

The Shrinking Hobby: A Strategy For Regrouping

[Disclaimer: This is not a gloom and doom report. It's food for thought regarding one possible option for dealing with the current shrinking hobby (and almost all collectible hobbies are currently shrinking)]

In this issue's *RMS Insta-Poll* (opposite page), one participant suggested "One club with everyone in it is better for the survival of the shrinking hobby. Besides it's not worth getting 6 or 7 bulletins some of which are not worth reading."

That got me to thinking. Would consolidating be bad? If not, how much? A little? A lot? Take club rosters for example. Each year or two, every club laboriously struggles to maintain, print, and mail out its club roster to members. What an inefficient waste! Some 80% of those roster names are duplicated on other club rosters, because most of any club's membership is made up of members who also belong to other clubs. I suggested years ago that all club rosters be merged into one definitive hobby roster, available both as a hard copy and electronically.

But, the idea has never gotten anywhere. Regional clubs have always nixed any type of consolidating, seeing it as a loss of club sovereignty, and, more importantly, a possible loss of future members. Clubs still see their rosters as a drawing card for membership even though that's no longer true. Most collectors can now be found on the internet. Many collectors, having established themselves in the hobby, no longer even bother with rosters.

In the past, a few clubs *have* consolidated, merging into a single club, but that was because one or both were on the verge of folding because of few members, few meeting attendees, etc., and that possibility certainly is stronger than ever now, as several clubs are currently hanging on by a thread. In the last three years, three other clubs have simply ceased to exist, and a further two have relegated themselves to basic inactivity as far as the general hobby is concerned.

The possibility of merging bulletins to any degree is probably non-existent. Since most of any club's members are from out of the local area, the club bulletin is the only thing that ties them all together. However, as the poll respondent above has pointed out, not all bulletins are equal: some are excellent; some aren't. (I should point out, however, that no editor can please everyone)

The dwindling numbers of collectors in the hobby not only affects the possible survival of the clubs, themselves, but also their activities. Attendance at meetings is down; attendance at swapfests is down; attendance at conventions is down. Where once RMS conventions could boast attendance of 400+, attendance now is less than half that. There's no fault here; it's simply a result of hobby conditions.

Since a club's 'new members' usually turn out to be collectors already in the hobby, this dwindling of total hobby participants means there are fewer collectors to spread themselves around the various clubs to begin with. On top of that, the hobby has not succeeded in drawing in *true* new collectors (hence, the number of *Insta-Poll* respondents who indicated that they wished to see more hobby publicity and media recognition).

The question of consolidation within the hobby, of *anything*, remains a thorny issue, no doubt a minefield of opposing personalities and questions of territoriality. Still, it's a strategy worth some thought.