

# Have You Got A Match?

by

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*[con't from our last issue]*

It turned out that the firm which bought the patent rights was the then little-known Diamond Match Company. Instead of dropping the suit, Pusey was hired to continue it, and for the rest of his life he served as Diamond's patent attorney at \$10,000 a year.

But when Diamond tried to make money on its investment, it found that the public was used to the more expensive wooden sticks and simply would not buy the flimsy-looking paper things. By 1894—before the paper match was two years old—it seemed to have come to the end of its career.

At that point 28-year-old Henry Traute was hired by a young but hopeful match-book firm to sell paper matches. Traute, a crack salesman, was amazed to discover that not a buyer in the country wanted to see him. He would look up old contacts and be met in the usual heart way, but when he mentioned the words "match book," these interviews would come to a hasty end.

Baffles, he asked his employers, "Has anyone besides that man Pusey ever made a dime on a paper match?"

Yes, he was told, one company had—but it had **bought**, not **made**, matches. This was the Mendelson Opera Company, a troupe of singers and players. After hiring a hall in New York, there was no money left with which to advertise, so the manager bought several hundred match books and set the troupe to hand-lettering announcements on them.

Every bit of space—from the cover to the match sticks themselves—was utilized. "WAIT—WE ARE COMING," they wrote, and went on about the "Pretty Girls" and "Handsome Wardrobe." "Look for the Date," they added; and "Get Seats Early." Then they pasted pictures of their star on the outside cover. Result: the hall was packed.

When Traute heard that, he headed for a lithographer's office. The lithographer could not make out just what it was Traute wanted. An advertisement? But what should he say on the advertisement?

“Anything! Anything!” cried Traute, now far too excited to answer reasonable questions.

He grabbed a magazine from a chair and found an ad for Pabst beer. This he thrust at the lithographer, along with a match-book cover, and told him to print the ad in match-book size. The bewildered man made up the ad as quickly as he could, and Traute took the next train for Milwaukee—where he secured an order from the Pabst brewers for 10,000,000 books with printed covers.

Traute next tried a tobacco firm, and he and his match books were unceremoniously thrown out the door. He turned to their rivals, the producers of Bull Durham, and got an order for 30 million books.

By this time, Traute’s home office was in a state of panic. “Stop!” it wired Traute. “To fill such orders, new machinery will have to be invented.”

But Traute did not stop. His job was to create the demand; he left it to the home office to furnish the supply. When he finally returned to New York with orders in the billions, he found new machines whipping out the booklets at the rate of 10,000 per hour.

But when the billions of match books with beautiful covers hit the market, the public refused to buy them. People said they were dangerous.

Traute had the striking surface moved to the outside cover, at a safe distance from the match heads, and imprinted with the now familiar “Close Cover Before Striking.” Still the public would not be won over, and advertisers began to cancel their orders.

Then Traute came up with another idea. He found a busy street intersection with tobacco shops on all four corners and offered the proprietor of one of them a batch of match books for a small sum.

“Match books!” said the man. “No thanks! I couldn’t give them away.”

“Have you ever tried?” asked Traute. “People like to get things for nothing. I bet you’d sell more tobacco. Why not give it a try?”

“Well, why not?” the dealer finally agreed.

Within a week he was selling twice as much tobacco as usual. Within two weeks the three other dealers on the intersection were handing out free matches. By the end of the year, New Yorkers were getting match books with their tobacco and cigarettes in practically every shop; and inside of five years the practice had spread to the West Coast.

As paper matches gained in popularity they attracted the attention of hobbyists, and today there are over a million match-cover collectors, making match books—next to stamps—the most popular collecting hobby in the country.

To be well thought of by a collector, a cover must have a distinguishing imprint or picture, such as the name of a town, ship or club, or the photo of a natural monument. Also, it must be rare.

The most valuable match book of all is one of the Mendelson Opera Company [*issues*] put out in 1895. Only a single copy remains. This is probably the saddest looking match book in existence, with the

lettering uneven, its cover charred, its pictures faded and three words misspelled. But it lies in state in a guarded vault, insured for \$25,000.

The girl who worked on it for half an hour probably never dreamed that giant machines two stories high would eventually pour out match books complete with advertising messages at the rate of 60,000 an hour. It is thanks to this advertising that firms like Diamond, Universal, Maryland, Lion and D. D. Bean, as well of hundreds of smaller companies, can do a multi-million-dollar business; and that the average American can use 3,000 matches every year at a cost of about 31 cents—the lowest cost per capita in the world.

*Ed. note: In several instances, the author's story above doesn't tally with what we now know about the evolution of the matchbook. For instance, although Traute may have independently come up with the idea of printed advertising on matchbooks, he certainly wasn't the first. Also, his selling his patent to Diamond for \$10,000 doesn't match the \$4,000 figure seen in other sources.*

*Inconsistencies aside, however, one wonders how the author got her information and how much literary license she has taken. She certainly didn't interview Pusey, who died c. 1910, or Traute, who probably wasn't alive in the 1950s either.*

*What I find really interesting, though, is, according to the story, billions of matchbooks were produced before the striker was moved to the outside. Has anyone ever seen one of these 'inside-striker' matchbooks? Prior to this, I've never even heard of their existence. [These matchbooks would have been issued c. 1910]*

*This 1954 article bears a striking resemblance to a slightly earlier article which appeared in Kiplinger's Personal Finance, Feb. 1953. The latter shows no author; perhaps the same author wrote both.*