

The Shadow Years: 1892-1919

by
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Recently, I happened to be talking to Loren Moore, President of the Sierra-Diablo Matchcover Club, about some very old material that had appeared on e-bay. He mentioned that we not only hardly ever see pre-1920 material, but that we also practically never hear anything about that period in the industry's history in the first place, and that got me to thinking...

There really *is* a significant 'hole' in our picture of the history of the American match industry...and the resulting history of matchbook production during the same period—1892-1919—over a quarter of a century. Why? Hadn't the matchbook been invented yet? *Yes*. Hadn't there been any widespread orders for such prior to 1920? *Yes*. Hadn't matchbooks become commonplace by, say, 1915? *Hmmmm! That remains to be seen*. In any event, I thought it might be worthwhile to examine the problem in some detail and see if some conclusions could be reached.

First, although there is certainly a lack of information concerning the matchbook and its industry prior to 1920, let's take a look at what we definitely *do* know about that period.

1892 Joshua Pusey, US, invented the first matchbook

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1893 Adirondack Match Co. formed, NY

1893 Binghamton Match Co. formed, Binghamton, NH

1893 First machine-made advertising matchbook, Binghamton Match Co., NH (Piso cover?)

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1894 Continental Match Co. founded, NJ

1894 Diamond Match Co. purchased rights to Joshua Pusey's matchbook

1894 Loehr Co. purchased by original Lion Match Co.

1894 First newspaper reference to matchbooks (*New York Dramatic Mirror*, Nov. 18) [Binghamton]

1894 Kaeser & Blair formed, Cincinnati, OH

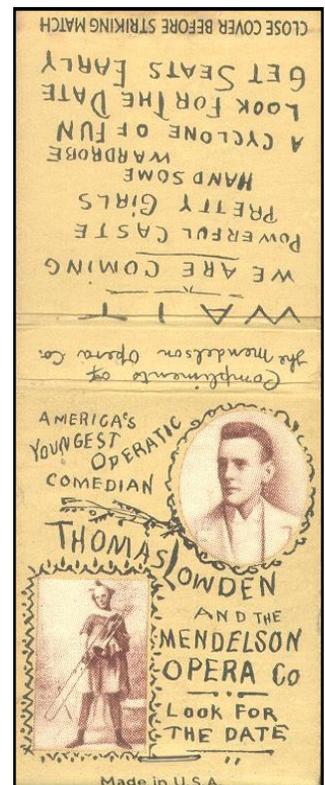
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- 1895 Binghampton Match Co. defunct (sued by Diamond Match Co.)
 1895 Ohio Match Co. formed, Wadsworth, OH
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 1896 Mendelson Opera Co. cover,(NYC) (handwritten advertisement)
 1896 Original Pacific Match Co. purchased and closed by Diamond Match Co.
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 1899 Adirondack Match Co. purchased by Diamond
 1899 Continental Match Co. defunct
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 1900 Atlantic Match Co. formed, Camden, NJ
 1900 Original Atlas Match Co. formed, Jersey City, NJ
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 1902 Helio Match Co. formed, Newark, DE
 1902 First large scale order of matchbooks (10 million for Pabst Beer)
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 1903 Atlantic Match Co. defunct
 1903 First Phillumenic club formed - Japan
 *
 1906 Original Atlas Match Co. defunct
 *
 1907 Helio Match Co. defunct
 1907 Bell Machine Co. founded, Oshkosh, WI
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 1910 Diamond Match Co. produced first non-phosphorous match
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 1911 Diamond Match Co. made non-phosphorus match public domain
 *
 1912 Bean & Symonds Co. formed, Jaffrey, NH
 1912 National Match Co. formed, NY
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 1915 Original Columbia Match Co. formed (?), Marinette, WI
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 1917 Standard Match Co. formed, Chicago, IL
 1917 Lion Match Co. formed



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1918 Original Gem Match Co. defunct

1918 Pan American Match Co. defunct

Although the American match industry can be said to have started in 1825 when Jacob Weller, of Mechanicstown, MD, produced the first lucifer match made in America, our story here starts with Joshua Pusey's invention of the matchbook in 1892...and that's when the gaps in our knowledge of the times and events begin—Pusey must have made a prototype. *What was it? What happened to it? Does it still exist?*

From there, we go to New Hampshire's Binghamton Match Co., which formed the following year, in 1893. We know that the Binghamton Match Co. produced the first commercial matchbook, apparently the Piso matchbook, in 1893-1894. We know that still exists. It just resurfaced a few months ago, after disappearing for some 50 years. In support of Binghamton's position as the first matchbook manufacturer, we have the first mention of matchbooks in a newspaper, and that was in a Binghamton newspaper in 1894, so, without reading the actual article, we can infer that it was in reference to the Binghamton Match Co. matchbooks.

We know that Diamond Match bought the rights to Pusey's matchbook in 1894 and then promptly sued the Binghamton Match Co. in 1895, for infringing on the patent, and Binghamton, consequently, went out of business.

Next, we come to Diamond's famous Mendelson Opera Co. cover from New York City in 1896. Now, Diamond touts this as the "first book match", but it obviously was not. As old and as historically interesting as it is, it's basically a blank that someone wrote on [*...exactly the type of cover that contemporary collectors would throw away and not think twice about it!*]. The Piso cover is older, was professionally printed, and has printed sticks to boot! All these years we've been paying homage to the Mendelson Opera cover, while we should have been exalting the Piso cover. *How'd that happen?* My own guess is that Diamond obviously had an ax to grind here, and it had the Mendelson cover, and, as America's premier match manufacturer, its self-promotional material was always readily available to collectors and the hobby in general. The Piso cover, on the other hand, has simply been quietly, and privately, held by first the Piso company, and then company President Henry Fisher, and then by his family, for the last 100 years.

Also, as an interesting aside, look at the early Diamond cover picture on p. 7. Its manumark reads "patented Sept. 27-1892". But, obviously that couldn't have been a Diamond patent; it must, instead, refer to Pusey's original patent.

In 1902, Diamond got its first large scale order of matchbooks—10 million Nationals for Pabst Beer. *What happened to them? None of those 10 million have survived?* I don't remember seeing any in my 20 years of collecting, and I don't remember anyone saying that they have one. After that, we have various other manufacturers popping up, and Diamond produced the first non-phosphorous match in 1910 and then made it public domain the following year.

So where does that leave us?...with a pretty sketchy outline of what happened during the years of 1892-1919! For me, at least, there are some big questions that need answering. The most obvious, perhaps, is *Where are all those covers from 1896-1919?* Only a very, very few such covers are actually known to currently exist. *Did they not survive in any noticeable quantity?* It's possible, perhaps. There were no clubs then to 'save' such covers. And, certainly, since they were the earliest editions, time has

had more of an opportunity to whittle them away via fire, flood, and sundry other hostile circumstances. On the other hand, the 10 million Pabst matchbooks aside, *Perhaps matchbooks simply were not produced in large quantities during those years?* That was a transitional period, after all. The industry was going from all wooden matches in boxes to eventually mainly paper matches in matchbooks, and I wouldn't be surprised to see that the latter didn't really 'catch on' until the 1920s. Indeed, I'm reminded of Agatha Christi's *Murder On The Orient Express*. In that classic murder mystery, which she wrote and set in the later 1920s-early 1930s, a match from a matchbook is one of the clues—and she refers to the matchbook in such a way as to make it clear that, at least in Europe, the matchbook was still a very new and unusual object...in the later 1920s-early 1930s.

Logically, it would seem that the latter was true—that matchbooks just hadn't become popular yet. But, if that's true, then *Why would it have taken almost 25 years for the matchbook to become popular in the United States? Could it have had anything to do with the non-phosphorus match not becoming public domain until 1911?*

And then there's the question of *Just who was making those pre-1920 matchbooks?* Diamond had the patent in 1894. Diamond started making matchbooks in 1896, and it had already sued Binghamton for daring to produce them in 1895. So, it would seem to necessarily follow that at least in the beginning years—all matchbooks were produced by Diamond. But, *When did Diamond's patent run out? and When did other match companies jump on the band wagon and begin producing their own matchbooks?* Ohio Match Co. was already around; the old Atlantic and the original Atlas companies appeared in 1900; the original Columbia Match Co. formed in 1915; Lion started in 1917. *Were they the first producers of non-Diamond matchbooks? Was it a myriad of smaller companies now defunct? Or big and small alike?*

Why is there such a dearth of information on manufacturers prior to 1920? And actually that lack of information extends right up through the end of World War II. Well, this question, at least, seems a little easier to answer. First, only a few of those manufacturers existed after 1945...and Diamond is the only one that exists today. Second, only the huge manufacturers such as Diamond, Universal, and Ohio, ever published information about themselves for public consumption. Consequently, unearthing information on smaller companies such as Star, Crown, Jersey, and the like is pretty much limited to occasionally running across an old newspaper article that relates to something about them. And, this difficulty is compounded even further when we're looking for information on pre-1920 companies. Third, and this is the one that I find surprising, early collectors seem to have taken little or no interest in the histories of such early manufacturers. That's very important, because when dealing of the past, it's often the case that we only have those records that interested parties in the past have seen fit to record and preserve (just as Medieval monks preserved ancient writings by making new copies when the old ones deteriorated).

True, most of the manufacturers in question here had already disappeared by the time even the early collectors had really appeared in the early 1930s, but once the hobby got going, say with the inception of RMS in 1940, one still can't help but be taken aback by the almost total absence of 'research' in the early years. The bulletins are all about covers: which types, who's got them, and how to collect. It's as if, I suspect, that in those early years of collecting, as people were finding that others had the same interests they had and everyone was getting organized, the feeling was that collectors had finally been let loose to run amuck in a candy store, and nothing else mattered. Indeed, in going through the writings of previous collectors and clubs, I really don't find anyone with this missing 'sense of history' until Ed Perkins in the 1950s.