



The Doorknob Collector

Number 45

January-February 1991

You just never know

by Vern Eklund

Collecting is a strange affliction that can take one down unplanned paths at times. Not long ago a doorknob to me was just a functional gadget that allowed me to get into the house. Now I find myself writing a piece for **The Doorknob Collector**. Let me explain.

Basically I'm an antique gun collector. A few years back I began researching Civil-War era natural thermoplastics because small pistol cases had been made from these early plastics. Today gun collectors usually referred to them as "gutta percha" cases. One major initial use of this shellac-based material was to produce daguerreotype photo cases which were made by the thousands in the 1850's and 1860's. These are known as "Union" or "Composition" cases today. Every sport has its own terminology it seems.

My pistol case research took me to Florence, Massachusetts, where Alfred P. Critchlow began making photo cases in the early 1850's. In 1858 the company became known as Littlefield,

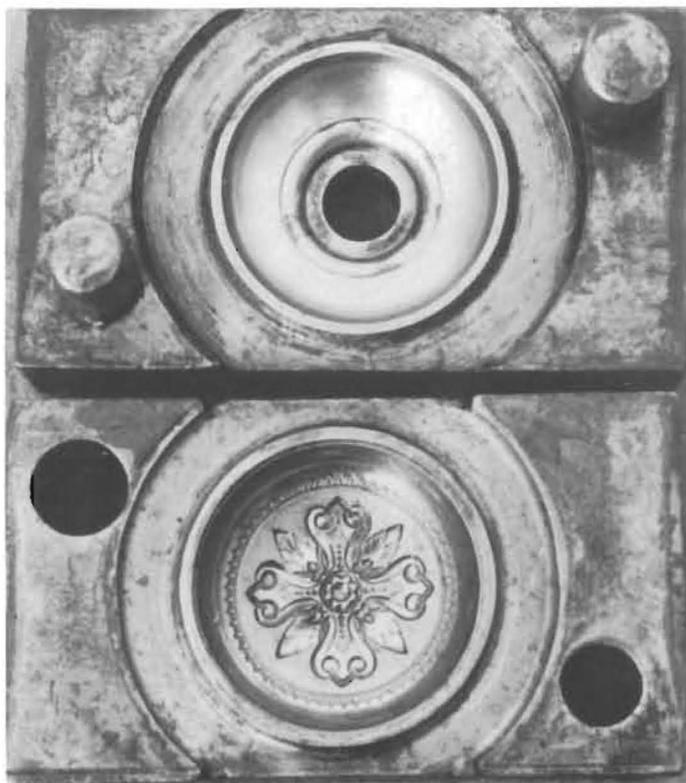


Fig. 1. Composition doorknob mold from the Florence Manufacturing Co., Florence, Massachusetts.

Parsons and Company but continued to mold these early thermoplastics. In 1866 the company name was again changed - this time to the Florence Manufacturing Company (FMC) but plastics were still their game. FMC began expanding its product line to find new markets for their molding expertise. Hand mirrors, hair brushes, umbrella handles, jewelry boxes, photo frames and yes, doorknobs were pro-

duces. The company name has changed several more times but the firm still molds plastics today as the Pro Corporation - some 136 years after it first started! The material initially used was a combination of "gum shellac, woody fibers" and a coloring agent like lamp black. Most of their products were black or dark brown during the mid-1800's. This composition was (continued page 2)

Eklund...(from page 1)
 described in patents of the 1850's but wasn't the exclusive property of Florence Manufacturing. The mixture was heated and placed into a steel die in a putty-like consistency and then pressed to form whatever object was being made. The molds or dies were heated to about 300 degrees F. during the molding process. The steel dies themselves are a work of art engraved by die sinkers to produce a very decorative image in reverse.

FMC initially called its material the "Florence Composition" but later referred to it as "Diatite" and used the trade mark -- DIATITE-- . It appears that other companies also used the name Diatite, a name probably derived from "Diatomaceous" earth.

The original 1866 Florence Manufacturing Company building still stands and is owned by its successor company, the Pro Corporation. In this structure one of my more exciting moments occurred a couple of years back when we discovered a vault containing over 100 original steel dies from the mid-nineteenth century. One of the molds or dies found, Figure 1, is for a doorknob. In fact "door knob" is stamped on the exterior of this die. Figure 2 shows this same die with an original knob produced from this very mold.

A key escutcheon mold, Figure 3, was also found. An example of this escutcheon, Figure 4, was found in the collection of the local historical society known as Historic Northampton. It had been given to them some years ago by the Pro Corporation.

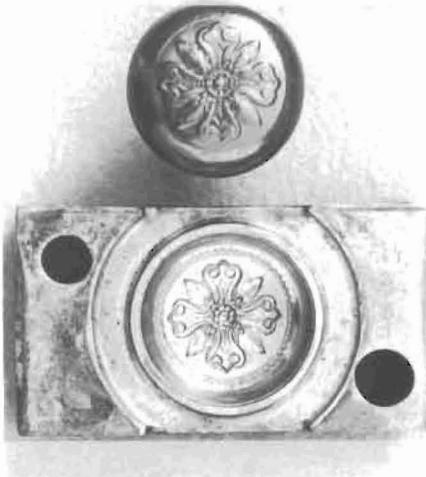


Fig. 2. Steel mold and composition doorknob.

The brown composition knob shown in Figure 2 is 2-1/4" in diameter and appears to have been painted over at some time. The key escutcheon is also brown but has not been painted. The knob has a 9/16 diameter by 3/4 inch steel knob shank molded in for what appears to be a 19/64 inch square spindle. The markings on the back side of the doorknob and in the steel mold are very faint due to wear. The same marking on the knob's rose (not pictured) is very clear, however:
**"NORWALK LOCK COMPANY.
 SILICA. --DIATITE--
 PATENTED DEC 15 1868.
 A."**

This leads to a bit of a mystery. The patent referred to is almost certainly No. 85018 for a "Material for Various Articles" by J. M. Merrick, Jr. of Boston, Massachusetts dated December 15, 1868. It was assigned to the New England Vulcanite Hide Company and covered a gum shellac and diatomaceous earth (silica) mixture for molding. Many of the FMC products - hand mirrors, for instance - have the trade mark -- DIATITE-- on them in addition to "Pat. 1868" and "Florence Manufacturing Co." Also the mold was found in their vault. It seems likely that Florence Manufacturing obtained the rights to the Merrick patent at some point although, they could have acted as a subcontractor for the Norwalk Lock Company. Whatever the arrangement, it appears certain that this composition doorknob was manufactured in Florence, Massachusetts and very likely in the 1870's

The limited company records available do not pinpoint the doorknob period. We can document that the photo case manufacture (continued page 3)

The Doorknob Collector

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THE OPEN DOOR

by ray nemec



We want to welcome Vern Eklund to **ADCA** and thank him for the fine article which appears in this issue.

The "find" of the month goes to Ed Sobczak who went to a locksmith shop looking for some set screws and walked out with a pair of Indian Head doorknobs, purchased at a reasonable price.

Two of our members, Debbie Fellenz and Rick Kelly, have set a wedding date...June 9th. We wish them all the happiness.

They won't be the first newlyweds to attend the **ADCA** convention, however. Al and Janet Still hold the honor, attending the 1985 convention in St. Louis shortly after their wedding.

For those who attended the 1990 convention and the fine meal at the Thrall's, **The Building**, this is an update on the legal status on the property as supplied by Ed. On November 3rd the town of East Windsor bought the building and the property it stands on at an auction. The town was the only bidder. The Thralls had never been issued a use permit and thus refused to pay taxes on the building. The conflict between the Thralls and the town has been ongoing since the late 1970's.■

Eklund...(from page 2) started in 1853, that the first pistol cases were sold in November 1858, that thermoplastic hand mirror and hair brushes were in production by 1865, so the doorknobs couldn't have been far behind.

Now for the rest of my story: My wife noticed that **ADCA** was holding its national convention in our "backyard" in East Windsor, Connecticut. I hurried on down on Saturday morning to see if I could learn anything about "plastic" doorknobs since I had by then found the molds. I soon met Maudie Eastwood and several other very nice people and did learn that "composition" doorknobs aren't all that common. Maude asked if I would draft this article to let the membership know about one company that produced composition products in the nineteenth century and to show you

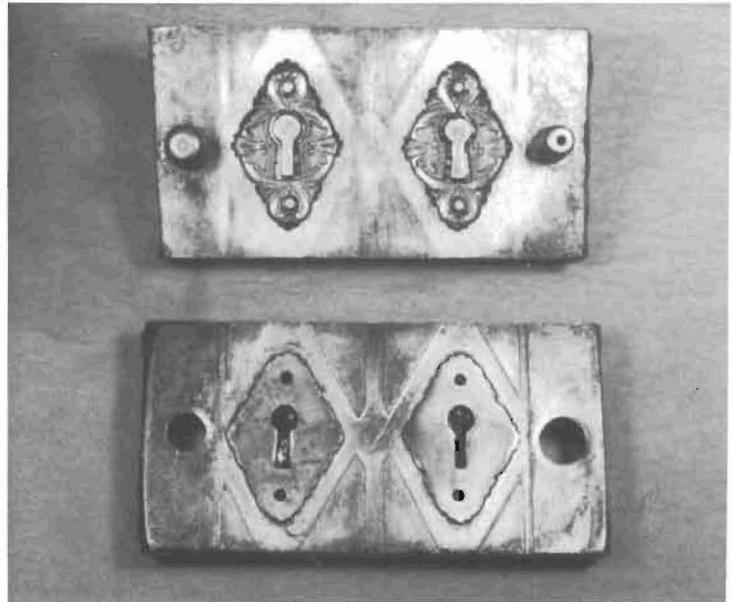


Fig. 3. Key escutcheon mold from the Florence Manufacturing Company.

what the molds looked like. Maudie also was responsible for putting me in touch with the **ADCA** collector who sold me the doorknob shown in Figure 2.

This unexpected detour in my collecting life certainly hasn't taken me down a deadend street...in fact, you might say it has opened a few doors!■



Fig. 4. Composition key escutcheon. Historic Northhampton collection, Northhampton, Massachusetts.

Doorknob collecting - Part IV

by Len Blumin

There is probably no aspect of doorknob collecting that generates more controversy than the subject of pricing antique hardware. To some it is almost sacrilegious to discuss their treasures in terms of dollars and cents, but such valuation is an unavoidable fact of life, and will be addressed here in a general sort of way.

Some hardware derives its value from other collecting fields. Take the fine buffalo head knob from the Irma Hotel, built in 1902 by Colonel W.F. (Wild Bill) Cody (TDC #19). It undoubtedly is worth more to a collector of Americana than it would be to the average doorknob collector. The same can be said for rare paperweight knobs of the nineteenth century from the studios of Baccarat and Clichy. Likewise, special designs such as those by Louis Sullivan (TDC #16) take their value as historic artwork by a famous person, rather than as a doorknob or escutcheon. Knobs in categories such as these can command spectacular values, even in the thousands.

Glass knobs are perhaps easier to discuss. The primary factors seem to be beauty, quality and condition. Nothing confers beauty quite like color when



Waterford crystal knob from Crystal Ballroom of the Grand Union Hotel.

it comes to glass knobs. A plain cobalt blue might be \$50-100, compared to a price of \$1-3 for a clear glass knob of the same shape. All colored glass knobs tend to be pricey, but none more so than those that also have been cut on a wheel (as opposed to shaped by a mold). Even clear glass knobs that have been finely cut and are in good condition command respect, and may cost \$25-100. Much to my surprise, rare knobs from the period 1840-1860, often with a metal shank passing all the way through, can still be found at very reasonable prices, especially in New England. Along with mercury glass knobs, they are "best buys".

Ornate metal knobs, mainly bronze and brass, comprise the largest part of our collections. The greatest majority of them, perhaps 80%, were

produced in large quantities and were well made, allowing their survival in numbers despite "urban renewal". They derive their value mostly as restoration hardware, rather than as rare collectibles or artwork. Therefore most old doorknobs are priced simply as replacement doorknobs. Not-so-nice ones (i.e. common, undistinguished design, stamped metal) can be found in plenty at the \$2-10 range. Cast knobs in decent condition tend to fall in the \$10-30 area. Complete sets, including working lock, plates, etc., are greatly valued by the builder, who will pay \$50-250.

When we get to the finer 20% of metal knobs, setting prices is a chancy business. Knobs in this category can more truly qualify as antiques, and their value tends to relate to the traditional parameters of quality, condition, rarity and provenance.

QUALITY - Simply put, a well made knob costs more initially, and appreciates better as an antique. Such knobs are usually finely cast and have an attractive motif. Included here would be many of the representational knobs, odd-shaped knobs and some emblematics.

CONDITION - Knobs with (continued page 7)

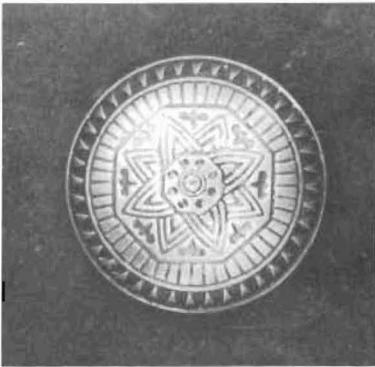
Ornamental design in antique doorknobs

by Len Blumin

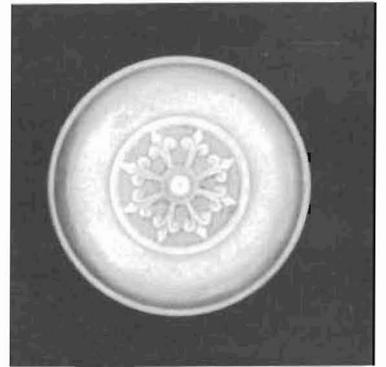
(The following regular feature is a supplement to Len's excellent book,
VICTORIAN DECORATIVE ART)

- K-227 Mallory Wheeler, vernacular, 1882 catalog. Cast Iron.
K-228 Unusual raised "button" in center makes this a rare knob.
K-229 Vernacular. AG Neuman #153. Crude, like many Neuman products.
K-230 Well made knob for the customer preferring conservative design.
K-231 Crude. Possibly Niles. "Saloon" type knob, for rimlock.
K-232 Cast iron, circa 1880.

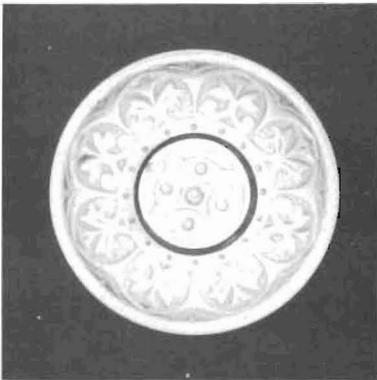
K-227



K-230



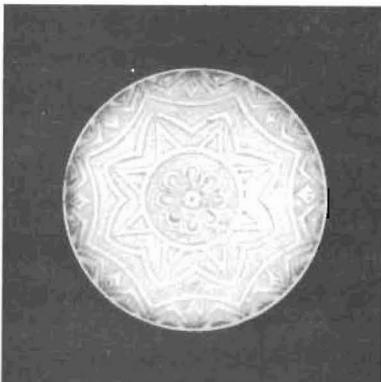
K-228



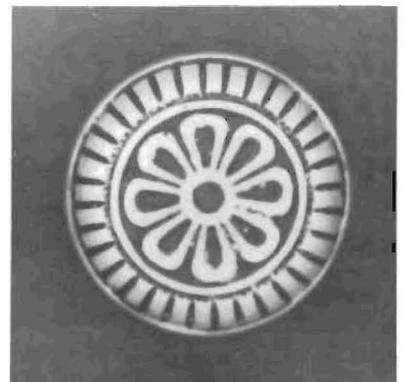
K-231



K-229

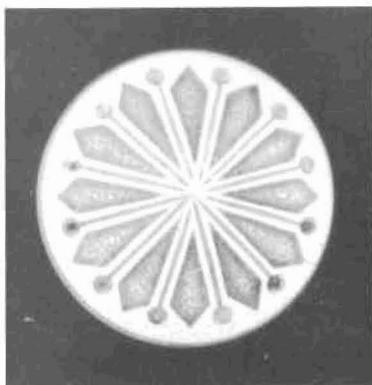


K-232

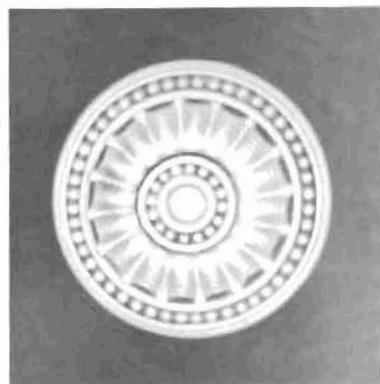


- L-125 "Robinson" knob. A rare beauty. (See TDC #14 and #20.)
 L-126 Gilbert, circa 1880. Note how the sevenfold design repeats in the center.
 L-127 Schroeder knob (patented shank).
 L-128 Unusual profile, with central portion raised.
 L-129 Cast, circa 1900. You could also call it eightfold or concentric.
 L-130 Another sevenfold radial pattern. Not enough for a category.

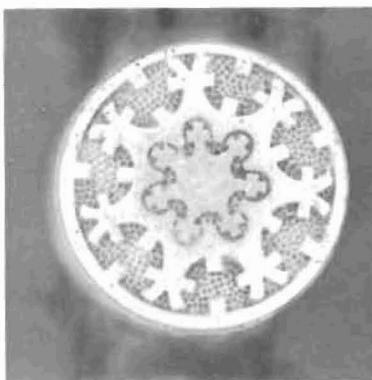
L-125



L-128



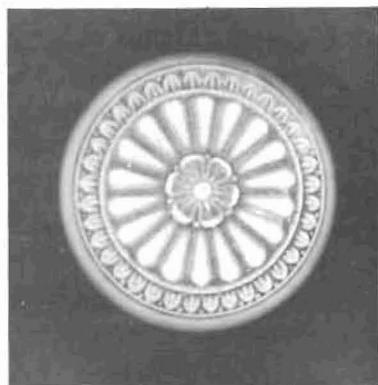
L-126



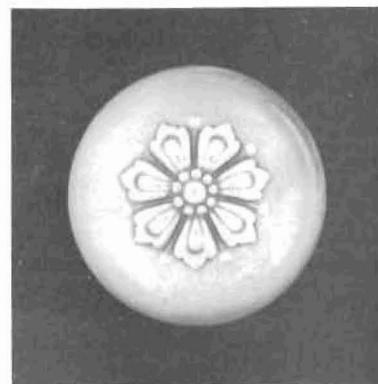
L-129



L-127



L-130



BLUMIN..(from page 4)

significant wear to the face will naturally be less desirable. A knob in fine condition will command a price several times higher than a worn or damaged knob.

RARITY - In and of itself, rarity is less important than one might expect. There are knobs of which only one or two examples may exist that many would not pay \$10 to acquire. But combine rarity with a fine design and good condition and you may pay over \$100.

PROVENANCE - In respect to doorknobs, provenance can be taken to mean "Who made it and where did it come from?" Designs by "desirable" makers such as Mallory Wheeler are more sought than otherwise pleasing knobs from unknown makers. A knob from a historic building that has been razed may be particularly prized.

Some examples may be pertinent. The hummingbird knob (A-106) is of fine quality, made by a great manufacturer (Russell & Erwin) and uncommonly found. In fine condition it has sold for \$75-100. The doggie (A-101) in worn condition has brought over \$100 at auction, and fine examples are rarely seen on the market.

Still, the "top end" of our field is not so high as to be beyond reach of most collectors. Now that door-



HUMMINGBIRD A-106
Exquisite design and workmanship. By Russell & Erwin in 1880.

knob collecting has become a respected hobby and building restoration a booming business, a true "marketplace" has developed for antique hardware. As in any market, value is determined by the price agreed upon in negotiation between a willing buyer and seller, neither of whom is under any pressure.

Prices mentioned above are values that I believe are representative of the "market" for antique (1870-1920) doorknobs today. You will hopefully find better buys at the flea market, and undoubtedly be asked for higher prices at the better salvage shops, but overall I think that the market remains undervalued, and that doorknobs remain true bargains in the world of antiques. ■

ADCA FINANCIAL STATEMENT

The following statement is for the year January 1, 1990 through December 31, 1990.

INCOME STATEMENT

Membership dues	\$3766.00
Donations	100.00
ADCA publications	610.00
ADCA promotional items	733.29
Consignment sales	340.00
Interest on investments	374.32
Convention income	1105.80
Miscellaneous income	19.75
TOTAL INCOME	7049.16

EXPENSE STATEMENT

Printing newsletter	\$1752.57
Other printing expenses	164.93
Postage	1064.58
Other publication expenses	102.58
Supplies & operating exp.	242.03
Computer	1942.92
Archives	300.00
Convention expenses	812.94
Consignment purchases	227.70
Insurance	174.00
Miscellaneous expenses	2.00
TOTAL EXPENSES	6786.25

Profit or (loss)	262.91
Beginning cash balance	6665.28
Ending cash balance	6928.19

We continue to be fortunate in being able to derive additional income from the sale of the club's publications and promotional items in addition to regular memberships. We continue our efforts to keep annual membership costs to a minimum in the face of increased publication and postal costs. Your continued support and patronage is very much appreciated.

Raymond J. Nemeč,
ADCA Treasurer

TAHOE SANDS INN

CONVENTION REMINDER

Mark your calendar. August 11-14 are the dates set for the 1991 **ADCA** annual national convention. It will be held at the Tahoe Sands Inn, 3600 Highway 50, South Lake Tahoe, CA.



FROM THE ARCHIVES



by Steve & Barb Menchhofer

GOOD THINGS ARE HAPPENING

A new year and good things are already happening to the Archives. They are growing, due to a donation by Mr. Bud Wolski of California. Mr. Wolski, a long time member of the **ADCA**, presented the Archives with a gift of two of his reprints of catalogs -- Earle Hardware, Los Angeles, CA circa 1925 and Pacific Hardware, Los Angeles, CA, 1912. We are pleased and thankful for his generosity.

Ten members ordered more than 50 catalog copies when we offered them for sale in the November-December issue to **TDC**. We think the response to ordering the catalogs has been good and if you haven't ordered any yet--don't hesitate to do so the next time we offer them for sale. Remember, we only offer them twice a year.

We appreciate the interest you share in the Archives and the Emil Miller Memorial Library.

Without your support, donations, informative notes and telephone conversations, our job would be a lot harder to do. Education is one of the main purposes of the **ADCA** and with your help we are able to offer more information to further your knowledge of hardware. ■



SEE THE DOORKNOB EXCHANGE
PAGE 10

THE ADCA IS GROWING WITH YOUR HELP!

More members in the **ADCA** means larger issues of **THE DOORKNOB COLLECTOR**...and more features and services for all members. You can help your club grow: Just send the names and addresses of potential club members to the **ADCA** - P.O.Box 126 - Eola, IL 60519-0126 and we will send them a current copy of **THE DOORKNOB COLLECTOR**. Spread the word - The Antique Doorknob Collectors of America is on the Grow!



ADCA

This mug was designed and produced for the Antique Doorknob Collectors of America. ADCA was founded in Waverly, Iowa in 1981.

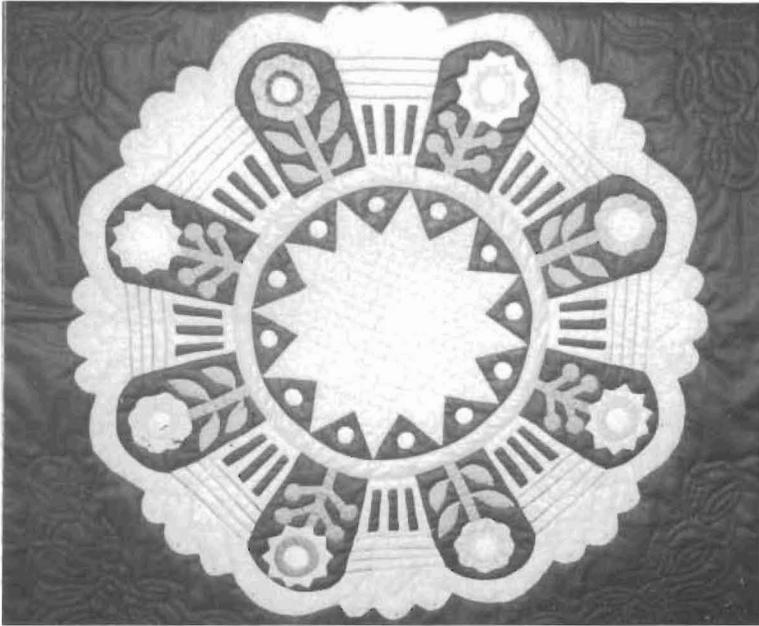
The "Doggie" doorknob, cast in bronze, was designed by Ludwig Kreusinger, manufactured by Russell & Erwin, and patented June 7, 1870. It is a beautiful representation of Victorian decorative hardware and a big favorite of the Antique Doorknob Collectors of America.

Doggie Doorknob Coffee Mug

By Antique Doorknob Collectors of America

\$6.00 plus \$2.50 shipping

ADCA, Dept. C, c/o Bill Byington,
415 Magowan Ave., Iowa City, IA 52246



Doorknob K-210 was the model for this beautiful quilt which was on display at the 1990 ADCA convention in Connecticut by Don and Becky Pearson. The quilt was made by Don's sister, Lois Griffith of Sparta, NJ.



THE ADCA LIBRARY TO YOUR LIBRARY

Several of **ADCA's** objectives deal with stimulation and dissemination of doorknob research. What better way to perpetuate **ADCA** and your own interest in doorknobs than by providing a collection of **ADCA** publications in your name to your local library?

The **ADCA** Library Donor Collection consists of, The Antique Doorknob, Antique Builders Hardware and supplement Number 1, all by Maude Eastwood, and Victorian Decorative Art, by Len Blumin. Also included is a one year mailing of The Doorknob Collector.

Upon your donation of \$55.00 to **ADCA**, we will send the Library Donor Collection to the library of your choice. Fill out the coupon below and send it with your check or money order (payable in U. S. Funds only) to:

ADCA
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 P. O. Box 126
 Eola, IL 60519-0126

 Yes, I want my library to have the **ADCA** Collection. Send the collection, in the name of _____

to: (name of Library) _____
 (attention) _____
 (street) _____
 (city, state, zip) _____

The doorknob exchange

Members are reminded that your dues entitle you to advertise items for sale, trade or wanted at no charge.

FOR SALE. Large selection of knobs - brass, glass and porcelain. Multiples of some decorative sets in stock. Also available; escutcheon plates, pulls and mortice sets. Specializing in authentic antique lighting, fireplaces, glass and iron work. Donetta George (#229), BRASS KNOB, 2311 18th St. NW, Washington, DC 20009. PH:202-332-3370.

FOR SALE OR TRADE. Columbus knobs A-316 \$75.00. **FOR SALE.** B-101 (flat version) \$35; K-206 \$35; K-114 (see TDC issue #25) "Star" classic, Mallory, Wheeler. Bronze \$30. Joe Mann (#70), 5364 Speedway Drive, Speedway, IN 46224. PH:317-244-4306.

FOR SALE. From thousands of miles of searching, over 300 different doorknobs, as a collection only, at \$10.00 each. On VCR tape, contact Ed Thrall (#53), 145 Chamberlain Rd., Broad Brook, CT 06016. Ph:203-623-5278.

WANTED. Ornate cast-iron mailboxes and curious monkey wrenches. Send your want list, I may have your doorknob. Charles Wardell (#9),

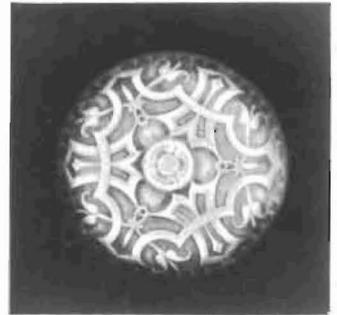
Box 195, Trinity, NC 27370.

WANTED. I am a collector of Masonic brass door knockers, trivets, bookends, and am now searching for a set of doorknobs with the square and compass logo. Many early Masonic Lodges used these fraternal doorknobs, generally inside doors of the temple which were not visible by anyone from the outside. Norman G. Gordon (#243), 34 Woodward Ave., Thornhill, ON, Canada L3T1E5. PH:416-889-3344

WANTED. Set screws (all sizes) to attach knobs to spindles. Bran Widseth (#87), 732 E. 16th St., #24, Minneapolis, MN 55404. Ph:612-375-0394.

FOR SALE. Antique Doorknob Collectors of America Sweatshirt. All sizes, all colors. Doggie doorknob likeness on sweatshirt. Price \$16.50 each. ADCA, Dept. S, c/o L.C. Bolen (#113), 17 Tree View Drive, Apt. B, Lithonia, GA 30038. Ph:404-981-1752.

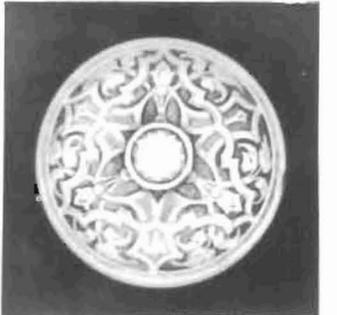
FOR SALE. ADCA club doorknobs. Walnut body, brass stems, design in club logo. Laser engraved. \$27 each includes shipping. ADCA, Dept. D, c/o Bill Byington, 415 Magowan Ave., Iowa City, IA 52246. PH:319-338-0982.



G-125



G-126



G-127

WANTED. A-302, G-125, G-126, G-127 (Sept-Oct 1988 TCD). Rosaria Sinisi(#223), 16 Clifton Place, Brooklyn, NY 11238. PH:718-638-4966.

FOR SALE. Doorknobs and related hardware in good quality and quantity as well as almost any type of door to place it on. Also parts of house of almost any vintage. David Olafsen, 20048 Free Church Road, Caledonia, IL 61011. PH:815-389-2728.