

Quantity or Quality?

by Mike Prero

The age-old question--What's more important, quantity or quality? Now, before I even write the article, we already know the answer...both! Or do we? *Are* quantity and quality equally important? Are we all agreed on just what *is* quantity and what *is* quality? There *are* different interpretations.

Almost everyone, I assume, would define 'quantity' as the size of a particular collection: 2,000 Best Westerns, or 86 Hallmarks, for example. 'Quality', though, might mean the condition of the various covers within the collection; to others, it may mean the rarer, harder-to-get issues within that category; and, to still others, it may mean the older, earliest issues. For the purposes of this discussion, we'll take it to mean the latter, which, in most cases, are *also* the rarer, harder-to-get issues.

I admit, up front, that I'm more of a 'quantity' collector, meaning that I believe it's more important to have a more comprehensive collection than focusing on those rarer, harder-to-get covers. Of, course, I get add the latter to such a collection whenever the opportunity arises, but I'm not a collector who picks through ebay and hobby auctions, looking for those rarities. Couldn't afford it, for one thing, and, as with most collectors, I can't compete with those collectors who *are* actively hunting for those covers. Ideally, any collector wants both quantity and quality, but, practically, in many categories, the rarities are normally going to be out of our reach. We may stumble across them, here and there, in donations, in mixed or bulk lots that occasionally come our way, but how many of us are prepared to pay \$100 for a single cover, or even \$1,000 for a Lindbergh? Not me.

Let's take a look at a couple of examples. How about Navy Ships? They're divided into Pre-War and Post-War issues. Although there may be some really tough acquisitions in the Post-War issues, almost all of the scarce/impossible covers, as you could guess, are in the older Pre-War group. I have a total of 2,437 Navy Ship covers, and I'm currently missing some 883 (based on the issues known to exist). Not surprisingly, most of what I am missing are the Pre-War issues. There are 67 or 68 DQ ships, for example, and I'm missing most of them(!).

Now, even if I could afford all the costs involved, I could spend the rest of my collecting career trying to track down and obtain those missing ship covers, and, at the end, I may have put together admirable

collection of rare ship covers, but does such a collection really tell the story of U.S. Navy Ships? Not from my perspective. It's the more comprehensive collection that does that, simply because more of the story's 'gaps' have been filled in, and, together, all those covers span a much greater number of years.

How about Girlies, as a final example? Here, I believe, we're talking more scarcity than inherent value. It's not DQ's or Safety Firsts here; rather, it's some of the foreign sets, Features, and sooooo many just plain obscure issues that there simply aren't a viable number of existing dupes of. So, do you focus on the thousands of Girlies that are reasonably attainable, or do you spend your time, effort, and \$\$\$ on those issues known to exist but perhaps only two or three collectors actually have them (and no dupes, of course)? (Then again, you don't know the latter until you've searched for them!)

Although it may sound as if I'm saying, "Don't waste your time and trouble on the tough issues," it's not a cut and dry, black and white, either-or proposition...unless your specific goal is to collect rarities. As far as a particular category goes, almost all collectors are going to collect whatever comes their way in that category--common-rare, recent-old, inexpensive, and (as much as they can afford it) expensive. The goal being to get them *all!* But, sometimes, priorities have to be set.

Of course, it's all a matter of perspective. For me, coming from a History background, I want my collection to show as much of that category's history as possible, which means focusing on quantity, including the national issues, errors, etc. If, at the end, I'm missing some or many of the rarities, I've still hopefully fulfilled my goal.

On the other hand, a collector could just as well have the primary goal of obtaining the rarities in the category, with the bulk of the 'common' issues not being as important. Indeed, that collector could be after rarities in general--a complete Celebrity Set, a 1934 Silver Chicago World's Fair set, all the Group I's, all the DQ Navy Ships, a Lindbergh, etc. From that collector's perspective, rarity and value is the goal...or the goal may simply be the heightened challenge...the ultimate hunt for the collector. Indeed, there are a number of whole categories that are almost exclusively tough! How many CCC covers do you have, for example? DQs? Lion Safety Firsts? The vast bulk of the Midgets aren't exactly easy, even though there are over 8,000 listed! You don't seriously pursue such categories unless you've already made up your mind to expend whatever it takes. There's certainly nothing wrong with any of these alternate goals; it just a matter of personal perspective.

But let's go back to the 'other quality' for a moment--the overall condition of your covers. Is *this* 'quality' more-equal to-or less important than quantity? This one's a different question altogether. While we all keep those struck covers we need, hoping to replace them when we find unstruck versions, just how many struck covers do you have in that collection? And how tattered are they?

Somewhere along the line, I believe, there's a point you don't want to cross...a point at which the collection becomes overloaded with, dare I say, 'junk'. A struck cover here and there is one thing; lots of struck covers is another, more so when we also add damaged and/or bobtailed covers to the equation. Each collector has to reach his or her own decision as to what will be acceptable as far as condition is concerned. As an example, I'm certainly not above keeping a struck cover, myself, but it's a rarity, and I never keep otherwise damaged covers. Bobtails? Never!...Well, I think I may have a bobtailed DQ Navy Ship...but that's an extreme exception. As a matter of fact, let's talk about a notable group of exceptions.

There are a number of categories that more or less 'lend' themselves to a much larger acceptable proportion of struck and...yes...perhaps even somewhat damaged...covers, I think. Basically, that's your