Some of them look like sheriff’s badges from an old John Wayne flick. Others resemble the serious, glinting symbols of authority that big-city detectives flash in crime dramas on TV.

Still others bear a state seal, an engraved image of the U.S. Capitol, or words like “Special Police Agent” or “Special Officer.” Whether they’re bright and gleaming or dulled and worn by age, the roughly 500 rare badges in Art Sinai’s collection of animal control and humane officer badges are really quite beautiful—and they illustrate the rise of the animal welfare movement in the United States.

Sinai, 71, started collecting badges once worn by officers from private humane societies (such as Henry Bergh’s ASPCA, founded in New York City in 1866) and state or city animal protection agencies 25 to 30 years ago, after encountering a few of them at a badge collector show.

“Somewhere way back, I got a badge … that just says ‘SPCA No. 1,’ and it says, ‘Employee D,’ and that was my first humane badge. I’ve never figured out where it [originally] was from,” says Sinai, who had a long career in law enforcement, government, and politics in several states and Washington, D.C., before retiring to Boynton, Fla., in 2002.

His initial interest in badges was sparked in 1962, while he was training as a special agent of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and someone gave him a law enforcement badge from Suriname, a South American country. As he rose through the ranks of various agencies, word of his hobby spread among colleagues, and people started giving him more badges.

“I used to have close to 4,000 badges,” Sinai says, a collection that included examples from federal, state, and city law enforcement agencies. Ultimately, he dispersed that collection, and then the mysterious “SPCA No. 1” badge caught his eye. “I remember picking it up at some badge show for a couple of dollars,” Sinai says. He recognized it as a humane law enforcement badge, “and I said, ‘OK, that’s interesting.’”

Sinai started seeing more such badges at shows in the New York area. “Most badge collectors had no interest in them, and I’d go, ‘Wow, they protect animals. You know, that’s really neat—that’s history,’” Sinai says.

He recently purchased a badge of 1870s vintage from the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a separate organization Bergh founded in 1875. (It’s also the first child protective agency in the world.) “I’ve been after one of those for over 25 years … it cost me several thousand dollars,” Sinai says.

His oldest and, to him, most valuable badge is one from the ASPCA that dates to the late 1860s. “It’s one of the biggest badges I’ve ever seen. It has the seal of the ASPCA in the middle, and on top of it, it just says ‘Detective.’”

Another favorite is one from the Washington (D.C.) Humane Society (WHS), which he believes is from the 1870s. The silvery badge—big enough to be a belt buckle—has the raised image of the U.S. Capitol. He notes that WHS was chartered by Congress. “I don’t know of any [humane] society like it.”

Though he’d been quietly collecting the badges for decades, Sinai only unveiled a selection of them for the first time in May at Animal Care Expo in Orlando, Fla. He and his wife, Christina, had a simple booth in the exhibit hall, with two velvet-line glass cases filled with badges.

“Other collectors had no interest in them, and I’d go, ‘Wow, they protect animals. You know, that’s really neat—that’s history,’” Sinai says.

It was also the first time that Bernard Unti—senior policy adviser and special assistant to the CEO/president of The Humane Society of the United States—had met Sinai, or seen any of his collection. The two men had been in contact for about 20 years, as they are both part of a network of people interested in rare and unusual items from the early years of the humane movement in the United States.

“It’s a fabulous accumulation of badges,” Unti says. “I always imagined it would be excellent, but I was struck by the breadth, the comprehensive quality of it, and the beauty of certain individual badges, which are unique.”

But it’s more than their rarity that makes them special. “It’s very powerful to consider that these were badges carried and worn by men who—perhaps 120 or 130 years ago—were the ones carrying the [humane] cause forward and taking substantial risks, in some cases, to confront cruelty and perpetrators of cruelty,” Unti says.

To learn more about Art Sinai’s historic collection of humane law enforcement badges, email him at badges@earthlink.net.