

A TOP DEALER in autographs, historical materials, and rare books, Kenneth W. Rendell has a home and offices west of Boston and a Madison Avenue gallery in New York. Rendell, 57, also owns a 5,000-piece collection of World War II artifacts, including a 34-ton tank.

# Kenneth W. Rendell

## What was the most thrilling acquisition you ever made?

The discovery was years ago in Boston. I had appraised the papers of Admiral [Richard E.] Byrd. There was no heart and soul of Byrd in them – it was science, mechanics, business. His estate had been in contention in the family, and I was the arbitrator. Mary Richardson did a *Chronicle* story, and a guy called me and said he found trash bags in his new house in Newton, and all the stuff was Byrd material. It sounded like junk, and it was – Christmas cards and a Whitman candy box. But all of a sudden, out from one of the bags pours everything that's important: all his messages from the South Pole to his wife, all of the guts of what Admiral Byrd was all about. I was stunned.

## What do you long to find that's eluded you?

For my own collection, I'd love to have a Jesse James letter.

## It sounds like your work is more than just a business.

It's a mission. The objects and papers make history real. I like trying to feel what it was like to be there. That's why I like artifacts. Right here in my office, this is Eisenhower's portrait of Churchill; there's a French Resistance radio which was used to broadcast back to Britain. I love having the stuff around me.

## Where does this passion

## come from?

There are all these shared experiences of being human, but I don't think that people do share them openly. There are all these things that link us rather than divide us, and it's tragic that people don't see that.

## Do you know why you feel this way?

No, though it interests me. My father had a drugstore in Allston and had great empathy for customers. He used to get too involved and gave them too much credit, and it took him down. We lived in Somerville; we didn't have any money. I'm fiscally conservative because of that. But to me, that empathy is the most important thing there is.

## Were you surprised your passion made you wealthy?

It wasn't a goal, but I have known all along that if you didn't run this as a business, it's not viable. I've been doing this full time since I was 17. I was competing with people who had a lot of money. When I started, Goodspeed's Book Shop in Boston was my big competitor in the area for buying material.

## Who's your competition now?

Nobody.

## You dominate the market?

Totally. I don't want to sound arrogant, but in the average month, we do more business

than all the dealers in the manuscript field combined. That's in part because we have a retail location in New York, and we do complete libraries and don't just sell individual pieces.

## There's a note in your office from Bill Gates thanking you for help with his library.

I still collect for it; that's the only thing I can say.

## What's hot in autographs?

Modern culture. The people who now have disposable income, in their late 50s and up, are looking for the icons of their youth, like signed Beatles albums, Elvis Presley artifacts. The Beatles outsell classical composers 10 to 1. Autographed albums signed by the four Beatles go for \$7,500 and up – we can't keep them in stock. Buddy Holly sells incredibly well.

## Whose artifacts do you like?

Napoleon interests me quite a lot. So does [polar explorer] Ernest Shackleton. He's a fascinating character. The reason is that he has a great sense of adventure combined with a great sense of responsibility. He got back and never lost anybody, and he never lost sight of the fact that you want to live to have another adventure. He figures into a talk I'm doing for the Appalachian Mountain Club [the keynote speech, Saturday, on the spirit of adventure at the AMC's 125th anniversary dinner]. I don't real-

ly like physical danger. When I used to do downhill ski races, I'd place in the top 10, but I was never in contention for winning, because I would never go out to the absolute edge. You can get seriously injured. That's why I like Shackleton. Where do I really push the envelope? I push it with ideas.

## What are the most valuable items you've bought and sold?

Michelangelo, Lincoln, Mozart material. We've paid multimillions for individual pieces.

## How often do you see forgeries?

Every two weeks. [Rendell, a renowned expert, exposed the fraudulent Hitler diaries in 1983.]

## Will your WWII materials ever be open to the public?

Absolutely. My next major project is how to do this. I don't want a typical museum with things behind glass. My answer is probably going to be low railings with objects just out of reach. World War II was the great human drama of the 20th century. Forty years ago, when I started the collection, nobody had any interest, and most of it cost virtually nothing. Only the Imperial War Museum in London has a bigger collection. But in terms of representing all aspects of the war, there is nothing like mine. □

