



This Sacramento-based California Fruit Exchange label features a small, saluting sailor.

Courtesy of Dwayne Rogers

## Crate labels that sold the Golden State now sold as decorations

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**D**wayne Rogers got into collecting crate labels like a lot of other folks attracted to this hobby: He grew up in the fruit business.

Rogers' family owned a pear farm near Auburn. As a young man, he worked as an inspector for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"A lot of early collectors were ag inspectors," said Rogers, better known as "The Label Man." "We traded labels back and

forth, with inspectors from different parts of the state. That's how you built your collection."

Eventually, Rogers' collection became his job. Via ebay and his own online store ([www.thelabelman.com](http://www.thelabelman.com)), the Chico man has sold more than 50,000 labels.

"I've probably sold 15,000 to 20,000 different labels," he said. "I average at least 3,000 packages a year."

What was once a niche pursuit in the California ag industry has grown into a much more popular pastime.

"A lot of young people

surprisingly buy them for decorating purposes," he said. "They're often humorous or cute. They look good on a wall."

Miniature works of art, these labels sold not just produce but the wonders of the Golden State. Often, labels featured local landmarks, colorful scenery or whimsical characters. Animals and kids became popular themes.

"All of these crates of produce were being shipped on the railroad," Rogers said. "Everything had

a label. You wanted something to make your produce stand out."

Produce packers in Washington, Texas and Louisiana followed suit and sold their fruit and vegetables with their own imaginative crate labeling.

"The lithography on these labels is phenomenal," Rogers said. "That's part of what makes them so appealing."

According to experts, crate labels represent some of the most visually striking examples of collectible paper. These pieces of ephemera were meant to be used decades ago.

But somehow, tens of thousands of these labels survived.

"You could find boxes of unused labels in these packing houses," Rogers said. "They were printed by the thousand. Someone paid good money to have them printed, so they didn't want to just throw them away. Even after you used some, you always had some left over."

In the 1970s when this hobby was first beginning to take hold, it wasn't unusual to find 1,000-count bundles of unused labels in old packing sheds.

"People are surprised, especially when they first start collecting, but it's either feast or famine," he said. "There are hundreds of some labels available while others, just a handful."

That keeps prices for most labels quite affordable, especially for beginning collectors. Many original labels are available for \$5 to \$10 apiece — less than reproductions.

"Prices are down overall," Rogers said, "but

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Courtesy of Dwayne Rogers

A crate label for Placerville Maid pears originally featured a chubby brunette girl. By the 1950s, the maid had blond hair and a ponytail.

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some still sell for over \$1,000. A lot of collectors are farmers and some are extremely wealthy. Those are the serious collectors."

Scarcity and image quality drive up prices for the rarest labels.

"Uncle Sam orange labels are probably the holy grail for most collectors," he said. "One of those sold recently for more than \$5,000.

"Image quality is the most important part. Even if there's a large quantity of one label, superior

image quality makes a big difference."

Orange crate labels tend to be the most sought after and highest valued, partly for their scarcity. Orange packers were among the first fruit processors to switch from wooden crates with paper

labels to preprinted cardboard boxes.

"Orange crate labels started about 1885," Rogers said. "That's when growers switched from (selling only to) local markets and needed crates for shipping produce via railroads.

"They started shipping apples around 1910, pears between 1910 and 1920. That's when we started seeing those labels. But they started using cardboard cartons in the 1950s and oranges were the first to go."

Packing houses gradual-

ly phased in cardboard over wooden crates. Among the last to switch were pear packers in the Sierra foothills.

"The older packing houses in Placer and Loomis stuck around because they didn't have the money to switch," Rogers





Orange crate labels, like this one for the Mt. Lassen brand, tend to be the most highly valued, partly for their scarcity. Fruit processors later switched to preprinted boxes.



Courtesy of Dwayne Rogers

A patriotic Riverside Navel Orange Co. label features its produce – and Uncle Sam. About 10,000 different designs for California citrus labels are known to exist.

said. “They were still using paper labels in the 1970s. That’s why a lot of those labels are still around.”

About 10,000 different designs for California citrus labels are known to exist, according to the Citrus Label Society. Most labels are 10-by-11 inches, just the right size to paste at the end of a wooden fruit crate.

Grapes, vegetables, pears and apples also got special labeling, although the size of their crates varied from the citrus standard.

Most collectors specialize in a geographical area (such as their hometown or region) or theme (animals, patriotic, sports, etc.).

“When I started, I was

really focused on Placer County,” Rogers said.

Some of his favorite crate labels feature Placerville Maid pears.

“Labels go through revisions,” he said. “Some labels, you’ll see five or six designs. Placerville Maid, for example, started with a chubby brunette girl with bangs. The original girl was modeled after the daughter of someone who worked at the packing house. By the 1950s, the little Placerville Maid had turned into a blonde with a ponytail.”

Rogers tries to limit his own collection to less than 1,000, he said.

“Someone told me, you can either sell or collect, but don’t try to do both,” Rogers said. “A lot of times, the guys (at pack-



The Lincoln Fruit Growers Association featured Abraham Lincoln, the 16th U.S. president.

ing houses) who saved these labels were kind of hoarders – they never threw anything out – but I’ve got to thank them for saving these.”

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## Tips for collecting crate labels

Dwayne Rogers, The Label Man, offers these suggestions to beginning collectors of crate labels:

1. Buy what you like. “In most cases, crate labels aren’t an investment,” he said. “They’re mostly decoration. Think of them as decorative art.”
2. Start slow. “Figure out what you like and what you want. Pick a theme or area you want to concentrate on.”
3. Know what you’re buying is actually vintage. “Reproductions can really sour you – and there are a lot out there. Look at the back of the label. Old paper should show some darkening.” Old paper also smells old.
4. Be a smart collector. Do a little research – both on the labels and the seller. “Don’t let people talk you into stuff,” Rogers said. “Buy what’s right for your collection.”