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Have Any Old Tin Cans at Home? They Might Be Collector's Items

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You'd like to collect something. But you're bored with Rembrandt etchings and bubble-gum cards. And paintings of soup cans are just too expensive.

So how about collecting tin cans themselves? Nowadays, all kinds of people are scurrying through flea markets, junk stores and garage sales in search of ornately lithographed rare cans.

Peter Sidlow, a California construction company chairman, recently remodeled his house to accommodate his collection of 3,000 cans—which fans like to call “tins.” He estimates that the tins have appreciated over 600% in value in the past decade.

Mr. Sidlow is president of the Tin Container Collectors' Association (TCCA), whose membership has soared from 35 to 1,000 since 1971. Besides publishing a newsletter, TCCA holds a “convention” every other year where members exhibit, trade, auction and sell rare cans. The gatherings also offer prizes for the best tins in 18 categories, such as the best peanut butter pail and the best cocoa tin in the shape of a lunch box.

The TCCA figures a can is “rare” only if fewer than three examples are known to exist, and a rare can often inspires a heated struggle. At the latest convention, held at the Parsippany, N.J., Hilton Hotel this

month, a Colorado restaurant owner and an Illinois computer entrepreneur battled at auction for a Bull Durham tobacco tin made around 1916. While there are countless Bull Durham tobacco *pouches* around, the producer used cans only briefly. Only one is known to exist. The restaurant owner finally won the day with a \$2,600 bid.

Elitists still sneer at can collectors as scavengers, but cans are getting more respect. The New York Historical Society included them in a recent exhibition on antique advertising, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington keeps them in its permanent collection.

Jerry Glenn, a Montvale, N.J., executive who helped organize the 1983 convention, says a TCCA member sold his collection last year for more than \$50,000. “Since most tins were made to be thrown away, and many were destroyed during wartime scrap drives, the law of supply and demand is sending prices way up,” he says.

Interest in the ornate old containers is so lively that several companies are issuing reproductions of their old cans as promotional gimmicks. Some collectors worry that the “nostalgia” tins, often unmarked as reproductions, might confuse the uninitiated. But others figure these too will gain value as novelties. Mr. Glenn thinks that some he bought for his daughter lately may be worth real money—“in about 25 years.”