

Cash Currency: Pennies become keepsakes with the aid of a penny smashing machine. Story page 30.

Jethro Tull in Trenton, page 21; TAWA at Ellarslie, 32, Billy's on Route 1, 42; Clarksville Road land sale, 53.

U.S.

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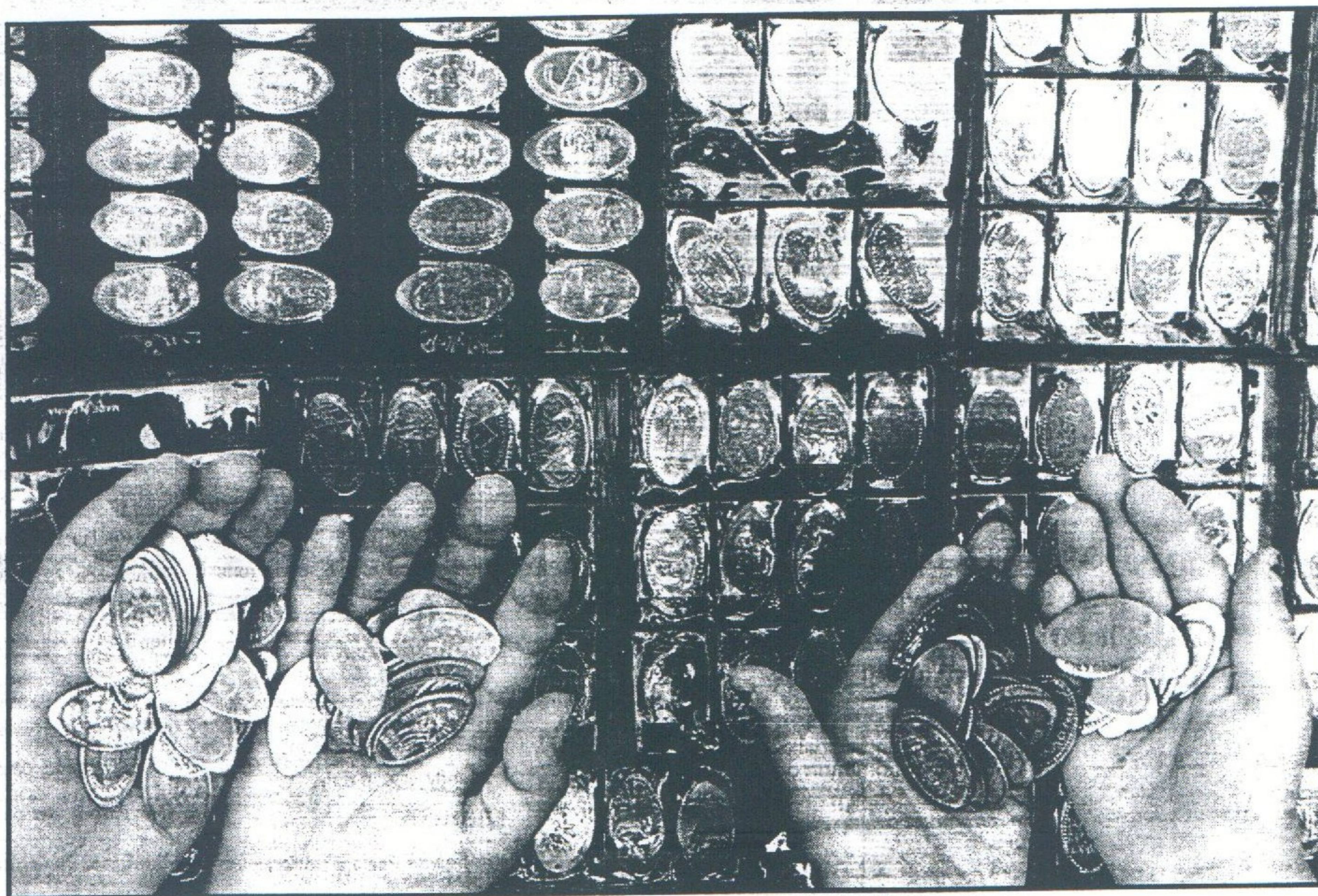
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CASHING IN ON COLLECTIBLES

Ordinary pennies become treasured collectibles when they are elongated with the help of one of the region's many 'penny smashing' machines. Diana Wolf reports on the money-lover's hobby, beginning on page 30.

A Penny for Your EC Collection

Squished. Squashed. Rolled. Flattened. Smashed. However you describe these elongated coins, they are one cheap thrill. You've surely passed the machines in your travels, hunkered down in the corner of a rest stop or amusement park gift shop. Give me 51 cents, I give you a penny, they promise. And your penny returns with an image of Mickey Mouse or a good luck horseshoe.

You may not have heard the squeaky screams of the innocent pocket change, but thousands of pennies perish from circulation every year at the hands of collectors who drive hours out of their way to smash a coin, planning vacations around penny machine locations. These people ask security guards to escort them to the penny machines, thus bypassing theme park admissions. They purchase extension cords to plug machines into a working outlet for this opportunity to smash pennies.

One man sold his 1958 Harley Davidson chopper to buy his first penny machine. Jewelry, keychains, and wedding commemorates are made from them. Detailed lists in Excel spreadsheets compile descriptions and locations of machines.

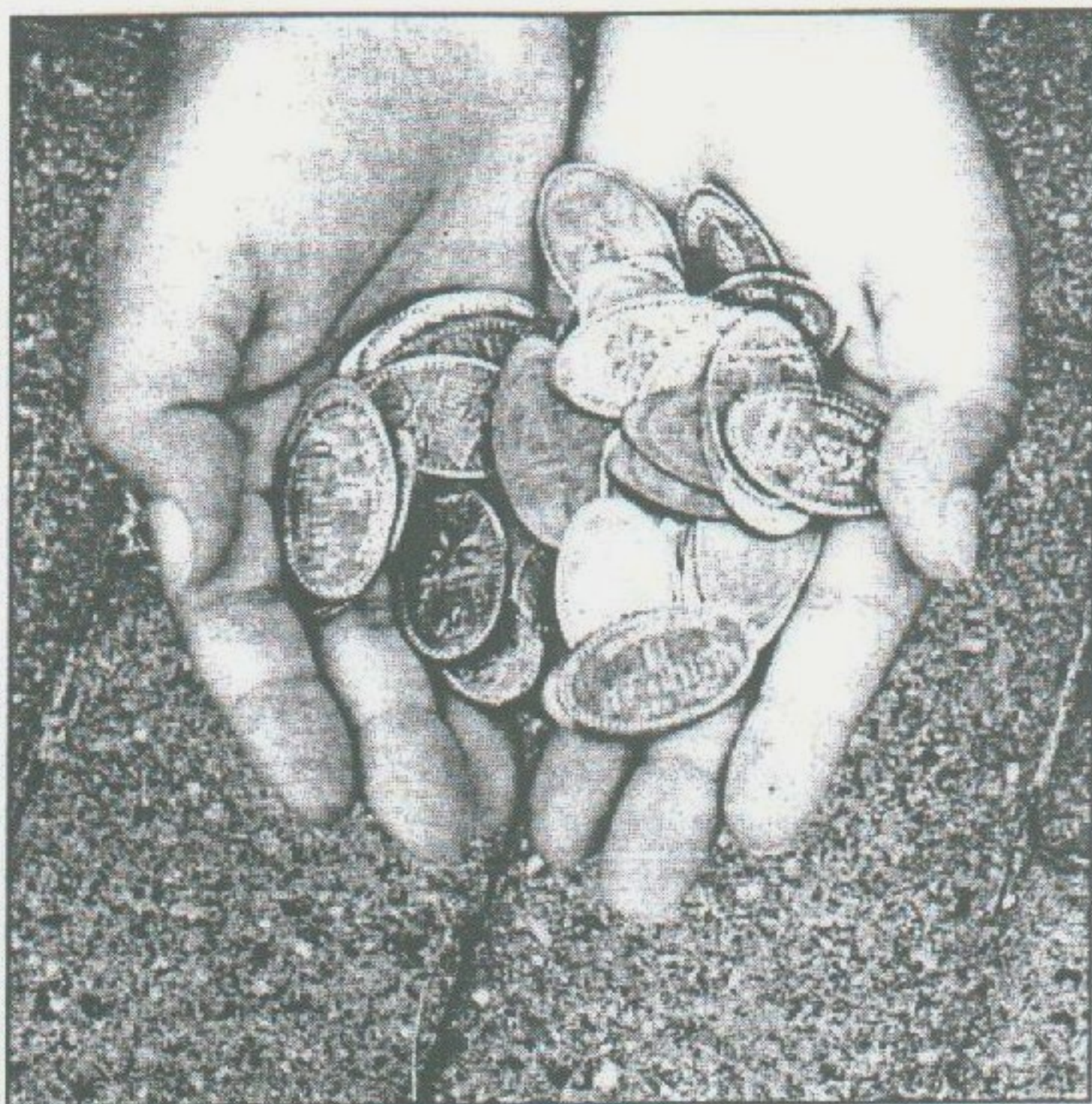
"In any collecting endeavor, the hunt is 95 percent of the enjoyment," says Bob Fritsch, incoming president of The Elongated Collectors (TEC), a group that has shared smashed coin collecting since 1965. "Once you've captured it, you have the remaining 4.5 percent enjoyment cataloguing it, and .5 percent enjoyment owning it forever."

Fritsch isn't alone, as his 3,000 TEC members will surely back him up. This retired Navy man currently living in New Hampshire is involved in numerous coin organizations. He collected stamps in his youth, but says, "coins are more fun," possessing an average size collection of 1,000 Elongated Coins (ECs). Pennies smashed on a railroad track don't fit into an elongated coin collection. Those are just plain smashed coins.

In a recent phone interview, he recalls attending his first annual American Numismatic Association (ANA) convention in 1993. "There was the huge Wow factor," he says, while wandering the booths of coin collectors. The TEC booth smashed pennies for passers-by, and Fritsch got one, stopping to chat and later attending their club meeting. "It was such a delightful group, I knew I had to be a part of it. They were people who loved what they were doing."

This hobby has been loved for 100 years, long after the U.S. Mint introduced the penny as its first circulating coin in March 1793. Although there is reputed evidence that traces the history back to the mid-1800s, the general acceptance of elongating coins began as a money-making souvenir at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1892. The Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago in 1933 saw the first large production of ECs. The popularity increased in the 1950s when people purchased their own machines and engraved their own dies. Technical innovations changed the original 3.5 foot, one-turn hand-crank machines to the automated 8-turn crank machines found today. Some newer machines elongate a coin with the simple touch of a button.

Don't worry about defacing money. Smashing pennies is legal. Section 331, Title 18, of the U.S.



A Coin by any Other Name: *Squashed, rolled, flattened, or smashed* — collectors call these elongated coins or ECs for short.

Code begins, "Whoever fraudulently alters, defaces, mutilates, impairs, diminishes, falsifies, scales or lightens any of the coins coined at the mints of the United States, or any foreign coins which are by law made current or are in actual use or circulation as money within the United States...." and the word to pay attention to is "fraudulently." Collectors are not in this for the money because they

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don't intend to buy anything with their creations, so they're off the hook.

Simple high school physics explains the specifics of the creation. In a process reminiscent of old washing machines, mechanical gears and levers push a coin through steel rollers, one of which has a reverse-engraved die cut into it. The design and diameter of the machines allows a maximum of four dies on any roller. The imprint of mechanics is left behind on every coin in the form of a semicircular tab at the top called "the catch." This groove in the die catches the rim of the coin, allowing it to drag across the design at the proper point. Approximately 22 tons of pressure exerts on this small surface of a penny, and that pressure distorts the coin's original shape from round to oblong. Every machine's rollers must be individually adjusted, because too little pressure causes the coin to fall out, while too much pressure creates a long, tapered "boat tail." A penny can be rolled out to one foot long this way.

"The whole bottom line of the elongating community is that it's fun," Fritsch says. "You see a machine you've never seen before, you put in your two quarters and your penny, and bang! Out comes something that didn't exist before."

The fun continues with the chal-

lenge to obtain the desired look of a stretched date on the back. Positioning a coin the proper direction is trial and error with each machine, but the non-printed side image is best seen with a naturally-tarnished coin. Originally, the cent was 95 percent copper, which tarnishes nicely. In 1982, the coins were made cheaper and 20 percent lighter as composition changed to copper-plated zinc, which smears and streaks the reverse image. Spraying the Lincoln (dated) side prior to smashing retains the design and the date. A fruitwood stain complements the coin's red copper color best, but chartreuse paint also "tarnishes" a shiny post-1982 penny well once it dries.

Cleansing pre-1982 coins of their circulated gunk is a more popular way to obtain the desired look. Collectors swear by many methods: a pencil eraser, ketchup (which is acidic, so must be washed off thoroughly), olive oil, Brasso, vinegar, a baking soda rub, or lemon juice and salt. Fritsch's secret ingredient is "a little bit of Aim toothpaste to take away that surface gunk. Colgate would probably work just as well, but Aim is a gel and it's not going to be abrasive. I like Aim. It's got the fluoride in it and that coin will never get cavities."

The health of coins is important considering the 25-year life span of a circulating coin. The penny is the "most widely used denomination currently in circulation," states the U.S. Mint, which, contrary to the wishes of many merchants and consumers, has no plan to stop production. Considering EC collectors intend the coins to last a lifetime, proper care is a must. After the tarnishing or cleaning, there is storage in Mylar holders or penny books that hold up to 30 coins. The cataloguing and photographing comes next. Everyone has their own particulars. Fritsch carries a kit with him whenever he travels. In his Dollar Store denim pencil bag, he has an Altoids tin of pre-1982 pennies, a roll of quarters, a Swingline tot stapler with extra staples, and several 2-by-2 Mylar holders for storing the coins. "It's small, compact, easy to carry. I toss it in the suitcase wherever I go."

The mindboggling marketing of memories and paying to make le-

By Diana Wolf

gal tender — a quarter, a nickel, or most commonly a penny — useless for purchasing power is not just for the wanderlust. If your collection is lacking, you can buy coins on eBay. There are numerous websites one can go to discover locations of machines when travelling. If you don't travel, ask the chat board to trade.

The Yahoo chat board keeps the penny world connected. Kathy Reddin established it in 1997. This longtime collector who smashed the first of her 2,000 coins at the ripe age of 10 at Universal Studios, created the board as the result of a bet. Her husband challenged her to locate something that could not be found on the Internet. She typed the phrase "squashed penny," and was surprised to receive two hits.

Finding others sharing her obsession led her to create a website and message board, which morphed into a discussion group. After several hosting issues, Reddin found eGroups — since purchased by Yahoo!Groups — which is a free service that hosts the chat board. Currently, 332 members post an average of 150 messages each month.

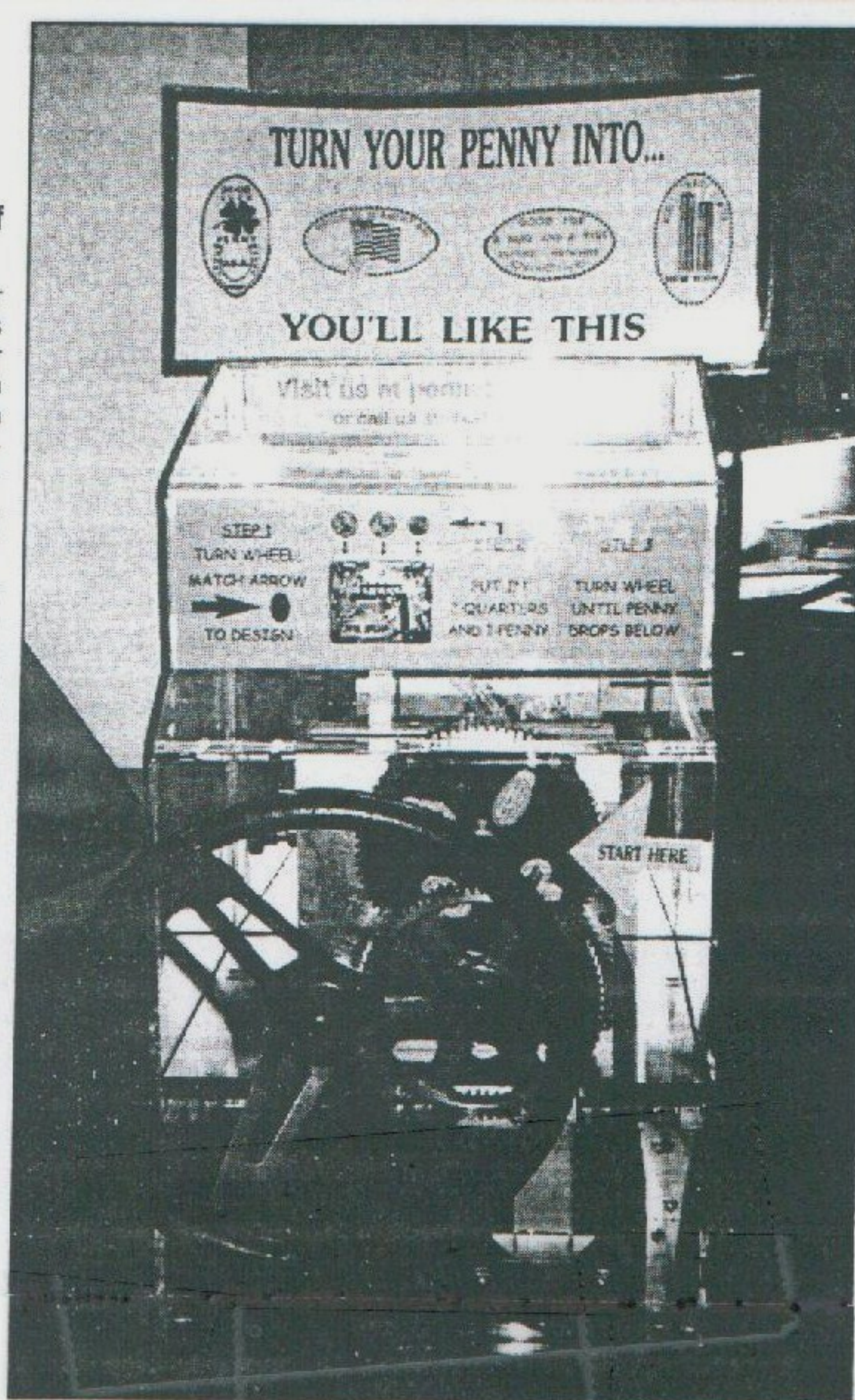
The former moderator admits in an E-mail interview to once being "a total nut."

"I lugged \$200 worth in quarters to Six Flags Over Texas in the middle of the summer just to squash pennies! I was able to get 15 complete sets of coins. The people at the metal detectors probably thought I was insane! I rented a stroller to hold the bag for me so I wouldn't have lug it all over the park!"

New Jerseyans can fill up on these tactile trinkets at various locations. These machines await your money at Six Flags Great Adventure in Jackson, Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, at the shore at the Ocean City Piers and the Seaside Heights Carousels, at the New Jersey State Aquarium in Camden, and at various rest stops along the New Jersey Turnpike, Garden State Parkway, and Atlantic City Expressway.

Betsy Ross House in Philadelphia is one of the best places to smash pennies, says Jim Giarrusso, the father of a Hillsborough family who began collecting ECs at Florida's Sea World in 2001. His two children, Justin, 10, and Alyssa, 7, were "running around the park after that, looking for these machines. And we're scraping for quarters and pennies." That experience, the Giarrussos discovered the network of collectors through TEC and on the Internet.

Jim now trades for places the family visited before collecting ECs using local coins. After Heather, the mother, located a machine at the New York ferry terminal with dies of the Empire State Building, World Trade Center, Statue of Liberty, and "Good Luck NY," they posted the information with the chat group and asked if anyone wanted to trade. He got 30



Money Squasher: Transforming coins into mementos is all a matter of old-fashioned gears, levers, and spare change. Photos by Diana Wolf.

replies, with some people wanting multiples. "Serious collectors want all dies. 'What else came from that machine?' they ask," Jim Giarrusso says. Their next New York ferry trip was accompanied by four rolls of quarters, enough for 80 pennies.

The children are the real collectors here. They have 300 to 400 between them, but the collections are not identical. When the family travels, each one gets one of every coin, but trades are divided between them. They store their coins in 30-count souvenir penny books. "Before I got the books," says Justin, "they were all stored in little baggies all over my room. I like it. It's a safe hobby. You can keep a piece of memory...from one coin that's 40 years old. You have a memorial if it ever gets torn down."

Every penny is an adventure. Alyssa's favorite EC is the Yosemite Sam Six Flags Great Adventure penny she found under a Coinstar machine.

As souvenirs, Heather says, "It's cheaper than T-shirts."

Jim says, "I like having memories of places we've been so when they get older, maybe they'll re-

member all the things we've done for them. Especially when we're old and we're heading towards a nursing home, maybe they'll remember we weren't so awful to them."

U.S. 1's nearest Penny Machine: The Molly Pitcher rest area, New Jersey Turnpike, southbound only, between Exit 8A and 8, home to Statue of Liberty and World Trade Center imprints.

Websites

The Elongated Collectors (TEC): www.money.org/clubs/tec.html

The Squished Penny Museum (Washington, D.C.): www.squished.com

The Penny Atlas (includes machine locations): www.pennyatlas.com

Maggie Nguyen's Personal Penny Page (informative): www.geocities.com/heartland/fields/4586/

The U.S. Mint: www.usmint.gov

American Numismatic Association: www.money.org



Collector's Choice: Smashed pennies with a variety of familiar landmarks including the now lost World Trade Center.