

Russ Marshall has built a collection of well over 10,000 old wrenches. Some of them date back to the mid-1800's.

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Bucket Of Wrenches Leads To Massive Collection

When he was a teenager, Russ Marshall, Allen, Nebraska, was given a 5-gal. bucket of wrenches by his grandfather, Walter Swan, Coleridge, Nebraska. From that small start, Marshall has built a collection of well over 10,000 - maybe even closer to 15,000 - old wrenches. Some date back to the mid-1800's.

He auctioned off about 1,300 duplicate wrenches from his collection last year at an average price of around \$40 per wrench. "Some brought just a few dollars, but several sold for hundreds of dollars," he notes.

But wrench collecting isn't about the money, he says. He just likes the shape and look of the wrenches. He likes adjustable wrenches and notes that they are often worth more than other wrenches so other collectors like them, too.

Some of Marshall's wrenches have many heads. "I just got one that was put out by the Monmouth Plow Co., Monmouth Illinois, that has three different sized open-end heads on one end and a socket-like head on the other."

He likes wrenches that have a story. One of his oldest wrenches was put out by John P. Manny, a Rockford, Illinois reaper maker. The story is that Cyrus McCormick thought the design of Manny's reaper was too close to his own. So he filed a patent infringement lawsuit against Manny in 1855. Manny hired a hick country lawyer named Abraham Lincoln to defend him against McCormick's charges and when Lincoln helped him prevail over the bigger machinery maker, Manny paid him \$1,000 for his work. While there's no date on the wrench, Marshall figures it was probably included with a reaper sold a few years after the case was decided.

Some of Marshall's wrenches have patent issue dates on them. The oldest of these is a buggy wrench patented in 1873.

Marshall got encouragement in collecting from a great uncle, Walt Meier, Randolph, Nebraska, who is also a collector. Meier helped found the Missouri Valley Wrench Club. "To my knowledge, it's the only collectors club dedicated strictly to wrenches," Marshall says. Despite its name, the club's more than 500 members come from 49 of the 50 states, most of the Canadian provinces and parts of the United Kingdom, too.

While he's collected for more than 20 years, Marshall says he began to take it more seriously about 10 years ago. Since then, he's averaged more than 10 hours a week reading sale bills, going to auctions and swap meets, and talking on the telephone tracking down

additions for his collection. He's also purchased whole collections. And in recent years, he's found a lot of wrenches offered for sale on the Internet, mostly through E-bay. "Sometimes, people just give old wrenches to me," he adds.

Marshall, recognized as having one of the largest wrench collections in the world, says there are still a lot of old wrenches out there to collect. "And they're making more of them every year. Some wrenches are collectable as soon as they're sold," he says.

He says collecting wrenches is easier than collecting old farm machinery. "They take up a lot less space and you don't have to get them out and use them once in awhile to make sure they still run. But since so many of these were sold with machines or implements, owning a wrench is like owning a part of a machine," he says. Another good thing is that unlike some things you can collect, wrenches seldom get broken and destroyed if they're packed wrong, fall off their display table, or are dropped by a curious child (or adult).

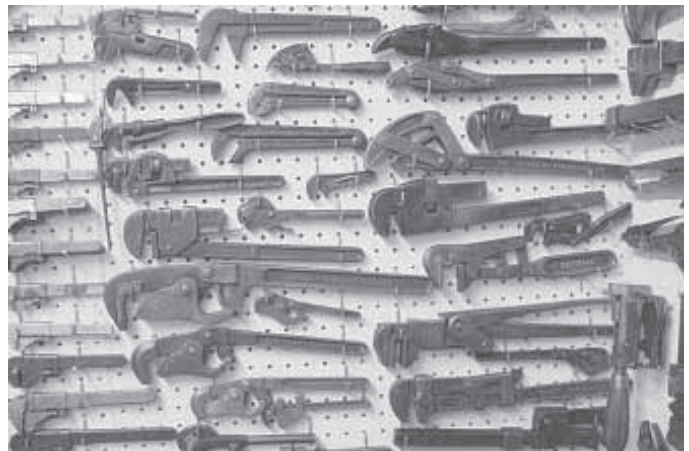
For people interested in collecting wrenches, Marshall has two suggestions. First, join the Missouri Valley Wrench Club. Dues are only \$10 a year and include a quarterly newsletter listing wrenches for sale and people looking for wrenches as well as members' wrench collecting tips. "The biggest benefit is the members themselves," Marshall says. "I've never met a wrench collector I didn't like."

Current club secretary is Virgil Saak, 403 Polk, Baxter, Iowa 50028 (ph 641 227-3193).

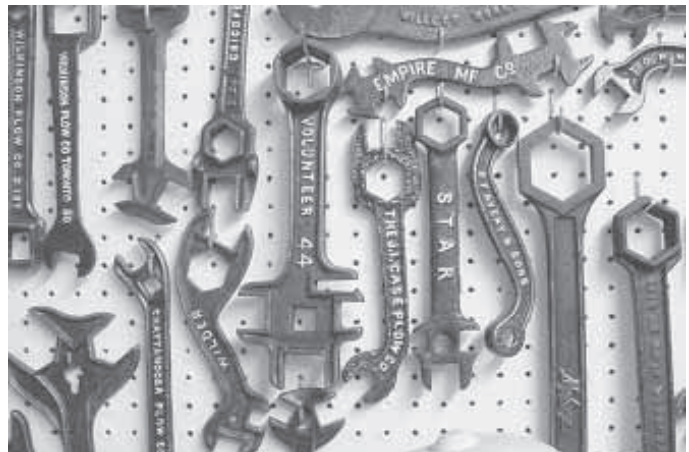
His second suggestion is to spend \$50 (plus \$5 for shipping and handling) to buy "The History of Old Time Farm Implement Companies and the Wrenches They Issued," a book compiled by P.T. Rathbone, a retired farmer/rancher from Marsing, Idaho and avid farm wrench collector. Request books from P.T. Rathbone, R.R. 1, Marsing, Idaho 83639 (ph 208 896-4478).

"He spent a great deal of time researching the old companies and reading their literature in order to put the book together," Marshall says. "Until it came out, there was no good reference for farm wrenches."

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Marshall likes adjustable wrenches and notes that they are often worth more than other wrenches.



Some of the wrenches have as many as three or four different heads.

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