



Editorial - Mentoring vs. Wet Nursing

Officially and unofficially, the idea of mentoring is not a new one in the hobby. There have probably always been more experienced collectors who were willing to take the time and trouble (and often, covers) to show new hobbyists the ropes and get them started. And, in more recent times, say the last 25 years, there have been a number of more organized attempts by various clubs at establishing some type of mentoring program. In large part, I think it was hoped that such would be answer to the chronic problem of so many novice collectors dropping out of the hobby after the first one or two years. With hindsight, we can now look back and see that it obviously wasn't...but that doesn't mean it was a bad idea.

When a person joins a new hobby, a new job, whatever, he or she has to learn the basics from somewhere or someone. With me, for example, Dean Hodgdon, OK, introduced me to the hobby, and Dan Bitter, then living here in CA, became my mentor...not through any organized program; Dan just did it on his own. And I can see that still happening right here, locally, with Loren Moore (President of Sierra-Diablo MC). Loren spends an incredible amount of time and effort) ferreting out those who might be potential collectors and then 2) helping them get established in the hobby.

Clubs, off and on, since I've been around, have attempted more institutionalized mentoring procedures at times. Long Beach MC, I believe, for example, used to assign a mentor to each of its incoming new members so they would have someone to answer their questions, etc. Great idea, but I, as one of those mentors, didn't see where it was having much success.

It's a good idea, and it certainly makes sense, but, as with everything else, it only works sometimes. It worked with me, but not for many others...and in the latter case it's not because *we're* not trying; it's because the novice's expectations are incorrect, his or her interest level wasn't all that high to begin with, and so on.

I think, in many ways, the whole idea of mentoring has become skewed within the hobby, itself...a result, perhaps, of the nonsensical politically correct nanny state we currently find ourselves in. For example, I recently saw statistics that showed that over half of the population of the country now receives some sort of government assistance/benefits. Correspondingly, the idea that it's our *obligation* to trade with new collectors or load them down with covers to get them started has become at least semi-entrenched within the hobby. Generosity is one thing...obligation is another.

Looking at the other end of the picture...at the novice...he or she can't be very interested in collecting if there's no willingness to do what's necessary to collect in the first place. What's happened to the ol' 'pull yourself up by your own bootstraps' mentality?...Squashed by the handout mentality! "Gosh, I just can't find any covers!" "Golly! No one will trade with me!" "Everyone's standards are too high"... "What's wrong with all these bobbed and used covers anyway?!" *Anyone know the address of the government agency that hands out free matchcovers?...There must be one, surely?"*

And how about the old standard, "Those old veterans are sitting on all the really good covers and not letting them circulate!?" I can guarantee that *most* of the really good covers haven't even come to light yet, and any collector is entitled to do anything *he* wants to do with *his* covers. The fact of the matter is that *he* acquired those covers, and other collectors, would-be collectors, or whatever, could do the same...if they were willing to put in the time, effort, and money. I mean, how many one-of-a-kind

covers are there, really?...The Mendelson Opera cover? (which *no* collector owns), the Piso cover? What else? Not much! Everything else is available from someone, somewhere...and we're talking *billions* of matchcovers!

No, the covers that *some* new collectors whine about not being able to get *are* available, but too many come into the hobby with the idea that they can just swoop in and walk away with exactly what they were after. Well, it doesn't necessarily work that way. Collecting is normally a life-long endeavor, and (to my way of thinking) any collection that you could basically put together 'overnight' wouldn't be worth collecting in the first place.

Or, what about, "*I wrote to this one collector, and he was very abrupt, even rude. Well! I'm certainly not going to be a part of this hobby!!*" Doesn't that sound like the little boy who went out to play, was bothered by another little boy, and so came back into the house and declared that he was never going to play outside again? Come on! How interested in collecting can a person with that attitude be?

And *that*, in turn, touches upon the whole group of people who get into hobbies for the *socializing* aspect, rather than the *collecting* aspect, which, not coincidentally, is currently one of the main divisive wedges within our hobby [*but I'll solve that problem in my next editorial (!!)*]

Correspondingly, assigning 'fault' here, if there *is* any fault to be assigned, has also become skewed, even reversed entirely. The tendency over most of this last 20 years, looking at the horrendously high turnover rate among new collectors, has been to assume that *we* must be doing something wrong—We must not be *likeable* enough, or *helpful* enough, or *forthcoming* enough. Somewhere along the line it became *our* fault that such new collectors weren't succeeding [*By the way, where does it say that every collector is guaranteed success?...Especially when they don't sustain the effort to attain success...Isn't that part of the process of collecting...to see just how well you can do? And we're much better off than most collectible hobbies...the material we collect is still abundant and still cheap...But, that's still not good enough for many of the newbies!*].

I'm not overlooking that there are other reasons for dropping out of the hobby--lack of room, lack of time, living circumstances change, incapacitated, and on and on. But, I *am* focusing on the more often heard complaints from people who have been in the hobby only that first year or two. Over the years, a number of surveys of such collectors have been taken by RMS and other groups in an effort to find out what their complaints are and then 'head 'em off at the pass'...but, as it turns out, it's just not something we can fix.

So-o-o-o-o-o, what am I saying here? Basically, we should always have available avenues to mentor new collectors...and to help anyone in the hobby who needs help...but we're expecting too much, both from established collectors and the newbies, and we should stop scourging ourselves every time we see people drop out of the hobby. Is it disheartening? Absolutely! Is it anything we really have any control of? No!

When it comes right down to it, the truth of the matter is....*we* are simply a tiny elite that the rest of the world may only aspire to...and if they choose not to aspire to it...*tough!* [*Well, that's one way of looking at it, anyway!*]

[*Have I been too harsh? Send in your cards and letters to ye olde Editor (make that 'higher end middle-aged' Editor)*]