

# 'I like digging'

## Student builds collection for Berkshire Military Museum

By DICK LINDSAY  
rlindsay@berkshireeagle.com

**SHEFFIELD** — Thomas Williams' passion for military memorabilia stretches from Sheffield to the Land Down Under.

The Ashley Falls teenager spent less than two years scouring attics, tag sales and the Internet to find medals, uniforms, helmets, weapons and other items linked to the Civil War, World Wars I and II, Vietnam War. The 15-year-old transformed the collection of primarily American and Australian war-related antiques in the Berkshire Military Museum, located in the basement of his home. The young curator offers tours by appointment and established a website with photos of his display and newsletters about the men who once possessed the items during or after serving their country.

"I've learned each soldier has his own individual story, but I realized there were hundreds and thousands more soldiers with such stories," he said.

Williams' collection has gone public for the next month, courtesy of the Sheffield Historical Society, which is hosting the Berkshire Military Museum at its Old Stone Store gallery and gift shop on Main Street.

During an opening reception last weekend, the freshman at Berkshire Waldorf High School was eager to explain the stories behind the collection.

"I was twice as impressed as I thought I would be," said

Steve Sagarin, Williams' high school history teacher. "I'm not a war history buff, so he's teaching me everything."

For example, Williams showed Sagarin the service medals from his Australian-born mother's side of the family; several belonging to great-grandfather Anthony Adrian Smith. Williams' most prized item — and most expensive to buy at \$500 — was a World War I U.S. Army dress uniform.

In all, the young man says he has spent about \$1,000 on the military artifacts, but many have been simply donated to him.

And the donations keep coming. At the reception, Betsy Garcia gave Williams a book titled "Army Boys in France" that belonged to her uncle, Charles Foster, during World War I. She also has postcards Foster sent the family while he was stationed stateside during "the war to end all wars."

Garcia didn't hesitate to put them in Williams' care.

"It's nice to find a young person who put together such a collection that tells a story," she said. Williams' interest in military history is recent; his ability to collect things goes back to his early grade school days.

"My dad always called me 'Lint Picker' because I was always picking stuff off the ground," he said.

Williams doubts he will have a career in museum work, instead, he may be a museum contributor.

"I would rather be an archaeologist," he said. "I like digging."



PHOTOS BY DICK LINDSAY — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Part of Berkshire Military Museum exhibit created by Thomas Williams at Old Stone Store.



Australian Army medals from World War I are on display through April 23 at the Old Stone Store in Sheffield.