

A GRAND OLD

Ben Zaricor talks fast and purposefully, and he moves through the Presidio Officers' Club galleries in much the same way. But that doesn't deter the small group gathered on an unseasonably mild, sunny February afternoon in San Francisco. A handful of visitors happily follows as he zigzags across rooms, as well as periods in history, talking about star patterns, manufacturing techniques and why he finds American flags so endlessly fascinating.

OBSESSION

By Anne Crump

Photos by David Studarus

Mr. Zaricor isn't a docent, though few would dispute his qualifications. He's the owner of a collection of American flags that makes vexillologists' hearts flutter. (Vexillologists are people who study flags.) His collection includes between 400 and 500 American flags in its 1,500-strong inventory of banners and related historical objects.

Ninety-one were on view this past winter in "The American Flag: Two Centuries of Concord and Conflict," at the Presidio, the former military base turned national park overlooking San Francisco Bay. The exhibit was the brainchild of Mr. Zaricor and renowned vexillologists Howard Madaus, Chief Curator at the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pa., and Whitney Smith, Director of the Flag Research Center in Winchester, Mass.

Mr. Zaricor is not a professional vexillologist himself. He's the President and CEO of Good Earth Corp., purveyor of nationally distributed Good Earth Teas. But he is a hobbyist flag fanatic who's been collecting for three decades. That makes him something of an expert.

The success of his tea empire has enabled him to amass an impressive array of historical flags. And that has put him in the company of experts like Mr. Madaus and Mr. Smith, who have shared their knowledge and fueled his fire for collecting—and for sharing these treasures with the public.

The Presidio exhibition marked the first showing of such a large number of original flags (most displays feature replicas, he says). That's partly because flags haven't been widely recognized as collectibles, partly because they tend to be used until they

38-Star U.S. "Parade" Flag

Date: About 1876–77. **Medium:** Printed on cotton. **Comment:** In May 1876, the United States began the official six-month centennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence. The Civil War was now a decade in the past, and the nation was in a celebratory mood. Flag makers began the celebration by anticipating Colorado's admission as the 38th state and manufactured 38 stars well in advance of the official admission of the "Centennial State" on August 1, 1876, (making the 38-star flag not technically official until July 4, 1877). In printing this small, inexpensive "parade" or celebratory flag, its manufacturer harked back to the double concentric ring pattern of stars that had been so popular among the Mid-Atlantic flag makers during the Civil War. But the maker arranged the stars in three rings: an inner ring of five around the center star, a middle ring of 10, and an outer ring of 20. Two stars were also added to the two fly corners of the canton to bring the total to 38.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection (ZFC1385) in 1997 from C. Wesley Cowan of Cincinnati, Ohio.



FLAG PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE ZARICOR COLLECTION



FLAG MAN

Ben Zaricor's collection highlights American history and values. "The American Flag: Two Centuries of Concord and Conflict," an exhibition featuring some of his collection, returns to San Francisco's Presidio from May 26 to July 31, 2003.

See www.atthepresidio.org for more information.

wear out, and partly because preserving aging fabrics is extremely difficult.

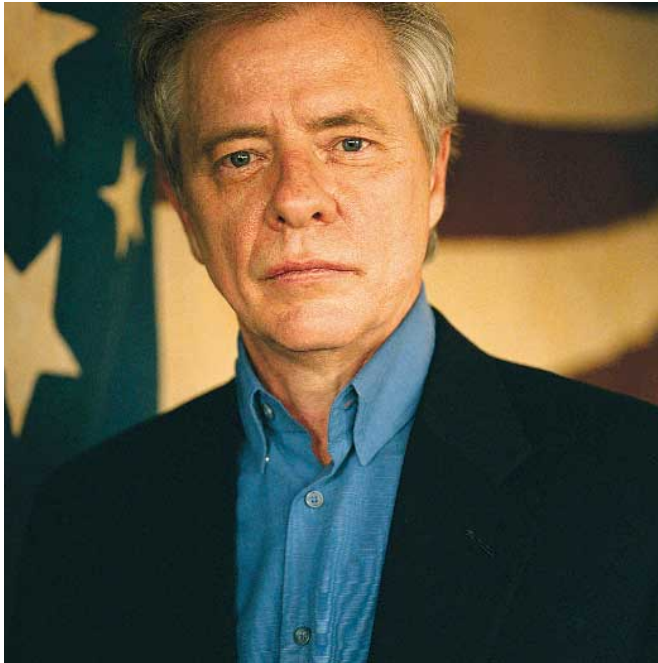
But Mr. Zaricor and his colleagues hope the Presidio exhibition is just a hint of greater things to come.

For the people, by the people

Mr. Zaricor, a Memphis, Tenn., native who once had a close encounter with Elvis while selling Coca-Colas at a baseball game, traces his flag fascination back to his college days.

He became aware of flags' symbolic power as student body president at Washington University in St. Louis during the politically volatile 1960s. One night, he found himself embroiled in a scuffle and was hauled off to jail when he came to the defense of a young man being beaten by police for "mutilating" the flag, which was depicted on a vest he was wearing.

Mr. Zaricor says he soon began collecting flags as a sort of political statement at a time when many people were burning



DAVID STODARUS

“The American flag is very interpretable,” says Mr. Zaricor. “The (social) conditions at the time when it was made tell something about the people who made it.”

flags to protest U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He came to see the flag as belonging to the people, not the government.

As his collection grew and his flag studies accelerated, he discovered there was a long tradition of people incorporating the flag into clothing and even “customizing” its appearance.

Starting in the Colonial period, American settlers had the task of crafting a flag independent of any government oversight. Their initial design was similar to the flag that flies today, except

a Union Jack—the British flag—occupied the corner spot which now features stars. (A replica is in Mr. Zaricor’s collection.)

After declaring independence from British rule, the Revolutionaries modified their flag design, replacing the Union Jack with a 13-star design, the first of which may or may not have been sewn by Betsy Ross, to whom legend gives credit. (In fact, no record of Ross making such a claim exists, only unsubstantiated claims made by her descendants many years later, according to Mr. Zaricor.)

And that was just the beginning of the American flag’s evolution. The star arrangement understandably changed as states—and stars—were added. The circular pattern became a star pattern, which later gave way to a series of rows, which were easier for seamstresses to manage.

The collection includes 15-, 16-, 17-, 19-, 20-, 21-, 27-, 28-, 43-, 44- and 48-star flags, and Mr. Zaricor notes that there are as many as 25 variations. Not all reflect a growing Union, which continued adding states until 1959. (The six U.S. territories—American Samoa, the District of Columbia, Guam, the Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands—are protected under the American flag, but they have not been incorporated into the design.) Some flags also memorialize the elimination of stars as Northern abolitionists dropped those representing the Confederate states during the Civil War.

Flag-making boomed during the nation’s centennial celebration in 1876. And, true to the independent spirit of America, more people than ever tried their hand at crafting a national banner. Some fashioned elaborate pieces of clothing out of the stars and stripes. They also added personal touches, like writing on stars or stamping their names along the borders—gestures which governments often see as defacing an official symbol.

In Mr. Zaricor’s view, however, these modifications give individual flags uniqueness, a human touch, a story—something he and other collectors relish. They also cement the American flag’s status as a symbol belonging to the people.

Mr. Madaus, who curated the Presidio exhibition and has studied flags since the 1960s when vexillology first took hold as a social science, adds that the variety of allowable design elements

reinforces the flag as a symbol of American freedom of expression.

“The flag is one of the most beloved, widespread images in society,” according to Mr. Smith, who has nearly 40 years of flag expertise and 24 pub-

lished books to his credit. “The public’s allegiance and attitudes toward it are instinctive. It’s a powerful force, and that doesn’t exist in most countries.”

He points to September 11 and the public’s response: embracing and displaying the American flag. For many it suggested patriotism, but it also was a symbol of unity in sorrow, community strength and steadfast endorsement of the values Americans hold dear, freedom chief among them.

“It’s an umbrella over all of us,” Mr. Smith says. “It’s what we turn to.”

Looking for a home

Ironically, while flags are fixtures in our daily lives, there’s no single institution where Americans can turn to learn the comprehensive history of their flag and to see its vast variety. Institutions like Baltimore’s Star-Spangled Banner Flag House (www.flaghouse.org) offer partial histories, but nothing so complete as that represented by Mr. Zaricor’s collection.

“This is one of the best, if not the best, American flag collections in the country,” says Mr. Madaus.

It’s come a long way from its hobbyist beginnings, when Mr. Zaricor casually stowed his finds in bags and footlockers. About 15 years ago, his acquisitions took a serious turn when he started buying entire collections—from museums, collectors and auctions—rather than purchasing individual flags. His collection’s credentials were formally established a few years later with the addition of two battle flags—which had been separated for 130 years—that belonged to Gen. George A. Custer. (Mr. Zaricor’s says of his personal coup of “capturing” Custer: “He’s a Yankee; I’m a Rebel.”)

Now the collection also includes such historically important pieces as a mourning flag that flew in Albany, N.Y., as Abraham

closely guarded their holdings, refusing to disclose or show what they had, so experts are just now analyzing the collection’s contents. Among the flags Mr. Zaricor purchased from the Mastai are eight 13-star flags, at least one of which could date as early as the Revolutionary period. There are also 11 with unique star patterns from the period 1780–1840, the largest surviving Civil War flag, and a number of Civil War flags with rare star patterns.

For flag enthusiasts, the chance to uncover a story in each flag is a big part of the appeal. Was it hand-loomed? Was the fabric imported? Where did it originate? What was it used for? Who made it and why? Many of these questions may never be answered, but some will—and the quest for answers can be as intriguing as finding them.

Just ask Kathleen Vitale, a DAR member who visited the Presidio exhibition. Mrs. Vitale’s mother was a textile preservationist who enlisted her daughter’s help in researching the origin of two Revolution-era flags found in a trunk in Oakland, Calif. Her mother kept up her investigation until her death at 92; Ms. Vitale picked up where her mother’s research left off, and is still intent on unraveling the flags’ mysteries.

The appeal of flags to history buffs, vexillologists and fiber experts may be obvious. But the American flag’s uniquely personal relevance to anyone who has stood in its shadow, or waved it as a symbol of freedom, gives it a far broader meaning.

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Lincoln’s casket passed through the city; the flag that flew over Appomattox, Va., when Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, signaling the end of the Civil War; and the last 48-star flag to fly over the U.S. Capitol. The latter was given to Mr. Zaricor by the Flag House in thanks for his discovery of three pieces of the original Star-Spangled Banner—the flag Francis Scott Key memorialized in what became our national anthem—in the institution’s attic.

(The Appomattox flag has more than just historical significance. It quickened Mr. Zaricor’s heartbeat for a few tense days when he drove away with the flag sitting on top of his car. Much to everyone’s relief, the man who found it responded to an ad reporting it missing, and the flag was back in Mr. Zaricor’s hands just days later.)

Mr. Zaricor is still adding treasures to his collection. In October, he acquired 81 flags at an auction from the large and mysterious Mastai collection. For a quarter-century, the owners

That’s why people like Mr. Madaus, Mr. Smith and Mr. Zaricor would like to see the creation of a permanent flag center. The country needs a place where visitors can view and learn about the flag and its role through history, where scholars can study historic pieces, and where flags newly discovered in boxes and basements across the country can be restored and preserved. (Light and humidity are flags’ chief foes.)

“The American flag is very interpretable,” says Mr. Zaricor. “The conditions at the time when it was made tell something about the people who made it,” whether it’s a Civil War-era abolitionist flag or a late-’60s nuclear disarmament flag, which substitutes a peace symbol for the stars. The flag belongs to everybody, not just one cause or another.”

But flags—even historic ones—have practical functions, as well. “If it can stand to be flown, fly it,” Mr. Zaricor says. “And if you’re going to collect, put them up so people can experience them. To see them, that’s a kid’s dream.” 🌳

35-Star U.S. Flag, (associated with Gen. George H. Thomas)

Date: 1864–65. **Media:** Wool bunting with cotton stars; hand-sewn
Comment: This large 35-star U.S. flag is thought to have flown over the headquarters building of Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas during the 1864 siege of Nashville. Thomas was nicknamed “The Rock of Chickamauga” for his stubborn defense in that battle. On December 15 and 16 that year, Gen. Thomas’ forces soundly routed the remains of the Confederate Army of Tennessee in the hills surrounding the important railroad and supply center at Nashville, just as Gen. Grant was preparing to replace him for acting too slowly. The victory cemented Gen. Thomas’ command over the middle theater of the Union armies.



The flag bears Gen. Thomas’ name on at least one of its stars. The postwar owner of this flag claimed it had also flown at Appomattox Courthouse after Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered. However, since Gen. Thomas was still in command of the Department of the Cumberland in

Nashville when the surrender took place, that claim makes it likely he signed it after the war for some reason. Other names (too faded to read clearly) are also on the stars; thus the claim of Appomattox may be valid since the star was signed by at least one former Civil War general. There is no evidence of any U.S. flag having been present at the McLean House where Lee surrendered. It seems likely, though, given the number of troops present, but no record exist other than this claim. It is possible this flag was raised at the courthouse or nearby area some hours or days after the surrender.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection (ZFC0142) in 1996 from the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House Collection of Baltimore, Md. Donated to the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House by Civil War veteran Francis Gilbert of New Jersey.

Last 48-Star U.S. Flag To Fly Over Congress

Date: 1959. **Medium:** Cotton; machine stitched

Comment: On July 3, 1959, after 47 years of unchanged service, the last of the 48-star U.S. flags was raised over the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. On the next day, the new 49-star flag became the new official flag of the land. This last of the old “forty-eighters” was presented to the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House of Baltimore, Md., by Sen. John M. Butler (R-Md.), who gave it to Maryland after it flew over the Capitol.

Provenance: Given to Ben Zaricor (ZFC0179) in 1996 from the Star-Spangled Banner Flag House Collection of Baltimore, Md., in gratitude for recovering three fragments of the original Star-Spangled Banner Flag of 1814 that had been lost for 30 years.



21-Star (“Grand Luminary”) U.S. Flag

Date: 1819–20. **Medium:** Cotton; all hand-sewn

Comment: On December 3, 1818, Illinois was admitted into the Union as the 21st state. Hence, in accordance with the provisions of the Flag Act of 1818, on July 4, 1819, a new United States flag with 21 stars became official.



The makers of this flag evidently were unable to secure wool bunting for the field and canton of the flag, so they made it entirely of cotton instead. Rather than beginning with a red stripe, they chose to commence the alternating stripes with a white stripe. (While this is heraldically proper, it is unlikely that the makers of this flag knew or cared about the intricacies of heraldry.)

Although commencing and ending the U.S. flag with horizontal red stripes was fast becoming the tradition, nothing in the adoptive legislation specified that the red stripes took this precedence. The makers of this flag chose to arrange the stars in the form of a “grand luminary.”

This pattern, emphasizing the notion of “from many one” (the direct translation of *E Pluribus Unum*) had been popularized during the debate over the 1818 Flag Act by Capt. S.G. Reid, whose wife had sewn the first flag of the new design that flew over Congress. Mrs. Reid’s flag bore its 20 stars in this same “grand luminary” pattern; however, Congress chose not to incorporate the star pattern as part of its legislation. Nevertheless, the “grand luminary” design remained popular among some flag manufacturers for another 60 years.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection (ZFC0422) in 1997; ex-N. Flayderman Collection.

13-Star U.S. Flag

Date: Probably mid-Federal Period (1800–05). **Media:** Wool bunting and cotton stars; all hand-stitched

Comment: This flag may well be the earliest U.S. flag in the Zaricor Flag Collection. The use of cotton stars suggests production after 1800; the woolen stripes have selvage edges typical of early power looms, and the flag is hand-



stitched. While it has been suggested that the flag could be even earlier than 1800, the marking “31-1/2” on the flag’s linen heading refers to a flag manufactured to a specific fly dimension—one and a half yards, i.e. 54 inches (the flag’s fly has been trimmed and resewn to a length of 48 inches). The size marking on the heading is more typical of flags manufactured as a “stock item” rather

than individually handcrafted on special order. The earliest identified flag manufacturer in the United States was Rebecca Young of Philadelphia and Baltimore, who advertised in the contemporary newspapers in 1803 that she had, on hand, ready-made flags. This flag may be one of her products.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection (ZFC0419) in 1992 from William Guthman of Westport, Conn.

43-Star U.S. Flag

Date: 1890. **Medium:** Cotton; machine-stitched

Comment: The 43-star flag became the official flag of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain admissions on July 4, 1890, only a day after Idaho’s admission into the Union. Although technically the design would be legal for the next year, few were made. Only a week after Idaho’s admission, Wyoming



was admitted to the Union as the 44th state. Although its star in the canton of the U.S. flag would not become official for another year, flag manufacturers and the public knew the 43-star flag would be obsolete shortly. So manufacturers quickly decided to discontinue making a flag that the public was not prepared to buy. As a result, the 43-star flag is one of the rarer commercial flags made.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection (ZFC0596) in 2002 from the collection of Judge John T. Ball of San Jose, Calif.

“Grand Luminary” 16-Star, 13-Stripe, U.S. Flag

Date: Mid-Federal Period (1800–10). **Media:** Wool bunting with cotton stars; all hand-sewn with linen thread

Comment: Although no 16-star flag was formally adopted by the U.S. Congress, the Spirit of 1794 Flag Resolution caused numerous patrons in need of U.S. flags to order flags that included newly added states, by either adding a star or both a star and a stripe to the then-current U.S. flag.

This flag conforms to that spirit. The linen thread with which the flag is sewn indicates a product predating the widespread distribution of cotton thread, and yet the stars are cut from cotton cloth, not economically available until post-1800. The 16 stars are arranged in the form of a “great star”—a design championed by Capt. S.G. Reid in 1817 as the star pattern that would best represent the national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*. It is possible that this is an early merchant ship’s ensign from the period 1800–05.

Provenance: Acquired by the Zaricor Flag Collection (ZFC0420) in 1997, ex N. Flayderman Collection.



A FLAG GLOSSARY

Canton or union: The flag is divided into four quarters, or cantons.

The blue canton in the upper left is also known as the union, because the stars symbolize the union of the states

Ensign: A flag, often specially designed and derived from a national flag, flown only on military or merchant ships.

Field/Ground: Background color of a flag or each section of a flag

Fly: The edge farthest from the staff (when a flag is flown horizontally)

Mullet: A five-pointed star

Source: www.usflag.org