

Dating Matchcovers by the Phone Number

by David Schroeder

This article first appeared in the March/April 1995 edition of the *RMS Bulletin*. Since that time, my collection has more than doubled in size. With the larger database I have adjusted two dates, and I also have added pertinent information regarding the internet.

Does a 2 digit phone number on a matchcover automatically mean that it is very old? If a cover has a 7 digit phone number on it, does that automatically mean that it is newer than the other cover? Many people think the answer to both of these questions is yes.

Look at the phone numbers on the attached covers. Notice that the matchcover from Legal Motors advertises a 1967 Plymouth, and Legal Motors has a 2 digit phone number at that time. Notice that the matchcover from Duparquet, Quebec advertises the 1975 Chevrolet, and Wettring Motor Sales has a 4 digit phone number in 1975.

I have about 9,000 different dated automobile matchcovers from the mid 1930's to the early 1990's. Each one specifies a year, so my collection is perfect for studying the relationship between age and the number of digits. (They do not all have a phone number, so the actual database is less, about 5,000 covers) Using my collection as a reference, I have observed the following:

Phone numbers with 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 (and very rarely 6) numerical digits were used until 1967.

Phone numbers with 2 letters followed by 4 or 5 numbers were used from 1939 to 1970.

The earliest appearance of 7 digit phone numbers is on 1962 matchcovers. The use of 7 digit phone numbers increased dramatically for 1963, then increased steadily each year reaching 100% by 1971.

Other than a very few exceptions (such as Duparquet, Quebec), the dates above apply to 99.9% of telephone numbers in Canada and the USA.

If you look up telephone number history on the internet, no internet sites agree with my dates. Wikipedia and others give dates that are far earlier. One internet site says that 7 digit phone numbers started in 1931, then slowly and steadily spread to everywhere. A few sites give 1951 as the start of 7 digit phone numbers. I firmly believe that those dates are totally wrong, and I have 5000 dated match covers, with phone numbers, that collectively back up my dates.

Other telephone numbers such as 241A or 33R3 also existed previously. These were party lines, usually in rural areas. In the first example, the party line was number 241, and each specific phone was assigned a letter. In the second example, the phone number was 33 and the specific phone was the one that rang with 3 rings.

C-547A Vista - Iltg Sales Office, Toronto, Ont.

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67 Plymouth

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Chrysler - Plymouth - Valiant - Fargo
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DESOTO

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PHONE 2233

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Strike Rite Matches Limited, Canada

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UNIVERSAL MATCH, DETROIT

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