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Collecting Colgate Covers

by
Win Lang (late editor of Golden Orange MC, reprinted from 1995)

The old story has it that when a mountain climber was asked why he had to climb a mountain, he replied, "Because it's there!" The same might apply to Colgate covers—a definite challenge, and not for the timid.

Last issued more than 50 years ago, they are much in demand, hard to come by, and growing scarcer yet, with very defined guidelines to follow...the serious collector's dream.

William Homer Colgate was executive Vice-President of Diamond Match Co., the only major match company executive to create his own designs, in his own studio, apart from company headquarters, at his own schedule. He was the man who was the attending physician at the birth of Group One covers; he was the man who had the better idea that the lowly, despised, much-scorned matchbook could be sold by itself, with no advertising. If the wooden match was to remain in the kitchen, then Milady's parlor was the answer. After being assured that he was wasting his time and that the idea would never sell, he pushed forward with great success.

It was in 1925. Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, Orange Squeeze, and Wrigley Gum had put the matchbook on a national distribution scale. None were candidates for Milady's parlor.. Bookmatches had to be "pretty" to attract Milady's attention ("Milady" was Colgate's own creation). They had to have a definite use. Women were



starting to smoke cigarettes, openly, in public. A new card game, an off-shoot of Whist, called Auction bridge, was currently sweeping the world. Why not take advantage of both? Bridge parties were now part of Milady's parlors, everywhere. Using pleasing, but inoffensive, designs on the outside, Colgate supplied a double need: matches to be used, and Bridge scoring rules and pads inside!

The new (1926) matchbooks immediately drew not only Milady, but cover collectors. Colgate obliged both. He used an inside code that alerted collectors as to the dates of release of each new design, their sequence of order, and how many cover were in each release. The code, "12345," for example, at once told the collector that that cover was #1 in a 5-piece set; the next cover has "2345," etc.

Each set also had its own title. Example: "Old Fashioned Bouquet" is also set #1610. The code "082737-45" shows that this set was released August 27, 1937, and the "45" shows it to be the fourth cover in a five-cover set. These numbered series began with 701. There are many gaps in the numerical order, such as 824 skipping to 1225. No explanation. Some believe that the missing series numbers were unsatisfactory to Colgate and never released. Many collectors of the time became intimate friends with Colgate. From their records, including the T & T lists, we know, today, every known Colgate cover (the "T & T" lists remain anonymous...most likely Tom Torrent. It was once assumed to be Torrent and Tripodi, but the latter disclaimed it; Tom Torrent just smiled and said nothing when asked).

The following comments are from the T & T lists, Ralph Arnold, Gary Clark, Al Polick, Art Steiner, and, later John Williams:

"These sets were sold in cigar stores and the 'dime stores.' Some were made on order by Woolworth and Kresge stores, exclusively."

"The '800 series' had 8 match books to one pack. The '1200' series had 12 books to a pack. A few had 16 books. The cello wrap was discarded, and boxes of 12 then appeared."

Here are handwritten notes from "The Desk of Wm. H. Colgate":

"'Laddie' was the original 'Companion Bridge Match' design, which I sold to F. W. Woolworth, March, 1932. It was a companion design to their playing cards."

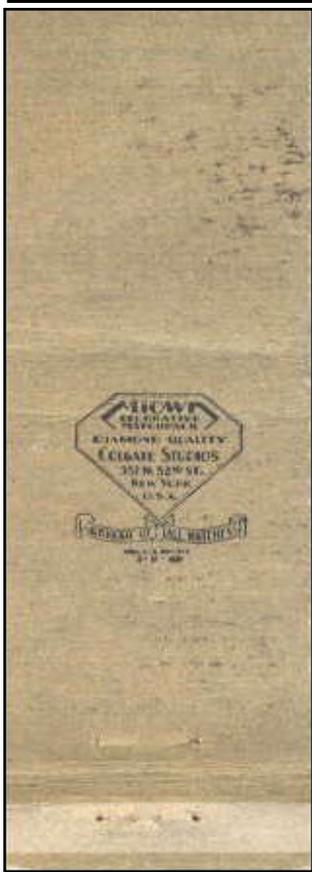
"'Pals'...#801 was the first 'Companion Bridge Match' design to be sold to S. S. Kresge. The design matched their 'Pals Playing Cards.' It was designed by Whitman."

"Herewith is my hand sketched sample package, which I sold to Mr. Wortman, in 1932. It was my first order from S. S. Kresge."

"This package of 8 different books awakened me to the merchandising minimum probabilities as provided under U.S. Patent #2024091. The provision to print 8 'Flowers' on ONLY 4 books so that by turning over a duplicate of each of these four books, the other 4 of the 8 designs would be displayed, on the face of the package."

"I never re-ran 'Flowers' as 800,000 proved too many."

"Packaged same so that 8 designs were displayed. Each retain package had the same sales appeal. Consequently I made more frequent design changes in packages, plus more sales of packages."



“The smaller ‘bulk package’ was designed specifically for the Super Markets distribution. This was a PRICE package, with one Front Cover displayed. This is a combination of the First and Second A & P packages.”

[Ed. Pictured with this article are a variety of Colgate types; notice that the first three, starting on p. 1, are noticeably longer than later issues. Also note that “Colgate” may appear in the manumark, as a footer, or on the inside of the cover.

These are highly sought-after covers, and normally highly priced. Searching searching will be called for here.

John Williams maintains a listing of the Colgate Bridge Sets. He also reported having 2,150 Colgate covers in his collection as of November 2005]

