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True to Twain Rare Books, Strands of Hair Are Among Collector's Prized Possessions

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

Bits and pieces of Mark Twain's legacy are scattered throughout Columbus in safe-deposit boxes. So are bits and pieces of Mark Twain.

Handwritten letters and manuscripts, original photographs and rare books, as well as strands of Twain's hair and some of his cigar ashes, have been stashed by Bob Slotta, known in rare book and collecting circles as "The Twainiac."

He has earned the sobriquet:

* Slotta married his wife, Lori, in Twain's hometown of Hannibal, Mo.

* He honeymooned in Bermuda, "because I knew Twain spent a lot of time there. I spent the whole honeymoon going around asking people about Mark Twain."

* He lives on the corner of Mark Twain Drive and Mark Twain Court, where, he says, "the twain finally meet."

* And, he has bought and sold some of the most impressive Mark Twain memorabilia that have come to market in the past 10 years.

"He's the super sluth of Twain collectibles," said Ed Hoffman, owner of Hoffman's Bookshop on Arcadia Avenue. "The day he told me he bought Mark Twain's rocking chair, I wasn't even surprised. He has turned up some incredible things."

Robert H. Hirst, general editor of the "Mark Twain Project" at the University of California Berkeley's Bancroft Library, concurred.

"Bob really knows his stuff," he said. "I don't know many dealers who offer money-back guarantees, but Bob can because he's so well informed. From my point of view, he's a wonderful resource."

In 1982, Slotta purchased a first edition of Twain's *Tramps Abroad* for \$20 at a Hiram College library book sale. (It was worth \$500.) He became a serious collector of all things Twain in 1986, after being introduced to Columbus resident Caroline Thomas Harnsberger, a close friend of Twain's daughter, Clara.

After a car accident in 1991, Slotta quit his job as an encyclopedia salesman for Colliers and dedicated his life to Twain.

“Before 1982, I didn’t know the difference between Samuel Clemens or Mark Twain,” Slotta said recently, surrounded in his office by photographs, posters and portraits of Twain, and by hundreds of books written by and about the humorist.

“The more I collected Twain, the more I came to admire him, for the advice he gave, for the philosophy he espoused, and for the laughter.”

Slotta owns the earliest known sample of Twain’s handwriting, a poem he dedicated, in a gift book, to his sister-in-law in 1856. He also owns the last manuscript handwritten by Twain.

And he owns the only known photograph of Twain’s son, Langdon, who died at age 2. (Twain wrote a note to Hart Crane on the photograph, making it even more noteworthy.)

Slotta’s honeymoon in Bermuda was particularly productive. While there he discovered one of Twain’s rocking chairs and the massive, 20-pound dictionary Twain referred to throughout much of his adult life.

“When Twain’s daughter died, he was distraught,” Slotta said. “He left Connecticut for Bermuda to get away from it all. But he sent a letter back home to his biographer, who was living with Twain in Connecticut, and asked him to send the dictionary, which, he said, he couldn’t live without.

“I bought that dictionary along with the rocking chair. There was only one deliberate marking in the dictionary, one deliberate marking in more than 2,000 pages. There is an ‘x’ next to the word prescient, which means a knowledge of things before they happen.

“When Twain left Bermuda, he told his hostess, Mrs. Allen, to ‘keep the dictionary, I won’t be needing it.’ He died 10 days after he returned from Bermuda.”

Slotta not only owned the dictionary, but also the letter Twain had sent to his biographer.

“I eventually sold the dictionary, but I found cigar ashes and strands of Twain’s hair in the book. I kept those,” he said.

In order to dedicate his life to Twain, Slotta was forced to sell his prized possessions. It has never gotten any easier, he said, to part with, say, a favorite manuscript or Samuel Clemens’ marriage certificate.

“I always say that rocking chair built this house,” Slotta said, motioning to his home.

“I’ve learned to deal with the pain of selling things out of my collection. Once I know it’s going to a person who will treasure it and understand its importance, I always feel a little better about things.

“I consider part of my job is finding the proper home for these materials.”

Most dealers in collectibles will offer a money-back guarantee on items found later to be forgeries. Slotta offers a double money-back guarantee, so certain is he of his expertise.

“If I were to find a piece of Mark Twain’s handwriting blowing in the wind, I would recognize it immediately,” he said.

Said Hoffman: “Bob can look at an autograph and not only tell you if it’s Twain, but probably what year it was written.”

There is a fine line between serious collecting and madness. Stories abound of collectors gone mad, stuffing stuff in garages and basements and warehouses without even knowing what they own.

But Slotta is a different sort of collector, according to Jay Hoster, owner, with his wife, Genie, of Books on High.

“For Bob, it all comes from the heart. He is a fan of Mark Twain first and last and always. Twain speaks to Bob from across the decades very, very strongly,” Hoster said.

“I’m especially interested in Bob’s take on Twain because he’s not an academic. He is intimately familiar with source material. His knowledge isn’t something he read in a biography of Twain that was dredged out of another biography of Twain.”

Slotta takes Twain personally. He was offended by Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s 1993 book *Was Huck Black?* and speaks of it, barely controlling his outrage, as if it had been published yesterday.

He excitedly points out contradictions in Fishkin’s thesis and turns to source material to refute several of the author’s main points. He is very persuasive.

“Everything has led me to Mark Twain and I have become a firm believer in fate,” Slotta said. “The more I read of Twain the more I find we have in common. Many of my thoughts, my beliefs, my feelings about life, I’m finding Twain had expressed them 125 years ago, albeit much more eloquently than I ever could.”