

Bob Burke makes his living as an attorney and is widely known as an author, but the passion that will not let him go is for amassing endless collections of very interesting “stuff.”



The Collector

By MICHAEL WATERS
Photos by ROBERT TAYLOR

continued



Bob Burke, right, points out some personal favorites to OU President David Boren from the extensive collection of political campaign buttons that he donated to the OU Libraries and were put on display last spring.



Depending on his mood, Burke will either credit or blame his predilection for collecting on a childhood spent in rural Oklahoma, just outside of Broken Bow. Beginning with stamps and leaves, Burke soon moved on to more ambitious pursuits, such as signed baseballs from the 1961 New York Yankees, who rank among the greatest home run hitting teams of all times.

As long as there have been objects to collect, people have been diagnosed with the “collecting bug.”

This little creature compels an infected person to fill up a den or study with hundreds of rare objects as disparate as coins, stamps, figurines, ancient beer bottles and even odder esoterica. The bug gives its victims a heightened sense of enjoyment and can induce euphoria whenever they locate a particularly prized and long-sought item. Often the afflicted will gab at length to friends and family about their discoveries. Levels of infection range from mild, to moderate, to severe.

Then there is the Bob Burke level—which, to borrow a phrase from the Temptations, is so high you can't get over it.

The affable Burke is well aware of his malady. “I think I've had it my whole life,” chuckles the Oklahoma City attorney, OU graduate and master multi-tasker.

He is not kidding. Burke's youthful passion for garden-variety collecting evolved over time into something light years beyond an ordinary hobby. He has put together one of the world's finest collections of rare Bibles, valued at several hundred thousands of dollars and since donated to OU's University Libraries. His extensive set of political campaign buttons from the last 80 years also has gone to the OU Libraries, and was put on public display in spring 2008. The centerpiece of his vast efforts is a sprawling, overlapping collection of some 15,000 historical and contemporary autographs, parts of which can be found at OU and other institutions as well.

“I love history very much. I'm an avid historian,” Burke says. “And I love collecting things.”

These twin loves took root at the age of seven. Burke grew up in a rural home outside of Broken Bow, where he put together his first collections—ordinary things such as stamps and leaves. Yet even then he did things on a big scale. He used paper-route money to buy baseball cards by the hundreds from a local five-and-dime.

“I was an only child and lived out in the country and often did not have playmates. My parents both worked in at their insurance agency in town. So, in the summers if I was not reading, I was collecting.”

By the time he started high school, Burke's interests turned



Burke still owns the baseball card collection he began while he was in elementary school. Even as a youngster, Burke could not resist the thrill of the hunt and used his income from a paper route to buy hundreds of cards, like this one featuring Oklahoma super slugger Mickey Mantle.

to fossils—boxes of them. After his parents bought their enterprising son a Hallicrafters shortwave radio, he amassed dozens of QSL cards, those colorful postcards sent by amateur radio operators to confirm two-way communications between stations.

While still in his teens, he obtained the first of a myriad of autographs. “In 1964, my father was for Barry Goldwater, and I wrote him a letter asking for an autographed picture. And he sent one back. I thought, ‘This is pretty cool.’”

Burke's career ambitions gave him an insider's opportunity to pursue the famous. He went into broadcasting, working as a radio and television sports journalist in Oklahoma City and New York. A three-year stint as an all-night disc jockey at Oklahoma City's KOMA during its '60s reign as a pop music powerhouse brought him into contact with stars of the day, and he took every opportunity to put pens in the hands of the celebrated. Over the decades he has amassed autographed albums and photos by luminaries—Bob Dylan, the

Rolling Stones, Madonna and a few hundred others.

After completing his 1970 bachelor's in communication at OU and a law degree at Oklahoma City University, Burke went to work as an attorney and into public service as well, as Governor David Boren's Secretary of Commerce. He also began a prolific life as a nonfiction author and has since written more than 80 books, focused on the state and its most famous citizens.

Meanwhile Burke's ongoing fascination with history took his burgeoning autograph collection far beyond celebrities and pop stars. Working primarily with an autograph dealer in New Hampshire, he began a 30-year effort to collect signatures of every president of the United States. He also obtained, through dealers, estate sales and private purchases, a wide range of historical autographs—vice presidents (every one), first ladies (all but two), signers of the Declaration of Independence (about half), and numerous U.S. Supreme Court justices, Civil War generals and authors. Meanwhile he kept up his letter-writing, requesting autographed photos and usually getting them. Most public figures are “very gracious” about such inquiries, he observes.

Far from hindering his passion for collecting, Burke's legal

career actually helped by affording him travel opportunities.

“One time my law partner and I settled a big case in 1986, then we took two months off and went around the world. I bought Bibles and rare books from Copenhagen to Bangkok. Also, anytime I went to other American cities on cases, the first thing I did when I got to my hotel room was look in the yellow pages and track down rare book stores. And I would discover incredible finds.”

His Oklahoma City law office looks unassuming at first glance. But a visitor quickly notices hangings on the back wall—fossils of 250-million-year-old fish bones and scales, along with a 250-million-year-old rose rock and a relatively recent 5,000-year-old bison tooth from the Arkansas River. A framed copy of a book by Oklahoma’s Ralph Ellison is taken from yet another of Burke’s collections, comprising some 2,000 Sooner state-related books.

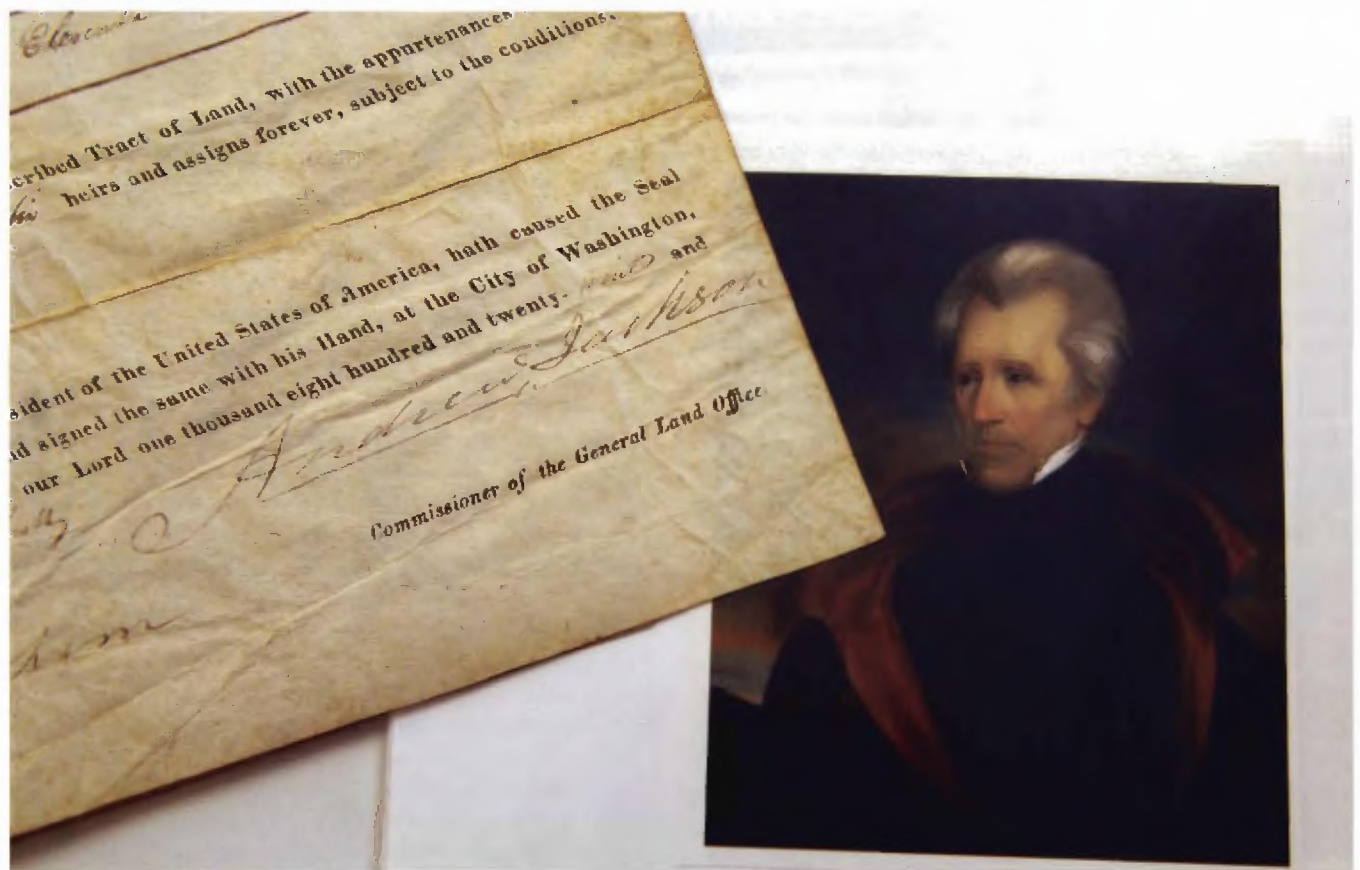
Burke points with pride to his right. “I’ve selected for this wall

some of my favorite autographs of American authors—Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Washington Irving. And over there is a handwritten lawsuit by a young Francis Scott Key.” Another frame contains handwritten sheet music by Mozart. Elsewhere in the well-ordered room sits a case displaying baseballs signed by members of the 1961 New York Yankees.

True to form, Burke’s collections of signatures from authors and historical figures run into the hundreds. His office storeroom is crammed with autographed photos—some framed, some waiting in stacks—of everyone from Roy Rogers to Hillary Clinton to Cher and the cast of the television series “Law and Order.”

The historical autographs are kept in bulging three-ring binders. Burke has made time to sort out the massive collections of author signatures (three volumes, alphabetized), Civil War generals (an alphabetized volume, with capsule biographies of each general), and still others. When he rifles through a binder bursting with signed photographs of more than a hundred world lead-

“We have a running joke that I’ve got to give all this stuff away or she’ll sell it on eBay. I’m not sure she’s kidding about that.”



This signature of Andrew Jackson on a land grant is just one of several volumes of historical documents Burke has acquired over time. His collection of autographs includes Civil War generals, American authors from Washington Irving to Ernest Hemingway, and entertainers such as Roy Rogers, the cast of “Law and Order” and Cher.



Collector Bob Burke is rapidly giving away collections of a lifetime, partly to make them publicly accessible and partly at the strong urging of his wife, Chimene, left, who hopes that new collections do not take their place.

ers, he speaks with a boyish intensity that peels away his 60 years.

“See? There’s John Major. Here’s the Prime Minister of India . . . and Lech Walesa. Isn’t this cool? This is King Sihanouk of Cambodia, and here’s Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. Here’s the King of Nepal. There’s the President of Liechtenstein . . . and that’s the Prime Minister of Croatia. There’s a Castro signature. Okay, look here—Desmond Tutu, from 1991.”

Somehow Burke’s relish for his collections, his book writing and his law practice does not seem to get in the way of family time. He credits his ability to live on five hours of sleep a night. (Sleep, he says, is “a waste of time.”) He has been dad to six children and tries to see his four grandchildren “every other day.” As for his mostly understanding wife, Chimene, he says, “We have a running joke that I’ve got to give all this stuff away or she’ll sell it on eBay. I’m not *sure* she’s kidding about that.”


With all this, is there anything else Burke would like to collect?

“License plates,” he admits. “One time in rural Oklahoma, I saw this incredible collection of license plates that a guy had put on his garage door. And I looked at my wonderful wife, and she said, ‘No.’ So that’s probably the only thing I’ve ever wanted to collect that I never have.”

If he ever does add a few hundred, or a few thousand, license plates to his holdings, there is a chance he will find somewhere to put them. His philanthropy is a saving grace. Recently he gave OU’s Western History Collections a set of 162 autographs by prominent Western stars. In addition to his gifts to OU, he has given Oklahoma City University a set of signatures from U.S. Supreme Court justices, 92 in all. As he gestures once more around the cluttered storeroom at some signed OU football memorabilia, he says, “Much of this framed stuff is going to the Jim Thorpe Association for a big auction. I’ve also given a lot of my sports stuff to the new Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame.

“So I’m *trying* to get rid of it.”

It is a better bet that he will keep filling up that storeroom with new collections to replace the donated ones. Then he probably will give those away, too.

But his obsession surely will be to the good of the many history buffs at OU and elsewhere who continue to benefit from Bob Burke’s life-long bout with an incurable bug. 

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Most kids have collected a fossil or two in their lives, but Burke took the pastime to a new level. Carefully mounted and displayed, Burke’s collection contains treasures from a 5,000-year-old bison tooth to a 300-million-year-old goniatite.