

Contemporary Collectibles: Enthusiasts aim for Red Ryder BB guns

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

If your family is anything like my family, there's been at least one showing of the movie "A Christmas Story" this season - the now-classic satirical tale that centers around a bespectacled boy named Ralphie and his longing for a Red Ryder Daisy air rifle BB gun, itself an icon of mid-century male childhood memory, and one coveted by today's collectors.

But who was Red Ryder? He was a redheaded cowboy in a white hat, riding a mighty steed named Thunder, who came into being on Sunday, Nov. 6, 1938, conceived by Fred Harman as a follow-up to Harman's previous strip, "Bronc Peeler." In the very first strip, which was set in the Wild West of the 1890s, he acquired as his companion an orphaned Navajo boy named Little Beaver, whose own horse was dubbed Papoose, and together they would soon encounter the other main characters in the tough cowpoke's adventurous life: girlfriend Beth Wilder, sidekick Buckskin Blodgett, his humorous aunt known as the Duchess and villain Ace Hanlon, a ruthless scoundrel.

Within a decade, "The Adventures of Red Ryder" was appearing in about 750 newspapers around the world, with a readership of 14 million in the U.S. alone. A daily strip followed in 1939, as well as comic books, Big Little Books, novels, more than 20 B movies and a radio show - not to mention rodeos and powwows.

The first Red Ryder comic book was published by Stephen Slesinger's Hawley Publications in September of 1940. Dell Comics launched its Red Ryder series in August of 1941, producing a total of 151 issues, ending in 1957. Any kid addicted to comic books could hardly miss the ads for the Red Ryder guns, which were introduced in 1938. Tops on the wish list was the Red Ryder Cowboy Carbine Daisy Air Rifle, which boasted a carbine-style quick loading lever, firing 1,000 shots in 20 seconds, a metal blue barrel circled by two Golden Bands, an adjustable double-notch rear sight, and a leather thong for "hanging to saddles, bicycle or wall of your room" - all for \$2.95.

Other models included the Daisy Pump Gun and the Lightning-loader Carbine. Some of the ads even offered "Reminder Kits" with stickers for kids to put on their dad's shaving mirror saying "Remember, Dad - I want a Daisy!" These days, a Red Ryder Golden Banded 1,000-shot Saddle Carbine can easily go for four figures.

A syndicated radio series was heard from 1942 to 1949, opening with the words, "From out of the West comes America's most famous fighting cowboy - Red Ryder!" No less than three different actors played the hero, and two portrayed Little Beaver. It was broadcast on the Blue Network three times a week at 7:30 p.m., for much of its run heard only on the West Coast under the sponsorship of a regional bakery, Langendorf Bread. For a short while, it was popular enough to beat "The Lone Ranger" in the Hooper ratings.

A TV adaptation was syndicated in 1956. Thanks to the marketing skills of Stephen Slesinger, Red Ryder

products ranged far beyond the Daisy air rifles and their catalogs and handbooks. In greatest demand are World War II items related to the Red Ryder Victory Patrol, such as the scarce Victory Patrol membership with comic, rodeomatic decoder, order coupon for "Magic V-Badge," membership card and membership certificate, valued now at up to \$4,200; individual elements are also sought after. Other items on the market include Big and Better Little Books, a Red Ryder Target Game from 1939, a Red Ryder molding set, a boxed Red Ryder secret pocket billfold, a steel and plastic pocket knife, badges and buttons, whistles, lucky coins, a plastic arrowhead key chain charm, and trading and fan cards.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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