

The Making Of An Error

I suppose it's not surprising that in an industry that cranked out hundreds and hundreds of millions of matchbooks that errors were fairly commonplace and that occasionally these errors were actually released into the public domain [*over 2,200 different errors are currently listed*]*—although I've often had doubts about the prevailing quality control system. Still, I love errors, so I should be the last one to raise such a question. In any event, Long Beach editor Isabel Lord once wrote in 1974 on how many such errors were produced in the first place. Read on, and learn...I did!*

“Matchcovers are not quite the individual product that they appear to be. Covers in the regular size are printed twenty advertisers at a time. After the type for each cover is set, they are ganged or grouped together twenty at a time. Their width equals a 240 size matchcover. They are printed on cardboard. These cardboard sheets are fed into a friction machine which paints a wet friction strip down the length of each sheet.

After drying, the sheets are cut into individual cover size which collectors call flats. The flats are then fed into a machine which inserts the comb of matches. The combs are created out of matchboard which comes in gigantic rolls weighing tons. A special machine cuts them into strips about 1½” high, and 15” wide. Next a special die cuts the individual match sticks into an effect much like a hair comb, hence the name match comb.

The individual combs are dipped into wax and then into the “head” mixture. The wax appears on each match stick as a dark area under the heads. The purpose of the wax is to retain the flame after the head ignites. When the heads are dry, the combs are assembled in pairs ready to be inserted into the covers.

In the final matching of comb with cover, the machine cuts the double comb into book widths, folds the cover around it, puts in the staple and delivers the books to the packer in rows of 25 in alternate positions.

Two rows of completed covers are picked up and placed into caddies and 50 caddies are placed in each case. Then the case is sealed.

When the machinery malfunctions as sometimes happens, off-cuts occur. Sometimes these off-cuts have half of two advertisers on them. Usually the more common thing is the cutting variations produce copy placement variations within a caddy. Collectors who find color or placement variations within one caddy should be wary of calling them separate items. Variations of whatever sort within the caddy are not really collectable variations. Mass production in itself creates minor variations at times which should be ignored. A true variety always results from separate printings at different times.”

The ensuing 30 years since Isabel's article has, of course, seen some major changes, especially in technology—the computer, for example. Thus, the production process described above may well have undergone some substantial changes, but errors continue to appear—old errors, new errors; they're there, and they're still being produced.

I've always been surprised that errors in this hobby don't command the interest and respect that errors in other hobbies do (stamps and coins, for instance), but perhaps it's simply that such phillumenic errors are so much more common.