



by
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As I have noted previously, the collecting of ‘Small Towns’, I think, has generally evolved into the collecting of ‘Towns’. I remember when I first came into the hobby, over 30 years ago, a veteran collector told me that ‘Small Towns’ were defined as those of a population of 5,000 or less. I don’t see how a collector of such could discern population numbers on all those possible covers. Oh, there’s always *Google* now, of course, but it would be very time consuming and tedious...and population figures change every year. It’s much more reasonable just to collect ‘Towns’, the goal of which is to get one cover from every town/city in the United States, or all the towns in California, or whichever your preferred state might be.

It’s more reasonable, perhaps, but certainly not easier! Wikipedia states that there are currently over 30,000 towns and cities in the U.S., “but defining the actual cities and towns from their metropolitan areas has a wide margin of error.” I’ve been collecting Towns for almost 10 years, now, and I only have some 10,249, so it’s not easy! But, Tom Valachovic, FL, had 33,322 as of January 2016!

The general qualifications for a Towns cover as I understand them is that it must be a 20-strike and have the name of the town and state on it, preferably on the front. Purists discount using any Perkins Americana covers. It seems there is some question about how Ed Perkins went about getting the orders for those covers. There are a lot of small towns in that series, however. Multiple towns on a single cover does not qualify.

The 20-strike requirement is only logical when you stop to think about it. There’s nothing stopping you from starting a Towns collection made up of 30-strikes, but you’re automatically going to disqualify most of the older covers, and that’s where you find many smaller towns, especially those that, for a variety of reasons, don’t exist any longer.

With a category like this, a checklist is mandatory, which means you're going to have to get a complete listing of all towns in the U.S....and as soon as you get it, or as soon as you put one together yourself, it will be obsolete, because new towns are being incorporated every year.

To say that collecting Towns is a challenge is certainly an understatement, but also remember that Towns includes both present and *past* towns!—Towns that have disappeared, towns that have merged into other towns, ghost towns! Plus, at least in my own collection, I include spelling variations and name errors. From Idaho, for example, I have covers from ‘Clark Fork’ and ‘Clarks Fork’, so leave space in that Towns listing of yours because you're always going to be adding to it.

I also include large military installations (Barksdale AFB, for example), since they have their own zip codes and are basically ‘isolated’ towns, with their own governing bodies, stores, homes, police force, etc.

You'll find lots of harder-to-get Towns in covers from the 1940s and 1950s, among Hillbillies, for example. The problem is finding those earlier covers in the first place. And, when you do...and when you then find needed Towns...you may well run into the ever present problem of priorities.

What if those Town covers are conjunctives? You have to make a decision which collection those covers are actually going to be part of. In my own case, for example, Dated has a higher priority, so if that Town cover is dated, it goes into my Dated collection rather than any other...and I just have to hope that I either find a dupe or some other cover that has that town.

One of the pluses in dealing with this category is the Town names, themselves. You'll run across some that are funny, some that are weird, and some that are unique, such as Peculiar, PA; and Fifty-Six, AR. But, what I've found astounding is the *lack* of creativity when it came to naming towns, because those funny, weird, unique names constitute a very small fraction of the total.

Instead, most Town names seem to duplicate other Town names. Just about every state, for example, has a Jefferson, a Washington, a Franklin, etc...plus, Oak-this, and Oak-that; Spring-this, and Spring-that; Forest-this, and Forest-that...and the list goes on. And look at all the ‘New’s.’ The very word indicates the name has already been used somewhere else. I happen to live in Auburn, CA. There are 31 different Auburn’s in the United States!

A lot of this duplication is historical, of course. Some community founders simply drew on names that they were already familiar with. Some communities were named after founders, etc., and some concepts were carryovers from the Old World—hence all the ‘ville’s,’ ‘burg’s,’ and ‘burgh’s’.

Whatever the cause, though, there's not much originality to be seen here. Overall, Town names tend to be bland and repetitive, rather than colorful and interesting. Off the top of my head, I think the one Town name that exemplifies this the most to me is ‘Humansville,’ MO. (The town was actually named after James Human, an early settler in the area, but still...‘Humansville’? Was there not *one* PR specialist among those early town founders?...I guess not.)

In any event, and whatever your particular bent, you could easily spend your entire collecting career just focused on the search for Towns...and what a pleasurable pastime that would be. And, as an added benefit, collecting Towns also affords you the opportunity to peruse just about all the other categories in the hobby at the same time, since any cover with a single address (city and state) is a possible candidate for your collection.