

Contemporary Collectibles: Jack Armstrong, All-American buy

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

For 17 years, from 1933 to 1950, for 15 minutes every late weekday afternoon, a large proportion of young American boys could be found glued to their radios, listening to the latest exciting adventures of "Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy." And many of them would promptly send away for the premiums offered on the show in return for a few cents and a Wheaties box top.

Jack Armstrong was, in fact, a typical middle-class American schoolboy, a popular sports star student at Hudson High School (the opening of the show was a rousing cheerleading theme song performed by a barbershop quartet, beginning "Wave the flag for Hudson High, boys."), who just happened to become involved in a series of remarkably gripping adventures all over the globe. He was accompanied on these exploits by his cousins Billy and Betty Fairfield, and their Uncle, Capt. Jim Fairfield, a pilot of the Silver Albatross. The quartet found themselves in exotic locales from Morocco to Zanzibar to the Andes to Tibet, usually tracking something stolen or buried, and, during World War II, were busy tracking down traitors and Axis spies.

The series, which originated at station WBBN in Chicago the same year as "The Lone Ranger" and "Tom Mix," became the longest-running such program, featuring, over the years, a few actors who would go on to more high-profile careers in the movies, including Don Ameche and Paul Douglas. In its final season, when Jack had at last graduated from high school (after being there for 13 years) and become a government agent for the Scientific Bureau of Investigation, the show was renamed "Armstrong of the SBI." Jack also made several extra-curricular off-air appearances. There was a 15-episode Columbia Pictures movie serial in 1947, a 13-issue-run of comic books drawn by Bob Schoenke, and a Big Little Book, "Jack Armstrong and the Ivory Treasure," in 1937.

The long-running sponsorship of General Mills' Wheaties, "Breakfast of Champions" precipitated a bonanza of premium merchandise, much of which was tied to the plot lines of the radio show. One of these, for instance, was a pedometer - yours for 10 cents and a Wheaties box top in 1938 - just like the one Jack used to measure his steps when following the directions of an old pirate map in order to avoid the traps set by the Cult of the Crocodile God, as well as several later Hike-o-Meters. Some of the other products sought after by today's collectors include a 1933 Shooting Propeller Plane gun by Daisy Mfg., which sent five-bladed toy airfoils whirling into the air (recently seen on eBay in the \$85 range), a Sky Ranger plane with a cardboard fuselage and aluminum wings and tail, a Dragon's Eye ring that glowed in the dark, with a green plastic "gem" and crocodile features on its sides; Secret Whistle Code rings with paper codes with which to send messages (and which have - be warned - been reproduced and faked); a striking 1936 Chart game - "Adventures with the Mystical Dragon Talismans," the talisman inscription translated as "China - The Key to the Door of the Room is Very Precious"; Listening Squad hardware (extremely rare), a multipurpose heliograph and distance finder, a 1938 Jack Armstrong wrist compass, a magic answer box, atorpedo flashlight, an explorer telescope, and a signaling mirror-not to mention a Luminous Gardenia bracelet exactly like the one Betty wore. Among the paper products were fan cards and photos of the All-American team, Listening Squad membership cards, Wheaties Library of Sports books, and a "Map of the Hidden City and Surrounding Jungle."

In addition, considerable value is placed on the actual cereal boxes promoting the promotions. For example,

the rare 1933 Wheaties box displaying the first premium offer - for hand exercise grips - has been evaluated at \$600, when in pristine condition.

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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