

May/June, 2002

Collectin' 'n Tradin' Part III

by
Mike Prero

When it comes to trading, it always feels as if I'm spitting into the wind—I keep touting it, and it keeps dwindling. Everything currently seems to be working against it: covers aren't as easily available, the number of collectors in the hobby has shrunk drastically, the number of collectors who are willing and able to trade has shrunk even more, postage keeps going up (and in a few weeks it's going up again!), and so on. Nope, trading certainly isn't as easy as it used to be...but the advantages that trading has to offer are still there....and, from my perspective, those advantages still outweigh all the hassles.

On the hassles side of the ledger, you can expect (at least from time to time) receiving covers that are damaged, struck, or totally irrelevant to your collecting wants. Some of the covers you received last week you can invariably expect to see in your mail box again...and again...and again (*see my prior article on "Covers From Hell!"*, Nov/Dec 2000 RMS Bulletin)...and sometimes all from the same trader! The late Kent Morris used to correctly point out that this particular problem escalates ten fold right after every RMS convention, as attendees returning home with the same covers in their convention bags send those same covers out to their fellow traders who did not attend the convention.

And then, of course, there is the constant problem of having to come up with good, appropriate covers to send in your traders' categories. That's often not easy to do, which is why it's always easier to trade with someone who is, say, a General collector (or who at least will take Hotel/Motel/Restaurant covers) rather than a very specialized collector who is only looking for covers in one or a few hard-to-come-by categories. For example, for awhile, I was trading with a gentleman who only wanted Front-strike, St. Louis Hotels—now how long would I be able to maintain that trading relationship?!

With trading also comes the responsibilities of being a good trader—answering your correspondence within a reasonable amount of time (*that disqualifies a lot of collectors right there!*), taking the trouble and

being organized enough to at least try to insure that you're not sending out dupes of what you've already sent that trader, returning at least equal quality covers, etc. And, actually, I'm sure that just answering your correspondence at all is a big enough hassle to deter a number of people from trading. Some people love to sit down and write long, newsy letters, others just can't seem to get around to it before the letters mildew and turn yellow, and still others just write a quick 'Hello' and "Goodbye.' Greg Lund, MD, and I have the latter down to a science. With each trade we simply send the same piece of correspondence back and worth, just adding a new 'Thanks, Greg,' or 'Thanks, Mike'!!

Last, but not least (*and this is my favorite part because I get to harangue the Post Office*), there is the United States Post Office...which, of course, makes trading possible in the first place...BUT which also often sees to do everything humanly (and inhumanly) possible to impede your trading efforts. I could tell you stories....(*I think I will!*) For example, anyone who's been trading for any length of time at all is familiar with the DREADED postal plastic baggie! That's where your mail arrives in a plastic baggie that says on the outside something like, "We here at the United States Post Office take every care to ensure that your mail arrives...", and you look in the plastic bag and what's inside looks like it's been nuked! Once, a couple of years ago, I received my own trade back in a baggie. Out of the original envelope and all the good covers I had enclosed, someone at the post office (with a warped sense of humor, I'm sure) sent me back the upper left hand corner of my envelope, the part with the return address—that was all that was left!...I laughed...and I cried.

And then there are all the intact, but late, deliveries—several days, several weeks, several months, or maybe it never even gets where it's going at all. My personal favorite anecdote, here, is the post card I mailed to Clarence Ginder in November 2000 (that's California to Pennsylvania) which arrived several months later, in 2001, after having been routed through the Philippines!

So, "Why?" you ask, would anyone one in his right mind even consider trading by mail?....because you DO get covers that you otherwise wouldn't, and THAT's what God put us here on earth for, didn't He? After all, what IS the single, defining characteristic of being human? What separates us for the other animals on the planet.....WE collect matchcovers! I defy you to show me any other living organism that can say that! Of course!

Thus, in my humble view, trading is worth it because I want covers for my collections, and Trading provides me with those covers. There's no way I could get anywhere near as many covers all on my own. With trading, I have an army (*well, OK, today it's down to a company*) of people looking for covers FOR ME! I couldn't possibly find all those covers myself—not in flea markets, not buying collections (*which I can't afford anyway*), not hogging the freebie tables at every hobby event—there's just no way. Here's a concrete example. Since I knew this article was coming up, I've been keeping notes on the covers I've gotten in trade for the last few weeks, so here's a rough accounting. Right off the bat, at least 80% of what I've received is material I can't use (I already have them, they're not in my categories, etc.), but....Stella Williams, OH, sent me some errors that I probably would never otherwise run across; Bob McMillan, FL, sent me some Chinese Restaurants I hadn't seen before; John Neforos, PA, found some new Fraternal for me; John Behr, CT, send me some nice date covers that will now have a happy home in my collection; and so on.

I suppose it comes down to your basic philosophy on trading. If you're basically a 'sometime' collector, you're probably not going to be willing to put in the time and effort that steady trading demands. If you're an 'ardent enthusiast,' you're much more likely to be aggressive in your collecting.