

Remembering Ed Chamberlain.

Jim Cerny, February 2019

Michael O’Leary and I both began slide rule collecting in 1999 and soon were what I call serious collectors, i.e., with more than 100 slide rules. We became aware of Ed Chamberlain as an advanced collector on the opposite side of New Hampshire, two hours away in the Hanover/Dartmouth area.

We invited ourselves to visit him and did so in February, 2001, following his winding directions to his farm in Etna, some 750 feet above sea level. Ed was a gracious host, with many rules spread out to look at, many items that were beyond our level of collecting.

Unlike Michael and myself, Ed used slide rules throughout his engineering career and began collecting before eBay existed. He described going to the famous Brimfield, Massachusetts, flea market back in the day, arriving in the dark and bringing a bicycle so he could cover more ground!

I often watched Ed’s buying and selling of rules on eBay, with the name “iknokold,” in the days when eBay was open to watching bidding habits. Ed was perhaps unique in having not only an amazing collection, worth perhaps \$50,000 by his estimate, but that he had paid for it by his buying and selling of rules. Ed made good use of his European connections, family and friends, to acquire rules on German eBay.

I went on several slide rule expeditions with Ed that had a big impact on me, though we were not in much contact in between. In fact, the last time I saw Ed was at lunch in 2014 and I did not realize he had died in October, 2017, until almost a year later. This remembrance is my tribute to Ed.

I went to three of the East Coast slide rule meetings in northern New Jersey and Ed was there each time – once we drove together. In December, 2004, we were invited to a work session at MIT on the occasion of the MIT Museum receiving the surviving K&E cabinet of sample slide rules, some of their own design and some of competitors. The session was conducted by curator Debbie Douglas and I’m not sure what came of our ideas, as the cabinet collection has not appeared online except for some photos I took at the time.

Of the various stories that Ed told, the one that really sticks is an example of a theme that is very strong with me, the contingencies

in our lives that have big consequences. Ed was stationed in Greenland and the living quarters were beneath the level of the ice. One day an aircraft came in and to relieve the boredom below ground, Ed went up on the surface where it was -50F in the bright sun. He was walking around, head tucked down, when all of a sudden something made him stop. He looked up at the rotating propeller of the plane, so close that he did not dare turn around, but backed up.

In October, 2013, Ed invited a handful of collectors to his home in Etna. That also included a side trip to Harold Frost as a local collector of specialized planimeters, some extremely unusual.

My one regret in all this was a trip not taken. Ed was aware that the American Precision Museum in Windsor, Vermont, had a surviving K&E scribing engine (logarithmic dividing machine). Michael O'Leary enthusiastically joined him and I foolishly believed I had to stay at work! What I missed was published in the book by Joseph Soper on K&E history.