

STAMP COLLECTOR

“The story of a lifer”

“What the hell are you doing?” That was the voice of my often profane father. He wasn’t angry; he was just curious what I was doing cutting up little pieces of paper and coloring them with my Crayolas.

“Dad” I said with a big grin. “I am playing stamp collector.”

I had watched my dad work on his stamp collection many times and it looked like fun. The time was in the fall of 1944, shortly after my sixth birthday. Dad’s response was. “If you are really interested, stamps are cheap enough, you can have the real thing.”

Within minutes, Dad went and brought me an assortment of U. S. Stamps. I was thrilled. At Christmas, I received a U.S. American Stamp Album. Weekend evenings Dad and I would work on stamps and Dad would toss me the duplicates, which were often quite nice. Dad worked in New York City for Jones and Laughlin Steel Company, in the Export Credit Department and did business all over the world. In the 40s and 50s, most foreign companies used actual postage stamps. As a result Dad’s office mail was rich in interesting postage stamps. I remember looking forward to Dad coming home from work evenings and unloading his pockets with philatelic treasures from all corners of the globe.

Before long Dad bought me a Scott International Album, volumes I & II, which I started to fill with not only stamps from Dad’s office mail, but also a little stamp shop down on Main Street. The stamp shop had a gigantic “penny box”, any stamp for just a penny each. The man who owned the store was a World War II veteran, with a wooden leg. When new juvenile customers would come into the shop, he would nonchalantly, but vigorously thump on his wooden leg with a very large monkey wrench. The first time I saw this I was horrified. Once I had seen the demonstration a couple of times; however, I enjoyed the expression on the new kids faces, at least as much as the proprietor. At the stamp shop I discovered that there were a number of my school mates who were also bitten by the stamp bug and we formed a stamp club at school, where we got together to swap stamps. Another source of stamps, of course was the post office, located perhaps two miles from my home.

In 1947 I had read in the local paper that a new stamp honoring Will Rogers was coming out. I walked all the way to the post office on a blustery November day, three cents in hand, to purchase the new Will Rogers stamp. First I carefully looked over the “wanted posters” on the post office bulletin board, in the event I should encounter one of these bad guys on the journey home. Then I marched up the window and made my purchase. Before starting on the trek home I carefully examined the stamp, a smiling picture of Will Rogers and the inscription “I never met a man I didn’t like.” I contemplated Roger’s message all the way home.

Upon arriving home I said to my mom. “What’s wrong with this guy, Mr. Rogers? I’m only nine years old and already I know of lots of people I don’t like!”

Mother smiled at me and explained that Will Rogers' meaning, was everyone has some good and likable qualities and that he always tried to find them in everyone he met. For me it was an important lesson that has stuck with me all of my life. It would not be the only useful morsel of information I would learn from stamp collecting.

In 1938 the U.S. postal system came out with a definitive series honoring our nation's Presidents. Starting with a one cent George Washington and continuing in order to the five dollar Calvin Coolidge. The set took me several years to complete, although the set was in use until 1954. Local post offices didn't carry the odd denominations such as the 19 cent Rutherford B. Hayes or the 22 cent Grover Cleveland. The result was that I learned and could and still can recite the names of our Presidents in order and therefore improving my grades in America history. Of course by collecting foreign stamps one also learns geography, world history and the specific history of other nations.

Take Germany for example, which postally has one of the most interesting illustration of its' history on stamps. It starts with various German states like Saxony, Prussia, Bavaria and Wurttemberg, to the forming of the German Empire under Bismark.. Followed by the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm, with ships depicted on German colonial stamps coincides with the German naval build up leading to World War One. The 1920s inflationary period when in 1921, a Mark would mail a sizeable package, to 1923 when it took millions of marks to mail a simple letter in one's own town. In late 1923 the Weimar Republic instituted a stable currency, although there continued to be continued unrest in Germany, giving rise to Hitler and the Nazis.

Once Hitler came to power the influence on German postage by the Nazis began subtlety with the Nazi swastika first appearing on the watermark of stamps honoring the revered President and war hero General Von Hindenburg. Later stamps came showing the German military build up, then many stamps with Hitler on them. Wartime stamps illustrated battle scenes, tanks, war planes, naval vessels, soldiers and of course Hitler himself as he led Germany to defeat.

After defeat of the Nazis, stamps were issued in the occupation zones by the Allies and Russians. Separate postal systems were established for the Federal Republic (west) of Germany, Berlin, and the German Democratic Republic, which of course was anything but democratic. In 1990 the walls came tumbling down and Germany was reunited. All clearly visible on German stamps.

My German collection got a wonderful jump start about 1950 when my Great Aunt Martha, escaped from east Berlin to the west. She converted everything she could into stamps, stuffed them into her brassiere , making an already portly lady even more so. My Grandfather had the collection, which include many stamps from the early 19th century through the Hitler issues of World War II, appraised. The value wasn't as great as Aunt Martha hoped. My Grandfather, understanding his sister's need, bought the collection from her for the appraised value and gave the stamps to me. The story of the growth of my German collection continues with her son Hans. Hans served on the Eastern front in the Luftwaffe, that is the Germany Air force.

Hans settled in Bielefeld after the war and took over the family dry goods business and also took up stamp collecting, or perhaps continued. Hans would send Dad and I German stamps and we would swap him U. S. Stamps. This continued until 1985 when Hans died. I continued to share

the hobby with my dad, who was an active collector, especially after he retired in 1962 and until he passed on in 1978.

For about 20 years I was less active as a stamp collector with, operating a business, raising five children. Once the kids left the nest I had more leisure time and once more took up collecting with my former eagerness. One of the great things about stamp collecting is they do keep with a minimum effort; that is keep them dry. After a few years of relative inactivity and not following stamp values, I was pleasantly surprised to find that some of the stamps I bought years ago had greatly appreciated. I don't recommend collecting as an investment.

The trouble with investing in stamps, or perhaps speculating is a better word, is stamps are at least as fickle as other collectibles. Values vary with a combined function of supply, demand, and current interest in a particular country or kind of stamp fuels speculation. Simple scarcity is not enough to make for a good "investment", because if no one is interested in that particularly rare country or stamp it will not go up in value. Never the less it is always fun to discover that a stamp you paid little for is now a Thousand Dollar Treasure!

On more than one occasion I have purchase a box lot of stamps for say \$20, with the objective of acquiring a number of common, but useful stamps to add to my worldwide collection. Much to my pleasant surprise I have discovered a stamp worth as much as one thousand dollars. For me going through a bunch of unknown, disorganized stamps, and coming up with an interesting or valuable philatelic prize is great fun. A part of smart stamp collecting is good organization and knowing what you have in one's collection. Of course the most important part of all of this is to have fun with it.

After all stamp collecting is a hobby to be enjoyed and there are many ways to do that. Some people collect topical issues, like: boats, butterflies, famous people, airplanes, frogs and other animals. My daughter Juli is not a collector in the usual sense of the word, but always enjoying pictures of frogs, dogs and her favorite musician, Bob Marley depicted on stamps. There are no laws about stamp collecting. You can do what ever strikes your fancy, after all it is your collection. This thought was brought home to me one day in trying help my grandson Haydn with his collection.

Haydn, age 7 at the time, likes animals, and was mounting stamps picturing various Australian animals on notebook pages. He was having a little trouble managing the hinges used to mount the stamps and as a result they appeared quite crooked on the page. I tried to show him how to manage the stamps in neat orderly rows. Haydn, annoyed at my interference, said. "Grandpa, this is my collection. You told me I could collect, the way I like them! I like this way." Then he pointed to the stamps, irregularly mounted on the note page.

Enough said. Haydn was absolutely correct. It was his collection and if it pleased him to mount his stamps every which way on the page, so be it! After all it is the collectors choice. The important thing is to have fun with stamp collection activities.