
Reflections: Twenty

Why, by cracky, I remember a time....*let's see..when was that? Must a been around...hmmmm....'round the winter of '82...Yes sirree, Bob! Those were the days! Covers were everywhere...collectors were relatively plentiful...and tradin'!!* Why, can you imagine? Collectors actually sent them little critters back and forth to each other in the mail...No, I don't mean e-mail, and I don't mean faxin', neither.

It's eye-opening to realize that it's been some 20 years since I first started collecting covers. I remember how dazzled I was when Dean Hodgdon, OK, sent me a sample page or two of covers, and I looked at all that art work, all that variety...and all that history! It was all the more amazing because here was something that I had been surrounded with my entire life (since my father was a chain smoker), but I had never really looked at matchcovers before. Imagine my surprise when I learned that there were covers from Navy Ships, Military bases around the world, and all the famous places I had been to in my earlier years! I was sold immediately. Little did I realize that I was actually coming in at the beginning of the end of the American match industry's peak.

Ah, those were the days...Universal was cranking out all those wonderful varieties of covers—Foilites, Filigrees, Cameos, Jewels, Jewelites, Ten-Strikes, and on and on; you could walk into just about any business and help yourself to a handful of covers from the inevitable bowl or basket that was such a familiar features to all of us back then. Collectors abounded...covers abounded...collecting activities abounded. That was then.

The last twenty years have seen major changes: in the domestic match industry, in the hobby, in technology, in collectors, and in collecting habits and preferences. Many of these changes, from a collecting standpoint, have been negative, some can arguably be seen as going either way, and a few have been positive.

By the early 1980s, the American match industry was beginning to collapse; by 1987, the collapse was complete: Lion Match Co....gone, Ohio Match Co....gone, Superior Match Co....gone; Universal Match Corp....gone, among others. Anti-smoking campaigns, cheap disposable lighters, soaring labor costs, and the inability to compete against foreign competitors all spelled the death knell for the domestic match industry. When the smoke cleared, only Diamond, Atlas, and D. D. Bean were left, and they split up what was left of the domestic market: Diamond took the box market, Atlas took the retail matchbook market, and D. D. Bean took the vending/resale market. And all this, in turn, had a direct and inevitable impact on the hobby.

The hobby shrank, and continues to shrink. The decline in cover production and resulting cover availability lead to fewer collectors > fewer collectors lead to declining memberships, with some clubs folding, and less attendance at conventions, swapfests, and club meetings. Indeed, some clubs have given up regular club meetings altogether. The local bodies just aren't there anymore. The same lack of collectors also lead to a huge decline in trading by mail (along with ever-increasing postal rates). From one perspective, one could argue that this shrinkage simply represents a paring down of the hobby—with the so-so, sometime collectors dropping out and the serious collectors remaining. From my own perspective, that's undoubtedly happened, but the shrinkage is going to persist beyond that, I believe, because of a lack of replacements for the veteran collectors that we continue to lose due to deaths,

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disabilities, and the like. The reservoir which produced these older collectors simply doesn't exist anymore. Families, for example, no longer collect matchbooks as souvenirs while on vacation; we have an entire generation growing up now whose normal exposure to matchbooks, if at all, consist only of generics. That's bound to have a continuing effect on hobby numbers in the future.

Technology in the hobby has mushroomed in the last two decades. Computers, e-mail, scanners, desktop publishing, copying, the internet, etc. have all changed collecting habits, bulletin formats, the availability and sharing of information, and so on. Never before have collectors had such a complete and wide array of 'support services' so easily available: lists, graphics, histories, encyclopedic data. More covers have been cataloged in the last twenty years, by far, than in all the preceding fifty years. We're more aware of what's currently in circulation and where those covers can be found (just look at Joe's article on p. 5 and Hans's information on p. 6, for example). We have greater access to collectors around the world. Software now exists for cataloging our own collections and keeping instantaneous track of auction activities. The internet has not only made the hobby accessible to the entire world, but it's also brought the entire world's covers, boxes, and labels, in turn, to us (via web sites such as e-bay and other private auctions sites).

Today's collector, besides being somewhat more lonely than his or her predecessors, seems to be leaner and meaner when it comes to covers. And I'd guess that the average collector is now somewhat younger than his peer twenty years ago. We've been losing lots of seniors faster than 'new' seniors have been moving into those slots, although no current survey has been done to back that up. Still, the majority of collectors are certainly 45+....maybe even 55+. I'm coming up on 59, myself. One thing I haven't looked at recently is if the erosion of members has significantly changed the male-female ratio. I won't have any new numbers until the beginning of the year when I do the 2005 Demographics study. This is still a heavily male hobby, though. And, one item here that has certainly not changed is that there are almost no youngsters in the hobby. Not surprising, since we, as a society, have always tried to steer kids *away* from smoking and matches, and they would have to rely on adults to procure the matches for them, anyway. Additionally, with the evolution of electronic entertainment within the last twenty years, kids have many more alternative activities today which serve to draw their attention even further away from collecting covers as a possible hobby.

There have certainly been some major changes in collecting preferences and habits, as well. Most obvious are the decline in trading by mail, the increased reliance on buying (and the parallel appearance of internet auctions), the switch from paper album pages to plastic pages, more professional-looking bulletins with a greater emphasis on graphics, and the incredible use of e-mail and the internet as hobby tools. As noted previously, within this same period, the popularity of Tobacco and Casino covers has risen by leaps and bounds, due to continuing new issues becoming available. Also, judging on just my own observations, I have the impression that there's much less emphasis now on small categories, although almost all of us still have them. With most of the 'drop-in/drop-out' collectors having disappeared from the hobby, those remaining seem to be more intent on the bigger, traditional 'deluxe' categories, if you will— "I want Railroads!" "I want Military!" "I want Navy Ships!"...and so on.

What will the next twenty years bring us? Change, for certain. Ever since the Renaissance, change has been happening faster and faster, so who knows? Watch for my next such article...in twenty years!