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## Onondaga Historical Association unveils Syracuse China exhibit for two fundraisers

By Tom Huddleston Jr.

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These are just a few of the rare and original items that are a part of the Syracuse China exhibit at the Onondaga Historical Association. The exhibit will be open for a sneak peek for two fundraisers March 24 and 26 before the full exhibit opens to the public in 2011.

Amid more than 30 display cabinets packed full of ceramic plates, bowls, dishes and containers on the fifth floor of the **Onondaga Historical Association Museum**, sits a wood dining room set covered with a white lace tablecloth and six china place-settings. Like the table it adorns, the china was locally made.

Gregg Tripoli, the OHA's Executive Director, explains the significance of this particular dinnerware, which he calls "the most collectible china" created by the subject of this exhibit -- the Syracuse China Corporation. "This china was never made available to the consumer," he says. "This china was made available only to the employees of Syracuse China during holiday seasons."

The striking pieces are from Syracuse China's "Blue Plum" collection, which feature intense cerulean shades that transition into spotless whites. Syracuse China, which was founded in Geddes in 1871 and closed its Syracuse factory in March 2009, was famous for such quality in its coloring, Tripoli says.

He said the line's quality and rarity are what make it so sought after.

The museum's newest exhibit -- and it's largest ever with several thousand pieces on display -- features the remnants of Syracuse China's prominent past, including items manufactured by the company under its original name, the Onondaga Pottery Company. A few local pieces from the mid-1800's even predate the company's formation.

After **Syracuse China's Salina factory closed** last year, Tripoli and the OHA began working with parent company Libbey Inc. to secure the company's revered collection of historical china.

The collection, which was on display in a private room at the Court Street plant, had previously only been open to employees and special guests of the company.

To Tripoli and the OHA, the collection is about more than just dinnerware.

"Syracuse China touched on everything and that's why it was so important to me and to the OHA that we keep this collection here in Syracuse," he says.

After 140 years of manufacturing china and employing local residents, the community's emotional connection to Syracuse China was enough to convince the OHA that its museum on Montgomery Street in Syracuse is the only suitable home for the collection. When asked how long he expects the exhibit to remain in the museum, Tripoli responds simply, "Forever."

Central New Yorkers can take a sneak peek at the exhibit during two evening fundraisers this week: 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesday (March 24) and Friday (March 26). Tickets to the event will cost \$30, and attendees will be able to tour the collection while refreshments are served.

Tripoli said the exhibit, which will be part of what the OHA is calling its "behind-the-scenes tour," will not be open to the public until 2011 because of some ongoing construction. The exhibit takes up about half of the fifth floor exhibit room, which is not usually open to the public.

Curators sorted through about 30,000 items to select several thousand that are on display in more than 30 glass-front display cabinets. Tripoli said the museum will change out items occasionally to keep the exhibit fresh.

"Because this is a tremendous collection," he adds, "because it takes up a lot of space, and because it does cost us a lot of money to maintain it, I'm hoping that the community continues that emotional connection that they have to Syracuse China and will come to see it here at the OHA to help us support it."

After arrangements were made with Libbey, the OHA found itself sitting on a pile of collectibles that had already been catalogued but required packaging, labeling and transportation. In the end, the items filled six and a half tractor trailers, Tripoli says.

M&T Bank helped the OHA by underwriting the cost of the move, and nearly 70 people responded to advertisements calling for volunteers to help move the items. Some of those people, Tripoli says, were former Syracuse China employees who wanted to show their appreciation to the museum for making the collection accessible.

"We've had tremendous response," he says.

Among the former factory workers was Lillian Tokarz, 68, of Syracuse. A graduate of North High School, she remembers finding her first job at the Syracuse China plant in 1961. She would continue to work there in various capacities for six years before leaving to raise her children.

When she heard that the OHA needed volunteers to help move the china collection, she said she gladly offered her services. She even stayed on to help other museum volunteers and staff arrange the collection in its new exhibit space. Her positive experiences with Syracuse China, along with the company's deep-rooted presence in the community, inspired her altruism. Quite simply, she says, the factory's closing in Syracuse disappointed her and she felt the need to contribute to the OHA's efforts to preserve local artifacts.

"It's history," she says. "It's a tradition."

The exhibit is laid out so that the oldest pieces are the first to be seen, allowing visitors to follow the progression of both the company and the trade. The collection's curator, Tom Hunter, appreciates the variety of the pieces made by the company and their adaptations to "social and cultural changes," he says.

The wide range of pieces on display includes a ceramic spittoon from the mid-1800s, plates hand-painted by such artists as Grandma Moses and N.C. Wyeth, the company's award-winning Imperial Geddo ware and a ceramic landmine. The company produced ceramic explosives -- which could not be detected by metal detectors -- during World War II in a secret section of the factory.

Additionally, the collection features examples of china sets from throughout the company's run, including those that were used by American embassies around the globe, as well as airlines, steamships and notable American railroads such as the Santa Fe, Union Pacific, Great Northern and the New York Central.

"It's using a tremendously beautiful, artistic medium to show the history of so much of American life, from domestic to commercial." Tripoli says, adding that the china offers a window into "tastes and trends of American life."

Because of the collection's size and rarity, Hunter says that no price could reasonably be applied to it. "It's priceless," he says. He also sees that the value of these pieces is likely highest to local residents for whom Syracuse China's reputation always provided a "sense of hometown pride."

"Those are the people that have that tremendous emotional, familial connection to Syracuse China," Tripoli adds. "For them it is defining of their life and their family's history here in Syracuse."

### **The details**

**What:** Syracuse China exhibit fundraisers.

**When:** 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesday (March 24) and Friday (March 26).

**Where:** Onondaga Historical Association Museum, 321 Montgomery St., Syracuse.

**Admission:** \$30. Reservations are required.

**Information:** 428-1864, ext. 312.



David Lassman / The Post-Standard

Volunteer Lillian Tokarz, who has been helping to install the display and worked at Syracuse China from 1961 to 1967, talks with Tom Hunter, assistant director and curator of museum collections. The table setting is "Blue Plate" which was a gift line made exclusively for purchase by Syracuse China employees.

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