

Tracking Down Locations

by Phil Gordon

Reference the December 2010 *Bulletin* article entitled “Where, Oh Where?” I share Mike’s and probably every collector’s frustration about such matchcovers printed without the city. But don’t give up! Part of the fun (or not fun) is the research that you can do while you’re sitting at your web-connected computer at home. In fact, I tracked down the locations all four matchcovers that Mike presented as examples in less than an hour.

The Falcon café matchcover was particularly intriguing to me since it stated that the venue was on Highway 14, and it was the “Northwest’s Finest Café”. Well, heck, I live in Washington State, in anyone’s book the Northwest, and I live about one mile north of State Highway 14. I should be able to help Mike out without much of a problem! There is no Falcon Café around here any longer, so I first checked several old AAA guide books that I had from the 1940s and 1950s that covered Washington State for a listing, since the matchcover said that the business was “Recommended by AAA” but I could find nothing. So I put in the proprietor’s name “A.G. Falk” and the name “Falcon” into Google and among the many websites that popped up was a web page describing the 1955 inaugural ball of Governor Joe Foss of South Dakota at the Falcon Café where the owner was “A. G. Falk”. How about that? But the Falcon Café was in Pierre, *South Dakota*. A quick check of my travel atlas showed that Pierre, the state capital of South Dakota, was on U.S. Highway 14. I then consulted one of my old AAA Tour Books that covered South Dakota, and it listed the Falcon as “AAA approved”. So we had our answer. Of course, what was not answered is why Mr. Falk would describe his café as “Northwest” when it was in South Dakota. And Pierre itself is not even in the northwest part of the state. Perhaps the café was in the northwest part of Pierre. Here was a case where my early analysis of the clues printed on this matchcover led me astray, so I consider the determination of the city from which this matchcover came to actually be a lucky hit on the internet.

So what about the other three matchcovers that Mike listed? I was on a roll now and since these other three matchcovers were all motels, and I have been pretty good in my past research at finding out what became of many motels, I went back to Google. So with quick searches, typing in keywords such as the motel name and the street name and street number listed on the matchcover, I found a reference to the Drake Motel at this same address on Broad Street. The web page that I found reported that this old motel was once a Quality Courts (like the matchcover says) and was in Chattanooga, TN, and was razed years ago to make way for urban renewal. (Many downtown motels that were bypassed by the new interstate highways lost access to paying guests and went downhill as apparently the old Drake Motel did.)

The Glass Motel I found was is still in operation after all these years on West 26th Street but now named the Glass House Inn in Erie, PA.

And the Village Motel on Pearl Road is still operating with the same name and address in Strongsville, OH.

So four-for-four is pretty good. But lady luck was on my side in this little adventure. Mike has an extensive collection of hotels, motels, and restaurants and other eating establishments and so his four selections were these categories. I have found that the easiest business type to track backwards over the decades is motels and hotels. I think there are three primary reasons for this:

First, motels and hotels are very specifically-built structures, and they stay as motels or hotels for decades and decades and more. Eventually, after a long time, a motel may be converted to long-term rentals or even cheap apartments. And hotels stay as hotels for decades and decades, too. Sometimes they are converted to

apartments (some downtown hotels in their last years of life may end up as “skid-row” type single-occupancy room apartments). But, of course, any motel or hotel may be razed after their useful life is gone.

Second, motels and hotels may appear in AAA guide books or Best Western or United Motor Courts guides, so if you have a collection of these items or know someone who does, you can get some leads there.

Third, many motels and hotels issued postcards and now with the internet there are a number of websites that include postcard images of towns that can be visited via Google or other search engines.

I have found that restaurants and cafes are a very distant second when it comes to successful research back over the decades. A few made it into AAA guide books and a few issued postcards but not many.

Most other small businesses that would appear on matchcovers, such as, say, barber shops, drug stores, service shops, taverns, hardware stores, etc., are very difficult to track back over the decades, particularly if you are basing your research on a front strike matchcover. Most of these businesses could occupy any generic storefront and over the decades many types of businesses could occupy that same storefront address since businesses come and go. Tracking backwards an obscure business from fifty or more years ago and getting relevant leads in Google or some other search engine is rare.

Another difficult business type to track backwards is the once-ubiquitous gasoline station. How many old gas stations from the front strike matchcover era are still in business as gas stations today? The comprehensive gasoline service station of the 1940s through 1960s with the service bays, parts, and tires is almost non-existent nowadays. The gas station business has almost completely changed over to the modern convenience store (built in the 1970s or later) or

truck stop. The few old gas station structures that I see in my travels around the country that have not yet been razed have usually been converted to small tire shops or repair businesses it seems. Razing old gas stations has been a common occurrence since the structures themselves are not worth a lot of money, are outdated for most modern uses, and many property owners want to get the hazardous old tanks out of the ground anyway so they are not at risk for environmental clean-up expenses. So I have not had much success using the internet to track backwards a gas station printed on a front strike matchcover either.

So the bottom line is that I was fortunate in tracking the four matchcovers and their issuing businesses back that Mike listed in the December *Bulletin*. That’s because three were motels (the easiest classification) and one was a restaurant/café that I was very lucky on since it was AAA approved and I got a lucky hit on the proprietor’s name in Google.

In my experience, if I take a random handful of front strike matchcovers that are not motels or hotels, I consider myself lucky if I can determine the city with high confidence for 20% of them. In these cases, the critical clues may be the telephone number (particularly if it is from the 1960s and has an area code), or the streets (particularly if there are two or more streets or highway numbers mentioned) or some other descriptive clue (like “across from the fairgrounds” or “across from the courthouse”).