

# Tobacco Tin Tags: A Hidden World of Tobacciana

By Paul Lefkovitz

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A tobacco tin tag is a piece of metal, usually pronged, which was attached to a "plug" of chewing tobacco for brand identification, according to "Tobacco Tin Tags" by Gary Schild. Tin Tags made their appearance in the 1870's and continued to be produced until around 1930, when cellophane and other paper wrappings came into common use. P. Lorillard & Co was the first company to introduce tin tags.

While they were originally introduced for branding purposes, they really caught on with the public and became popular as collectables. Eventually, they were also used as premiums, to be turned in to the company for prizes.

It is estimated that there are over 12,000 different types of tin tags in existence. While diminutive, they represent a beautiful domain of tin lithography. Subject matter is all over the map, including humorous, political, satirical, romantic, sports, food, animals, famous people, beautiful women, militaria, sports, and just about everything else conceivable.

In addition to the huge variety available, tin tags are a delight to collect since they are educational, colorful, visually appealing, generally quite affordable and take up hardly any space. Most common tin tags in average condition can be purchased in the \$2 to \$10 range. Bulk purchases can be had for as little as \$1 apiece or less. At the same time, like any collectable, you can also spend as much as you'd like on scarce items in mint condition. Such examples on eBay can command well over \$100 each.

The title of this article draws its inspiration from the fact that very few tin tags are ever seen in antique shops, malls and even the AAAA Convention. In contrast, tin containers and signs are routinely seen in abundance. I brought a few tin tags to sell at the AAAA Convention and was surprised at the number of individuals who had never even seen one or heard of them.

And yet there does seem to be a hidden "world" of tin tag collecting. On eBay, between May and July, a total of 2,367 tobacco tin tags were sold. That's sold--not just offered. And actually, the number of tags greatly exceeded that amount because a number of the auctions included multiples or large lots. So thousands of tin tags are being sold on eBay. That obviously means that the charms of tin tag collecting remain apparent to a number of individuals, even though their profile is not high in the antique advertising community.

For those that would like to learn more about tin tags, the definitive reference guide is "Chewing Tobacco Tin Tags", by Louis Storino, published by Schiffer Books in 1995. This excellent guide includes listings of 6,000 tin tags and clear color photos of 2,000. It also includes a price guide. While out-of-print, it is readily available on eBay for a very modest price.

Photos of some tin tags recently sold on eBay appear below to give you an idea of what is out there. This grouping includes some common examples that went for a few dollars each but also includes some rarer items in outstanding condition that went as high as \$100 or more.



