become new military insignia collectors for several reasons. First, most

boys like to collect things—ranging from stamps to bugs to comic books—the list is endless. Second, most Boy Scout troops still wear uniforms with various patches, badges, medals, etc. attached. This means most Scouts will have an innate sense of what you are talking about when you say “insignia.” Furthermore, Boy Scouts (and Girl Scouts, too, so let's just say “Scouts”) are encouraged to earn merit badges and there is a merit badge for “Collecting.”

Adding all this up, I decided the Scout troop at my American Legion post was fertile ground for the hobby of military insignia collecting. I therefore emailed the scoutmaster with a bright idea. I offered to come to a Scout meeting sometime and make a presentation to the troop about the hobby of military insignia collecting. My offer was gratefully accepted and I began to prepare for my pitch.

Anyone who has collected for any length of time probably has a supply of duplicates that probably cannot be sold or traded to other established collectors be-

cause they are just too common. I have one friend who used to throw away all the 3rd Armies, 5th Armies, etc. he picked up when he acquired a collection. His reasoning was that they were too common and he'd never be able to sell them. Now they go into a “kids and new collectors” box and are given to kids at shows or sold for very little to new collectors. I have such a box and I used it to put together “New Collector Kits” to give out at the end of my presentation to the Scouts.

The handouts I put together had two patches, two DIs, a back copy of *The Trading Post*, an ASMIC membership form (more on that later), a short article about the hobby called “A Short Guide to Military Insignia Collecting” (2) and an insert called “What's In Your Kit.” All this was enclosed in a zip-loc bag with a label on the outside that read: Military Insignia Collecting Starter Kit compliments of A.S.M.I.C.” The reason I put two each patches and DIs is based on my theory that if you have two of anything you have a collection and all it takes is the



Answering questions about military insignia



Discussing insignia with Boy Scouts

presence of the “collector gene” in the Scout and you have a recruit to the hobby.

One reason I like the fact that the troop was sponsored by my American Legion post was that, by definition, a Legion post consists of veterans and vets usually have military insignia around the house. In days past, almost every post had an insignia board where the members of the post stuck up one of their patches or DIs. It seemed to me that the members of the post could help the Scouts and vice-versa. The Scouts could put together a patch or DI display for the post and the post could help by contributing spare insignia they had at home. The Scouts get their merit badges and a start in the hobby and the post gets a nice display.

As noted earlier, I gave the Scouts an A.S.M.I.C. membership form in their New Collector kit. In order to encourage the Scouts a little bit more I gave the Scout troop a gift membership in A.S.M.I.C. I did this well in advance of my presentation so that they would have a chance to see an issue or two of *The Trading Post* ahead of time and perhaps be primed for my pitch. I was not disappointed.

The scoutmaster had scheduled my talk so it would be part of a series of topics having to do with collecting. The Boy Scouts of America has two collecting merit

badges—one for stamps and coins and the other for general collecting and my talk was part of the general collecting series of discussions. On that evening there were perhaps twenty-five Scouts present along with a number of parents. I brought examples of patch and DI displays. I also had copies of several reference books and catalogs that are available from A.S.M.I.C. and the scoutmaster brought the latest issue of *The Trading Post*, which the troop had just received.

My presentation lasted about twenty minutes and I took questions as I went along. In my talk, I explained my idea for putting together a display for the post and offered to act as the counselor if any of the Scouts decided to try for the collecting merit badge using military insignia as the basis. The Scouts listened very attentively and also asked some very astute questions.

At the end of the talk I handed out the New Collector Kits and bedlam prevailed. It was gratifying to see some of the Scouts immediately start trading with others to get a patch or DI they wanted more than the ones I had put in their kit. I had made certain that I brought more than enough for the expected number of Scouts. It would not have done to be short one or two of the kits. As the Scouts looked through their kits and examined the displays I had brought they came up with more questions. I stayed

until the end of the meeting to make sure that all questions were answered.

At this point the results of my efforts remain to be seen. (3) Timing may be a factor in that. My talk took place at the beginning of summer when the Scouts are thinking about Summer Camp and not so much about merit badges. I plan to follow up in the fall with the scoutmaster and see if there are any Scouts ready to make the commitment to getting their badge. Even if there are no immediate results from my efforts, who is to say that someday in the future one of these Scouts will not run across his New Collector Kit and decide to take up the hobby. That’s pretty much how my brother and I got back into collecting.

Lessons Learned

Every member of A.S.M.I.C. is capable of doing something similar to what I have done and my hope is that many will. If we sow enough seeds of our hobby on fertile ground, some are bound to sprout new collectors. I intend to do this again for other groups of Scouts and I have come up with some changes in my methodology that I would pass along to those who plan similar presentations. First, I would try to time my presentation so that it was early in the fall of the year when the Scouts are think-



Distributing beginner collector kits

ing about the year ahead and what merit badges they may want to go for.

Next, I would downsize the kits I handed out. This is more an economic factor than anything else. I would leave out the back copy of *The Trading Post* and just have a copy to display during my talk. I have a fair supply of extra patches and DIs, so I would still include two of each. However, if I were getting short on my supply I would make up the packets with either DIs or patches and not both.

Another thing to keep in mind is to take along a camera when you make your presentation. Ask the scoutmaster or someone else to snap some photos of your pitch and then send copies to the troop to remind them you were there and perhaps trigger a positive response. If enough A.S.M.I.C. members do this, perhaps we could have a spot on our website for photos of presentations to groups and that would be a reason for the Scouts to log on and check it out. (Make sure to mention the website in your talk. The Scoutmaster should be able to get a logon ID and password for the troop to use if you have given them a membership in A.S.M.I.C.)

One of the questions I was asked was “Where do you find this stuff?” Part of the answer allowed me to advertise the local shows. If you have flyers from the show(s)

put them in the New Collector Kit. You might even offer to let a new collector share part of your table at the next show. Also, try to get offers of free or discounted admission for Scouts who wear their uniform to the show.

I know the cost of membership has gone up and you may even question spending money on yourself but the gift membership is a very worthwhile gesture. The scoutmaster will especially appreciate it as will the Scouts. It may even be tax deductible to the right group such as B.S.A and it benefits A.S.M.I.C., too. On the subject of cost, don’t forget to prepare your audience for the shock of some of the prices they will see at shows and on online auctions but do emphasize that for a starting collector, it doesn’t have to be expensive.

If anyone is interested in talking to me about this methodology, either to make suggestions for improving it or to learn more about it, please email me at bro6970@cox.net or write to me at my P.O. box. I will also be happy to provide any member who requests it, a copy of the Short Guide to Military Insignia Collecting that I handed out to the Scouts in their kits.

OK, all of you who have stood around talking about the problem—get out there and sow some new collector seeds.

Footnotes

1. Militaria collectors are not alone in this concern. Publications for coin and stamp collectors have run articles in the recent past with ideas for encouraging the spread of their hobbies.
2. This guide is built around the requirements for the “Collecting” Merit badge. It answers some but not all the questions a Scout will have to answer to get the badge.
3. The Scoutmaster informs me that at least one of the Scouts has started a collection.

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