LUNCH BOX COOL

Now cultural icons, they used to make a personal statement

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'Kung Fu' lunch box from 1974.

Lunch boxes are all about taste.

Not culinary tastes, though. Cultural taste.

During the glory days of the metal kids' lunch box, between 1950 and 1985, hundreds of pop culture images found their way onto these simple items: TV stars, music groups, movie scenes, cartoons characters, and more. Which one you carried to the cafeteria meant a lot. It defined you.

"It's the way that you advertise who you identify with in pop culture," said Montana Miller, an assistant professor in the popular culture department at Bowling Green State University.

So in the big scheme of things, it wasn't important that your mom packed a bologna sandwich and brown banana as long as you got to carry them around in a hip, blue Beatles lunch box. If you were the sad soul carrying around the boring plaid lunch box, condolences were in order.

The evolution of kids' lunch boxes traces back to the late 1800s. Just as workers hauled their lunches in special containers, so did their kids, sometimes using leftover biscuit tins or lard cans.

Containers just for kids followed, but things changed radically in 1950 when Aladdin Industries tried to jump-start slumping sales by putting a decal on the side of a square lunch box — which already resembled a television — with a kids' favorite TV cowboy hero. In the first year, it sold 600,000 Hopalong Cassidy models.

MULTIMEDIA
See a photo gallery of old metal lunch boxes

Other companies and designs quickly followed: Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, the Lone Ranger. As the times changed and kids' heroes evolved, so did their lunch boxes.

Some icons were natural choices: Batman, *Star Trek*, the Flintstones, the rock band KISS, and Disney characters.

Others don't sound so great in retrospect, like The Exciting World of Metrics and cartoon characters from *Goober and the Ghost Chasers*. One even resembled a loaf of sliced bread.

A northwest Ohio company, Ohio Art (of Etch-A-Sketch fame), got in on the action by producing a number of lunch boxes over the years.

"Every time a particular cartoon or something on TV would be famous, then we'd make a lunch box of it," said Dale Taylor, 64, who recently retired from working at the company after 42 years.

He collected some of the more interesting lunch boxes over the years, including a kit that he thought was one of the ugliest — a black model with fluorescent, psychedelic flowers.

The schoolchild's mainstay has become quite the collectible over the years. Some sell for hundreds, even thousands of dollars. A Superman lunch box from 1954 has gone for more than $10,000.

The days of the metal lunch box started coming to an end in the early '80s when, the story goes, some parents opposed the kits as dangerous weapons that could be used to assault other children. This, combined with the advent of cheaper plastics technology, helped spell their doom. Modern novelty items aside, the last kids metal

lunch box manufactured was a Rambo design in 1985.

Today, Thermos makes a Barbie kit that looks like a purse and a Superman one that comes with an attached cape, but they're made out of softer materials that provide better insulation to calm parental fears of food safety.

This stuff isn't the same for collectors like Allen Woodall. The 73-year-old who has more than 2,000 lunch boxes and owns the Lunchbox Museum in Columbus, Ga. said modern products can't compare to vintage designs.

"There's nothing like the graphics that were used on old metal lunch boxes," he said. "They're fantastic pop art."

And more than that, they're great nostalgia.

"I grew up in the '50s watching all the Westerns, so to see a Hopalong Cassidy lunch box, it brings back the memories," said Chuck Shumaker, 63, a West Toledo antique dealer who collects lunch boxes.

He isn't alone. The Smithsonian Institution has a standing exhibit of lunch boxes and dedicated an entire traveling exhibition called "Lunch Box Memories" to the subject. It featured 64 pieces and ended in 2005.

"Objects take us places and growing up with these pieces meant something," explained Marquette Folley, the exhibition's project director. "They signify who we thought we were, who we wanted to be, and ultimately, who we are, and who we became."

Not bad for a little lunch box.

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