

The Shadow Years

Revisited

by
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In January/February 2004, I wrote an article about the dearth of information on the industry, and a definite lack of covers, from the period between 1892-1919. I recently ran across an article by Frank Ryan in the July 1957 RMS Bulletin where he wrote about the same thing.

“The first booklet match dates in the late 1890’s, and it seems strange to me that we have so little data about covers between 1900 and 1932. Why don’t we have more Patriotic Covers from the First World War? Personally, I have seen only five. Two are well known, the Knight’s of Columbus one issued to the ‘doughboys’ by this grand organization, in fact, the Knights issued two covers during the war. Another prominent cover during this period was one issued to our fighting boys by the 28th Division Command, this being the Pennsylvania Keystone Division. It shows the state insignia on both front and back of cover. Another is BUY FIFTH LIBERTY BONDS by a Philadelphia concern, and each match had BUY BONDS on it. Another cover was issued by the Cramp Shipyard in Philadelphia and it solicited labor to build ships.

In my years of collecting dated covers, I have been unable to find any collector who has a dated cover between the years 1900 and 1930. It would be true that many concerns would not be old enough to celebrate birthdays on 25 years, but surely, someone, somewhere, would have issued a cover with a date on it...

Covers began to become plentiful during the early 1930’s, and during this period, sets began to appear. The most famous of these covers being those issued during the Chicago World’s Fair and sold at the Fair Grounds in 1933...”

Well, it's been some 56 years since Frank's observations, and his concerns still hold true. Since then, only a very few dated covers from those first 28 years have turned up (and they're mostly from the late 1920s). But the enigma is still there. Where are the covers?

As a hobby 'historian', if you will, I also noticed early on that there was just hardly any information on the industry from those early years, other than, of course, the famous story of Diamond Match Co's formation from the merger of some 12 match manufacturers and it's subsequent purchase of Pusey's patent for the matchbook.

Back in 2004, I speculated that perhaps the lack of information on matchbook manufacturers from 1892 to 1930, and a corresponding lack of covers, was basically because Diamond had the patent, and that probably gave it something of a lock on matchbook production until the patent rights ran out. But, after another some 10 years and the availability of further information, that no longer seems likely [although I wish it did. I like simple, neat solutions!]

There certainly were other manufacturers during those early decades, but, at least in the beginning, they were makers of wooden matches for boxes. If Diamond did have a monopoly on the matchbook during those early decades, we wouldn't see matchbooks from other companies during that period...but we do! For example, going through the listings for old companies, we find the following dated matchcovers:

<u>McGill Match Co.</u> 1 - 1914
<u>Ohio XL</u> 2 - 1929
<u>Universal XL</u> 1 - 1928
<u>Union Match Co.</u> 1 - 1929
<u>Star Match Co.</u> 2 - 1928
<u>Lion SF</u> 1 - 1919 11 - 1920's
<u>Diamond SF</u> 1 - 1918 1 - 1919 2 - 1920

Not many, to be sure, and there are certainly covers from the time period that are not dated, such as Diamond's Washington Crisps cover, which caused such a stir in the hobby in 1995. It was estimated to be from c. 1910. So, two things are clear: 1) Other companies besides Diamond were producing covers from at least 1914 onwards; and 2) there are surprisingly few known covers from this period, even from Diamond. How do we account for that?

Amherst College, class of 1894, 25th Reunion cover, dated 1919. Diamond Safety First

As for other companies producing matchbooks, possible explanations would include:

1) Diamond's patent rights expired by at least 1914. *[If the 1892 patent was good for 20 years, that would take it up to 1912. The US Patent and Trade Office currently grants patents from 14-20 years, but I don't know if that was the case in the late 1800s]*

2) Diamond eventually gave up its patent rights, a move perhaps initiated because of America's entry into World War I in 1914. *[Diamond Match Co. did make its non-poisonous match public domain*



in 1911, but I've never seen anything indicating that Diamond ceded its rights to the book match, and, besides, why would Diamond do that? There was no safety issue with the matchbook, itself, as there was with poisonous matches.]

3) Other companies came up with matchbooks that were different enough from Diamond's patent to allow them to do so without get sued. [That doesn't sound feasible. Almost all of the early non-Diamond matchbooks we've seen were basically identical to Diamond's. Pusey's design called for the striker to be on the inside of the cover, but Diamond moved it to the outside in 1895 (something for which they probably took out another patent), and that's about what everyone's matchcovers looked like from then on.]

What about the lack of covers from that period in general? Two possibilities, as I see it:

1) Matchbooks didn't become popular and common place until the 1930s. [That, I think, is correct. Even though the first large order for matchbooks was in 1902 (10 million Pabst Beer matchbooks from Diamond), with others following over the years). There's just nothing to indicate that matchbooks were widespread before the 1930s. People were used to using matchboxes and wooden matches, and they had to be wary of those. They were dangerous! Diamond Match Co. general superintendant William Fairburn didn't invent the non-poisonous match until 1910, and it wasn't made public domain until 1911. In 1912, Diamond invented a match wherein spontaneous combustion was impossible (the 'Safe Home' match).

2) No collectors to save them. [The first cover collectors that we know of popped up in the early 1930s (which would be another indication that matchbooks hadn't become that popular before then). And, there weren't any matchcover clubs until RMS in 1941. Even granting that some of those 1930s collectors actually started collecting in the 1920s and only surfaced in the early 1930s when realizing there were at least some other people who collected the same thing, there would only be a handful of such people.

Now, you take that handful of collectors, add in the difficulties of traveling in pre-1930 America (compared to the way we all zip around today), poor communications, no established collector network, etc....and the result is very few covers saved for posterity (what few covers there were).

What about the lack of information on the industry during the 1892-1930 period? That's for out next issue!

