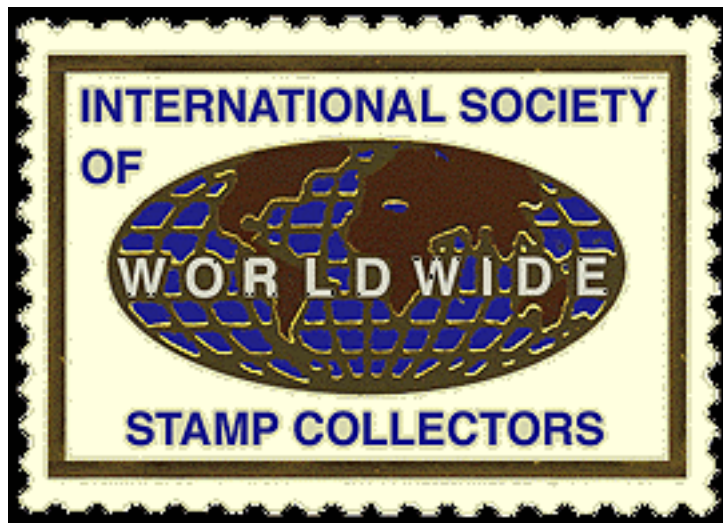


HANDBOOK OF
STAMP COLLECTING BASICS

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Part I

Starting Out in the Hobby

Wife Catches Collecting Fever

Today, I am a retired housewife and I would like to share my interest in stamps with other collectors' wives. I started collecting when I was 13 years old. I sent away to Pensupreme Ice Cream, which advertised a starter album and stamps. The only payment needed was in popsicle wrappers. I couldn't wait to get it. Finally it arrived and I had so much fun trying to figure out where the stamps went in the album. Unfortunately when I tried to get more money to buy additional cheap stamps, my father discouraged me. Since we were poor, he said it was a waste of money. One dollar would have bought a package of several thousand stamps, but since we were on a tight budget, I soon lost interest.

When I married at age 26, I discovered my husband Al was a stamp collector, too. In my spare time, I started to look through his stamps. It brought old memories and rekindled my interest. It didn't take long to find my old Pensupreme Album and try to fill spaces with his doubles. That really got me started. When my husband went to the stamp store, I of course tagged along. While he was talking to the dealer, I was busy going through the penny box. I had so much fun that he had to drag me away when it was time to go home.

Eventually we started to buy worldwide mixtures. He would help me identify stamps I couldn't figure out. Every four years we cataloged his entire collection. Through this process I learned to identify colors, shades, perforations and watermarks. I asked questions whenever I didn't understand something in the catalogues. I'm now familiar with tagging and don't have much trouble identifying different types of paper and printing. Some stamps

are really a challenge and you get the greatest feeling of satisfaction once you identify the stamp correctly. I especially enjoy the challenge of identifying stamps others can't!

Besides Scott's, we now have quite a few foreign specialized catalogues. To help us read the foreign catalogues, we purchased books to translate different languages to English. It's not as difficult as you might imagine. By learning a few key words you can usually figure out others.

I'm writing this in the hopes of getting more spouses involved and interested in the hobby. You'll find the hobby very rewarding. Learn about and enjoy geography. It will make you better appreciate current events and gain an historical perspective on today's world. Our grandchildren now come to us to help them with their homework. Without the knowledge I learned from philately (the study of postage stamps in all its forms), helping them would be very difficult.

My only regret is that somehow I should have stayed with my hobby when I was younger. But as you can see, it's never too late to go back and pick up where you left off.

When I first started helping my husband with his collection, I sorted stamps by countries, not knowing enough about perforations and watermarks. I had difficulty identifying the correct catalogue number, so I took the easy way out. I left them all for Al to figure out. At first, Al would check the stamps over carefully and number them accordingly, but then one day he insisted it was time for me to do it myself.

He began by explaining what the notches meant on the perforation gauge. For instance, perf.12 means that you had 12 perforations to a line two centimeters long. (Actually, this form of measurement was devised by a Frenchman around 1860.) Since I understood what the numbers represented, I started using the perforation gauge by myself.

Watermarking was a little more of a challenge. A watermark is a security design impressed onto blank paper when it's manufactured. Al showed me several ways to detect watermarks on a stamp. Designs can sometimes be seen by holding a stamp up to a light. Paper is thinner where the watermark is, making the design more translucent.

Another method of checking out a watermark is by laying stamps on a black surface (small trays are sold for this) and pouring a tiny bit of watermark fluid on them. The design will appear darker than the rest of the stamp.

Unlike water, this chemical fluid will evaporate and is safe to use on mint stamps without washing the gum away. You must be sure not to use this fluid on photoengraved stamps (see the next article). Never use watermark detector fluid in a room that is not well ventilated. Breathing it in can be very dangerous to your health. Some watermarks can't be easily identified by either of these methods.

We have two other tools that we use for the tough watermarks. The first is a Sinoscope, made by the Safe Corporation, which is rather easy to use. The second is a Morley-Bright Roll-A-Tector, made in England, which again is fairly easy to use. The advantage of these two products is that you don't need to wet your stamps in any way to use them.

As for stamps, I especially enjoy the stamps from Great Britain and her colonies. Not only are they the most beautiful to me, but they present a challenge to properly identify them. Now that I've learned the "tools of the trade" and their proper use, I actually enjoy trying to catalog these stamps and can finally fully appreciate them.

Part II

Stamp Production

Printing Differences

Stamp collectors need to distinguish the different printing methods used to produce stamps. The words typography, lithography, engraved and photolithography meant nothing to me at first. Considering I was new at this, I was prepared for a long drawn out technical explanation of each, but to my surprise it was rather simple. In less than an hour I was identifying the major types of printing. Some were a little more difficult than others and I still make mistakes, but I'm getting better all the time.

Here's a quick primer:

Engraved is perhaps the easiest to identify. The ink lies on top of the paper, by sliding your finger lightly across the stamp, you can feel the ridges of the ink. Ridges can clearly be seen using a 10 power magnifying glass. The ink is so high on some stamps that you can easily feel it with your fingernail.

Typography is just the opposite of engraving. The ink is pressed into the paper, similar to a typewriter. With a 10 power magnifying glass you can see that the paper rises above the ink. The color seems below the surface of the paper.

Photo-lithography is more difficult to determine. The simplest way to describe it is to first look for the darkest part of the stamp. You'll find the color is made up of tiny dots instead of being solid. It's not hard to see the little dots using a magnifying glass.

Lithography is perhaps the toughest. These stamps usually are of the poorest printing quality. They often lack fine detail, being made up of lines of various lengths and thickness.

CHAPTER 2. PRINTING DIFFERENCES

There are many other ways stamps are printed, but I think for the novice collector, the above four printing methods cover the greatest number of stamps.

Now I have a lot of fun identifying the printing method of stamps. I hope you newer collectors find the above information helpful.

Determining Paper Types

Trying to distinguish the different papers used in printing stamps can be a little tricky. Holding stamps up to the light and examining them from their white back is usually sufficient.

Woven paper is the easiest to confirm. It appears to be rows of little dots. Most stamps are on wove paper.

Laid paper can be identified by either horizontal or vertical narrow line as you look through the stamp.

Granite paper is rather unique. It looks like wove paper but has blue and red silk fibers throughout.

Perlure paper is very thin, not much thicker than an onion skin. It is usually hard and brittle.

Quadrille paper is similar to laid paper having horizontal & vertical lines, looking like little squares. A good example is from France, Scott # 103.

Chalky paper, used especially on British stamps, is easy to identify, too. Chalk-surfaced stamps when rubbed with silver will leave a black mark on them. Be careful when testing these and just touch a small corner or part of the stamp. Watermarks are sometimes obscured by this kind of paper.

Other types of paper seldom used that you will come in contact with include: native paper, used in early Asian stamps; manila paper, used mostly in envelopes; and India paper, introduced in China, mostly for die proofs and specialty applications.

CHAPTER 3. DETERMINING PAPER TYPES

There are others, but for now, this will get you started. Additional information about paper types can usually be found in most catalog introductions.

Colors and Shades

As a long time stamp collector, I still have difficulty identifying colors and particularly shades. I can just imagine how beginners feel when they try to identify a specific shade. The best way, of course, is to have the stamps expertized, but that can cost a lot of money, especially if you have lots of stamps with different shades.

I find a "Stanley Gibbons" color gauge very useful but still not exact. Stanley Gibbons is the major catalog producer for Great Britain and the British Commonwealth- Scott's counterpart. This gauge works somewhat well if used only in conjunction with their catalog color listing. You see, a particular shade in their catalog, brick red for example, might be described as dark brown-red in Scott's. So there is no uniformity among the major catalogs about to color.

You must also consider that most older stamps fade and some colors actually change over the years due to the color fastness of the ink used. Violets and purples turn grayer in time. Some colors just oxidize and look totally different from what they are supposed to be. Yellows and oranges turn to shades of brown, for example. Stamps on display in a case or frame, or even left out in direct sunlight will also change colors given enough time.

Another difficulty is with stamps classified as two hyphenated colors. Red-orange refers to a stamp mostly orange with some red added to it. The second color is the primary or dominant color. You may also find the listing as reddish-orange, meaning the same thing as red-orange. Use these colors only as guides.

Try comparing the stamp in question with another stamp from the same country. The reasoning here is that each country often uses the same printers during the same time period, which use the same inks. So comparing stamps from the same country is sometimes helpful.

Some shades are nearly impossible to identify, such as light blue, baby blue, powder blue, and so on.

Here's an interesting project to visually understand what's happening with colors and shades. Try sorting common definitive duplicates from a variety of countries by color. Look them up in any catalog you have, as it doesn't matter which one you use. You'll soon discover that there will be a shade range even for the exact same specific color listing!

As you can see, determining colors and shades is not for the faint of heart. Even experts can sometimes disagree. The bottom line is do the best you can and ask your other philatelic friends or possibly a dealer to give you a hand.

Perforations

I've been getting requests from several ISWSC club members to go into more detail about perforations. I hope this explanation will satisfy most requests.

The first stamps appearing in the early 1840's were imperforate- without holes- needing to be cut to separate them from the sheet. Soon after perforations appeared. Cutting out tiny holes became the most common way of separating stamps.

Gauges soon became available for collectors to measure these holes in a more accurate manner, created by a Frenchman in the 1860's. The number of holes every 2 centimeters corresponds to its perforation. Perf 12, for example, means that the stamp has 12 holes every 2 centimeters in both the horizontal and vertical direction. A perf value of 12x13 refers to the perforation being 12 horizontally and 13 vertically.

Early imperforate stamps must be checked carefully to be sure they are not a later perforated variety with the perfs cut off. This "technique" is used to fool a collector into thinking he has the more valuable imperforate variety. When buying expensive imperforates it probably would be wise to have them expertized.

Another form of perforation is called rouletting. This is done by cutting partially through the paper but not punching any of it out. To explain how it's done simply imagine a pizza cutter. The cutter actually scores the crust, making it easier to separate each piece. Different forms of rouletting exist. Most have French names. Examples include; "perce en lignes," meaning cut in lines; "perce en arc" and "perce en scie," meaning pierced in an arc or saw

CHAPTER 5. PERFORATIONS

tooth; and "perce serpentin," or cut in tiny, wavy lines.

Sometimes it's hard to tell a rouletted, perforated stamp from a regularly imperforate one. It's best to have such stamps in pairs that have not yet been separated. They will look like imperforates, but the scoring will be clearly visible.

For examples of the above mentioned types, refer to the following: "perce en lignes"- Mexico Scott #500, "perce en points"- Mexico, Scott #242-56; "perce en arc" and "en scie"- Hanover, Scott #25-29;- "perce en serpentin"- Brunswick(Germany), Scott #13-18.

Other types exist if you want to explore any worldwide catalog. So take a good look at your stamps and remember how important perforations are!

Part III

Stamps and Albums

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Buying Stamps

Now for a discussion about buying stamps. I'm sure everyone has their own favorite dealer, but I'd like to tell you about some of the ways that I buy stamps that work well for me.

To get started in worldwide collecting, the best thing for beginners to do is to buy the largest worldwide assortment of stamps they can afford. You'll gain a lot of enjoyment and knowledge sorting the countries. By the time you get through several thousand stamps in this type of "kiloware," you'll find it will become easier to identify countries.

The next step would be to buy stamp packets of a particular country. For instance, you may want to purchase a pack of 500 stamps from Germany or 1000 from Hungary, etc. These will really help to fill in the country chosen. Consider filling other spaces by visiting dealers or sending them your want lists. Another good way to fill holes is through approvals; stamps sent to you through the mail to look over. You buy what you need and return the rest. You'll be surprised how fast your empty spaces vanish.

At this stage of collecting, consider yourself an "intermediate" or "advanced" collector. You're now ready to accumulate better sets of stamps. Be prepared that prices start to grow from here on! Relying exclusively on dealers could prove to be very expensive. You do have other options.

Mail bids/mail sales are similar to public auctions except that you can't attend in person. When you bid in mail sales, I find you can often win the bid for mint or used stamps for above 50% of the current Scott's catalog value. If they are damaged- heavy hinged or short perfs, thin spots, etc., I bid less

than 50%, dropping 5% for every flaw mentioned in the description. For mint never hinged (MNH) stamps, in most cases expect to bid 60-80% or even above the 100% mark. Since you're not competing against "floor bidders," winning bids are accepted at the discretion of the mail bid organizer. He may accept the highest bid or reject the offer if he feels the price is too low. Be aware that unpublished "reserve" prices may be on any lot, below which no one will purchase the item.

In public auctions, you either mail in a bid or you (or your representative) bid live against "floor bidders." Some of these sales offer much higher priced, and respectively, more scarce and higher quality material. When mailing in a bid at a public auction, bid the highest price you are willing to pay for the lot. Remember, you get just one chance with a mailed in bid. Any floor bidder might out bid you.

Stamp Buying Tips

I'm going to let you in on one of my best secrets. If you are fortunate enough to live in or close to a large city, watch your newspaper for information regarding very old public buildings that are going to be demolished.

I make it a point to be there and offer to buy the contents of the box in the "corner stone." When these buildings were built, owners often put an accumulation of collectibles representative of the time of construction in a box placed in the corner stone. It was placed in one of the blocks near the main entrance. I've found some beautiful Columbians and other stamps, by themselves and on letters along with plenty of good postal stationary out of these boxes. The "price" typically is a donation of a few dollars paid to one of the laborers doing the demolition work. The contents of the box means nothing to them. Now that my secret is out I guess I'll have to compete with others to get these boxes.

Getting back to buying stamps, I find that many dealer prices for short sets are very reasonable. "Short sets" are stamp sets missing a few denominations from being complete, often the higher values. I only buy them if one or two of the high denominations are missing, which typically are the most expensive individual stamps. Then I watch for a mail bid sale and bid on the high values to complete the set. I often win such bids because the only people bidding on them are collectors like me trying to complete a set. I realize buying this way takes longer to complete sets, but who's in a hurry? There are so many stamps that I need that there is always something I can bid on.

Here's another inexpensive tip. Try asking a local company to clip the stamps off of incoming mail for you, or at least save their entire envelopes

for you to clip at home. You may be lucky and find a great source of all the current stamps you need nearby.

I correspond quite a bit with collectors in other countries that are usually anxious to trade for current US stamps. It's also a good way to make new friends in foreign countries.

Stamp Pricing

As a long time worldwide stamp collector, I'd like to give you a few thoughts about the controversy and complaints about Scott catalog pricing.

How many members of your local stamp club participate in the "big league" stamp auctions? I'll bet there are relatively few, if any. Most of us buy stamps to fill spaces and try to buy from a dealer we trust. Most of us have a fixed budget and we try to get the most for our money, primarily inexpensive stamps and sets. Then why complain about how Scott prices stamps? Those with unlimited budgets rarely have a reason to complain, yet seem to be the most vocal in their opposition. Remember, dealers sell stamps to make a profit and must remain competitive to stay in business. If they were to fold, then where would we turn?

What difference does it make to any of us if Scott has a minimum value of 15 cents for any stamp? If the complainers had to sort these stamps, they probably would soon find out that they are losing money at the 15 cent minimum price. I don't think any of us is so naive that we expect to get anything near catalogue value for our stamps when we sell them. We are hobbyists, buying these stamps for our own pleasure. So-called investors almost ruined our hobby not too many years ago. It seems to me that since Scott's lowered their values to reflect retail value some of these investors are trying to get back into business again. Perhaps they need the market to fall like it did several years ago.

Let's leave stamp collecting as a hobby. As a stamp collector for many years, I can honestly say I have learned more geography and history than I ever learned in school from my stamps. When I went to school both these subjects

were boring, but since collecting stamps, I find both subjects fascinating.

I find the Scott's catalog full of valuable information besides pricing. It teaches us to sort our stamps in an intelligent way. It gives us a way of identifying our stamps. We buy and trade stamps based on their Scott number. Can you imagine how dull it would be collecting stamps without the use of a Scott catalog?

My advice to all collectors is to enjoy the hobby for what it was meant to be. Stay within your budget when buying stamps, purchase from a reliable source, and learn to use the Scott's catalogs for their valuable information and don't worry how much you're going to get when you sell your collection. The education you will have received from this hobby by then is well worth whatever money you spent on it.

The Hinging Craze

To hinge or not to hinge: that is the question. Many years ago when I started to collect stamps at age 10, I bought packets of stamps at the Five and Dime store. For a quarter you bought a whole envelope full of worldwide stamps. Stamps were off paper, some were mint, most used.

I never thought about "never hinged stamps," as I hinged everything. It didn't make much difference to me because I knew I didn't have anything of value. I collected stamps for perhaps a couple years and then put them away because of other interests. When I was about 16, I found my old stamp album and again caught the collecting bug. That was during the years of the great depression and I had very little money to spend on stamps. I used to buy approvals from dealers like Harris and a few others that were popular at that time.

Up until then I never read any stamp newspapers, attended stamp meetings, or ever heard of the "never hinged" craze. That changed when I was about 25 years old. I soon discovered that never hinged stamps (those in pristine, post office fresh condition) cost almost twice as much as hinged, but it never mattered to me. If I had a choice, I would always buy used or mint hinged, preferring used stamps, trying to avoid canceled to order stamps.

Since I collected worldwide stamps up to 1960 (and still do), if I acquired any stamps that managed not to be hinged over a period of about 30-40 years then I used a Showgard mount. This is a brand name, and several other companies make them. These are best described as clear plastic foil with a black or clear backing. They're split in the back half-way with glue on the reverse allowing you to put the stamps in and attach the mount to

an album page.

I'd suggest that you use these mounts for never-hinged stamps with a value of a dollar or more. This protects the stamp and its value as a never-hinged item. They're rather expensive, so consider using them only for your never-hinged stamps. Hinging them instead is still OK, but when it comes time to sell a collection or trade material, values will be lower, especially for more valuable items. Remember, the choice is yours!

Choose The Album Best for You

In a recent issue of the ISWSC's newsletter, "The Circuit," Douglas Casey raised an interesting question. He was concerned that most commercial stamp albums were printed on both sides of the pages. Since other collectors may be faced with the same situation, I decided to write about ways to cope and give alternatives as well.

Worldwide albums, for the most part, are printed on both sides. As you fill stamps in, remember that stamps may interlock and touch those on the opposite page, tear at the perfs or cause the paper of the stamps to fold. To prevent this, consider buying glassine interleaf sheets, available from most major loose-leaf album companies. They look something like wax paper and are semi-transparent. If you've experienced interlocking problems, this is your best solution.

What I did may be a little costly, but I intended to stay with the hobby for many years. I purchased the "pages only" for the entire world that go with the Scott's Specialty Series albums, costing well over \$1,000. These pages are printed on one side only. I sorted out the pages alphabetically and then purchased #4 sized Scott Specialty Binders that are for loose leaf pages, each holding 400 pages. I decided to only install pages that I had stamps for. That way my albums don't have a lot of blank pages. As I purchase stamps I add the appropriate pages. This works out very well, as I now have about 20 albums, but this plan may not be to your liking.

An alternative is to simply buy binders and blank pages to fill them. That way you can make up your own pages to suit yourself. This would be a lot less costly and you'd have fun designing customized pages. A cheaper

alternative would be to buy three ring binders and again make up your own pages. If by chance you have a computer, you can buy software that will allow you to design pages that could look even better than preprinted ones. One downfall to this method is that you may need to continually remount material as you go along.

Part IV

Knowing What You Have

Identifying Stamps

Trying to identify stamps is the most difficult part of our hobby. Patience and experience are often the best keys to uncover a mystery. Here are a few tricks of the trade that can possibly help you.

The first thing I do is to watermark the stamp, which can be very revealing. Many times a stamp's watermark will give you a clue to its origin. You may know of the British Crown and CC, Crown and CA and such watermarks found on stamps of the British Empire. You may also be familiar with the lozenges and network watermarks on German stamps and those of its colonies. Early Italian stamps just used a crown. These can all give you a place to start. Do you know which country uniquely used a pineapple as a watermark? For the answer, see the end of this column.

Check out clear cancellations that sometimes bare city and country names on them. You may recognize a major city of a country without recognizing the native spelling of the country's name. Also check for currency. It may be marks, pounds, schillings, kronas, francs and so on. Sometimes even a coat of arms or a landmark on a stamp helps you identify its origin.

If you can make out any of the words on a stamp, check the index in the back of the major catalog you use. Scott's has a very useful one that includes overprints as well. But I guess if you're like most of us you'll buy Linn's Stamp Identifier or similar identifier and just hunt until you can figure it out.

Stamp ID If You Know The Country

Over the last 20 years, Scott's catalogs have depicted only one stamp out of a set, making it difficult for the average collector to locate a proper catalog number. Even those of us who use a catalog regularly have trouble. They used to show them all, but now there are just too many stamps issued for every country. I'll tell you some of the things I do to make it a little easier.

If you have a used stamp, sometimes you can find a date in the cancellation that will give you the year the stamp was used. If you were lucky to find this, just look at stamps issued that year and of course read the information that describes the stamps in sets issued that year. Also be aware that some country's stamps have the year printed on them near the bottom of the design. This really makes it easy!

Another thing I do is check the stamp's denomination. For example, if you have one showing 50 pfennigs, start looking for sets of stamps that have a 50 pfennigs stamp in them, then try to find a match. You'll also notice that every so often postage rates change. Check catalog pages that have similar values within sets. That's easier than looking at all the pictures trying to find your stamp.

I find it useful at times to check the currency. There are occasions when money changes. As an example, some countries that used pence and pounds switched to cents and dollars in 1969. Start checking the catalog where such changes took place. This can save a lot of time.

Check the stamp carefully. In many cases stamps within a set depict the same subject or topic. If the unidentified stamp shows fish, look for catalog

pictures of fish. If the stamp shows the leader of a country, again look for a stamp with that same theme. Sometimes the borders of sets will look the same, too.

Even with all of these suggestions, you'll still have some stumpers. There's no way of getting around it. You have to do a lot of research. Most difficult are non-Scott listed issues, viewed as non-postal releases by the editors. Foreign catalogs are the only solution here.

I even went as far as buying foreign language dictionaries that convert to English. I have French, German and Spanish dictionaries that I refer to quite frequently. Understanding the words on a stamp could help identify it.

If you still have trouble after trying all the above, my only suggestion would be to close your books and try again another time. Often years may pass before you or your friends finally figure it out! By the way, early stamps from Jamaica have a pineapple watermark! When you get a chance, take a good look through and see all of the interesting designs watermarks reveal.

The Necessity Of Using Catalogs

I'd like to tell you about an incident that happened when I purchased my last catalogues. I went to my favorite stamp shop wanting to buy the latest set of Scott's catalogs. There was another customer who was standing close to me in the process of buying some earlier US classic (pre-1900) stamps. He said that I was wasting my money buying catalogs and that I'd be much better off if I spent that money on stamps instead.

In my mind I was thinking, without the most recent catalog, how could he know a relative price for what he was buying? There could be many varieties of the same stamp with great differences in price. He has to take the dealer's word that the stamp he is buying is properly cataloged and fairly priced. Hopefully, he knows what he is buying.

My own experience tells me that dealers make plenty of mistakes, not intentionally, but they are made none-the-less. I've found that when I order stamps from a price list through the mail, as many as 1 in 5 are miscataloged, with either the watermark, perforation or the variety incorrect. By coincidence they're often cataloged as the higher priced stamp. I'm not suggesting that the dealer is intentionally wrong, but perhaps he or she needs to take a little more time in correctly identifying them. When you order a \$10 stamp and wind up with a 25 cent variety, that's a big difference!

If you multiply your loses from my case above many times over the course of a year, we're talking about a considerable amount of money. In any case, I check every purchase that's sent to me. I have a budget that allows me to spend X number of dollars per month. So I buy accordingly. I very rarely return extremely low priced stamps that are wrong, but when the difference

is a dollar or more I return them.

In a way, I felt sorry for the man who said I was wasting my money on catalogs. For his sake I hope he always gets what he expects. My own experience proves otherwise. I don't say that it's necessary to buy new catalogs every year. If you collect older stamps like me, you can buy catalogues that are a few years old. I have already bought them from libraries that are getting rid of old books for as low as 25 cents each volume. I've purchased specialized catalogues just a few years old for only a few dollars.

If you're a member of a local stamp club, they usually have a recent catalog you can use to check your stamps. If not, check out the reference section of your neighborhood library for another inexpensive way of checking out your stamps.

Catalog Pricing & The Value Of Your Collection

Much has been said about the new pricing system the Scott's catalog, the "bible" of American stamp collecting, is using. Since I have been collecting worldwide stamps for about 60 years, I'd like to give you my opinion on the subject.

First of all, I collect stamps for the fun of it. I love to fill pages and it gives me great satisfaction. Here in the US, the Scott's catalog is the glue that holds our hobby together. The valuable information in it provides the means to identify and price stamps systematically. It allows us to distinguish stamps that look alike but may be different by shades, perforations, watermarks, and types of paper and printing.

Sometimes we get lucky and find a better variety of a common stamp. We all hope that someday we'll find a rare stamp and make some money from it. It probably will never happen, but we keep on treasure hunting!

Now, for average collectors like me, published prices mean relatively little. Those quoted are usually for near perfect stamps. Most of us buy stamps for the fun of it and aren't too fussy about condition. If we need the stamp offered and the price is reasonable, we buy it. It may not be perfect, but to us it fills a space.

Most dealers price according to catalog value, but at a discount to their respective values. If you examine the stamps that you buy carefully, especially those heavily discounted, expect to find minor to major defects, including short perfs, centering off a bit, a smudged or heavy cancellation,

heavy hinging, or maybe a thin spot. Most of us would accept a less than perfect copy.

The point I'm trying to make is this: If you are collecting stamps as a hobby, collect for the fun of it. Yes, you'll get something back when you sell, but don't expect to make a profit. Expectations of big profits will leave you highly disappointed. A stamp dealer will look at your collection, decide what price he can sell items for and offer you a flat price for the entire collection. He will pull out the better material and then take the common leftovers and sell them off in cheap packets. Remember that a dealer is in business to make a profit. His time is valuable. He not only needs to take time to sort out collections, but he has expenses as well.

The best way to get more for your stamps when you sell is to retail them in a club that has a sales program. Price your stamps as you see fit, at a discount from what a dealer would sell them for. It takes more time and effort this way, but in general your return will be greater than selling to a dealer.

If you're collecting stamps only with the intention of making a profit then in my opinion, you're not a stamp collector, but an investor. If so, you more than likely will buy mostly from auction houses. Bidding can get fierce for more desirable items and expect to pay top dollar. Remember, even then it's a gamble, just like any other business. The market is bound to fluctuate, so be prepared for the ups and downs.

The Scott's catalog is a must. Rely on it as a reference for its valuable information, but don't completely depend on it for pricing. Buy your stamps to please yourself and I hope you all enjoy our hobby as much as I do.

Part V

What to Collect

Classics

Stamps issued in the 19th Century are usually referred to as "classics," although some consider stamps up to 1940 in that category as well. Most of these stamps are engraved and have many varieties, such as; different perforations, watermarks, shades of ink used, types of paper, hidden marks and some even have grills to check. Philatelists specializing in this era refer to themselves as "classic collectors." They tend to be very advanced, spending lots of money to purchase a specific variety of a stamp they need. Before buying these stamps they should be expertized and authenticated.

There are still plenty of low cost classic stamps available, but it doesn't take long to get into the expensive ones. Sometimes I wonder why some US classics are so expensive. You can find just about all of them advertised by US specialized dealers and at prominent auction houses. If so many dealers have them available, why are they so expensive? The answer, of course, is their scarcity and the laws of supply and demand.

Quality or condition of these classics is always an issue, with the best being termed "superb." Faults always reduce price, sometimes dramatically, for things such as poor centering, damaged gum, re-gummed, short perfs, faded colors, etc. Honest dealers selling you a quality stamp will hopefully consider buying it back (when the time comes) at a similar grade, but it's not always the case. This is the main reason why I like collecting worldwide. There are far more inexpensive worldwide classics than there are US ones.

I would advise anyone buying expensive early classics to have them expertized. So many have been reproduced by expert forgers that even experts differ on opinions at times. Shades of stamps can be altered with chemicals to

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try to fool collectors and experts alike. Perfs can be repunched, covers and postmarks faked, etc.

So avoid high priced "classics" and enjoy the hobby.

Semi-Postal Stamps

Semi-postal stamps are a form of a tax on postage. Scott's lists them with a "B" in front of their number, placing them just behind regular stamp issues. Use of these stamps is sometimes mandatory, but more often than not voluntary in nature. You can learn much about a country from these semi-postals. They usually portray the purpose for which they were issued. A good bit of the taxed funds are donated to various charities, such as youth programs, hospitals, churches, etc.

All such stamps carry a premium above face value, most often found along with the specific postal denomination. For example, 25+5 would mean 25(of whatever the currency) was for postage and 5 for the charity. Some philatelists refuse to collect them believing they were only issued to collect a "tax" from them! They're issued in lesser quantities than regular stamps and sometimes increase in value faster, but always remember that price is based on supply and demand.

My favorite semi-postals come from Belgium. Some may say that there are too many of them and are too costly, but I find them fascinating, colorful and beautiful stamps. Quite a few are engraved and I've always preferred engraved stamps.

The best way to collect them is to buy complete sets. Broken sets are very hard to fill. If you find them too expensive, you may want to buy short sets avoiding the high priced ones, thus having a representative sample of them. Of course, broken sets have little value when you dispose of your collection.

Semi-postals have never been issued in the US, but available regularly in

Europe and a few other countries. Early semi-postals were regular stamps overprinted or surcharged with the extra denomination. This practice is nearly extinct today.

Once you start collecting semi-postals you'll find it hard to stop. New Zealand is an especially prolific producer of these stamps and their mini-sheets of 6 to 10 stamps are quite popular. Some countries issue semi-postal airmails. Scott lists them with a "CB" in front of the number.

I don't recommend semi-postals for everyone, but for those of you that can spend the extra money I'm sure you'll find them as fascinating as me.

Forgeries

When beginners hear about forgeries, they think that only very expensive stamps are forged. Wrong! Even very low priced stamps have been counterfeited. The reason why these so called "album weeds" were produced was as a "filling" for low priced stamp packets. Unfortunately, these packets were purchased mostly by beginners.

When you first start collecting stamps, most collectors try to get as much as they can for their money. Packets serve many purposes. We learn to sort stamps by country, become familiar with foreign languages to some extent, learn about currency, etc. We often times feel compelled to try to fill sets. By this point, any collector could benefit enormously if he could identify forgeries. Higher denominations as well as lower ones were counterfeited and no one likes to be gypped.

So what could we do about it? I recently purchased a book from Linn's called "Focus On Forgeries." This book is a must for beginners who intend to move up to the next stage of collecting. It identifies the most common phony stamps. After using this book for a little while you'll soon learn to recognize the "weeds" from the genuine items. When you start buying stamps from dealers either through price lists, mail sales or auctions, you'll have a good guide and be able to recognize counterfeits listed in this book immediately. Don't hesitate to return these fakes to whomever you purchased them from and insist on a refund. "Focus On Forgeries" can be purchased from: Linn's Stamp News

PO Box 29

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Sidney, Ohio 45365

Price is \$14.95 delivered to US addresses.

By the way, there is a subtle difference between the terms "forgery" and "counterfeit." A forgery is a faked stamp meant to deceive a stamp collector, whereas a counterfeit is a bogus stamp created to deprive postal authorities from revenue.

Abnormals

The word "abnormal" has a different meaning to different people. When used in the philatelic context it refers to the British "abnormal" stamps. Among them are Scott #59-65. These stamps were issued using several unique plate numbers different from production runs in non-standard shades and colors. The plate number is a tiny number, usually in a circle, that can be seen on the face of the stamp.

Very few of these stamps exist, as only a handful of sheets were printed for retention by the British Archives. They were not supposed to be available to the public, but some made their way to post offices and used. Others were obtained through bureaucratic friends. Over the years these stamps became among the rare and most valuable stamps of Great Britain. Many used stamps have been identified, but others are possibly in collections of unknowing collectors.

This is where my story begins. I was about 8 years old, back in the early 1930s, when I began collecting stamps. I would save my pennies until I had a quarter, then rush to the "Five and Dime Store" and buy the largest packet of used stamps I could find. Arriving home I would quickly sort and mount them the best I could. As years passed, I bought better albums and remounted the stamps, correcting any errors I had made earlier.

About 10 years ago, I read an article in Linn's Stamp News written by Donna O'Keefe describing these British abnormals. She mentioned each of the stamps by their Scott number, plate numbers and color. I checked my stamps as I usually do when I learn about something new. In every case I had the more common variety. Then my luck changed. The last one I

checked had the correct plate number, but the stamp came in two shades; chestnut and rare pale chestnut. Of course I couldn't tell which shade I had. So every time I saw this particular stamp and plate number advertised, I would buy it. They only cost a couple of dollars each and if damaged, less. I found that the 10 stamps I purchased were all the same shade of chestnut, but my original stamp was without a doubt a much paler shade.

By now my hopes were really riding high. A good stamp collector friend of mine from England who visits our country regularly was in town. We got together and talked about this possible abnormal and he agreed that it may be an abnormal. He suggested that I let him take it back to England and get an opinion there. A few weeks later he called me and said the experts at his club identified it as a bonafide rarity. He asked me if I wanted to sell it, but it has more than monetary value to me.

Linn's Stamp News wrote a story about my lucky find, not mentioning my name as I requested. The writer of the article received several offers for this stamp, but I decided to keep it in my collection. The moral of this story is that the more knowledge you acquire, the greater your chances of finding a valuable stamp, however remote those chances are. If I didn't read the story about the abnormalities, the stamp in my collection would have remained undetected. Educating ourselves does pay off and I'm proof that miracles still happen!

Reconstructing GB Sheets

It's a good idea for any philatelist to stray once in a while into uncharted territory and start a specialty collection. Trying something new certainly broadens one's philatelic perspective.

Unlike topicals, consider a single stamp specialty. Scott #33, Great Britain's penny red, is a particularly good example. This is an inexpensive stamp, with used copies costing just pennies. Condition of the stamp really doesn't matter. At times it's possible to buy this stamp in quantity but poor quality at a reasonable price. The same thing can be done with other issues from Great Britain, but with more expensive stamps.

Two letters are found in the lower corners of this stamp. By properly arranging these letters it's possible to reconstruct a complete sheet of stamps. Here's how to do it:

#1-a stamp with "A" in the lower left corner and "A" in the lower right corner means it came from the 1st row, 1st stamp;
#2-"A" lower left, "B" lower right translates to 1st row, 2nd stamp;
#3-"A" lower left, "C" lower right, first row 3rd stamp, etc.

The sheet continues 12 stamps across (AA through AL) and goes 20 down (the last row being TA through TL). When you first start your sheet it will be easy, but as the sheet fills up, trying to find those you still need is a challenge. Completing the sheet gives great pleasure and satisfaction.

If a simple reconstruction isn't enough of a challenge, this stamp also was

printed from over 200 different plates. The plate number of each is found in the scroll work on either side of the Queen's portrait. Of course, each plate also has 240 different letter combinations, so you'll need nearly 50,000 different stamps to complete such a collection, which will be guaranteed impossible. You see, one plate number, #77, is very rare, with used copies typically auctioned off for over \$10,000 each!

Postmarks & Cancellations

Cancellations are a good way to get children and beginners interested in stamp collecting. You can get them from your own incoming mail or get friends to save the envelopes. It's a great way to learn about the cities and towns of your own state and those around the country. For something different, try collecting cancellations from foreign countries as well.

This would be a good time to discuss definitions. A "postmark" is a mark that shows the place and date of mailing. A "cancel" is a mark meant to simply deface the stamp and does not carry other information. Today, only postmarks are used in the US, but there is a rich history of cancels from the 19th and early 20th century. These two terms are interchangeable now-a-days.

All you need to start is a 3 ring binder, blank pages and a pack of hinges. Make a page for each state. Mount the entire envelope or cut out a 2 inch by 4 inch piece along with basic information about the place. You can find information from encyclopedias, almanacs, and books from the library or on the Internet.

Besides regular cancels, special pictorial postmarks are available around the country, commemorating anniversaries, events and alike.

Some collectors I know use a large map of the US and mount it on their hobby room wall, marking the cities where they have cancellations from. Others try to get a cancellation from every city in a state, or specialize in just one state or region. Also be aware that town and city names change over a period of time. Very few places are named the same as when they

were founded. The town in Pennsylvania where I live changed names three times since I've been here. When I came here it was called Eddington, then Cornwells Heights and now Bensalem, and I never moved once!

Postmarks and cancellations make an interesting and inexpensive second collection. If it's not for you, consider saving them for collectors who do. Imagine if no one saved stamps many years ago. They would be scarce today. I'm not suggesting that the cancels or stamps of today are or will be valuable in the future. Collect for the fun of it!

Every collector could learn much from this kind of collection. For a change of pace from just stamps, give it a try.

Part VI

Other Areas of Interest

Cultural Aspects Of Philately

There is another side of our hobby that I find fascinating. I think most of us stamp collectors have a secret desire to learn about the history, geography and culture of foreign countries.

As we sort and admire our stamps, we vision ourselves visiting all these wonderful places that are shown on our stamps. As we go through our albums we are taking imaginary trips to some countries that we probably never visited or even heard of before. How many times have we day-dreamed of being in one of these places and wonder what it would be like to have a friend there who could show us around? They could introduce us to their friends, explain the ways of their people, and see all of the interesting things in their country.

To most of us these dreams are far-fetched, but in reality we can do the next best thing: get a stamp collecting pen-pal in that country .I correspond with an 18 year old young man named Xing. He lives in Datong, Shanxi Province, in the People's Republic of China. We have been corresponding and trading stamps for about three years. I have learned so many things first hand from Xing about China that you don't usually read about in the newspaper. Xing fortunately writes near perfect English. He translates our letters into Chinese so the rest of his family can read them, too. They are extremely interested in learning about our lives, and in particular our schools and the way we raise our children. Xing tells me that teachers in China are looked down upon and apparently not too happy, preferring to change professions. School children in China form opinions about their teachers before they get to know them, just as ours do.

He tells me computers in school are rare in China, but that interest seems to be growing in them. English and math are especially important subjects to all school children. Corresponding with Americans helps him immensely with his English. Xing says that in order to go to college one must have extremely high grades. While he was third in his class, he felt he was letting his parents down by not being first. He's now in college in Beijing.

The younger generation in China has much respect for their elders. Their families are close, as most live with elderly grandparents and other relatives.

Other letters additional insight into his everyday life. School hours in China start at 7:00 AM to 12:30 PM, followed by a two hour break for lunch and rest, resuming again at 2:30- 7:30 PM, six days a week. Soon they expect school will be open every day of the week. Teenagers have no dating privileges. Parents do not watch TV while children do homework and study so as not to distract them.

I could go on with interesting things that I learned about China. You, too, can experience the pleasure of corresponding with collectors anywhere in the world. It's easy and fun. So come on, get a pen-pal!

Inventories & Computers

Inventory! How to know which stamps you have and, of course, which stamps you need.

Years ago when the Scott's catalog was complete in one volume, I'd simply check off the stamps that I had on the pages. If I'd go to a bourse or stamp show, the catalog came with me. While checking through dealer stocks, I immediately knew what I was missing. I always had a want list with me with the individual stamps I needed to fill sets. When price lists came through the mail, it was always easy to check what I needed. All I had to do was pull out my catalog. It wasn't necessary to constantly go through my albums, except for newer issues. That system worked great. Now the Scott's catalogs are in 6 volumes. Although I still use the catalogs as my check list, it's a lot to carry when you go shopping for stamps!

Well, we now have a computer. We're in the process of inventorying our collection in the computer. We bought an inventory system from M.S.L. Software in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania called "Stamp Keeper." While we like this system, it's not exactly what we wanted, but it did give us some ideas to develop our own.

Al created a simple inventory program from spreadsheet software. We can easily input newly acquired stamps, then sort by catalog number, printing as we go along. We're very happy with this solution, which could also be very useful in the event the collection is stolen. We can now print out specific want lists instead of lugging our catalogues everywhere we go. It's also easier to add special notes about particular items in the database. In the near future we plan to design our own album pages.

We've also installed an encyclopedia and world-wide map on the computer. This helps us find towns and cities that we find on cancelled stamps that are otherwise hard to locate.

We realize that a computer doesn't fit into everyone's budget, but if you can afford one, you'll find as we have that it really enhances the hobby. I'd be glad to hear from anyone who has a computer. Perhaps we could put our heads together and come up with an ideal program. As collectors, we could probably develop a system that suits us much better than a commercially produced software program. Computers are just another way to have fun with our hobby. By the way, early stamps from Jamaica have a pineapple watermark! When you get a chance, take a good look through and see all of the interesting designs watermarks reveal.

IRCS, ETC.

Did you ever write to a stamp dealer or a stamp collector in a foreign country and not get a reply? Children in particular write to other youngsters for trading and correspondence and hope to get an answer. Postage is a big expense, especially for kids in less developed countries. The price of postage is a burden on their finances. You have a better chance for a reply if you enclose an International Reply Coupon, also known as an IRC.

All countries that are members of the Universal Postal Union issue IRCS. You simply need to go to your neighborhood post office, purchase one of these small forms (about 4 by 6 inches) for about \$1.05 and include the IRC in your letter. The recipient can redeem this coupon at his or her post office for the airmail stamps needed to return a letter to you. This only pays for the lightest weight airmail letter back to you. Additional IRCS are needed if the return letter is heavier, or special services such as registration is needed.

Businesses have their own form of prepaid mailers called the international business reply service. This program allows specially marked envelopes and cards to be returned to the sender from certain countries without prepayment of postage. It works like the familiar BRCs (business reply cards), which are postcards or envelopes sent within the US at no charge to the sender. Companies pay the postage and fees only for the pieces returned. Consult your post office for details, or ask for Publication 513.

If you need to send money overseas, international postal money orders can do the job for you. Most countries have agreements with the US Postal Service for exchanging these securities. The maximum amount for a single money order is \$700.00. Check with your post office for fees and further

information.

Teaching Youngsters About Philately

I was invited to the Village Park Elementary School in Falls Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to give a presentation about my hobby- stamp collecting. I spoke to a class of twenty five children in the third grade. Fortunately for me I had my wife Mildred and my daughter Deborah with me to lend a hand. The children were so excited and had so many questions that the three of us were kept jumping for hours.

Our intention was to keep the children busy the whole time we were there. We started out by giving each child an envelope with a city/state cancellation on it. Inside the envelopes were an assortment of off-paper worldwide stamps. I spent my time explaining the many things that could be learned from stamps. I included information about some of the many aspects of stamps, such as watermarks, perforations, colors/shades, tagging, etc. which we demonstrated later. Mildred passed out copies of Linn's stamp newspapers plus some older catalogues. We tried to keep the whole presentation as informal as possible. The front table was filled with the tools of our hobby along with an assortment of philatelic items for the kids to look at. We displayed several moon landing envelopes, 3-D stamps, railroad cancellations, and other interesting items. While I talked, kids were encouraged to walk around the table and ask Mildred or Deborah questions, and believe me, they had plenty.

We asked the kids to locate the city and state found on their individual envelopes. If they could, we rewarded them with another packet of stamps. Everyone took part, helping those that needed assistance so that they, too, could get a prize. I wish you could have seen their faces when we handed

them their gifts. Then we had them remove the foreign stamps from the envelope and rewarded them again if they could find a country their stamp came from. We had so much fun that afternoon. I'll never forget it.

At the end of our demonstration we decided to have a contest, with the prize being a stamp from Turkish Cyprus, inscribed "Kibris." The stamp depicted President Reagan and President Gorbachev signing an arms agreement, which was in fact the beginning of the end of the Cold War. We explained the history of the stamp and what it would mean to each and every one of us.

For a contest, each child was asked to design and draw their own stamp over the weekend. The teacher collected their pictures and the winner was picked by their fourth grade peers. Incidentally, the design that won was for a British stamp. We sent it to Queen Elizabeth and she sent a beautiful letter to the winning child.

The principal and the teacher say they haven't seen such enthusiasm since. It was a day of fun that I'll never forget and am looking forward to doing it again as soon as possible.

ISWSC SERVICES

ISWSC has available for interested philatelists and club leaders a library of low cost albums. They are equally valuable to beginners and children. Some will be especially useful to teachers for use in classroom projects. For the most part, they can be filled with common, inexpensive stamps. Due to our production costs, only one of each album may be ordered, however they are easily photocopied. For a complete listing of available titles and prices, please see elsewhere on this site.