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WAR OF 1812

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Militaria collectors show growing interest in War of 1812 artifacts



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The bicentennial celebrations of the War of 1812 have generated new enthusiasm for the period among militaria collectors, people who seek out and preserve antique weapons, uniforms and war medals.

“War of 1812 items are more popular and desirable than ever,” says Angela Koszuta, owner and operator of the Toronto Military Show, a militaria market. “When something special turns up from that period at one of our vendors booths, there’s a big buzz that goes through the hall.”

Demand for militaria is growing: the Toronto Military Show now stages six shows annually, twice as many as it held a few years ago. The Ottawa Military Heritage Show is another popular market, and its late October show was crowded with vendors and buyers.

Among them was vendor Louis Grimshaw, a military antique dealer (www.grimshaw-military.on.ca) from Kingston, Ont. He displayed a British bayonet made between 1750 to 1840 — “they didn’t change the design regularly,” Grimshaw says — which could have been used in the War of 1812. Priced at \$175, it was one of the few relics available at the show.

“The problem is that there are very few 1812 artifacts available to the public in Canada,” says Grimshaw. “Compared to other military conflicts, it was a short and small war. As well, there really wasn’t the same culture among people of saving war-related items, as there was after World Wars One and Two.”

This doesn’t mean that 1812 artifacts aren’t available. Another vendor at the Ottawa show had a British cavalry/light infantry sword on sale linked to the war. But aside from swords, bayonets, badges, buttons and muskets, 1812 militaria is scarce.

The most prized items tend to be in public collections. The uniform worn by Sir Isaac Brock when he was killed at the Battle of Queenston Heights in October, 1812, is on display at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. The faded red coat still bears the hole produced by the bullet that took Brock’s life.

There are almost as many reasons for acquiring militaria as there are collectors. Some want to own artifacts linked to local historical events, says Carroll Delery, an online militaria dealer (historicalshop.com) based in Metairie, La.

“For instance, my interest in the War of 1812 has to do with the 1814 Battle of New Orleans, where Americans defeated British invaders,” he says. “For people living in the Niagara region, they want artifacts from the battles that took place there.”



Some individuals collect militaria just for the sake of collecting. “They collect badges, swords or muskets the way others collect beer bottles or hockey cards,” says Grimshaw. Significant militaria of national interest attracts institutions and private investors with deep pockets.

War of 1812 artifacts continue to appear on the market, deriving from various sources. Some were acquired during the war and carefully passed down generation by generation. Others were stored away and forgotten in attics, boxes, and government storehouses. Still more have been discovered by collectors using metal detectors in old battlefields. Regrettably, many of these sites are no longer available to the amateur collector.

“Most of the War of 1812’s battlefields are not accessible,” says Grimshaw. “Fort Detroit has long been paved over, while Crysler’s Farm was flooded when they built the St. Lawrence Seaway.”

Militaria acquired from such digs typically has little value — its condition is frequently poor and the provenance of such items is often obscure. The most valuable militaria is accompanied by documents that prove its authenticity.

“As with any valuable collectables, there are always issues with copies and counterfeiting,” says Koszuta. “But if you are buying from a reputable dealer, they should stand by it and include documentation and/or provenance.”

The final Toronto Military Show of 2012 will be held Saturday Nov. 10th at The Markham Fairgrounds in Markham, Ont. For details, go to www.torontomilitaryshow.com.