

Trading

by Jeff Nigrelli

“Matchcovers,” the very same things my Father attempted to capture my interest with when I was nine. I started to pour through the classified sections of the antiquing newspapers and magazines, [oh yes, mid-century modern furniture had also become an obsession by this time], collectors’ newsletters, and books at the public library. I found the Rathkamp Matchcover Society address in the fine print under “Ephemera.” Sending off a letter of inquiry netted the address, membership application, and roster. I had also taken to asking whenever I went into a second hand shop, or consignment store, or even a flea market, to see if there might be a few “match books” lying around. Nine times out of ten, I would spend a few minutes explaining what I was looking for to the quizzical look I was getting from the person behind the counter, only to be face with “Yeah, we had some of those.....check back all the time.” This was at the time before E-Bay and the mindset that everything was worth a “gazillion bucks.” Matchcovers were at the cusp of the inflationary collectible scale, about where baseball cards had been a decade before.

I was more fortunate than I realized in the early days of my collecting. Most of the people I took the liberty of sending covers to responded in kind, even those that were not interested in trading. Some never responded at all, and I kicked myself for mailing them the covers cold when I had with no promise of return. The majority of the people who responded could see where I was in the hobby, giving me encouragement and advice. Some were not so nice, as if I had violated some sacred trust by sending them a scratched cover or, Heaven forbid, “a national” whatever the heck that was! Ahhhh, the intensity of the “serious” collector.

Eventually, I began to catch on, and at one time, I was trading six or eight times a week with almost thirty other collectors.

The mid-nineties brought their own wrath upon the Hobby. When once I was content to walk away from a fifty-cent cover, I found myself appalled at matchcovers selling for twenty, thirty, or more dollars each. Club auctions, where one could be assured of getting some fine covers for a two-dollar bid, ceased to be the only avenue of access for unstruck front-strikers. Even flea markets, once scoured by collectors looking for the rare find and even rarer bargain, had caught on that there was another “new” collectible out there and thought that there was money to be made on any beat up scrap of cardboard they could find. Everything became “they don’t make those anymore” and while there was some truth to the statement, the asking price was disproportionate to the item. One of the first things to be learned about any collectible, maybe even before “supply and demand” is “condition.” The Sellers seemed to have learned so much that they forgot this. Anything folded, bent, or mutilated, passed for a treasure, a “real find.” This was also the time that “the Price Guide” came out.

Now, I think, in my opinion, [subliminal disclaimer] it is important to understand that if I am an automobile salesman, of course you need a new car. If I am a carpenter, of course you need your kitchen remodeled and roof shingled. If I am an ephemera dealer, of course your hobby needs “my” evaluation at what you should pay to enjoy yourself. By the way, did I mention that I have this brand spanking new model on the lot that I can let you have for just pennies down.....?

One of the current “hot topics” in the Hobby appears to focus on the lack of interest in trading the old fashion way, one for one cover, through the mail. Having gone from a lot of traders to two steady traders

for the past three years, I can understand why people are not really enthused about this manner of adding to their collections. I think there are as many types of traders as personalities, and I would like to take the opportunity to classify them according to my experiences.

The Neophyte: we were all one in the beginning. Timid, unsure, not much trading stock, and apprehensive to give up what little we had. Pretty content to sit on the edges and watch the Big Dogs go at it.

The Organizer: really likes his computer. He has so many covers he can scarcely remember which ones, so he configures a spreadsheet telling him the intimate details of each one. In light of technological failure, he also has printed a copy, just like in the old days when most of his covers were issued. [Remember typewriters and mimeograph services?]

The Good Trader: no one ever gets a cover or two past him. If you send him an Insurance cover with no picture from Des Moines, he will respond with a Bank cover with no picture from Fargo. And if you send twenty-three covers, do not expect twenty-four back; you are not going to get the best in the trade no matter what. Cross-collectible covers find a one-way street into his albums. The trading is only good for him and the postal service.

The Serious Collector: has been in the Hobby so long he forgot the kindness of his peers. If every cover he is sent is not in pristine condition in his exact category, you may get a curt note back saying “Don’t send me any more junk!” Let that be a lesson to all of you.

The Forgetful Trader: cannot remember the note you sent him four years ago telling you did not want to trade anymore, usually because he is really one of the collector profiles above and you did not want to hurt his feelings, just got tired of mailing covers and buying stamps.

The Friendly Trader: this is the real reason I think we are in this Hobby. This Trader will overlook the fact that he sent you four unstruck DQs and six midgets and in response you sent two forties and a bunch of twenties that were not in any of their categories. These are the people who share the details in their lives with you, their trips, birthdays, anniversaries, happinesses, and tribulations. They extend their trust and in turn you know you can trust them. They may be people you will only meet once in a lifetime, maybe never, but you do know them. The real trade is the very special note, sometimes only a couple of lines, which accompanies the envelope every month.

I guess I have no Favorite Category. I do not even have many covers to show for almost ten years of collecting. I have three albums that are about half full each. I tend to cull out covers whenever I am hit hard to return a trade. If I only had eight or ten covers, nice ones, I would still be enthusiastic about the Hobby. For me, matchcovers are a form of “graphic agitation.” A good cover will provoke me to thought, and I have always contended that I was born two generations too late. [Another obsession is Black & White movies, but that story is for another day...].

I am reaching a point where I think I would be willing to trade on a limited basis with other collectors. Not 100 or 200 covers at a time, but a few good covers, and stay in it for the duration. I know that the mean age of the Hobby is older than my 49 years, and that our energy wanes as we mature. Yet, we need to continue to use our faculties lest they desert us entirely leaving us in a far worse state than having too many Traders! The new generation of Matchcover Collector can greatly benefit from the Experienced Collector.

If I have done no more than provoked the readership to thought, to stand up and tell me how wrong I am, then I have contributed in the way I knew how!