**Happenin’s ‘Round the House**

*Rachel Barnes, Education and Volunteer Coordinator*

The Hart Mansion may be a museum, but part of what makes it remarkable is the way it really reflects the intricacies of a private residence. House museums can and do focus on specific elements – an amazing collection of some-such material, a specific moment or period in time, or a particular style. The Hart Mansion focuses on daily life in a movie star’s private home. So while it does display remarkable collections of art and Old West memorabilia, it also displays daily life necessities like food stuffs (60-year-old olive oil, anyone?) and toiletries (60-year-old toilet paper??).

And it displays the occasional “oddity” – the gift or collectible that was beloved for its sentimentality, but would not be an item one would expect to see in \*this\* person’s home.

Imagine the home of a cat lover with cats everywhere (cat wallpaper, cat upholstery, cat figurine collections, etc…), and then, right there on the mantel, is a picture of the Alamo.

In Hart’s home, western mementos reign supreme, but then, right there on the record player, is a pair of Japanese swords. According to Hart legend, the swords were a gift to Bill from his live-in staff, Richard and Ina Ito. Some sources claim the Ito’s acquired the swords themselves on a vacation in Japan in the 1920s, and others claim the swords belonged to Richard’s father. Either way, they are a remarkable gift, and one Bill Hart cherished considering their prominent placement on his living room mantle during his lifetime.

Though we tend to refer to the swords as *samurai swords*, they are more accurately called *daisho*, which translates to English as “big-little.” A perfect word for the two swords since one is the “big” *katana* and one is the “little” *wakizashi*. The swords together are a mark the owner is a samurai – a warrior and a noble in the Japanese feudal system.

Swords were manufactured in Japan as far back as the 1st century, but the characteristic curved blades of the *katana* and *wakizashi* started appearing in the 10th century. *Katana* became a preferred weapon for close combat warfare because its sloping curve and single sharp edge meant the best samurais could pull the sword from its sash and kill the enemy in a single fluid motion. With its long blade – coming in at between 23 and 29 inches depending on when it was forged – the *katana* also had a long grip for two-handed handling.

The smaller *wakizashi,* with a blade length of between 12 and 24 inches, seems to have been a back-up weapon, or one the samurai used when fighting indoors. In fact, it is believed the samurai always carried their *wakizashi* – always and everywhere. The *katana* however could be “checked at the door,” or set aside on specific occasions. Furthermore, the *wakizashi* was a commonly available weapon. Anyone with the money could own a *wakizashi*.

However, only the samurai could own a *katana,* and only a samurai could wear a *katana* and *wakizashi* together. The *daisho* pairing was a symbol of the honor accorded this elite warrior class.

Both *katana* and *wakizashi* are still manufactured today. However, Hart’s swords were forged centuries ago – the *katana* appears to date from sometime between 1650 and 1700. His *wakizashi* is even older; it was made sometime between 1550 and 1600. Both were products of the prominent Sukesada family, a famous line of swordsmiths based in Japan’s Bizen province. In fact, the Bizen province was the center of sword-making during the samurai era thanks to its rich stores of iron and its fine beach sand, and the Sukesada family were some of the best swordsmiths around. They were so renowned for their high quality products, as many as 40 different swordsmiths used the name “Sukesada” on their own creations, even though many of them were likely no relation of the admired family.

The 100-year difference in their ages means Hart’s *katana* and *wakizashi* were not manufactured as a set – as became common in later samurai history – but instead appear to have been brought together sometime in the 1800s. And while we may never know how these incredible swords came into the hands of Richard Ito, one thing is very clear: Bill Hart valued them. Valued them enough to place them on his living room mantle amidst his bronze sculptures of Will Rogers sitting on Soapsuds and an Indian woman with a papoose.

Hart valued them enough to make them part of his legacy that we as the museum work hard to keep alive. So come see these “oddities” a western movie star collected. Come experience daily life in a movie star’s private residence.