The first thing to know about Henry Voigt’s menu collection is that it contains, besides menus from restaurants, hotels, and resorts, many others from the most unexpected of public-eating situations. Take the one from San Quentin, a dance-card-sized (four-by-five-inch) booklet tied with lemon-colored string. It was issued in the officers’ and guards’ mess Chinese New Year, February 7, 1932. “There’s actually a lot of San Quentin stuff,” says Henry, turning the pages of one of his archival binders. He shows me two more San Quentin bills of fare. One lists choices for an everyday meal served March 7, 1929. It’s a single sheet of typewritten carbon on tissue paper. The other is from Christmas dinner 1928. On folded stock, it’s decorated with a holly motif. “Oh, the jailhouse menus are fabulous,” says Henry. “This is as charming as they get.” He calls my attention to the musical program on the Chinese New Year one; it was scheduled after the dinner of sturgeon soup, chicken chop suey, and fried chicken with mushroom gravy. “Is it a guards’ orchestra or guys in the can?” he muses aloud. “Don’t know. I couldn’t believe I was getting menus from San Quentin. I thought, ‘This is the most bizarre thing yet.’”

Although Henry started collecting menus just a decade ago, he already has amassed one of the most significant private collections in the country. In July 2003, after the popularly extended run of the New York Public Library’s exhibit New York Eats Out, its curator, William Grimes, the former New York Times restaurant critic, contacted Henry for copies of menus that were gaps in the library’s collection. More recently, a request for a copy of a menu came to Henry from the Enrico Caruso Museum of America in Brooklyn. That menu, dated January 12, 1919, commemorates a private dinner at New York’s Biltmore Hotel given by the Society of Arts & Sciences in Caruso’s honor. “It’s not much graphically,” allows Henry. “But that’s probably why copies are rare—few people saved them.”

Before he became collector, Henry already had a few 1950s menus from the ocean liner Liberté. His family did not usually take expensive vacations. An only child, he was six when his father died, and his mother worked. But in 1959 the remarried widow had a windfall: a few thousand dollars. “So my mother called up the French line and booked first-class passage for herself, my stepfather, and me on the finest ship afloat. I was just thirteen. And all of a sudden, we were walking up this gangplank. It was enormously luxurious. There was a row of bellboys with the buttons on their jackets and the little hats on their heads.”

It wasn’t until the advent of eBay that Henry started collecting in earnest. “It was eBay,” he says, “that began to supply the market for something one couldn’t easily find otherwise.” Ephemera dealers have long sold menus at antiques shows, usually filing them under their locale, the better for the regionalist collectors to find them. But the collection that Henry has assembled would have taken decades to cull by hand from dealers’ inventories.

eBay is the place where curators, like Grimes, have encountered Henry; indeed, these seekers are often his under-bidders. Henry and I, too, met through eBay, in 1999. An antiques dealer friend had given me some 340 vintage menus to sell, and I did it one by one over a period of eighteen months during which Henry bought nearly a third of them. They were magnificent things in pristine condition, having come directly from the family that had eaten the meals in the late 1870s and early 1880s, mostly at places in the East. After I finished selling the menus, Henry and I stayed in touch through e-mail. Last spring, when he found out I would be passing through Wilmington, Delaware, where he lives, he invited me to see the rest of the collection.

Anyone who undertakes a visit to a collector is well advised to arrange an open-ended schedule. Collectors can be monologists. It’s also true that many deal on the side to finance their purchases, so their fervor is often partly sales pitch. But I already knew from a phone conversation with Henry that he wasn’t like that. I knew, too, what he looked like, because his silver-haired headshot, along with his brief biography, was on the DuPont Web site under “Meet the Executives.” What did surprise me, when we finally sat down together, was that his demeanor didn’t at all match
his high-powered résumé. Although he had just returned from a business trip to Japan, he acted more like a man who had just returned from vacation. Neither a collector type nor a corporate type? (His wife, Julie, an art teacher, with whom he has collected the art that hangs on the walls of their house, says that DuPont can’t figure him out either, and that’s one reason why he keeps rising up the ranks.) A company man nonetheless, he went to DuPont directly from Virginia Polytechnic Institute, where he was graduated in 1969 with a degree in mechanical engineering.

Restaurant owners and hoteliers often collect menus, if only to monitor the competition. One collection Henry now owns he believes “most certainly” once belonged to the proprietor of Feltman’s Restaurant in the 1920s, successor to founder Charles Feltman (purported inventor of the hot dog and builder of the vast Ocean Pavilion on Coney Island). Oscar of the Waldorf had a big collection, too. But their focus was primarily culinary. The same is true of the New York Public Library’s collection and the four other major public collections in the country, at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island; the City College of San Francisco; the Los Angeles Public Library; and Cornell University. Henry’s focus is broader, aided by a mandate: “To try to touch history. You can’t. But once in a while the object has enough presence that you can sense it.” He has noticed that vintage stock certificates and vintage menus have certain aspects in common, including beautiful graphics. But the broader cultural themes aren’t in the stock certificates, because the food isn’t. “You know, the world works by relationships, and relationships are formed over food,” says Henry. “And the menus are tangible evidence of those relationships. I’ve seen so many good ones and bad ones over the years: how things are done at the table, unspoken things, in families and in business. Asian cultures have it down pat,” he adds. “Americans don’t understand it as well.”

Henry’s broader themes are informed by readings of Ephemera Society materials and by his own feelings about what themes pervade American life. They can be stated briefly as “progress,” “identity,” and “class.” With those themes in mind, he has divided his menus into these categories: “Everyday Life (1842–1954),” “Special Events (1854–1966),” “The Economic Boom (1878–1883),” “New York City (1884–1940),” “American Military Menus (1847–1955),” “Let’s Celebrate (1950s & today).” The earliest one, dated June 20, 1842, is from Parker’s Restaurant of Boston, fore-runner of the Parker House, the 1840s being the time that menus began to be printed here in the United States. The newest ones are from Henry’s own experiences at culinary monoliths like Chez Panisse and Chanterelle, as well as quirkier places like Mark’s South Beach.
It’s not always easy for him to decide how to categorize a menu. “For example,” he once wrote me in a commentary about the lists, “the 1903 Frank’s Restaurant menu from the gold fields of Nome, Alaska, I listed under ‘Everyday Life,’ but the miners probably ate there only after they struck gold. Similar issue for the 1912 Bergez-Frank’s Old Poodle Dog, which was the best place to eat in San Francisco at the time. It was an ‘Everyday’ place only for the well-to-do. Incidentally, it is crudely printed but still appealing. I recently learned during a trip to San Francisco that the Old Poodle Dog proprietors printed the menus themselves in their basement….”

But Henry isn’t a collector captivated by classification. He also distances himself from what he calls his “greatest competition” on eBay—“other menu collectors who are just compulsive collectors, people who buy five or ten a day.” Can you imagine? he asks rhetorically. “And they will pay absolutely anything. They want it; they need it.”

Henry once pooh-poohed the vacuum-cleaner habits of a Coney Island collector who outbid him on an item I was selling. He said he could guess he didn’t appreciate the graphics. The Victorian examples I sold to Henry are notable for their engravings. They most often show the multistoried turreted hotels and resorts of the era—the cruise ships of their day. A proud proprietor often put his building’s picture on a menu’s front cover and printed a new one for every dinner (even though the food choices were relentlessly the same: roasts of all kinds, along with boiled meats, especially boiled leg of mutton). But as Henry showed me much more spectacular examples from later eras, I could imagine studying the whole history of graphics via menus. The visual delights from other eras include arts and crafts woodblock prints, art nouveau curves and scrolls, and art deco Egyptian motifs. There are political cartoons damning the start of Prohibition on banquet menus in 1920. There is a pastel by Raoul Dufy to honor the Lincoln Center’s new opera house at a dinner for patrons in 1966. There is even a photograph by Ansel Adams on the cover of a menu from a hotel dining room in Yosemite National Park. Dated August 19, 1936, it’s from the Ahwahnee, which is pictured by Adams nestled in the dramatic landscape of the park.

Some of the menus were annotated by their original savers. “First date,” says one. “Atom bomb job,” says another. It’s from Hanford Engineer Works, Hanford, Washington, for the holiday
meal served on December 25, 1944, to employees working on the Manhattan Project. A favorite of Henry’s includes an annotation in the form of what must be called a piece of original art. It’s a pencil sketch on a menu from the Brunswick Hotel in New York, dated May 31, 1886. A woman in riding gear is pictured; she wears a helmet and a fitted jacket, a shirt and a tie, and a pocket watch and fob tucked into her vest. And she was drawn right over the list of thirty elegant champagnes on the menu’s back cover. “The Brunswick was a spot frequented by the fashionable people, the hory set, very upper class,” says Henry. “This was also Memorial Day as celebrated by a postwar generation. To them it was real. So somebody sketched a woman who was there. She and her horse may have participated in one of the parades.”

One “Everyday” menu came with a bonus of another kind: a letter in beautiful script. The menu, dated November 8, 1883, is from the Pierson, a hotel in El Paso. The letter, written the following day, was signed “J.T. Stevens” to his parents in Brookfield, Connecticut. Having gone to Texas for a job as a store clerk, Stevens sent the menu with his letter to reassure Mom and Dad “that I am not entirely out of the world, if I have got nearly to the jumping off place,” since the Pierson’s baked lamb pie and mashed turnips were dishes he would have eaten at home. This unwitting historian made nonculinary observations, too: “It seems to be quite healthy here. I have not put up a single preparation for coughs in the two days I have been here, which would have been very unusual in New York.”

The menus that don’t yield their stories easily Henry calls “invitations to inquiry.” One of them is a “Special Events” menu from a dinner given by the steel industry at New York’s Metropolitan Club, January 5, 1898. It came with two extra items. One was a leather-bound book, the size of a composition notebook, lined with silk, its pages caricatures of each dinner guest, no names. The only one he recognized was Andrew Carnegie, in the image of a butterfly. The second item was a single caricature, an identical image from the book, which he surmised was this guest’s place card. “But now here comes the surprise,” says Henry. “Five days after this dinner there was an increase in tubular steel prices.” He knows this from reading period newspapers, which mention that the group met in New York. “Of course, you could do that [fix prices] in those years. These became known as ‘Gary dinners.’ Judge Gary [Elbert Henry Gary (1846–1927) for whom the steel town Gary, Indiana, was named] ran us Steel for about twenty years. And he was very persuasive at these dinners: ‘Okay, boys, let’s get these prices up.’ It’s the history of the steel industry in a menu.”

Henry owned another of his “invitations to inquiry” for over a year before he discovered its full significance. From Delmonico’s, it is dated March 2, 1880. Printed on a card fastened to maroon silk by a matching grosgrain ribbon, it
has a Latin motto at the top—the family motto of Ferdinand De Lesseps, as it turns out. De Lesseps was the Frenchman whose company built the Suez Canal in the 1860s. At the time of the dinner, he was in New York promoting the idea of a Panama canal. “Rutherford B. Hayes was all in a lather: ‘The canal has to be American.’ So this dinner at Delmonico’s was a big event from a political and financial point of view. But it was also big from a culinary point of view, because De Lesseps was the great French hero of the age, and Charles Ranhofer, who was Delmonico’s head chef, and Lorenzo Delmonico himself, wanted to show off for him. Ranhofer, when he wrote The Epicurean [1894], chose this menu as one for reproduction.”

A third menu that didn’t immediately yield its secrets to Henry was one I sold to him. From Ogden House in Council Bluffs, Iowa, it was a small yellow card fastened with a black ribbon. The date was September 21, 1880. When I put it on eBay, I didn’t know its significance, either. A few weeks after Henry’s winning bid bought it, he wrote me this e-mail: “They say that one appeal of ephemera is that it provides a history trail that pieces together actual examples of an evolutionary process. It is unwitting evidence that has somehow survived and now provides a window into the past and its culture. Remember the black ribbon on the menu from Council Bluffs? I figured it out the other day. President Garfield had finally died two days earlier of gunshot wounds he had received that summer. Our nation was in mourning…Hence the ribbon…Henry.”

What the family who collected the menus I sold Henry was doing in Council Bluffs we’ll probably never know. More commonly their trips were to many fashionable spots of the Gilded Age: Saratoga Springs, Martha’s Vineyard, Newport. Henry tells me he is sorry the collection was broken up. “Its value was in its totality. It was a book sold page by page. It was not a rare book that it’s some crime to break up, but as a historical unit, it was unique.” Still, as a businessman, he understands that my “fiduciary responsibility” to my antiques dealer friend was to maximize profits. And I detect some approval of my acumen in Henry’s next, wry comment: “It was like the Vietnam War. It was just draining you financially. You don’t know how many of these Goddamn things there are. Whether she’s saving the best for last, the worst for last…”

Henry’s profession requires him to monitor business cycles, and he obviously delights in noting how historic ones are manifested in menus. The depression of 1873
reveals itself not so much in menu design or content but in sheer rarity. “Try finding a menu dated ‘1874,’” he says. “Then the country started coming out of it in ’78, ’79…. After that there was this enormous economic boom.” One example from the boom years is a menu that clearly illustrates Henry’s “progress” theme. It’s from Chicago’s Grand Pacific Hotel in 1881; the occasion is the hotel’s 26th Annual Game Dinner. The meal was beyond opulent. Served were prairie chickens, hunter’s soup, leg of mountain sheep, deer tongue, buffalo tongue, ham of black bear, wild turkey, saddle of antelope, loin of buffalo, pheasants, three kinds of duck, sage hens, wild turkey, blue-billed widgeon, black-tailed deer, sand-hill crane, ragout of squirrel à la française, along with ornamental dishes like a coon at home, a rabbit on watch, a snipe in a marsh, blackbirds at play, and a crane listening. The first annual banquet and reunion of the Society of Colorado Pioneers, held that same year at Denver’s Windsor Hotel, is similarly extravagant. But also on the menu is circa 1899 “grub”—beans, bacon, hardtack—from America’s covered wagon days.

The grub wouldn’t actually have been cooked, served, or eaten. But at military reunions, it often was. Listed in italics on an 1868 menu from the Reunion Banquet of the Armies of the Ohio, Tennessee, Georgia, and Cumberland at the Chicago Board of Trade are “hard tack” and “sow belly”—battlefield cuisine—to be served along with the ornamentals of famous battle scenes. “Sherman and Grant were there. Sherman did the talking. All Grant did was sit there and be Grant,” says Henry. (Again, he knows this from his supplementary reading.) “Garfield wasn’t there, although he is listed on the program. This is just three years after the war ended. The Gar [Grand Army of the Republic] had been founded but wasn’t yet well known. They smoked cigars, drank whiskey, told stories, gave speeches, and I have read those speeches….”

Perhaps the most poignant military reunion menu in the collection is from a Gar banquet held in Richmond, Virginia, in 1883. It is printed on a Confederate ten-dollar bill. Henry tells the story: “It was a hard thing to figure out. Why would a Gar banquet menu be printed on a Confederate bill? It was actually a conciliatory act. It could have been the opposite. But a group in New Jersey contacted a Confederate post in Richmond. The Confederates were just beginning their Confederate Veterans Association. So these two groups, from New Jersey and Richmond, got together. The reconciliation started with the soldiers. They started showing up on the same battlefields on the anniversaries of the battles, and started shaking hands. This was soldier-to-soldier level. And so now they are getting on a train, returning to the South to embrace their brothers, breaking bread.”

Much of what the menus reveal isn’t new information; it’s new manifestations of it. The menus that provide otherwise unwritten history are my favorites. Who has heard of the Tremont House Waiters’ Association, a late nineteenth-century trade association for black employees of the Boston hotel? Henry has a menu from its third annual dinner at the Odd Fellows Hall, March 10, 1892. The piece, with scalloped edges fastened with pink-tasseled string, is actually a dance card, concert program, and menu all in one. “The waiters at Tremont House catered to upper-class white society. These waiters knew how it was done. So they weren’t like blacksmiths getting together,” says Henry. “These guys were doing it for themselves in style. They didn’t have a lot of money, but they knew how to throw a party. Many roads cross that one.”

Sometimes the history of an individual gets preserved in menus, along with the history of a social group or class. The Tremont House piece contains a list of members’ names, perhaps otherwise lost. Two other favorites of mine have documentary qualities, too. They are banquet menus that came with seating charts. One is from the annual New York Press Club Banquet served at Delmonico’s, November 7, 1883. The chart enumerates, among others, then mayor of New York W.R. Grace, founder of the eponymous company. “This comes from the family,” says Henry. The other is from a dinner at Boston’s Brunswick House, October 13, 1880, honoring Ulysses S. Grant, who had recently lost his bid to be Republican nominee for a third term as US president. He was nearing the end of his career. The chart shows two head tables—demilunes—and then a series of long tables running perpendicular to them. Hundreds attended this dinner. “I have a lot of other stuff from it,” says Henry, professing the invitation, a place card for one “Mr. Conant” (a one-by-three-inch oval with a little fish graphic on it), and the number (#251) that Charles F. Conant was given so he could find his seat.

Conant served in various capacities with the US Treasury Department during the administrations of Grant, Andrew Johnson, and Rutherford B. Hayes. In the fall of 1998, the Internet has told me, the bulk of Conant’s papers were acquired by the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center in Fremont, Ohio. This menu and its extras slipped through somebody’s fingers.

Henry is aware of being a caretaker and knows that others, particularly those who sell family pieces, see him that way, too. “Handing the stuff off to me is good, because it’s going to get cemented in. It won’t be thrown away,” he says. (It also gets preserved with magnesium oxide or, if necessary, repaired by restorers who also do work for the Winterthur
Museum, at the rate of seventy-five dollars an hour). When, in turn, it's time for Henry to dispose of his collection, he's fairly certain he will bequeath it to one of the public archives named earlier, where researchers will be able to see the riches that I have seen.

In the meantime, the collector naturally continues to collect. Since my visit over a year ago, Henry has added several choice pieces, including one from a 1908 banquet held at the Bismark Hotel for the accountants (“auditing employees”) of the American Can Company’s Chicago district. A special feature of this menu is that it was lithographed on hinged tin. Henry has also acquired a menu for the dinner given by President Nixon for the Apollo xi astronauts at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles just a few weeks after the moon landing July 20, 1969. This one came from the estate of Sanford Fox, then chief of the social entertainments office of the White House. Perhaps many of those who attended that historic meal saved the menu, but Fox also kept some related ephemera, including the invitation, the response card, a blank ticket, a table diagram and layout of the ballroom, the parking windshield display for the presidential party, the Apollo xi flag sticker that was provided at the tables, and a White House photograph of the dinner.

Three other new additions, dated 1940, are scarce San Simeon menus, two for dinner and one for lunch, each typed on stationery headed “La Cuesta Encantada.” They were reportedly saved by a couple who worked for William Randolph Hearst on his estate. “The fare is simple,” says Henry’s e-mail, “typical of what Hearst served his guests. Despite the formality of the dining room (called the Refectory), Hearst always used paper napkins and had ketchup bottles set out on the table. Given these rules, the number of important guests over many years, and the uniqueness of the dining room itself, it seems to me that this is a small but interesting part of the story of ‘dining out in America.’”

Finally, in chronological order, here are a few more highlights from the whole, to tantalize those who must wait until this private archive someday goes public, or perhaps to inspire others to begin menu collections of their own.

- 1847, First Regiment, First Brigade, Connecticut Militia, Camp Seymour, Connecticut
- 1863, Boston Light Infantry Association, Parker House, Boston
- 1877, Anchor Line, SS Trinacria
- 1870, Glen House, White Mountains, New Hampshire
- 1878, Palace Hotel, San Francisco
- 1880, Harvard Class of 1871, Parker House, Boston
- 1882, Young Men’s Social,” Brick Church, Rochester, New York
- 1885, Chicago & Grand Trunk Railroad, Niagara Falls Air Line
- 1887, Corn Club Supper,” Congregational Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
- 1894, Vassar College “Thanksgiving,” Poughkeepsie, New York
- 1904, The Electric Kitchen Café, St. Louis World’s Fair
- 1910, Hotel Potter, Santa Barbara, California
- 1912, Hong Far Low, Chinese Restaurant, Boston
- 1915, Ambulance Americaine, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France
- 1918, American Expeditionary Forces, “Christmas,” Vladivostok, Siberia, Russia
- 1923, Immigrant Dining Room, Ellis Island
- 1930, Russian Bear, New York
- 1934, Cotton Club, Harlem
- 1934, Topsy’s Cabin, Long Island
- 1935, The White Swan Greyhound Bus Stop, Route 66, Sullivan, Missouri
- 1937, Village Barn, Greenwich Village
- 1938, Hotel Algonguin, New York
- 1940, Chrysler Jefferson Plant, Executive Dining Room, Detroit
- 1944, Prisoner of War Camp, “Christmas,” Camp Shelby, Mississippi
- 1955, Flamingo Hotel, Las Vegas