Desperately seeking souvenirs
SUNY seminar will document New Paltz history old and new through saved objects

by Frances Marion Platt

MOST OF THE time, when people think of historical documents, what they visualize are things written down on paper or parchment, maps, drawings or photographs. But solid three-dimensional objects often survive the ravages of time longer, and serve to convey valuable information about the people who made, owned and used them. And even in one lifetime, an object can become imbued with personal stories that make it a treasure beyond its apparent worth. When passed down through families, ordinary household furnishings as simple as a crock or a button can bear the weight of dreams, triumphs and tragedies.

Dr. Cyrus Mulready, a professor in the English Department at SUNY-New Paltz, found himself profoundly moved by a book published in 2010 titled The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance. The

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author, British ceramist Edmund de Waal, is the scion of a once-wealthy Jewish banking family, the Ephrussi, whose fortune, including a large art collection, was confiscated by the Nazis. All that was saved was a collection of netsuke -- tiny carvings used in Japan to attach small containers to one’s garments -- that a Viennese maid working for the family managed to hide inside her mattress. De Waal’s book uses the story behind each netsuke to chronicle “the rise and fall of his family through the 20th century in Europe,” according to Mulready.

“I thought, ‘What an amazing thing: to tell a story through a collection of objects,’” Mulready recalls. “I wanted to teach a course allowing students to do the same.” Thus was inspired an interdisciplinary seminar that he will be guiding during the coming spring semester for honors students in various majors, titled “The Materials of History, Thought and Art.” And local residents, past and present, are being invited to participate by sharing objects associated in some way with the history of New Paltz.

As part of his regular SUNY gig, Mulready, who got his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, teaches courses on Shakespeare and Renaissance literature and a senior seminar in “Adventure, Fantasy and Magic” that sounds like enticement enough to go back to school all by itself. But he notes that even for students of literature, material culture is an important component of their education. In Shakespeare classes, he says, his students learn about props, clothing and so on to help understand the historical context of the play that they’re studying.

The dozen or so students who are lucky enough to enroll in the new honors seminar will first be asked to identify objects that carry meaning in terms of their personal and family histories and tell their stories in class and through blogs. The next segment of the syllabus, scheduled for March and counting for 20 percent of their grade, is a Collaborative History Project focusing on their present community of New Paltz. They will be asked to explore existing resources of local history, from Wikipedia to the Elting Library’s Haviland-Heidgerd Collection and the Sojourner Truth Library’s archives on New Paltz, and to think about what might be missing from those re-
sources that they could investigate personally.

The group will visit Historic Huguenot Street and learn about Lenape culture from SUNY Anthropology professor Joe Diamond. And then Mulready will turn them loose to conduct some original research. “Research is about making discoveries. We need to find ways for students to find out things that people don’t already know,” says Mulready. “That’s why I’m a scholar: I get excited about contributing knowledge to the world.”

That’s where the community comes in. The professor is hoping that present and former residents of New Paltz, and people whose families lived here in the past, will come forward to allow the students to take pictures of cherished objects and hear the reminiscences that they evoke. But he’s not just interested in Huguenot descendants: “I want to bring it up to contemporary times,” says Mulready. Although he has only lived in the area for about five years, he has heard stories about what a wild place New Paltz was in its hippie heyday of the ’60s and ’70s, and wants his students to document that as well.

“We’re going to be local history detectives here, and find out what stories these objects have,” he says. “Our goal is to get it started this spring and have a digital exhibit up and running by the end of the semester, but it could continue.” The students will curate a virtual exhibition based on the results of their research and design a New Paltz history webpage to be hosted by a consortium of local libraries and archives.

You can read more about Cyrus Mulready’s background at www.newpaltz.edu/~mulreadc and check out the course outline for “The Materials of History, Thought and Art” at http://npobjects.wordpress.com. And if you’ve ever wondered what to do with that roadsign hanging on your wall that you ripped off after a long night at P & G’s way back when, or wanted to share the odd story of the person who left that tie-dyed scarf or brass incense burner in your keeping during your student days, the good professor wants to hear from you before the end of February. Drop an e-mail to objects@newpaltz.edu, and let him know what artifact you’ve got and why you think that it’s interesting. You may be hearing from a SUNY-New Paltz student quite soon! ++