

Contemporary Collectibles: Pep Boys collectibles still have pep

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Many, if not most, people who drive by or enter their local Pep Boys shop have little idea of its long and interesting history, both as a business and as an advertising vehicle, although the familiar caricatures of Manny, Moe and Jack - the actual originators of the firm - live on in the collective imagination.

Actually, it should have been Manny, Moe, Moe and Jack, to truly represent the founders. The story begins in 1921, when four young Philadelphians who had met and become friends while serving in the Navy during World War I - Emanuel "Manny" Rosenfeld, Maurice "Moe" Strauss, Moe Radavitz and W. Graham "Jack" Jackson - each made a \$200 investment to launch an auto supply company.

And how did they come up with the firm's name?

It seems they were sitting around discussing the question when one of them eyed a shipment of Pep valve grinding compound, one of their first product lines, thus inspiring the name Pep Auto Supplies. The ultimate name resulted from a local policeman telling everyone he stopped at night for not having an oil wick burning to go see the "boys" at Pep, which gave rise to the name Pep Boys.

The use of their first names came about when Moe Strauss took a trip to California around 1923 and noticed how many shops there used their owners' first names, in particular one named Minnie, Maude and Mabel's. When he returned to Philadelphia, he had a cartoonist friend named Harry Moskovitch create the caricatures.

There were changes over the years: When Jack left the firm, his face was replaced by that of Moe's brother and new partner, Izzy Strauss, though Izzy's name was never used. The corporate characters became American icons, being joked about in Johnny Carson monologues and parodied on Saturday Night Live, and also seen in Claymation on late-1980s television commercials.

This logo was also found on any number of products over the years, all of them now of interest to the collector. Most common and familiar are the matchbooks that portrayed the Boys, some with the name of the firm, some without, promoting everything from Clipper tires to Varsity wax. There were catalogs, mailers, circulars and manuals, the early editions of which hold considerable deco-period graphic interest.

Other collectible paper ephemera includes a 1926 U.S. Sesquicentennial Exposition decal (now worth \$100 and up in mint condition with its envelope), an amusing set of playing cards with Manny, Moe and Jack as the figures on the face cards valued at \$175 and up, stickers and posters.

Pep Boys sponsored a radio program in the 1930s called "Dawn Patrol," and material related to that show, such as an elaborate postcard sent to fans with a facsimile signature of the announcer, Fred Wood, are also sometimes found.

There were other non-paper items, including a 1930s patch offered as a premium, a brass match cover holder, bobblehead figures of the three founders, Zippo lighters, a desirable early Pep Boys hand soap metal can with images of Manny, Moe and Jack (\$450 and up), a large variety of tin advertising signs, magnets and a 1950s plastic cigarette holder.

Not surprisingly, many of the Pep Boys collectibles relate to cars, gasoline, etc. Prime among them is a Corgi minitruck, with the familiar logo emblazoned on the side, while others include early 1 gallon Pep Boys 600 transmission oil metal cans with black and orange lettering, and Strauss, Penn and other gas and oil cans.

Also, in the television age, there were animated commercials featuring Moe and Jack, and items relating to them - such as animation drawings and original hand-painted production cel set-ups used in the making of the commercials - are also collectible.

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