

Treasures That Tie Us Together

Finding Kinship in the Art of Collecting

BY LAURA LIEFF



There are all kinds of collectors around the world. People collect baseball cards, shells, music memorabilia, coins — the list goes on. There is also a long history behind why, what and how people collect. Psychologist and University of Texas at Austin professor Andrew Dillon describes collecting as “a fundamental aspect of human existence” that offers “value to us as individuals and as communities.”

Colorado is full of collectors — people have multiple bikes, snowboards, fishing rods, pairs of skis and more — but collecting goes beyond accumulating gear. Sometimes it's more about natural objects because, throughout all four seasons, treasures like rocks, feathers and fossils can be found across the Vail Valley. Depending on the season, successfully finding these items depends on knowing what to look for and paying attention to your surroundings.

According to Dillon, “Collections serve as a basis for informing and learning ... and marking our lives in personally meaningful ways.” My 6-year-old son, Fleet, began showing an interest in collecting around

age 2. It started with picking up various items while walking our dogs and continues to develop as he gets older and is able to hike more miles. Some of our most exciting finds include a bobcat skull, antlers, fossils and snake sheds. Each time we hike, snowshoe, walk dogs or fish, we're always on the lookout.

When we return home, we empty our pockets and put our treasures in assorted plastic containers. By the time Fleet turned 3, the containers were stacked all over the house. In an effort to have one place to store and display our finds, I bought an inexpensive piece of thrift store furniture with shelves and drawers. Creating a space for all the objects turned into our official family collection. We've been adding to it ever since.

PASSION FOR COLLECTING

When people visit our house, Fleet usually shows our guests his recent finds. He takes a lot of pride in telling the stories of where and how he found his treasures, why they are significant and facts about them. According to Dillon, “Having the ability to share with others who are interested ... enhances a collector's passion for the process.” This statement rings true for Fleet because, in addition to finding items with us, he also enjoys fossil hunting with local dinosaur expert Billy Doran, who has been collecting since his grandmother gave him fossilized shark teeth in the early 1970s.

“When my grandmother gave me those shark teeth I didn't think about the worth or science behind them — I just thought they were cool,” Doran recalls. “Since then, I've always thought that collecting brings mystique and magic to your life because you're part of something bigger. I still have those shark teeth.”

Through Fossil Posse, The Museum at Dinosaur Junction and the various fossils he finds, Doran educates Vail Valley residents and visitors on Colorado's prehistoric past. “When you're a collec-

tor, it's your hope that others experience that feeling of wonder that you feel, too,” he explains. “To hold a tooth that's older than human civilization is awe-inspiring.” Stories of what used to be here when dinosaurs roamed turn into a reality when relics of the past are found during today's outdoor adventures — and that's true for both adults and kids. “These finds provide a sense of pride and self. In a world that can be confusing, it gives you something to hold onto,” Doran adds.

SENSE OF PLACE

Collecting has become part of Fleet's identity, which is fascinating to watch — especially when he shares what he learns with others. Hearing him tell stories of finding a snake shed on the trail or digging around the river to find fossil shells brings joy to our entire family. Dillon explains that “there is a strong relationship between human psychology and the desire to collect, one that mediates personal identity, sense of place in the world and a desire to form networks and build community.” Doran says that is true for him, and I think it applies to Fleet as well.

We've always been a hiking (snowshoeing in the winter) family and, like many people living in Eagle County, spending time outside is a year-round priority. Even when the weather throws a curve ball, focusing on finding objects along the way makes outdoor adventures more fun. While my investment in display furniture and plastic containers is clearly going to increase, I hope Fleet continues to grow his collection and maintain his curiosity about natural objects.

So, as you head out for your next outdoor adventure, don't just look ahead or up at the scenery — look down for all the treasures the Vail Valley has to offer. Learning about these items — where they came from and why they matter — because my son wants to share them with me is one of the best parts of being a mom. +