

# Trends!

by  
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The hobby has gone through major changes in the last number of years, most notably shrinking more than 75% from the mid-1980s. What might we expect the future to hold?

Well, there's no sugar coating it; relative to where we *were*, where we're heading doesn't look good. One should note, however, that I'm speaking of the *hobby*, not the *collector*, so let's take a look...

**In 1987, the hobby numbered 4,000 collectors.** As of this writing, we're down to 865 (although the latter number changes slightly almost weekly as collectors pass away or retire and new collectors appear). Those new members, though, aren't balancing out the numbers of collectors leaving the hobby for one reason or another. The hobby has always been very top heavy with older individuals, and thus there is a high attrition rate simply due to age. At the same time, we've never attracted youngsters, and the chances of that changing are nil, especially today when they're already hooked on cell phones, social media, and video games.

One might hope that the hobby would attract millennials, then, but those young adults are, and have already, grown up in a society where matchbooks have relatively disappeared. Mom and Dad used to be able to go into any business and take matchbooks from that familiar basket on the countertop, starting little souvenir collections during vacations and the like. Matchbooks were plentiful, readily available, and free. No more. Therefore, it's not likely that the hobby shrinkage will change. Still, there will always be collectors and, thus, always a hobby.

**Bulletins have already generally become smaller and less frequent**, as clubs attempt to cope with declining dues and ever escalating printing and mailing costs. E-bulletins are the solution to this problem. They can be as long and as frequent as desired at no additional cost, and with the additional benefit of full color. Clubs are gradually offering E-bulletin options to their members, but people are slow to change, and many simply dig their heels in and refuse. One club now offers a 10-page, monthly bulletin

*continued on p.3*

thanks to E-bulletins, but I don't expect the downward trend in bulletins to change within my lifetime.

**The number of clubs has been diminishing.** That's to be expected with dwindling collector numbers and will continue.

**Club dues are ever rising.** This is bound to continue as long as clubs are tied to hard copy bulletins. It should be noted here that e-bulletins actually allow clubs to *decrease* dues.

**Fewer club meetings by existing clubs.** It's always been hard to get collectors to come out to meetings; now there are fewer collectors, and fewer collectors mean fewer people within driving distance to meeting. A few clubs have given up on meetings entirely.

**Fewer club members > fewer volunteers** > same workers doing more jobs for multiple clubs. If enough clubs fold, that would mean more collectors would be available as volunteers for the existing clubs, but I don't see this situation changing. (God bless the volunteers! Without them we wouldn't have a hobby at all.)

**The number of auctions has mushroomed in recent years,** again because clubs are attempting to pay their bills. That *used to be* a working option, but because of declining membership, there are now fewer buyers, fewer donations, and more competition. I don't see the auction situation changing any time soon.

**Demographically,** although there are about as many collectors in the West as there are in the East, the hobby has always been centered in the East. That's because 1) the hobby started in the East, and 2) collectors in the East are more concentrated within a smaller area whereas collectors in the West are more spread out, often by vast distances.

**Male-female ratio within the hobby** has always been about 3:1. That's not going to change.

**Collector age?** Average collector age has always been in the 60s. I don't see that changing. This has been a 'seniors' hobby at least as long as I have been a collector (35 years)...and now I am one!

**Plastic pages have taken over.** I don't see anything in my crystal ball diminishing that trend.

**Trading has certainly fallen off** -several factors continue to work against this time-honored tradition: Continually rising postage rates; less availability of new covers (more difficult to build trading stock); fewer collectors to trade with

**Much higher percentage of veteran collectors** (which also lends to fewer traders, since veteran collectors tend to give up on trading because of the lower yield of useable covers). We've lost the looky-loos and some-timers. About all we have left now are the hard core veterans.

**Harder to sell your collections.** Fewer collectors mean fewer buyers...which puts the seller at a distinct disadvantage. That's also going to continue, although consigning your collection to a club bulletin auction is a way around that...but it's a slow process.

**Downsizing continues?** AMCAL 2019 has been cancelled; Long Beach 2018 Swapfest was also cancelled; the Girlie Club has at least temporarily discontinued its bulletin auctions; Tri-State MC recently announced that it will probably no longer give out RMS Area Awards...

Well, good grief! Aren't there any positive trends? Certainly, although some of them depend on your perspective (and I'm giving to mine here).

**Technology.** I've already mentioned the benefits of e-bulletins, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. Computers have already been around for about 30 years, and, although early hopes of computers cataloging collections have never materialized (too time-consuming), they have certainly proved a boon to editors for desktop publishing, listing covers, etc. E-mail enables us to easily and rapidly communicate with collectors all over the world. Cell phones do the same (and without long distance charges!) Web sites on the worldwide web have enabled the hobby to publicize its existence, accomplishments, and events. Additionally, forums such as Facebook have enabled collectors to 'personalize' their hobby endeavors and reach out to collectors wherever they happen to be. Scanners let us instantly create photos of our covers which can then be shared with others...and the list goes on. All these, and untold other upcoming wonders, will continue to let our small hobby have a large voice.

Technology has changed not only many of the processes within the hobby, but the hobby itself. There may be fewer of us, but we're a much, much tighter community now. That's a huge plus, and it will definitely continue.

**More covers pouring into the hobby.** There aren't as many new covers as there once was, but there are still untold hundreds of millions of covers still in existence *outside the hobby*, in closets, in garages, in warehouses, and (again, thanks to technology) every week non-collectors contact someone in the hobby with covers to sell or donate because they read about us on one of the hobby web sites. That's certainly going to continue.

**Selling covers.** For most of the hobby's existence, selling covers was actually frowned upon."Real" collectors didn't do that. However, since the supply of new and readily available covers has all but disappeared [*yes, I know there are some here and there*], selling has become not only accepted, but the most easily accessible means of obtaining new material. Clubs rely on auctions for survival; collectors hope to get something for their collections when they call it quits; other collectors seek to at least partly cover their hobby expenses, and so on. And, even so, covers are still a bargain! The selling trend is certain to continue.

So, what does all this mean? It depends on whether you're a 'glass half full' or a glass half empty' person. On the face of it, it might seem a pretty gloomy report, especially if you've been in the hobby long enough to remember how it used to be. But, for me, as a collector, the hobby's changed and is changing, but I go right on collecting. The collecting hasn't lost one iota of its attractiveness.

And, if you find it consoling, you should be aware that many other hobbies have, and are, suffering the same diminishment as our own. We live in an increasingly fast-paced society that leaves less and less time for a slow-paced, albeit incredibly satisfying, hobby such as our own. [*see our next issue's editorial on "The Plight of Hobbies"*].

It would be nice if the hobby were not diminishing its services; it would be more fun if there were more people at conventions and meetings; more people to trade and dicker with; but the hobby, itself, will always be there, and there will always be collectors...and there will always be covers!

*Just as a follow-up—and to see what other collectors might be able to come up with on the idea of trends within the hobby, I asked fellow collectors to see what they could think of in the way of positive trends in the hobby. Check out the results on p. 26.*