

Are General Collectors Still “The Backbone Of The Hobby”?

A rather good question, I thought, upon reading an article by the late Isabel Lord in the 1970s about how important General collectors were to the hobby. If you're new to the hobby, a “General” collector is one who collects in all categories. Such a collector is the easiest to trade with because you can send him anything (except junk) and there's a chance he can use it—because he collects everything!

There are advantages and disadvantages to being a General collector. The biggest advantage is that you are never at a loss for what to collect and never at a loss for covers. Disregarding dupes, used, damaged, and National covers, you can stand a chance of using just about everything on the freebie tables, everything that comes in trade in the mail, everything that is bought in auctions, and everything that comes your way in the form of local accumulations, etc. Hunting is easy, finding traders is a breeze (relatively speaking). What a life!...and everybody loves you...because you're so easy to deal with!

There are some disadvantages, the most serious of which being that pretty soon you start having major SPACE problems! Where to put all those boxes of covers, and the albums of covers, and the stacks of covers, and the drawers of covers?? Many new collectors start off as General collectors, which gives them the chance to get a true sampling of what the hobby has to offer, and then pare their choices down when space starts running out. Another disadvantage to being a General collector, although I honestly don't know how serious this one is, is that other collectors sometimes see you as their golden opportunity to get rid of all the covers they have that they can't trade to anyone else—all those wonderful covers from chemical companies, janitorial services, sewage plants, etc—not exactly *HOT* categories. Now, the General collector, who technically *does* collect chemical companies, janitorial services, and sewage plants, is bound to have his own preferences—and I'd be almost willing to bet that those particular types of covers really aren't wanted. Thus, some General collectors tell people ahead of time that they want only “good” covers, and, when they define what “good” covers are, it turns out that they're the same covers that the specialized collectors are looking for—Hotels/Motels/Restaurants, Fancies, etc. So, those General collectors really aren't so “general” anymore.

In any event, since the 1970s, the industry has drastically changed, and, as a result, there have been some rather large changes within the hobby. Where is the General collector today? Is he still the “backbone on the hobby”? If you look on any membership roster, it's still easy to find collectors who list themselves as General collectors, so they're still in existence, although not in the same numbers that they were in Isabel Lord's time.

At the same time, it also seems that there are many more specialized collectors in the hobby today; they're only looking for certain categories, and a significant number of the new collectors coming into the hobby, say, since 1990 right up to the present, are *very* specialized in their wants—i.e., that collector only wants Beer covers, and this collector only wants Railroad covers, and Bob only wants full-book Features. A lot of these new collector-specialists, by the way, really aren't *in* the hobby. They've just tapped into matchcover collecting in order to procure peripheral items for their main hobby interest (beer cans, sports ephemera, etc). Well, that's OK, but the point here is that it's basically impossible to trade with such specialists on a regular basis. And is the General collector going to want to trade off his Beer covers for “General” trades?

So, is the General collector slowly dying out, or...as the matchcover tap steadily dwindles, will *more* of us turn to generalization as an attempt to cope with the increasing unavailability of current covers? H-m-m-m-m-m?