

THE STATE OF THE HOBBY: 2000

by
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Knowing this would be our “millennium issue,” I have been planning this article for over a year. I had envisioned something along the lines of a glowing report—underscoring the major changes and steps forward RMS has made in the last several years; pointing out the birth of new clubs, such as Southeastern and Texas National; emphasizing the entry of the hobby into the global world of the internet; and focusing on today’s collector as generally more “worldly,” more technically knowledgeable, and more active than his past counterpart [*although, I admit, the last point is arguable*]. But, I find I cannot do that. I believe this hobby is in serious trouble.

Even though I had already been shocked at the 1997-1998 RMS membership report, I cannot begin to tell you how stunned I was when I finally sat down and read the latest such report (1998-1999), given by Membership Secretary Terry Rowe at last August’s convention. I felt absolutely certain that we had finally turned the declining membership trend around. I had been religiously watching the membership numbers in each Bulletin, and each time they came out to gains in membership—but I was only to learn that, in fact, not only has RMS membership continued to decline, but that that decline is in *significant* numbers...down 66 members year before last, for example, and down another 79 members last year. What I had failed to look at was suspensions (which don’t appear in the Bulletin). Looking back over the last nine years, in 1990, RMS membership was **1,530**; our latest reported current membership is **1,080** (July 15, 1999). We have shrunk by a whopping 30%!

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
New Members	244	126	188	167	147	74	65	127	93	74
Reinstated	38	26	42	57	19	22	12	18	12	16
Resignations	28	34	11	19	20	19	20	9	7	16
Deceased	18	9	18	9	13	8	13	9	10	6
Suspensions	244	249	213	176	239	98	196	101	154	118
Total Members	1530	1390	1391	1416	1310	1185	1043	1225	1159	1080

This certainly wasn’t the rosy picture I had envisioned. Not surprisingly then, I had to go back to the drawing

board for this article. What on earth was going on here?! I contacted clubs, I scoured all the membership rosters I could get find, I collected statistics, I crunched the numbers—the results?

Well, the good news is—the problem is NOT RMS...because the bad news is the membership decline is basically across the board, throughout the entire hobby. Look at what's been happening over the last nine years:

<u>Club</u>	<u>Membership</u>		
	1990	1999	
Berks County Matchcover Club	63	43	= DOWN
Connecticut Matchcover Club	154['91]	92	= DOWN
Empire Matchcover Club	150	134	= DOWN
Forest City Matchcover Club	96	87	= DOWN
Girlye Matchcover Club	211	209	= DOWN
Long Beach Matchcover Club	444[est.]	423	= DOWN
MARVA Matchcover Club	105	78	= DOWN
Mid-South Matchcover Club	95	59	= DOWN
New Moon Matchbox & Label...	128	91	= DOWN
RMS	1530	1080	= DOWN
Rocky Mountain Matchcover Club	95	62	= DOWN
San Diego Matchcover Club	150[est.]	118	= DOWN
Trans Canada Matchcover Club	160	120	= DOWN
Phyllu-Quebec Matchcover Club	45-50	45-50	= SAME
Tri-State Cardinal Matchcover Club	188	188	= SAME
Badger Matchcover Club	95	115	= UP
Liberty Bell Matchcover Club	120	149	= UP
Lone Star Matchcover Club	142	157	= UP
Sierra-Diablo Matchcover Club	210	308	= UP
<i>[Figures for other clubs not available] [Penn-Ohio discounted due to size] [Denver Strikers discounted due to founding date of 1988]</i>			

<u>Convention Attendance</u>			
	1990	1999	
AMCAL	125	86	= DOWN
RMS	269	233	= DOWN
UES	120	115	= DOWN

<u>Defunct Clubs Since 1990</u>	
Golden Orange	
IMC	
Mid-Hudson MC*	
Military Club	
Southeastern (Carolinas MC)	
St. Louis Matchcover Club*	
<i>[*Never really got off the ground]</i>	

<u>New Clubs Since 1990</u>	
PNMCC (1991)	
Huggable Bears MC(1993)	
Southeastern MC (1997)	
Tobacco MC (1997)	
Texas National MS (1998)	
<i>[1. Only regional clubs counted] [2. Wolverine MC discounted since it's basically a social club only]</i>	

Just out of curiosity, I also checked with the clubs overseas that I have access to via E-mail, and membership in the British Matchbox Label & Booklet Society is down for the same period, as is the that of the Australian club.

I don't know about you, but this looks pretty scary to me. This is not the picture of a healthy hobby. I'd be concerned if we had simply managed to remain stable over these last nine years, but we're far from even doing that.

New clubs appearing in the hobby are always a cause for joy, but even that is misleading in the sense that they often represent a mere reshuffling of collectors already in existence; this is especially true in the case of the specialty clubs (i.e., Tobacco club, Huggable Bears, Casino club, etc.)

Figures, no matter how startling they may appear, often tend to produce a glaze in the reader's eye, so let me try and present this on a more personal level. As an active collector, I can *feel* the difference in the hobby. My trading is a mere shadow now of what it used to be. In 1990, I had some 150-170 traders; today I have 51, and many of those are sporadic. I attend the AMCAL convention annually, and I see fewer people in attendance each year. My local club meetings were scaled down from monthly to bimonthly because of lack of attendance; other clubs have seriously considered closing up shop all together because so few show up for club meetings that it doesn't justify the time and trouble. Keystone-Lehigh, for example, recently scaled itself drastically back. Additionally, I have maintained for several years now a data base of all active collectors; I'm undoubtedly missing a few here and there, but what is significant, though, is that the total number of active collectors has also steadily been going down.

Some might argue that the hobby doesn't need to grow. I disagree. There's nothing wrong with the veteran collectors pouring over their covers and swapping stories, and they're the ones we go to for guidance and as mentors, but we *need* those new collectors for any number of reasons. There's no substitute for experience, but, by and large, it's the new collectors that eventually come up with the new ideas and new approaches. Think of the loss if we had never encountered the Loren Moores, Greg Lunds, Rich Greenes, Rose Rundells, Mike Snyders, Annie Johnsons, and Mark Quillings—for example.

Well, we could beat this death forever, but the question is, "What do we do about it?" It seems obvious that recruiting new members is neither the problem nor the solution. RMS Publicity Chairman Joe DeGennaro has been doing a great job publicizing RMS, the web site has proved to be worth its weight in gold in that respect, and the regional clubs are always coming up with ways to pull in new members—and the new members are coming in—but they're not staying. That's the problem! Most stay for the first or second year, and then they leave. Why?

In prior years, the hobby has actually surveyed people leaving the hobby to find out why. Answers tended to be of the "I felt lost," "I felt unloved," "I want my mommy" genre. The hobby responded with various "Adopt-a-Novice" programs. I was a member of Long Beach's program for several years. I wrote welcome letters, I offered assistance—rarely did anyone respond—not even an acknowledgment of the offer to help. It's a nice idea, and help for any collectors should always be readily available, but I don't think that's the solution, either. Neither do I agree with the accompanying theory that it's necessary to 'bribe' novices by deluging them with CARE packages made up of our dupes. What often happens is that the novice eventually drops out of the hobby in one or two years, sells those covers, and disappears. I don't mind 'making an investment' in new collectors, but the effectiveness of this solution seems to be dubious, as well.

Perhaps at least part of the problem is the economy. It is true, after all, that, as part of a well-recognized cycle, interest and demand in collectibles decline in good times and increase in bad times...but who knows just how significant that is here.

So, now that you have waded through three pages of statistics and my soapbox philosophies, I wish I could reward your patience with a neatly wrapped, all-in-one solution to this problem, but the truth of the matter is...I don't have one. I would suggest someone taking a look at those four clubs that have successfully bucked the trend and see just what they're doing. Perhaps there's a common thread there that could point to an answer.

I'm anticipating lots of feedback from you on this, so I'll reserve extra space in our next issue for your comments, views, and suggestions.