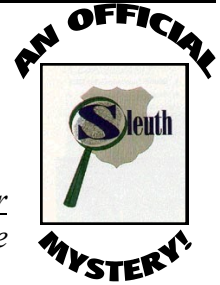


An Unresolved Label Mystery, Or Is It?

by Jerry Bell

[Jerry is the editor for the Australian Match Cover Collectors' Society's Observer bulletin, and he's also RMS member #9398, and I thank him for his welcome article here]



When I first started collecting matchcovers, mainly labels, in the UK in the 1940's, I had migrated to match cover collecting from postage stamps, as there were some similarities in the way they were collected, and they were cheaper and more easily accessible. Naturally, one of my first questions was what were the rarest labels, and what were they worth?

Herein lay a major difference. Whereas the first stamp, the penny black, had been printed in millions and was readily available at that time, the first match package did not have a label, and these did not come into common usage until some years later. Also, stamps were official issues, so there were detailed and accurate records of which country issued what, and when, whereas matchcovers were commercially issued, and few, if any, early records have survived.

However, in the late 1940's, there was a common understanding that probably the rarest label was the so-called "Troy", or "Trotting Horse" Sulphur Match label, issued by V.R. Powell, of Troy, New York. I have attempted a sketch of it here, since I understandably do not have a copy to photocopy.

Legend had it that it was issued between 1830 and 1831, there were only four or five copies in existence, and that sums up to \$500 had been offered at auction in the US in the 1930's. Senior figures in the hobby talked and wrote in respectful and knowledgeable tones about it. Copies only existed in the grandest of collections.

Over the course of time, news began to circulate that more copies were in existence than had been previously thought. Auction prices fell to a more realistic, as one commentator put it, \$5! The last comment I read, written in the 1980's, merely said "Fakes - of curiosity value only" or some such. The slippery slide had indeed reached oblivion!

So, what is there to make of all this? There seems to be a reasonable certainty that V.R. Powell did exist as a manufacturer and did make matches., as they are apparently recorded when the US Match Tax was imposed in 1865. However, that is a long time after 1830/31 and would pre-suppose a large number of extant labels if they had been manufacturing over a period of 30 years or more.

From a historical perspective, I would be suspicious about two elements of the label wording. Firstly, the use of the word "matches" on the label. The word "match" was not necessarily standard in the first thirty years of the development of the industry. Friction matches, Lights, Congreves, Lucifers, and others were all words used. Bearing in mind that the first friction matches dated from 1826, I would have been surprised to see "matches" used in such a modern manner as early as 1830/31. Secondly, whilst sulphur matches were quite popular in places such as India at the end of the 19th century, I am not aware of any early developments of match making using sulphur at the time this label was supposed to be issued. There was a lot of early experimentation with potentially lethal substances, mainly based around phosphorous, but not sulphur, as far as I know.

If the label is genuine, and it always could be, then it is more likely to have been issued neared 1860 than 1830. I am not sure on what authority the original dates of 1830/31 became established. If it was genuinely issued at a later date, then it is perfectly feasible that it was copied with a view to deceiving collectors. Perhaps there are Rathkamp members who have a specimen, and who can throw more light on this.