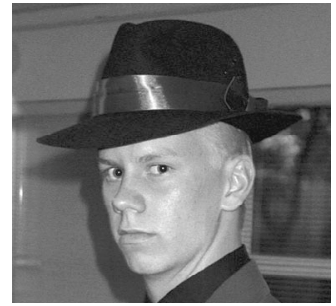


An Outsiders View

by Michael Keljo



I first discovered the CC>CC (Casino Chip & Gaming Tokens Collectors Club) several months ago, while considering a project for my Freshman Anthropology Seminar at University of Pennsylvania entitled “Money in Society and Culture.” When I thought of money, casinos quickly came to mind. At first, I was interested in casino chip design, but soon I came across what seemed to be a sub-culture of casino chip collectors, which I found to be much more interesting than the chips themselves. I then decided to do my project on the people of the CC>CC, and what follows is a brief synopsis of what I discovered.

It did not take me much time to discover that Howard Herz is credited as being the first man to collect casino chips as a method of preserving gaming history. Little did Herz realize that not only was he establishing a concept that would preserve gaming history in the minds of thousands of interested collectors, but that he was also planting the seeds for a hobby that would form its own, unique social community by the end of the century, a community that can easily be seen even by an outsider doing a research project.

My main goal was to understand the motives of chip collectors. Why on earth do they collect casino chips? I devised some questions which I hoped would provide me with some answers, and I posted them on a CC>CC message board. Within a

day, I had over a dozen fully completed responses. I was delighted at everyone’s help.

After reading the responses to my online interview, I was able to quickly establish two major motives for chip collecting. It seemed to me that most collectors were seeking to establish ties, which I divided into two types: historical and social. By “historical ties,” I mean the efforts made by these collectors to connect themselves with periods in history and certain famous individuals through the chips that they collect. They imagine that the chips they hold in their hands played a role in the past and that, by owning these chips, they are linking themselves to the past in such a way that they can vicariously live through a chip and “its experiences.” By social ties, I mean that a fundamental motivation of the collectors to join and continue the hobby is to develop social ties with their contemporary collectors.

The vast majority of chippers interviewed professed major historical influence in their collecting habits. This historical value seems to be, for most collectors, centered on the vicarious experience of history through the chip. As one collector related, “an original Flamingo chip from Las Vegas is the “holy grail” to chip collectors not so much as it’s the first issue from the casino but it was issued while Bugsy Siegel was the owner! Most people lucky enough to

own one of these chips wonder if the famous gangster held the very same chip in HIS hand!” Said another collector, “Without the history of the chip in your collection, all you have is a little piece of clay. To me it is everything. I have chips that it is possible Bugsy Siegel held in his hands.” To both of these gentlemen, it is as though, by owning a chip that may have been held by Bugsy Siegel, they are relating themselves directly to him, somehow sharing in the life of this long-dead gangster. The thrill of linking oneself to the Godfather of Vegas is not difficult to understand, even for a non-collector.

Yet, what struck me even more than the historical ties made through the chips were the social ties made as a result of common interests. It was readily apparent that social interests were every bit as important as the historical interests. The president of the CC>CC declared, “I have as much fun socializing as I do collecting. These two activities go together. There is a certain rush or sense of accomplishment when acquiring a special chip, but the constants are the friends and chip talk.”

Since most trades require trust, I asked each collector how they felt about the people they did business with in the hobby. The responses were astounding. “Do I trust them???” Like a daughter trusts her father. I will send any CC>CC member

chips before I receive payment.” This comment really surprised me. I do a fair number of E-bay transactions myself, and I know better than to send something before payment is made. But this collector was not alone in his opinion. Said another, “Trust and reputation are important, but in the relatively close-knit hobby of chip collecting, most dishonest people don’t last long at all. The hobby is pretty strong and self-policing in that regard.”

Yet what surprised me most was the friendliness displayed by the community. I found no traces of exclusivity, and was in fact invited to join by several collectors who were nice enough to answer my questions when I had nothing to offer them. I heard fascinating stories of generosity and kindness within the CC>CC. “I was amazed at the knowledge and

welcome that I received,” recalled one collector. “Then I started getting chips in the mail from all these nice people and they didn’t want anything in return.” Another collector received similar gifts during illness. “When I was hospitalized people (other collectors) sent me well wishings as well as chips and casino memorabilia to brighten my days. Bear in mind most of these people only knew me as another collector (and never met me personally).” Such giving typically only takes place among the best of friends, and it is amazing to see it occur among people who have never met one another face to face.

The people of the CC>CC experience social ties that span both space and time. While some are interested in connecting themselves with people who lived in the past, nearly all form bonds with people who are

still alive today in the course of this hobby. The hobby becomes more than a simple hobby. It is not a set of isolated people collecting inanimate objects for their own, isolated collections. Rather, it is a set of people who become intertwined with other people, both past and present, in the pursuit of artifacts that help them to become further intertwined with people, whether they realize it or not. While the hobby has done much to achieve Herz’s original goal of preserving gaming history, it has gone far, far beyond that as it has both created and preserved social relationships in its relatively brief history.

Michael Keljo hails from Dallas, Texas but moved to Pittsburgh, PA this summer. He is a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania’s business school (Wharton), where he hopes to concentrate in marketing, entrepreneurship, and legal studies