

Working With Older Covers

Older covers, 1950s and before, demand extra care and attention. Like us, some age gracefully; many don't! It's certainly worth a collector's time and effort to preserve as many of these covers as possible, but to do so takes some extra, and, in some cases, extraordinary steps.

STRIPPING: If you come across old full-books, you'll probably want to strip them unless you have a particular reason for keeping them intact. In any event, you'll find that, depending upon the conditions in which these books have been stored, some simply won't withstand the stripping process. Rusted staples aren't a hindrance, in and of themselves, but if the striker has become soft or brittle, forget it! You'll have to keep it as a full-book. Otherwise, it will simply fall apart when you start working on it. I've seen old full-books that separate from the striker as soon as the book is opened, so look carefully before you start to work.

Also, some of the older covers, usually 1930s and earlier, had the striking material applied *over* the staple (many old Diamond books, for example). Thus, you're going to damage the striker just to get *at* the staple. If you're lucky, you can do this and remove the staple and be left with 2 clean lines where the staple ends lay, plus the two staple holes. Again, though, if the striker has become brittle or soft, the removal process may well prove fatal to your cover.

If you can successfully strip the cover, then do so by the usual process, flatten, and so on.

HANDLING: Check all old covers for deterioration before actually working on them. Turn the cover over to the inside and look for "browning," which, when present, is almost always in the area that has the striker on the other side. If that inside area has turned brown (compared to the rest of the cover), that area is going to be extremely fragile and should be handled very carefully.

If this is the case, one thing you can do is to cover that inside area with a piece of tape. In this way, if the cover later breaks, the tape will at least keep all the pieces in place. A broken cover isn't ideal, of course, but it's highly preferable to one that has disintegrated altogether. When working with such covers, try and hold them by the sides rather than the top, where the striker is.

If the striker does happen to come off before you can do anything, you can still try and reattach it with tape on the back (but it's not an acceptable practice to replace it with a completely different striker; also...don't send such covers in trade without checking with your trader first....as a courtesy. These are now damaged covers, if they weren't before, so another collector may prefer to pass on them).

FLATTENING: Older covers are generally more difficult to flatten because they're significantly thicker than contemporary covers, but they can still be successfully flattened in the usual manner. Basically, you have to "press" them between two opposing pressures. There are a variety of ways that collectors use to do this. You can simply put them under heavy books, for example, or you can use two thin pieces of wood, heavily rubber-banded, with the covers in between. The late Tom Tresnak, CA, made small, screw-down devices especially designed for flattening covers. They work quite well. More than once, I've used the vise in my garage, again with strips of wood with the covers in between. Make sure the wood is very smooth, though, or "patterns" will be pressed into the outside covers. The wood also prevents the teeth of the vise from chewing up the covers. With the latter method, I've successfully flattened up to 50 covers at a time. I usually leave them in for a few days.

MOUNTING: Sooner or later, most of your collection is going to end up in albums, so now that your old covers are stripped and flattened, you're ready for this next stage.

Again because of the age and thickness of older covers, slotted or slit pages usually spell disaster for many of these gems. The corners get torn up, the fragile striker gets broken, and if the stock, itself, has lost some of its 'tensity' (it's gotten soft), the edges may get torn up as you try to put such covers in the slots...It's often very frustrating. If you *have* to use these pages, then it's always a good idea to widen the slots first, so you're not working with tight fits (I use an Exacto knife left over from my college biology classes). And, as usual, handle the covers carefully, trying not to apply any undue pressure to browned areas. Unfortunately, if the cover has become brittle, there's a good chance it will break later, even AFTER you've got it on the page, what with the page turning and bending (you might use the tape idea as extra insurance).

For these covers, the best reasonable solution is to put them in plastic pages. Here, you simply slip the cover into plastic pouches which make up the page. No edges roughed up; no corners bent or split (you should use flat edged tweezers to take them out and put them in). Plastic pages have the additional important advantage of showing both sides of the cover without having to take the cover in and out of the page. This produces less wear and tear on the covers. For older covers, especially, the less handling, the better. Another point in favor of plastic is that you can turn these pages all you want, and you won't have covers popping out of slots, sliding around on the page, or falling out altogether.

There are some disadvantages to using plastic pages, however. They're relatively expensive, running from .28¢ - .45¢ per page, depending on where you buy them and in what quantities. Also, the older plastic pages can be heavy! And when you get an album full, we're talking *forklift!* If it's cold, the pages tend to get stiff, as well. Although, with the newer plastic pages, which are lighter and much more flexible, these disadvantages have been minimized.

In light of what you're trying to accomplish, though, any such disadvantages are all minor if you can manage the money side. I've gotten around it by compromising. I can't afford to put all of my covers in plastic pages, but I do use them for my old covers and selected other categories, and the pages have worked out quite well. Just make certain that the plastic pages you use are PVC-free, which was a problem with some earlier plastic pages. I've tried a variety of brands, and I'm most satisfied with the Bettervue pages that Sierra-Diablo is the distributor for. I believe we currently send in two orders a year, so contact Jack Benbrook, AZ, for ordering information and deadlines..

STORAGE: Generally, the rules for storing old covers are the same for any covers. If they're loose, they should be banded together in stacks (with paper bands rather than rubberbands). This prevents them from getting jostled around and the corners getting banged up. If they're in albums, and they should be, you won't have this problem.

Whether loose or not, though, keep them out of high humidity areas, as this will cause mildew, mold, and striker deterioration. Keep them out of direct sunlight, as protection from fading. Additionally, it's always a good idea not to store covers at ground level...just in case of flooding.

And, always keep the ones you're especially proud of within easy reaching distance. People always want to see the "old ones!"