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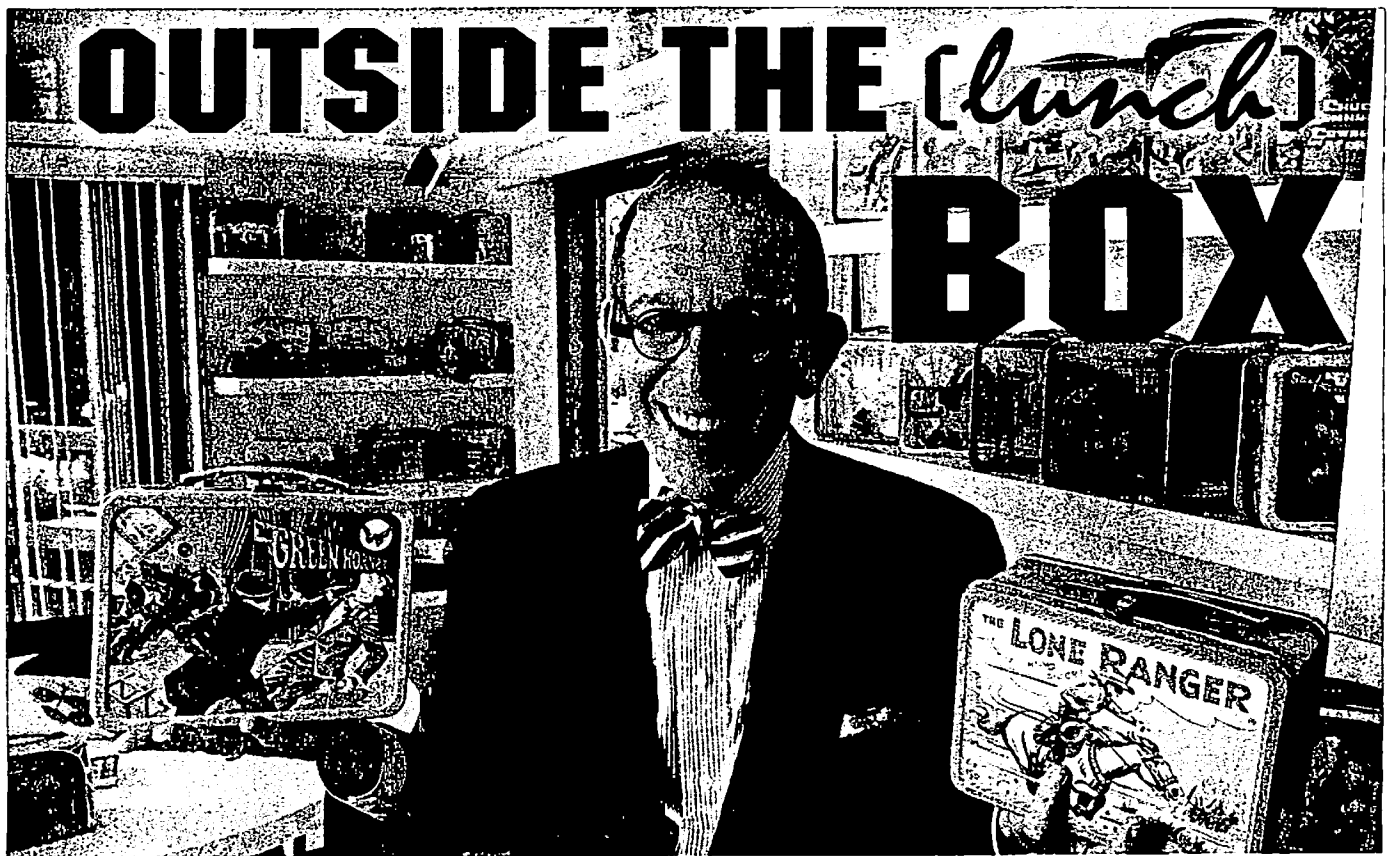


LUNCH DATE

Over the years, Southfield attorney Harvey Heller has amassed a premiere collection of 110 antique lunchboxes that span four decades of pop culture.

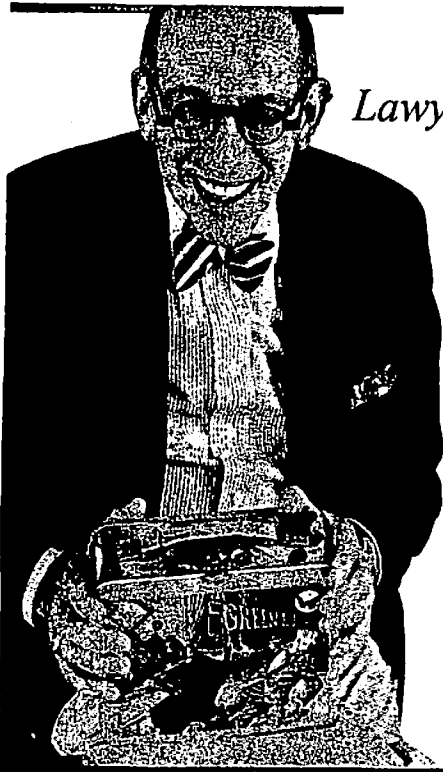
See his story on the Back Page.

Friday Feature



Photos by Robert Chase

Meddlin Hauser Wartell Roth & Heller attorney Harvey Heller poses with just two pieces from the extensive collection of antique lunchboxes on display in his kitchen. At left, he's pictured with his favorite model, a purple-and-green depiction of comic-book hero The Green Hornet.



Lawyer captures pop culture history in unique collection

BY TARYN HARTMAN

Legal News

The color palette splashing across Harvey Heller's West Bloomfield kitchen would be the envy of any interior decorator.

But the bright hues don't come from the cabinets (white with red handles), the floor (black-and-white checkerboard linoleum) or the appliances (standard stainless steel).

Lining the walls is Harvey, a partner at Maddin Hauser Wartell Roth & Heller in Southfield and head of the firm's insurance coverage and defense practice group, and wife Ronna's collection of antique lunchboxes, an array of oranges and turquoises and hot pinks some 110 strong that immortalize pop culture icons like Superman, G.I. Joe and the casts of "Bonanza," "Lost in Space," and "Get Smart."

"They're a specialty," Harvey says. "This is very much a premiere collection for this area, because the condition of the boxes are very, very good, for the most part. There are some bad ones, but overall it's an excellent collection and not a lot of people collect lunchboxes."

It all started in Royal Oak, where the Hellers found their first two lunchboxes — a 1973 Dr. Seuss model that is still Ronna's favorite and the first of what would grow into three Popeye lunchboxes, this one yellow with red trim.

"And we said, 'Gee, those would look cute above the sink,'" Harvey remembers. "One thing led to another, and we found ourselves at flea markets and collectible shows for years thereafter."

The blue and white Dr. Seuss box has since been moved to the center of the top shelf running the length of the back wall above the sliding glass door to the patio, and the Popeye box has joined its siblings on the shelf above the entrance to the kitchen. The bulk of the collection rests on custom-built white shelves edging the far end of the kitchen.

To peruse the Hellers' collection is to take a tour through the history of decorated lunchboxes, each one telling its own story, beginning with a 1946 Joe Palooka edition decorated with the characters from a comic strip that would become the precursor to Bazooka Bubble Gum and its in-wrapper Bazooka Joe comics.

"The history of lunchboxes, really, before the early '50s there wasn't much going on in lunchboxes," Harvey says, pulling the Palooka box from the shelf like a library book. "It wasn't much of something that was done until the early '50s, when one of the box companies came out with two boxes" — he replaces Palooka for another model — "this one, Hopalong Cassidy with a simple decal on it, and then you see those two space boxes up there on the right." He gestures across the kitchen to shelves next to the microwave where one red and one blue box feature illustrated stickers in their middles.

"And so when they did that, the competition came out with a fully decorated Roy Rogers," Heller continues. "And in response to that, they then started this process, and so the legend goes, decorated lunchboxes were born."

He explains that each year, lunchbox companies unveiled six or eight new models just in time for the back-to-school season, most designs not repeating year to year.

"Throughout the '50s you get a lot of the Westerns here," Heller says, gesturing to one shelf lined with the likes of the original Lone Ranger lunchbox, boxes featuring Wild Bill Hickock and Zorro and "this 1954, pristine-condition Annie Oakley, just perfect" that Heller convinced a Macomb County collector into selling him.

"In the late '50s, these boxes took off, and that's sort of like

"It is a collection, for all the effort we have undertaken, we can't imagine parting with it. I think Ronna and I probably said at one point in time it would take six figures to move our heads, but even then we probably wouldn't get moved enough. That's how we feel about our lunchboxes."

your conventional workman's lunch pail box," Heller says, pulling a box with a curved top painted in a pirate motif off a shelf. "There were 41 dome boxes that were designed, you're seeing 34 of them," he adds.

"And this is the rarest box of these types, called Hometown Airport," he continues. "Rare, because no cool kid wanted this box." Heller estimates it could easily fetch \$2,000.

The un-cool factor of the planes adorning Hometown Airport may explain why there was no Perry Mason lunchbox. "It would have to be something that was kind of cool," like a cartoon or superhero, Heller says. "In those days, that's how they did it."

"A little later on, in the '60s, you get to the TV shows." Heller points out a "Land of the Giants" box adorned with a self-portrait of the artist who painted it.

"There was a lot of that going on, they drew pictures of themselves and they inserted them," he explains.

There's also an original Star Trek box featuring the mugs of William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, versions featuring The Man from U.N.C.L.E and the Flintstones and Jetsons.

"This is the original Mickey Mouse Club box," Heller says. "So there's Annette, and there's Bobby and there's Jimmie Dodd and there's whatever her name is. But the interesting thing about this is there was a little boy on the show and his name was Cubby O'Brien. And Cubby O'Brien, in later years and currently I still believe, if somebody like Cher was on the road, he might be in the orchestra being a drummer.

"Anyway, we were at the Fisher, and we sit down and we're always looking through the playbill, and I look down and it says 'Cubby O'Brien.' So I walk down and I said, 'Is it really you?' and he said it was, so the following week I convinced my partner, when it was his season ticket, to walk down the center aisle with this and have Cubby sign it."

He turns the box over, where there's a signature in Sharpie over an illustration on the bottom of the box.

"Now, we weren't so lucky, nor did we try when Paul McCartney was in town for the Beatles box," Heller says with a laugh. There are two Beatles models near the superhero section of the Hellers's collection: a blue one and one embodying the famed yellow submarine.

"This one was unusual." Heller picks up one of the brighter boxes, day-glo colors featuring the visage of actress Diahann Carroll. "This is Julia. 'Julia' was a TV show in the early '60s, very ahead of its time as a TV show because it was pre-Cosby. And we found this wrapped, fully covered with a flocked wallpaper. We found it at the Royal Oak flea market, and all I could do was try to peel it back, and I peeled it back and I saw this green edge, and I said, 'This is worth buying.' And we bought it, we took it home, I worked on it for a long time and discovered this was underneath it."

Portraits of live actors on lunchboxes got to be so serious that when the original Dr. Dolittle movie was filmed in 1967, "Rex Harrison, who played Dr. Dolittle insisted to have prior refusal rights," Heller explains in legalese, "and he insisted that his likeness be exact."

The lunchbox Heller carried to school as a child is in the collection, although by the time he wanted to display it his mother had gotten rid of the original model and Heller had to pick up another one. His calls his favorite lunchbox, the purple and lime green Green Hornet design, "one of the best superhero boxes ever produced just because of the action scenes" that include sketches of Bruce Lee as Kato.

Parts of the collection have been out of the house on loan at various times to the West Bloomfield public library for back-to-school displays.

"We love the opportunity to-you could've said you were from the Weekly Reader," Harvey says. "We love the opportunity to show our collection."

Heller estimates his insured collection is worth more than \$25,000, but it's never been about the money and he has no interest in selling.

"As a collection, for all the effort we have undertaken, we can't imagine parting with it," he says. "I think Ronna and I probably said at one point in time it would take six figures to turn our heads, but even then we probably wouldn't get turned enough. That's how we feel about our lunchboxes. Fair statement, honey?" he asks his wife.

"I think so," she answers. "I actually had an offer yesterday for somebody to buy a Beatles box. I told them no."

"... The chances of us parting company...we love them too much," says Heller. "We get a lot of joy just sitting in here and enjoying them."