
The Beginning Collector

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As an experienced collector of slide rules I like to share my experience with beginning collectors. I am a born collector of stamps, old cameras (I have 950 different ones), and am also a slide rule collector (I have 1600 different ones). I collect many other things. I hope that this sets the scene for you. I do not care to say how old I am, but I have been collecting stamps for 65 years, cameras for 30 years, and slide rules for 25 years.

One of the quips that I wrote when I retired from 31 years with Shell Oil Company is: "Teachers, managers and collectors are born, not made". If you are older than 30, and you have never been a real collector, I think you should not start collecting, because you are not a born collector. People who keep stamps in a shoe box and say "I will start collecting when I retire", will in fact never start collecting when they reach 65 years of age.

My experience is that as a beginner one tends to buy every slide rule one sees that is cheap. You also let friends and colleagues know you collect slide rules, because then you will get many of them for free. These two facts show that normally in the beginning most people who start a collection have no plan for their collection, because they have to learn about what they are collecting as they go along.

My history and theme of collecting has been:

1. Buy everything when cheap, even if you think that you have one already, because there are many variants, and as a real collector I like to have the variants as well. Cheaply bought duplicates can always be sold cheaply to a colleague or a starting collector.

2. If a rule is damaged, a corner missing, has cracks in the body or is very much discolored, do not touch it unless you get it for free. A missing cursor is a pity but no reason not to buy the rule, and of course you can haggle on the price. Refer to my condition description at the end of this article. I will never buy C8 and only buy C7 if it is nearly free. I will hardly touch condition C6, which means well worn, but C5, C4, C3, C2, C1 and C0 are all very collectable.

3. Depending on your budget, buy the expensive ones, say \$100 and above, only if you know it is rare in the category RRR (see below for my definition of rarity). Find out from friends whether the rule is indeed rare. Many rare ones are discussed in *JOS*. Often I have been offered a rule that I considered too expensive, did not buy, and found one three months later in better condition for half the price. Still, the very special one you may only see once in your life you should buy when you find it, because somebody is probably looking over your shoulder waiting for you to put it back on the table.

I realize that in the US sometimes prices go through

the roof; in Europe in general prices tend to be lower than in the US. During the last ten years some of us were able to buy old factory stock and get it very cheaply, while in principle such items were reasonably rare. I had that happen to me with military rules and some Graphoplex rules. The excess went to colleague collectors for reasonably low prices. Some I gave away, because I had another, saying in effect that "in any situation where you have more than seven duplicates one is worth nothing", because you can not sell or swap more than six of them.

4. Specialization in collecting very often only comes in time and for a variety of reasons. You may like the watch types, or cylinders, or military, or aviation, or 50 cm ones, or 10 cm small ones, or a certain make or other types, not related to your (previous) job, but because you happen to have several of these and you like them.

5. This section is only for those over 70 years of age. I am a collector who, because of age, is now mainly looking at the very special rules. I have so many that at a certain moment I say: yes, it is a different one, but it really looks so much like the one I already have, I pass and do not buy it. But then if I see one that is really different I go for it and I am prepared to spend a bit more. Although I also have many variations, I may sell most of these in the next two years, but of course only after I have taken a picture and put them in my CD Catalogue. Even if I sell one, I still have a feeling that I have it, be it on the screen of my computer or on a printout. But this item is for me as a 70 year old, and is much more applicable than when you are below 55 years of age and/or a beginner. What is to be done if you die is a separate subject, particularly if your children have no interest in the hobby. In that case you have a potential problem. Of course that is only of importance for the collector over 90, but it may be a good idea to start thinking about it when you reach 70. A third comment is: "never give your whole collection to a museum", because they will show at most 10 items, and the rest will be stored in the cellar. There your collection is out of the collectors' circuit, which is a pity. You may consider giving them the five special ones they consider worth having, as long as the museum people promise to show them permanently.

6. In the old camera-collecting world during the last 10 years something happened that I have also seen happening in stamp collecting, and which will also be true for slide rule collecting. While 15 years ago a box camera from the years 1910-1920 was worth 30 guilders, today the 1600 collectors in the Netherlands all have many box cameras and the price has gone down to a 10-guilder level. Only the very special ones are still worth money. The same is true for a Leica camera; here the condition has become the important factor. Now only the Leicas in mint condition are worth money. The result is that cameras that are rare and/or that are in mint condition will keep their value and may become worth more in the future. This is already happening with slide rules as well.

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In the slide rule world there are only a few people prepared to pay more than, let us say, \$100 US for a single rule.

These days I sell my Aristo 0903 LL slide rules for 5 Dutch guilders, but only when I find a buyer who is interested in a variation he still does not have, or if the rule is in mint condition in the original new box. By the way, there are at least 20 variations of the Aristo 0903 LL.

A last piece of advice: do not be too optimistic on the value of your whole collection. Here I am talking about an average type of collection with a bit of every thing. There are many rules in such a collection that a person will have great problems selling because, the number of collectors in the world that is prepared to pay reasonable prices, is very small. Neither are there many auctions of slide rules of any importance. I have not yet seen an auction of 2000 slide rules.

In round numbers: I spent 50,000 buying 3,000 items. I have sold 900 items for 30,000. I have insured what I still have (1,600 in my collection and 500 duplicates) for 110,000, and I would be happy if somebody paid me, one week before I die, 55,000. Whether this is Liras, Pesetas, US dollars, or other currency is up to you. I am still trying to find a good friend who is prepared to help my wife sell my collection if it becomes necessary.

Although the last part of my story sounds a bit sad, I am not a pessimist. Every day I enjoy looking at my collection, seeing other collectors' items, working on my slide rule CD (adding on average 60 a month) and reading about what is going on in the small world of slide rule collectors.

Rarity

For describing rarity the following codes are suggested:

- **Common** Four out of five collectors have one; can be bought at flea markets.
- **R** Only one out of five collectors has one, may come up for sale every month.
- **RR** One out of 25 collectors has one; it may take a year to find an example in the market place.
- **RRR** Very rare, only one or two known to collectors; may take several years before it comes up for sale.
- **RRRR** Extremely rare; a museum piece; unlikely that an example will ever come up for sale.

Condition Description

This is a suggested standardization of condition descriptions:

C0 = Mint condition with all extras such as box, case and instruction manual present also in mint condition, factory clean.

C1 = Mint condition with all extras such as box, case and instruction manual present but these extras not or not all in mint condition.

C2 = Mint condition but without one or more of the extras.

C3 = Very minimal signs of use (first impression is that it is new but by careful inspection you find a slight scratch)

C4 = Minimal signs of use (say on the back side on end plate one can see it was used, otherwise very nice)

C5 = Signs of normal use (one third of all rules are C5)

C6 = Signs of heavy use (ugly but not damaged)

C7 = Small damage but for the rest C4 quality or better.

C8 = Damaged and well worn.²