
Caring For Smelly Matchcovers

By Jean Christenson

[Ed note: Duane Ready, PA, sent this May/June 1992 RMS Bulletin article in response to an earlier discussion on older covers that smelled of mildew, mold, etc.]

When I first started collecting matchboxes, I brought a shoe box home, filled with smelly match covers. The odor was awful. I wanted to save the 20 and 30 year old match covers so something had to be done.

The reason for smelly match covers is moisture and dampness leading to mildew. Don't leave match covers in attics, basements, or garages where there is no warmth. The humidity will gradually cause mildew. Don't mix offensive smelling match covers with fresh ones, as the mildew smell is easily transferred by contact. If you have a smelly album, air the book before adding new match covers or pages.

Once, I discovered the match covers left in a five gallon tin can had a bad smell. The owner added a fresh handful every six months and after ten years--Wow! I let him smell the match covers and we both agreed that his airtight can compounded the effects.

Here's what I do with smelly match covers. I use a flannel cloth to gently wipe both surfaces, removing obvious mildew. Alternate wiping surfaces as mildew appears on the cloth. I call this task an ounce of prevention.

One method is to take a flour sifter and sift a thin layer of Borax on a tray or container. Place the match covers flat on the Borax and sprinkle another thin layer so they are completely covered. You can do several layers if you wish. Remove them when they are odor free. Bounce off the excess granules and wipe off the remaining Borax.

One day while listening to the radio, I heard a lady say, "to get rid of mildew from books, put them in cat litter." If it worked for books it should work for match covers. I use the same procedure explained with the Borax, except layered the cat litter by hand. Another suggestion is to take a medium size cardboard box and put several unwrapped bars of unscented soap in it. I prefer to put several glasses in the box and then stand the match covers at an angle against the glass. This way the effect of the soap reaches both sides of the match cover. Another method is to place match covers flat on the bottom of a box. In a week, turn them over so soap fumes can get to the other side. In either case, close the box airtight and leave them for a month.

Air drying is best after wiping them down. I use an outdoors clothesline. Take the match covers and pin the non-striker end to the rope. Hang match covers out on a sunny day with some wind. I had over 100 covers hanging on a clothesline one day. Remove them before dark as you don't want additional moisture to collect. After two full sunny days, the foul odor should be gone. Of course, my neighbors thought I was losing it but after a brief explanation, they thought it was clever.

I tested for fading with duplicate match covers. The colors remained the same but the satin covers did change. Bright reds became wine color and greens rendered darker. Some collectors may prefer a large tray or box instead of a clothesline. Cut the sides of the box to about two inches high so the sun can get in. Lay matchcovers flat and place the box somewhere in the sun. Don't put the box or tray on the grass as some unsuspecting dog or cat may leave a calling card. Place all matchcovers face up for two days

and then turn them over for another two. Avoid days when there is a slight wind as your matchcovers can fly away quickly.

Used Borax or cat litter can be saved and used several times. Dump the material only when you think it has been overworked with mildew matchcovers. It's been a challenge working with smelly matchcovers, and I hope you'll try one of these techniques and let me know.

[Editor's Note: All methods should be tried on valueless matchcovers first. Let us know how things work out]