

Tattoo Archive

Contributed by WaterTattoos.Net
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There are quite a few hats that I wear here. I'm a tattooer, I have a mail order business, selling posters and post cards and stuff, and then I do quarterly newsletters, so I do a lot of writing and research on the history of tattooing. The mail order business - that aspect of the Tattoo Archive actually started when I first started getting tattooed, which was in 1965. I started collecting business cards and such then - and flash, and machines if I could afford them. And then as things went on I would go to conventions and meet more and more tattooers and others who were interested in the history of tattooing, so I came up with the idea of - instead of buying just a single one of these items that comes my way - a book, or whatever - I would buy whatever I could afford and I would resell them to kind of cater to these other collectors.

The mail order aspect of the Archive actually grew out of my desire to collect. The first catalog had 12 items, and now I think I have about 400 or so: posters, postcards, books, videos, all sorts of things like that. Mostly paper items, which is my obsession.

I did an apprenticeship with Ed Hardy in the mid-seventies in San Francisco and I've been tattooing ever since. I worked for Hardy, and then I worked for Paul Jeffries for a while, and for Dean Dennis in San Francisco, and then for Goldfield in San Francisco, and then in the mid-eighties I got my own shop here in Berkeley. So I've been working here at this same location on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley since then.

The research aspect of the Archive - that's the quarterly newsletter, which is called "The Archive File", is 10 or 12 years old now. That evolved out my collecting again. I would gather all this information up, and being an Aries I kept it in some sort of filing system so I had access to it. And then organizations such as National would ask me to write historical stuff, so I started trying to assemble this information into some kind of form that people could decipher. I wrote for quite a few years for the newsletters: "National", "Tattoo Life", and "Tattoo Buzz" in England, and "Tattoo International".

All the stuff that I was writing was all historical. I'd tell people "I only write about people that are dead. And there seemed to be more and more interest in tattoo history, so about 10 or 12 years ago I actually started a quarterly historical newsletter which is known as the "Archive File". It's a relatively modest newsletter. At this point it has kind of evolved into one continuing article which I call "Tattoo History from A to Z". Back in the 80's I started writing for Lyle Tuttle's "Tattoo Historian" and came up with a column idea. It was "Tattoo History from A to Z", and I started with the letter A in the alphabet and now I'm up to M, so it's taken me almost a decade to get up to the middle of the alphabet. So it's kind of a lifetime project, I think. There are about 100 people who subscribe to the "Archive File".

Here at the Archive we are also the mailing address and the operating base for the Paul Rogers Tattoo Research Center, which is actually a California and federal non-profit. So we do have our 5013C license from them, and what we're trying to do is to create a collection of tattoo stuff that actually belongs to the whole tattoo community, rather than just to a single individual. The base for this collection was Paul Rogers's own personal collection. He had his stroke and then he died in 1990 I think it was, and about 1993 we formed the Paul Rogers Tattoo Research Center. When he died, he left his collection to the Archive. All of his tattoo stuff. He worried about what was going to happen to his 60 years of accumulation of tattoo-related stuff: machines, flash, personal correspondence, business cards. You name it - he had it.

And so he worried about what was going to happen to that collection as many old-time tattooers do. He made out his will about four years before he had his stroke and died. All of his tattoo stuff would go to the Tattoo Archive. I had met Paul probably 20 years before and spent quite a bit of time with him. It was kind of a surprise to me actually. All of a sudden one day I received a letter from Paul and in it was a copy of his will. He wanted to make sure that I knew that all this stuff had been left to the Tattoo Archive. That just kind of came out of the blue. Paul never mentioned that to me. And then the letter arrived that this was where it was going to go. And so we talked about it. I visited him many times before his death.. After Paul's stroke it was obvious that he was never going to be able to go back to his trailer and live the life that he had before the stroke. His oldest son, Leonard, who was the executor of his estate, decided to settle the estate and sell the trailer and the piece of land and all of this because Paul was obviously going to have to stay in a nursing home and have individual care for the rest of his life.

So I went to Paul's place and packed all of his stuff up and shipped it back. It sat here for a while just as part of the Archive collection. Paul made a big impact on me personally and professionally. And I just felt that somehow this stuff should just not be part of the Archive. It should kind of have a life of its own. So we formed the non-profit and now I'm busy assessing Paul's collection into the non-profit. So that's going to be the base for what we hope some day would be a permanent collection housed, hopefully, in the Bay Area.

Paul did not have a massive collection of stuff in relation to Lyle Tuttle's. But he did have a little bit of everything. He had business cards, books, etc. - he had a little bit of almost every tattoo collectible there was. So there really was a great

representation of all the memorabilia that kind of evolved around the tattoo scene. So I thought it would make an interesting collection. Of course, we are buying and acquiring and are certainly being given other stuff that is going into the Paul Rogers collection, so it will be broader than just Paul's. So that will give us at least a base to work from.

I worked desperately to try to keep the Archive and the Paul Rogers Collection separate. And I think in most people's minds they are pretty separate. It's massively time-consuming, but it's also fun, too, because I get to handle all these artifacts. I'm doing it pretty much single-handed. I have an apprentice that just came and she's very dedicated and diligent, so she'll be a big help. I have also had some help from a few volunteers in the area, so there are some people who are stepping forward to help.

When we formed the Paul Rogers Collection in 1993 our goal was to start fund-raising, and our aim was to have enough money to secure a space by the year 2,000. It's moving along. The first year of course was fabulous and then the hard part is to maintain that momentum, so we keep chugging away. We did the "Flash from the Past" book, which was a nice fund-raiser, and we're hoping to do another one of those.

I just chip away at it one item at a time. It's not like there's going to be a big revelation and all of a sudden there's going to be all these history buffs in the tattoo scene. I think what we've just got to do is chip away at them one at a time and win those converts over. Persistence will pay off. That's my take on it. If there are 10,000 tattooers in the country there may be 400 of them that are interested in the history, and the rest of them could care less. What I think the crux of the problem is with the new generation of tattooers is that the majority of them did not come through a traditional apprenticeship. And so they don't have that link with the old school. I find that an amazing number of them actually realize they missed out and now are really hungry. At conventions they come to my booth and they come and visit me here and I get calls from these people who are trying to seek this information out. And they actually realize that they did miss something.

The starter kits and the supplier ads in the magazines are just going to compound that further and further. Now, those tattooers that are tattooing with lots of technical skill are going to start teaching other tattooers. If they have no history to teach them, then the next generation has the same deficit. I think the history of this business is so fascinating that it should be passed on. I'm just like a zealot for it. I think some of it's just going to rub off on them. If they get around me enough it'll just rub off. I love the history and I think I would continue to write the stuff and print it even if I didn't have any subscribers to that newsletter. Because when I finish one of those issues of that newsletter I've learned more than any of the readers will. It's been a much better experience for me than it could be for anybody out there that it goes to because I got to do all that research.