

Family Skeleton? Maybe Dressler Will Buy It

Brush Off The Long Red Flannels That Grampa Used To Wear—They May Be Valuable



By Whit Wellman



Fire engine of the vintage of 1850 which Dressler located in a western town. This, as with almost everything he bought, he sold at a substantial profit, to himself and sometimes, to the purchaser.



Another Dressler item, the first automobile ever to travel the trails of the west. Circa, 1906—name unknown. Note iron tires, and "unique" spring arrangement.



Albert Dressler, Champion Collector of "Early Western Americana" and for many years called the "Millionaire Tramp."



Dressler, dressed as a junkman, in front of his store at Berkeley, on a "boneshaker" bicycle with iron tires and practically no springs. Of the vintage of 1868. Note the petrified Arizona Indian which caused so much consternation among passing women that he had to dispose of the two he had.

RED-SHIRTED miners, pioneers of the West's stormy and not so distant past, prospected for gold.

Some became millionaires, others made a bare living—but most of these hardy prospectors left behind them relics valued in the tens of thousands, worth more in many instances, than the yellow metal taken from their mining claims!

Basements, attics, forgotten cupboards and dust-covered trunks in old homes of the Pacific Coast have yielded treasure neglected for half a century.

Collectors of the "early West" have made fortunes—journeying from town to town, unearthing mementos of the gold-rush period: old pictures, furniture, women's hats, stamps, dance programs, ancient play bills, river steamers and stage coaches, rare items which can never be reproduced.

A champion collector of such antiques is Albert Dressler, for 20 years famous as the West's "millionaire tramp" (because, as he recalls, he had a few dollars in his pocket!), historian and author of several books, and above all, a man who follows his "hunches."

"You can follow your sub-conscious mind to a fortune," smiles this whimsical gentleman, whose adventures in prying into strange corners of deserted towns would fill many volumes. "It's a sort of sixth sense, which, if you follow it, will lead you to what people call luck. It isn't really luck. Rather, there is a law of attraction. Just open your mind to what you seek, and more often than not, you'll come upon it."

BUSINESS had been fairly slow for a few days, and Dressler judged it was time to open his keen collectors mind to new suggestions—and new places.

Into his head came a name—"San Jose! Go to San Jose!" He didn't, of course, have the least notion of what awaited him. The trip meant a drive of several hours, making plans to be away—but he'd followed the same "hunches" before, and been more than satisfied.

Late in the afternoon he rolled down the main street. First he called on his dealer friends, chatting a while, inquiring for the latest news. "Town's cleaned out," they said. "We haven't found anything in months."

Dressler, stubborn and confident, made several other calls; then he entered an old cabinet shop, where the owner had piled heaps of ancient furniture in an old dance hall overhead. He knew Albert Dressler, and his reputation for "smelling out" rare antiques. Dressler ranged about the little shop, inspecting many chairs and tables, all of these ordinary and unexciting. Asking permission to go above, the collector poked around in the abandoned dance hall, and discovered a black moth-eaten portfolio. Opening it, he came upon a dozen old prints, which he believed were extremely rare. These he divided into two groups—those he wanted to buy, and a few he could not use.

He was ready to descend, when he recognized

a strong burning odor. Rushing to the stairs, he warned the cabinet maker. "My stew! My stew!" the man cried, dashing to the kitchen.

DRESSLER saw that he must return later, after domestic problems were settled. He walked around the block ten times, purchased a roasted chicken, and again entered the shop. The chicken calmed the cabinet maker, and Dressler went up the stairs once more to his portfolio.

Coming down, he carried two sets of prints—one group rare, the other worthless. These last he presented to his host.

"I'll buy these at a reasonable price," he said. "The others are worthless to me."

"You can have those you don't want," the dealer said, "for \$5 each. Come back next week, and I'll put a price on the set you're after." The canny cabinet maker had become wary; he was not parting easily with anything which Dressler thought of value.

Dressler dug into his pocket book, found sufficient money, and departed with the prints he really wanted—a set of six Honolulu color prints, dated 1854.

To a collector, any item is worth while if he can see a market for it. Sales are the life of trade—as well as the life of a dealer.

ONCE, in the pioneer town of Dawneville, California, Dressler rummaged in the cellar of a grocery store. The stairs had rotted away, and he pushed a plank through the window, slid down into dust and rat nests. This cellar contained boxes of what collectors call "junk," but one large barrel held carefully packed (and forgotten) lamp chimneys. Each chimney was handsomely engraved with flowers and Civil War scenes. Holding aloft a lamp, Dressler emerged from the grime, looking not at all like a "millionaire tramp," and showed his prize to the store keeper.

"Goodness!" the man exclaimed. "Do you want that thing?"

"I certainly do."

"Well, you can have 'em all. Didn't know the darned things were there."

"How much?" Dressler inquired.

"Two-bits for one. Twenty cents each if you take 'em all at once."

This price was what the chimneys were worth—in Civil War days. Back home again, Dressler had but to announce his discovery to a few dealers along "antique row," and the lamp chimneys were sold for \$2.50 each, allowing a neat profit.

But like the stock market, Lady Luck lets a collector get so far, then turns on him. Things go amazingly well for a time, and suddenly, as Dressler says—"you don't know how it happens, but things begin to go upside down."

Shortly after the successful lamp chimney episode, a dealer friend asked Dressler to inspect an old desk he'd had lying around for many months.

"For only \$5," said the dealer, "and cheap at the price. It's probably worth hundreds, but I want to get rid of it."

Dressler demurred, saying that he would return again within a few days. Even small purchases can mount up quickly, and if you're wrong about values, the money goes out instead of coming in—which can sadden any collector.

THREE weeks later he called again, and found the unwanted desk in the back yard. In daylight he saw minor scars on the desk's top, and though the scars he discerned unsuspected layers of paint. What lay under the paint he did not know, but was willing to take a chance. He

Early Western Stagecoach. Many such items were sold by Dressler to the movies as authentic "props" in costume and western pictures.



Dressler perched precariously on another of his "Relic Bicycles". Vintage 1873-1884. Just another transaction.

bought the desk, took it home, and removed the extra layers. He found himself the owner of a beautiful old Winthrop desk!

A day later in came another friend—also in the collecting business.

"Anything new?"

"Yes—a desk I just bought. See what you think of it."

The collector took one look.

"I think I'll give you \$75 for it. How's that?"

"Done!" Dressler took the money, and his friend became the new owner of the Winthrop desk.

Within the week Dressler strolled down the avenue, and saw the desk in a shop window. He dropped in for a few words, and learned that this dealer had paid \$125 for the desk, and would sell it reluctantly for \$250. In the antique business you can't always judge what a desk may bring! From \$5 to the final sale price was something of a leap, and Dressler strolled out, thinking to himself, "... well, you can't always be right!"

"My next deal," Dressler relates, "came out better. I came upon a collection of rusty swords and daggers in an old army store. I thought of Hollywood and the movies, bought them in a lot, and polished them up. These swords had come into the country during the Spanish-American

war, and a picture director producing a war story snapped them up for \$200.

"Usually I'm able to supply whatever a man wants, but the other day an ad appeared in The Swapper which I couldn't do anything about. Not many people could! Look at it!

PETRIFIED MAN

WANTED—to buy, rent, or lease—a petrified man. If you have one or can get one it will pay you to write to me. Lee Bertillon, Mineola, Texas.

"There are probably a lot of petrified men lying around, waiting to be picked up for a song—but at the moment I don't know where to locate one!"

AT ONE time, however, the collector did possess a petrified man; in fact, he had two! Not long ago in his Pioneer Place in Berkeley, Calif., he displayed two gruesome relics of America's southwest—mummified bodies of Arizona Indians.

"They were not actually petrified," he relates, "but the result was even worse than if they had been. One wealthy museum owner from Los Angeles bought them from me, thinking they would be a distinct attraction to his personal collection of early Americana. I boxed them, and sent them along in the regular way. But when he opened the coffins in his home, his wife happened to be present. She promptly fainted—or he said she did!—and told him he must choose between his mummies and herself. What could a good husband do? He sent them back to me."

"Whereupon I stood one of the mummies in front of Pioneer Place. It looked all right to me, and my friends envied the strange thing. . . . until a lady on a shopping tour crossed the street toward my window, spotted the mummy, and promptly swooned. When she came to she called the police. The officer on duty who flew to her rescue was a nice sort of chap, and he liked mummies. He said, 'It's all right, Al, you keep it there as long as you want. Just so long as fainting women don't block traffic!' But—there's something incompatible between mummies and women. My own wife began to object to my treasures; they were too shriveled, too, too horrible! I'd have to sell them of something. So, my collection of Indian mummies came to a sad end. But it was great fun while it lasted!"

PERHAPS the most amusing of this collector's adventures occurred when he visited a little dry goods store in a Northwestern town (name omitted out of chivalry for the lady!) looking for women's hats. He'd heard about her store for months; his friends had "seen things" on the shelves, objects they swore were hats of a variety most unusual. Dressler stood outside of the fly-specked window, peering within. Behind the counter stood a charming little old lady, serving a customer. On a rack nearby hung several of the oddest hats he'd ever seen. He waited for the customer to leave, and entered. A tiny bell tinkled as the door swung in.

"I understand you have some very fine hats,"

he began, "and I've come a long way to see them."

The little old lady beamed on him. She mounted the stairs to a balcony, and brought down dozens of great bonnets dating back 50 years. Many were decked with ostrich plumes, peacock feathers, and bird's heads.

"Nice, aren't they?" she asked.

"Wonderful!" Dressler rejoiced. "I've never seen anything like them! How much for all?"

"You want them all?" She looked at him queerly, probably thinking him slightly touched. But she made her bargain promptly. "Fifty cents each—"

Dressler took the lot. A number he sold to a society woman who conceived the idea of giving these amazing Victorian models to her guests as party favors. Others were leased to a banking institution for window displays, and a few Dressler kept for his own amusement.

IN ONE cellar he discovered an ancient box which aroused his curiosity; it seemed old enough to hold treasures. He pulled it into the light, and out jumped two huge rats which he insists "almost knocked me over—". He regained his composure, and dug into the box. There lay, packed tightly together, hundreds of old envelopes which had been mailed; each bore a stamp of an early date. He picked out 200 of the best preserved specimens, and sold the lot to a stamp collector for \$200.

At Gold Hill, Nevada, he spotted an ancient tavern which caught his fancy—and his immediate "hunch" told him that something was about to happen. It did, and promptly. First, he chatted with a friendly young man, who warned him that a disguise was needed to deal with the tavern owner.

"You're too well dressed. He's apt to chuck you out before you tell him what you want. Get a pair of old jeans, smear your face up with dust. Act like a junk dealer."

Taking this advice, Dressler donned mining regalia before a mirror, acquired a slouch hat, and wandered aimlessly into the tavern.

"Any old junk you want to get rid of?" he asked.

"There's a big wood shed full of stuff I've been planning to burn. Take it away—"

"How much?" It was the invariable question.

"Nothing. Glad to get it out of there."

In that dilapidated shed he uncovered 5,000 checks bearing Nevada revenue stamps, valuable old town records, and several rare old books. All of these he disposed of easily to collectors in Nevada history.

The tavern keeper, however, did not go without reward. He refused to accept money, but allowed Dressler to purchase from a little furnishing store he owned—24 pairs of socks, two suits of clothes, two pairs of shoes, a gross of collars, and a dozen neckties.

"Often this collecting hobby is a battle of wits," says Dressler. "Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose."