

# RMS Convention: 70th Anniversary!

by  
Mike Prero

Although this initial meeting in 1939 [pictured here] is sometimes referred to as a 'convention', it was much more of a planning session. Collectors gathered at Henry Rathkamp's home in Newport, RI, and plans were made for a 1940 convention to be held in Pennsylvania, and things seemed to be going smoothly, with everything and everyone headed in the right direction, but there were problems lying just around the bend.

"...the plans for a 1940 meeting were nearly derailed. The convention was to be held in Philadelphia. The committee to make the arrangements consisted of the Bob Lockard, the Henry Rathkamp, and Tom Torrent. Plans went along smoothly for a May meeting when suddenly two of the expected participants began to battle with each other. The late Frank Ryan wrote of the incident thusly, 'The battle waxed hotly and even went so far as to try and break up the Philadelphia convention by arranging another at about the same time. Several who were active in the plan for the Philadelphia convention shifted to the newer place and group. This nearly wrecked the convention, but after much persuasion Bob Lockard agreed to go on with the plans.'

Then tragedy struck when Henry Rathkamp died. Ryan continues, 'This was very



close to the May date...and Bob was all for throwing the whole thing over. He and Henry were very close friends.' But history records that a 1940 convention was held in Ardmore, PA, and that was the first real convention. *It's interesting to note that the conventions started even before RMS was officially formed in 1941.* There were no conventions in 1943 and 1945, due to the war.

Unfortunately, there are no detailed descriptions of any of the early conventions which would enable a comparison to the conventions we have today. When did tours start to be a part of the conventions, for example? I don't know...although one could possibly point all the way back to the 1939 meeting where everyone went to the 1939 World's Fair. Were there dealer's tables at the earlier conventions? I don't know...although there was certainly a well-established history of collectors selling covers, going back to at least the earliest collectors' clubs in the early-to-mid-1930s.

When did room-hopping start? Were there auctions at the early conventions? Undoubtedly, they have changed considerably over the decades, as each succeeding convention attempts to be bigger and better than its predecessors—more activities, different activities, etc.

And what about the length of the conventions? Judging from the covers seen here, the conventions started out being three-day affairs through 1954. Then, starting in 1955, the conventions went to four days. This continued up to 1959 [about half of the 1958 convention covers show four days, but the other half show three days]. In 1959, we have our first reference to a full seven-day convention, although, here too, a lot of the 1959 convention covers cite only three days—*Loretta and Tony Baptista played it safe, I see. Their covers simply say August, 1959!*

Hmmmm! *August!* Has the convention always been in August? No. Looking at the convention covers in my Dated collection, the conventions were held in September up to 1958, although there may



have been a few 'adjustments' during the war years. Then, August pops up, and it's been there ever since. That's the last 52 years the convention has been in August...Maybe it's time we experimented with another month? At least one collector noted some time ago that room rates are lower after Labor Day.

Convention covers certainly abound! Right from the start, *someone* had the idea of announcing and commemorating the conventions via matchcovers. Twenty-strike issues dominated up to the mid-1990s. Although 30-strike issues can be seen at least as early as 1954, they were relatively rare in the 50s, 60's, and 70s. By app. 1995, however, 30-strikes had become the more common, especially with the large contact and other sets. Ten-strikes go back to about 1958 (judging from my own collection), and there are a couple of other sets in the early 1960s, but they're rare. Forty-strikes are more common. I see a single in 1951, and then they run helter-skelter through 1997. There were a few Jewelites issued from 1973-1986. Looks like only a handful of boxes, starting in 1982 and going to 2005.

Convention issues have dropped off drastically in the last several years, but, of course, so has the number of total collectors, so much of that would be expected. The price of a case of covers has also risen, along with fewer and fewer design and color options available to the small-order customer, so convention covers aren't as an attractive idea as they once were in the heyday of the industry.

There certainly have been a lot of them, though in the last 70 years! Tom Gray, IA, had a whopping 12,059 in his collection as of November 2005. Included, you'll find Girlie, Hillbilly, Safety, and Patriotic sets, along with a lot of Girlie singles.

These covers not only chronicle the ongoing 70-year span of RMS Conventions, but many of its members, now gone, but, thanks to the covers, never forgotten.

