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Japanese Samurai swords are part of James Dryden's World War II collection.

Collector's target is WWII museum

By Ken Goze
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Although many people pursue hobbies purely for personal pleasure, James Dryden hopes that soon people will be able to see — and learn something from — his collection of World War II artifacts.

Dryden, a financial consultant from Hawthorn Woods, is planning to open a non-profit World War II museum based almost entirely on his personal collection of German and Japanese relics.

In almost 20 years of collecting, he has amassed thousands of pieces into one of the largest private collections of war artifacts in the nation.

His collection ranges from Japanese Samurai swords hundreds of years old to uniforms, documents and even a complete silver service that belonged to Adolph Hitler.

Dryden said he is considering sites in Arlington Heights and Elgin for his "Midwest Military Museum," and expects to start setting up by the end of the year.

Although the museum will be relatively small, Dryden said it will be the first of its kind in the area and hopefully bring to life the war and times of a different generation.

"Kids today do not get the full scope of World War II in their studies and in some small way hopefully I can tell the story," he said.

The story is one of desperation, unity and sacrifice in a time before the Soviet Union was the "evil empire." A time when a "New World Order" might well have meant the complete extermination of Jews and other ethnic groups, swastikas in classrooms and German as the new official language.

Dryden hopes his museum also will remind people of the sacrifices made by veterans and their families during a war that lasted four years and claimed about 40 million lives worldwide.

While not downplaying the heroism of Persian Gulf War veterans, he feels World War II soldiers, who fought for years, have been "given the short shrift."

Born during the war and never having served in the military, Dryden owes his interest in collecting to the exquisite artwork of many pieces and the personal stories behind each of them.

While almost every Japanese soldier owned a ceremonial sword, often machine made, descendants of Japan's disbanded Samurai class sometimes refitted ancient family blades with simple military fittings and carried them to war.

Even seemingly mundane items such as stationery, uniforms and the hundreds of awards given out in a fiercely nationalistic Nazi Germany for anything ranging from childbirth to heroism show what life was like.

He began collecting when his uncles gave him a Samurai sword and German dagger from the war.

The hobby has changed drastically since he began. "The availability of items was far, far greater 20 years ago. People are also much more cognizant of what they have today," Dryden said.

Rarity and prices topping \$10,000 are an open invitation to forgery.

Dryden said, opportunists around the world expertly reproduce items using wartime molds and materials along with acids and other artificial aging techniques. In the months following the war, daggers were often pieced together from leftover material and sold to GIs.

Dryden said the authenticity of items such as the silver service taken from Hitler's mountain retreat can be verified by U.S. government papers listing it as "war booty."

Dryden said he was stung "a few times" in his collecting career and lets his experience guide him.

"With a great deal of it, it's just a matter of being able to see an item enough times to be able to determine if it's good," Dryden said. He also protects himself by buying mostly from veterans and their families.

Dryden is still actively collecting and will pay up to \$5,000 for authentic artifacts, especially Samurai swords and armor. He does not buy firearms or Korean War or Vietnam War artifacts. He also will not sell or trade items.