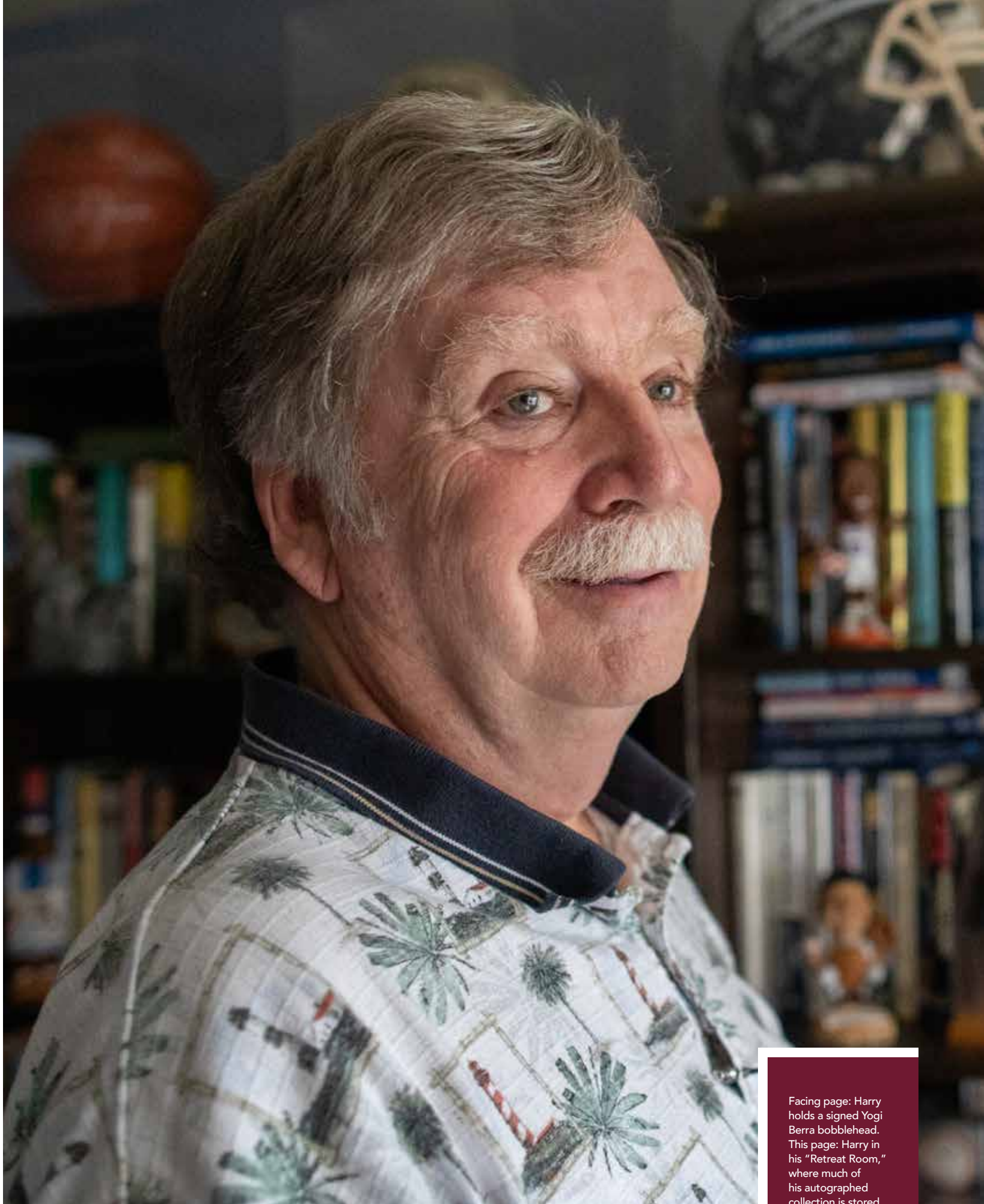


SIGNING UP

For decades, Harry Meyer '68 has been building a one-of-a-kind signed book and photograph collection.

BY JANA F. BROWN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAIME VALDEZ





Facing page: Harry holds a signed Yogi Berra bobblehead. This page: Harry in his "Retreat Room," where much of his autographed collection is stored.

Not long after American author John Steinbeck published *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, a copy of the 1962 book found its way into the hands of a then-16-year-old boy named Harry Meyer '68.

That particular hardbound copy of Steinbeck's travelogue detailing his cross-country trek with his standard poodle went on a subsequent journey of its own – from Meyer's home in Queens to the author's in Sag Harbor, N.Y., and back. Though he didn't know it at the time, *Travels with Charley* would become the first in a vast and eclectic collection of autographed books and photographs that Meyer has now been gathering for more than 50 years.

Meyer's parents were self-proclaimed book lovers, so Harry developed an early affinity for the written word. After a few semesters at Delbarton School in Morristown, N.J., Meyer began to recognize that there could be a higher purpose for the growing mound of schoolbooks that accompanied him home on breaks. After returning to New York City with the tomes from his American Literature and History class one summer, Meyer wondered if he could get any of the books autographed. Using pre-Internet resources, Meyer searched through *Who's Who in America* at the local library, where he was often able to locate the home addresses of authors, celebrities, and their agents.

"I would write up these fanciful letters and tell them how wonderful they were and then mail them off," says Meyer, who now lives in Tigard, Ore., "and I received all but a couple of them back."

Some of those to whom he sent his books returned them with signatures, as requested, while others included bonus content in the form of brief, personal notes. Through the mail, Meyer has been able to exchange his letters for the signatures of more than 200 authors, celebrities, poets, and sports figures. They range from luminaries to lesser-knowns whose work caught Meyer's attention at the time. Most penned short thank-you notes, while others corresponded in more detail. When Meyer sent his copy of *And Then There Were None* off to mystery maven Agatha Christie, for example, she complied. But Christie also offered young Harry a rebuke.

"I have signed your book, but this has become somewhat of an imposition," Christie wrote, noting that she had encountered difficulty finding a mailer to return the novel and suggesting that Meyer send her six pence to cover the cost of return postage.

Meyer considers a signed copy of the 1976 book *Roots* by Alex Haley

to be among his most cherished. Both men served in the U.S. Coast Guard, where they worked as cooks. Meyer noted that shared history with Haley in his request letter, and asked the author if he had started writing during his time in the military.

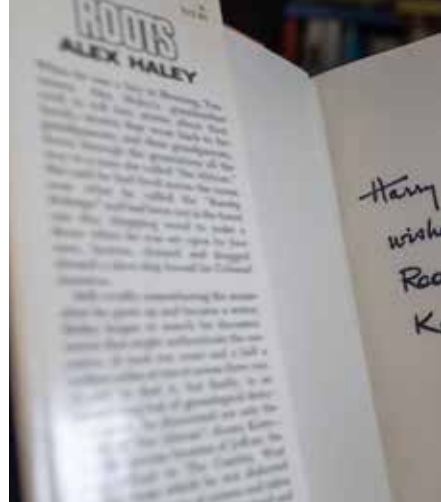
"I will tell you one thing," Haley wrote to Meyer in 1978, "I sure wish that I could have known even a little bit of what was lying ahead in those days when I was a cook on a Coast Guard ship. Thank you for going to so much trouble [to write to me]."

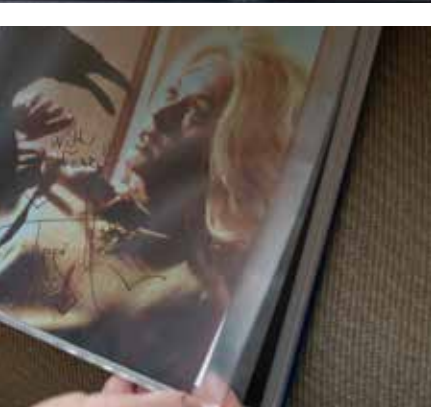
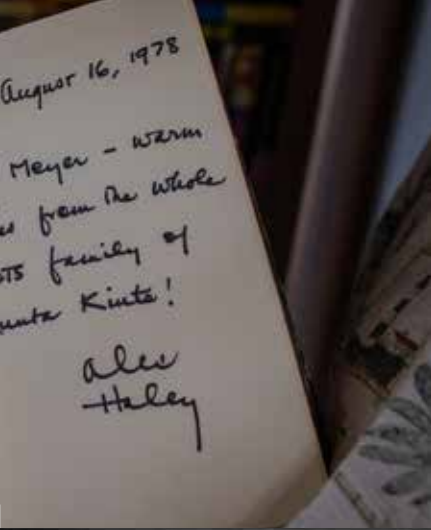
Herman Wouk, author of *The Caine Mutiny*, wrote to thank Meyer for his kind words about his 1965 novel, *Don't Stop the Carnival*. As a graduate of Franklin Pierce, Meyer became aware of the work of New Hampshire historian J. Dwayne Squires, who wrote *The Story of New Hampshire* in 1964. In his letter to Squires, Meyer referenced an article he had read about the historian's work in *Echoes Magazine*, an acknowledgment which, Squires replied, "pleased me very much." Meyer (a history major) also took the time to have Franklin Pierce history professor Harold Hammond sign two of his works in 1967, when Meyer was a student at Pierce. Hammond was the first Ph.D. hired by the University and co-authored *A Commoner's Judge: The Life and Times of Charley Patrick Daly* and "...a more perfect union," a concise guide to the U.S. Constitution.

At some point, Meyer branched out from traditional writers to comedians who also had authored books. Among his first was comedic legend Bob Hope, who inscribed Meyer's copy of *The Last Christmas Show* on March 8, 1975, with one of his classic lines, "Thanks for the Memory." Meyer has books signed by generations of comics, including Groucho Marx, Steve Allen, Carol Burnett, Tim Conway, Jay Leno, Steve Martin, and Jeff Foxworthy. In a quip to explain his delayed response, funnyman Dick Cavett wrote to Meyer, "Thanks for lending me this book for a month."

"It is almost like a life chronology," Meyer says of his collection, "because as you look at the people when I first started – John Steinbeck, Groucho Marx, Bob Hope – they are not around anymore. It's a part of my life, and you go through stages. They are certainly – exactly – a time machine."

Images, from top to bottom: A signed autograph and a message from Alex Haley, the author of *Roots*; a photograph signed by Millvina Dean, who was the last survivor and the youngest known passenger aboard the *RMS Titanic*; Jerry Mathers from *Leave it to Beaver*; autographs from Janet Leigh and Tippi Hedren; signatures from Harry's favorite team, the Yankees.





“I have signed your book,
but this has become somewhat
of an imposition.”

—AGATHA CHRISTIE

At one stage of Meyer's life as a collector, he encountered a phase during which he tired of buying books and realized that he could more easily retype poems and send them in a standard envelope to their writers. Poets whose signatures have found their way into Meyer's collection include Mark Van Doren, Phyllis McGinley, Robert Penn Warren, and Pulitzer Prize winner Archibald MacLeish, who wrote, "Perhaps I shouldn't say so, but I liked ['Words in Time'] too."

At some point, Meyer began writing to celebrities in search of their signatures. He has a signed photograph of actress Tippi Hedren, best known for her role as heroine Melanie Daniels in *The Birds*. A bit of nostalgia: The 1963 Hitchcock thriller was filmed in Bodega Bay, Calif., where Meyer had been stationed while serving in the Coast Guard. Other celebrities in Meyer's collection include prolific actor Richard Chamberlain, Charmian Carr, who played fictional Liesl in *The Sound of Music*, and real-life von Trapp matriarch Maria, who wrote a book in the early 1970s about her life with the Trapp Family Singers. Signed photos of Bob Newhart, George W. Bush, and Barbara Bush also adorn Meyer's Oregon home, as do autobiographies by musicians Eric Clapton and Linda Ronstadt.

"And, I have a copy of the Warren Commission Report, signed by Gerald Ford," Meyer adds.

A slew of sports books in the collection is highlighted by a signed copy of a memoir written by Meyer's boyhood hero, Mickey Mantle. Autographed baseballs and other sports memorabilia, plus a half dozen vintage radios, are also important to Meyer's collectible history. He also has acquired several items involving the *RMS Titanic*, the doomed British transatlantic passenger vessel that sunk on its maiden voyage off the coast of Newfoundland in 1912. Those items include a small lump of coal, about the size of a fingertip, recovered during the 1994 expedition to the ship, and a photograph of the luxury liner, signed by Millvina Dean, the last survivor of the *Titanic*. Dean, who died in 2009 at the age of 97, was only

two months old when the ship went down, and was the youngest known passenger on the *Titanic*.

Fortunately for Meyer, Portland, Ore., is home to Powell's Books, which holds the distinction of being the largest independent seller of new and used books in the world. He and his wife, Linda, are regulars at the frequent author readings hosted by Powell's. At the Meyer home in Tigard, the collection is dispersed among 13 bookshelves, categorized by genre — mystery, sports, comedies, etc. The baker's dozen of shelves is not enough to fit the entire assortment of Harry's books, however, and still more reside in a secure storage facility.

While the classics are certainly among Meyer's most cherished volumes, he also takes pride in more recent acquisitions. He wrote to Brooks Brown, author of the 2002 memoir *No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind Death at Columbine High School*, and told the survivor of the 1999 school shooting at Colorado's Columbine High School that Meyer had used the book in teaching confirmation classes. When he wrote the book, Brown shared in a note to Meyer, he didn't think about the different ways it could be useful.

"I was blown away by the fact that you used it in confirmation class," Brown wrote in the letter to Meyer. "Thank you so much for caring. One of the things I love most is finding out my book is being used where I least expect it, and confirmation is one of those. Thank you so much for it. Really, thank you. Every Moment is a Gift."

The rise of the Internet has made Meyer's job easier in the years since he wrote to John Steinbeck. He frequents the American Book Exchange website (AbeBooks.com), a source for 1,200 independent bookstores across the U.S. and Europe. There, he can often find pre-signed copies of books by coveted authors, though it has reduced his correspondence with the writers themselves. One of his most prized recent acquisitions is a signed copy of *A Dog's Purpose* by Bruce Cameron. ("I just love his books.")

Are there others he still covets? "Not really," says Meyer. "I'm very happy with what I have." ■