

Where Does The Hobby Go From Here?

In our last issue, we took a look at how collectors' interests have changed over the life of the hobby, all the way from Group I and 1939 World's Fair covers to the present-day boom in Casino and Cigarette covers. But, where do we go from here?

Of course, anything I put down here is going to be pure speculation, but it seems to me that there are at least some general indications.

As an amateur researcher and a teacher of History, I can say with certainty that the best way to predict the future is simply to look at the past. And, in the hobby's past, with respect to collecting interests, an almost ironclad trend can readily be seen: Whatever's readily available at the moment is hot.

Thus, Group I appears in the mid-1930s and it becomes the hottest category. The 1939 NY World's Fair begins, and collectors go after those covers. The late 1950s saw the stampede for Matchoramas and Navy Ships begin. As Universal introduced its lines of Fancies, Fancies became sought-after. When non-stock Holiday Inn covers were at their peak, so was collecting Holiday Inn covers. When American Ace boxes abounded, so did collectors' interest in them...and so on and so forth, right up to today. What are the only two current categories in which covers are still plentiful?...Casinos and Cigarettes...and those are the two hottest categories today.

Interest in Girlies has even dropped off. The number of Girlie Club members, for example has declined (*Jan/Feb 2000, RMS Bulletin*), and it's very difficult to find people who can trade Girlies with you...because just about all the domestic sources for those covers have dried up. Thus, collecting such covers becomes more difficult and interest begins to wane. I'm a dedicated Girlie collector, myself, but I believe the category is really only being kept alive by the "artificial" infusion of collector-produced Girlie covers each

year in the form of Convention Girlies. Foreign Girlie covers appear from time to time, but the vast majority of collectors have no opportunity to obtain them.

So, as we look into the first decade of the 21st century and beyond, what lies ahead? Well, if you're a sometime, when-there's-nothing-better-to-do collector, the prospects for collecting look bleak. The number of available covers to collect will continue to diminish, as fewer new covers are made and attrition takes its toll on the older covers. Along with this, thanks to these and other factors, such as eBay, competition for buying covers will continue to get stiffer. Result: fewer covers and fewer hot categories...which, in turn, I believe, will lead to the "casual" collector basically being forced out of the hobby....which, it would seem, is exactly what's already been happening the last several years. This would also explain why the drop out rate of novice collectors is so high...collecting just isn't as easy as it used to be.

And that leaves *us*...the die-hard collectors! We're the ones that are willing to *work* at collecting. We'll do the searching—the tramping through paper shows, open-air markets, and garage sales; we'll do the buying—the small and large accumulations, and the estate collections; we'll do the shucking and organizing; and, yes, some of us will even still be trading.

I don't know if the flow of Casino and Cigarette covers will continue in the years ahead, but, even if it does, those two categories won't be enough to sustain most of us. But we're the diggers! It doesn't matter what the current fad category is to us. Our digging turns up our wants. Thus, the Loren Moores will still be looking for old Telephone Numbers, and the Clem Paters will still be searching for County Seats and American Aces; those like me will always be on a quest for those grand old manumarks and footers, while those like Warren Marshall will still be looking for Towns; and the small, specialized categories will always be important to many collectors.