

The Mathematics of Collecting

[I originally ran this in 1995, but, in light of present circumstances, it's probably even more appropos now.]

“Even if you’re new to the hobby, you’ve undoubtedly already heard a variety of lamentations from various sources about how the match manufacturing industry is in jeopardy, how the supply of matches has dwindled severely, and how the hobby will suffer accordingly. The match manufacturing situation has changed radically in the last ten years, but there’s no need to panic.

Ture, the face of the industry, itself, has radically altered since I started collecting, a mere 13 years ago. In 1972, U.S. match-making peaked at 550 billion lights, but that was also the same year that the disposable lighter was introduced, and production started its irreversible decline. Couple that with the advent of national anti-smoking campaigns (including the eventual banning of smoking in many public places), and the ever-rising costs of U.S. labor and materials, and the writing on the wall began to become apparent to the industry.

Little did I know, as I entered the hobby in 1982, that the entire domestic industry had already been deteriorating for ten years. The next 13 years saw the collapse of the majority of the American manufacturers and the closure of 11 match manufacturing plants. Today, U.S. match production is down

manufacturers and the closure of 11 match manufacturing plants. Today, U.S. match production is down by 80% of what it was in the early 1970s. Pretty dismal.

And, hobbyists have definitely felt the effects of all this. Such a drastic drop in production translates into a drastic drop in availability, even taking into consideration all of the foreign-made matches coming into the country. The times when a collector could go into any business and come out with handfuls of matches or even caddies are pretty much over (although those who are really persistent will tell you that you can still be successful on your match-hunting expeditions).

The media has noted the changing times, as well. I've seen several articles in the last three years focusing on the decline of match use and what the effects of such would be on the industry and the hobby.

Well, does all this mean that collectors might just as well give up? Does it spell the demise of the hobby? *Of course not!* Just look at the mathematics...

Based on 1994 American Match Council statistics, and starting with the first big order for matchbooks in 1902, I calculate (*very roughly*) that somewhere in the neighborhood of at least 540,562,000,000 matchbooks and boxes have been produced domestically...that's 540.5 **billion!** And I'm purposely trying to be conservative in my figures.

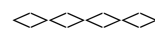
Now, considering that "accumulating" matchbooks/boxes has been estimated to be the second largest hobby in the country (that's counting all those millions of people who *casually* save them, but don't *formally* collect them), I think it would be reasonable to estimate that perhaps 2% of that 540.5 billion still exists today, socked away over the years by collectors and all those who wanted souvenirs of various places and events.

That would mean that even if the U.S. match industry shut down completely tomorrow, there would still be somewhere in the neighborhood of

10.8 **billion** covers and boxes available to collectors, and that's not counting Canadian and foreign!

That's the upside. Unfortunately, there's something of a downside to all of this, as well. More and more, collectors are going to have to shift from looking for covers and boxes from businesses to looking for them from individuals who have accumulated them over the years. That's going to involve both advertising and purchasing costs, whereas we've been used to getting them pretty much for free.

I hope I will be a distant memory by then, but the point is...***there will always be matchcovers!***"



Now, looking at this article eleven years later, in March 2006, it's still perfectly accurate, 'current' dates and numbers notwithstanding. One thing that I didn't seem to mention is that it would seem logical that there would now be a greater emphasis on getting to club meetings, swapfests, and conventions. If you're looking for *lots* of covers; if you're looking for *free* covers...collector get-togethers are the one place, it seems to me, where you will still always find them. I go to AMCAL every year, for example, and I *always* come back with free covers...from the freebie tables, registration bags, room-hopping, etc. Each year I go to the Sierra-Diablo Swapfest and come back with *more* covers. I should note that at a *swapfest*, you're expected to *trade* for your covers, so you have to bring your own trading stock with you, but that's pretty easy because different people are always looking for different things. It's not just the high-end material (DQs, Midgets, Contours, Features, etc.). So, don't discount going to such functions just because all you have available is Hotels/Motels/ Restaurants and/or Small Categories.

If you're relatively new to the hobby, it's all the more beneficial to you to go to such activities. It's a great way to get started on collecting covers, discovering new categories that you may be interested in...and the people that can answer all your questions are right there, and they're always tickled pink to help you out. With that in mind, just look at all the upcoming events on p. 7.