

History for the bidding: Rotman collection of Central Mass. memorabilia on auction block



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Telegram & Gazette

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WORCESTER — If your Christmas shopping list includes 100-year-old Major Taylor memorabilia, the original Worcester Base Ball Club's contract with the National League, an autographed certificate signed by Isaiah Thomas, a framed photo of Worcester's first candlepin bowling championship team or

other hard-to-find Worcester-centric antiques, collectibles and artifacts, we have the place for you.

For 70 years, Steven Rotman, president and CEO of Rotmans, has been collecting Worcester historical artifacts and memorabilia.

Now, Rotman — who ran a successful sports and memorabilia auction house in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the family furniture business Rotmans — has decided it's time to part ways with his extensive and eclectic collection.

“It’s probably the largest auction of Worcester County items in private hands,” Rotman said. “Over the years, many items have ended up in museums. And a lot of the museums don’t have heavy traffic. So I think the history of our county — Worcester County, Massachusetts, Central New England and New England — isn’t really felt by the majority of people, because they don’t see the things. They don’t feel them. They don’t really understand the history of where they are.”

Central Mass Auctions Inc. is conducting an auction of Rotman's collection of Worcester and New England memorabilia.



Bids for the virtual auction are being accepted now, with the auction happening at 6 p.m. Dec. 7. A live preview of the 700 lots hitting the auction block will be from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at Rotmans, 725 Southbridge St.

The collection features advertising items from Worcester merchants and manufacturers from days gone by, including an Andreson & Patterson's Crown Quality Ice Cream tin sign, L.W. Pond Machine Co. print, Worcester Corset Co. trade card, Forehand Arms Co. firearms catalog (1894), G.F. Wright Steel & Wire Co. catalog and Plunger Elevator Co. catalog.

Also up for grabs are many catalogs, newspapers and books, such as a Lake Quinsigamond picture book from the early 1900s; a combination Worcester almanac, directory and business advertising book from 1845; a program for the Worcester Air Pageant held in 1927 in North Grafton; Remonstrance Against Division of Worcester County book from 1850 with foldout map; Worcester Legends book from 1905; Worcester YMCA 60th Anniversary book

from 1924); 1919 Worcester Telegram Peace Edition — End of World War I; and Massachusetts Worcester Gazettes, circa 1784.

Signature items include an American Antiquarian Society certificate signed by Isaiah Thomas, 1819 signed Andrew Jackson Tom Cribbs Memorial to Congress, a card signed by Abby Kelley Foster, and Centrum concert programs signed by Paul Simon, Neil Diamond and Randy Travis.

And if you are into sharp objects, one of the knives made by the Buck Brothers — who came from England and arrived in Worcester in the 1840s and set up a knife factory on Southbridge Street — is on the auction block, as well as a battle sword used by Edmund N. Benchley of Worcester, a West Point graduate, Class of 1884, who was killed in action in the Spanish-American War and the brother of humorist and actor Robert Benchley.

From street signs to medals

Other Worcester-centric merchandise include a Worcester Place enamel street sign, Worcester police and fire badges of various ranks, war medals and an F.B. Norton & Co. stoneware crock.

Wayne A. Tuiskula, auctioneer and appraiser at Central Mass. Auctions Inc., said the Rotman collection is very impressive with so many varied items.



“Steve (Rotman) didn’t just focus on books or one type of things,” Tuiskula said. “There’s a lot of things that history buffs will like but it’s a wide variety from sports items to advertising to police badges and the Major Taylor collection. It’s just impressive that he has such a wide range of different items in this sale that he’s collected over the years.”



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The 83-year-old Rotman said he started collecting Worcester memorabilia when he was 13.

“We have hundreds of bottles from Worcester. I used to go looking in Coes Pond and Lake Quinsigamond,” Rotman said. “I was all excited with my bicycle at the time. I was very aware the history of cycling in Worcester, because a lot of the early bicycles were made in Worcester. I found that Worcester was the beginning of many things.”

Memorabilia of Marshall W. “Major” Taylor, the first Black cycling world champion and Worcester resident for 35 years, has already garnered interest. Major Taylor memorabilia includes magazines from 1902 to 1908, a 1908 bicycle race trade card, postcard, pins and photos, a majority of which Rotman found in France.

“Major Taylor moved over there (to France). I don’t know if it was because of the racial atmosphere here but he found life to be comfortable over there. He raced a lot over there,” Tuiskula said. “A lot of the memorabilia of his is printed in France, like that postcard (being auctioned) is French. There are magazines that are French publications. That card is also a French card.”

Rotman credits Isaiah Thomas, who established the “Massachusetts Spy” (later “Worcester Spy”) newspaper in 1770 and the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester in 1812, for the existence of many of the historical documents dating back to the 1700s, some of which are being auctioned.

“Worcester was really founded, in a sense, by a lot of people that left Boston because of the fear of the English taking over. And a lot of documents left Boston to come to Worcester. So the beginning of Worcester was really Isaiah Thomas, the history coming from Boston to Worcester,” Rotman said. “He really set in stone, in a sense, that Worcester would become the place where all the documents were kept. Probably two-thirds of all the printed material prior to the 1830s is in Worcester at the Antiquarian Society. So we’re sort of known as the place where all these things began. And I saw all these items and nobody had any interest. And I was concerned that they would be destroyed.”

Reflection of Worcester's importance

Rotman said his collection shows some of the unsung importance and significance of Worcester in our country’s history.

“This collection should give people of Worcester and Worcester County an understanding that the beginning of most of the industries in the United

States started here. And if we didn't do what we did, we wouldn't have advanced the technology we have today," Rotman said. "Worcester, with its 10 to 12 colleges and universities, really stimulates the fact that we really started a lot of things. And the history goes back a long way. And I think the more we understand the history, the more we understand our roots and where we are."



As to the question if it was going to be painful or difficult to part with the extensive collection that he has accumulated over the years, Rotman said he never felt that he really owned the items. He was just guarding them for safekeeping.

“I look at the items and say they’re not really mine. I was really protecting them for the next people who want to enjoy them. So it’s always has been in my thinking that it would eventually move on to some other people,” Rotman said. “You reach a certain point when you realize that you have to move on and have other people get involved. I’m at that point where everything is difficult when you get older...I think it’s part of life that we have to pass on.”

One day when he was still an avid collector, Rotman got a call from Marcus A. McCorison, who, at the time, was the executive director of American Antiquarian Society, inviting him to become a society member. It was the same year President Jimmy Carter became a member, Rotman points out.

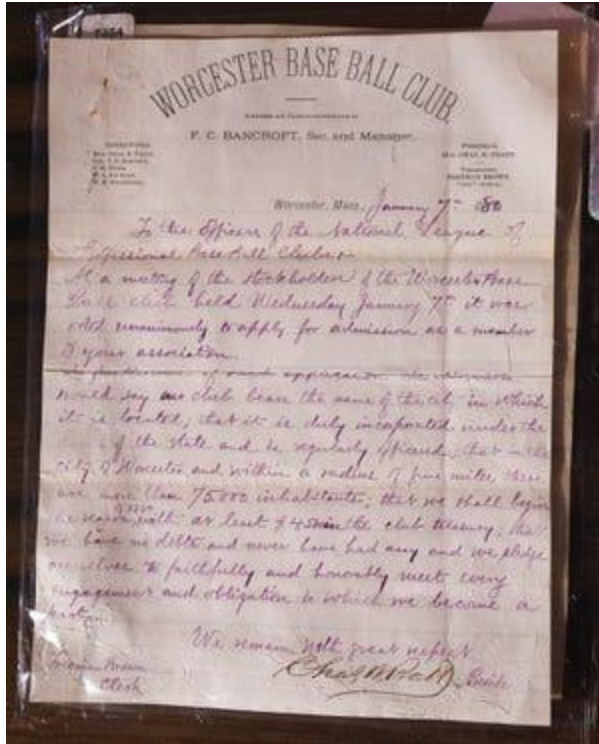
“He (McCorison) said to me, ‘You know, now that you’re in the society, you collect a lot a things related to Worcester. There are some things that we need. And we would love to work with you to get that accomplished. And I hope that you would do that.’” Rotman said. “And I said, ‘If there’s a request, I will work with you to try to get it accomplished.’”

Rotman said he feels that some of the items in his personal collection that are on the auction block will end up in the American Antiquarian Society and the Worcester Historical Museum. He and Tuiskula both predict Worcester Baseball Club’s application letter and contract in the National League.

Worcester enters the major leagues

“In 1881, the Worcester Base Ball Club ended up applying for the National League and saying, we would like to become a member. And then they waited. And finally they got the letter that said they were accepted,” Rotman said. “I have the application from the Worcester Base Ball Club and I have the letter of them getting accepting. And they’re in this auction.”

As for this one-of-a-kind find, Rotman said somebody found a long, forgotten safe in New York that hadn’t been opened for decades that turned out to belong one of the early commissioners of baseball.



“They opened it, finally, and they find all of these contracts,” Rotman said. “Because I was friendly with somebody who was involved in that find, he called me to tell me that there were Worcester things available in it.”

While the baseball contract was a major find, Rotman said early artifacts and memorabilia related to candlepin bowling were as hard to find because it’s not one of the major sports in the country.

But he did find an early, rudimentary set of candlepins, as well as an early portrait of the candlepin championship team in Worcester.

“Worcester is where it’s started,” Rotman said of candlepin bowling. “I have a picture of one of the first championship teams in Worcester. It started in the 1880s. So, we think, this is the first team professional picture.”



Another aspect of the auction that Rotman thinks people will be astonished by is how Worcester was once a big bottle manufacturer.

“I don’t think people realize the amazing amount of bottles that were produced in Worcester. There were many, many companies producing bottles but the brand of the bottle is different. So companies around the country, very early on, used Worcester to make their bottles,” Rotman said. “Because of the fear of Boston being bombarded and destroyed by England, a lot of things moved to Worcester, which was only 40 miles away. We were the major town that was going to save the commonwealth.”

In the end, Tuiskula predicts the auction will make six figures.

“There are items that are definitely big draws. Some of the things are so important, historically, having Isaiah Thomas’ signature. There’s a book signed by Andrew Jackson,” Tuiskula said. “Steve got things from the 18th century to Centrum programs. It has been fascinating to look at while I cataloged it because Steve had such a wide focus. To have so many items like this in one place related to Worcester I haven’t seen before.”