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People

Spectacular specs

By Paul E. Kandarian | January 19, 2006

If **David Fleishman** has his way, Pisa, Italy, will be known for more than just that famous leaning tower.

Fleishman, retired chief of ophthalmology and eye surgeon at Good Samaritan Medical Center in Brockton and a resident of Sharon, is creator of a website museum of all things eyeglasses, and he wants to make sure Pisa is recognized as the birthplace of vision aids.

"The first known glasses were known as rivet spectacles, and were developed by someone in Pisa around 1286," Fleishman said. "Amazingly, Pisa doesn't even have a plaque to commemorate this, but hopefully we'll get one put up there for this most remarkable achievement."

Fleishman's website, <http://www.antiquespectacles.com/>, sprang from his career but also his passion for glasses. After retiring four years ago, he began collecting antique eyewear, a dabbling that quickly developed a life of its own. The website was born in August 2003, the brainchild of Fleishman's eldest son, Andrew, who talked his father into tapping the Internet instead of following his first instinct, to write an academic paper.

The result is a multifaceted and fascinating site that includes, among many other things, nearly 1,800 images of antique glasses, a page for educational games about glasses, and a guide to identify your own old specs. There's even a section for famous quotes about eyeglasses, such as the fan mail from Thomas Jefferson to his optician: "You have heretofore furnished me with spectacles, so reduced in size as to give facility to the looking over their top without moving them. This has been a great convenience."

Fleishman has visited about 140 institutions, such as small historical societies, to identify their collection. His most recent find, about which he talks with unrestrained delight, was a pair of leather-framed spectacles at the Groton Historical Society.

"The Smithsonian and the Museum of Vision in San Francisco, both with major collections, only have one pair of leather-framed spectacles between them, and tiny Groton has two," gushed Fleishman. "That made my week; it made my month."

The website keeps growing, courtesy of nearly 500 individual contributors and more than 300 institutions. It is now in Fleishman's will that the site continue after his demise.

"They can sit with their family and wander through pages and pick up tremendous amounts of history and a deeper appreciation of the impact eyeglasses had on mankind," said Fleishman, who wears a pair of reading glasses with original lenses from the 1700s. "Without them, the world would be very blurry."