

HOBBY HISTORY

Private Proprietary Match Stamps

by Mike Prero

This is one of those areas where our hobby overlaps another hobby...in this case, stamp collecting. Why would this be of interest to you. Well, more and more of today's collectors are so "into" the hobby that they are spreading out and also collecting 'related' items—salesman's sample books, match safes, old match company stock certificates, shipping crates, etc. And, of course, what matchbox collector would turn down a box from the 1800s!? *And*, on that box there might be a Private Proprietary Match Stamp.

What *were* Private Proprietary Match Stamps? They were a result of the Revenue Act of 1862, passed by the federal government because of the rising cost of the Civil War...a war that many had initially believed would last only six weeks. This act, among other things, instituted an internal revenue levy on documents of all kinds (deeds, mortgages, contracts, etc.) and on matches, canned fruits, and patent medicines. Payment of the tax was to be evidenced by stamps placed on the individual documents or on the containers of the various "proprietary" products. The tax on matches was 1 cent per 100 matches or fraction thereof. This remained in effect until March 3, 1883.

Although regular U.S. Internal Revenue stamps were prepared for all the taxable classifications, manufacturers of matches and other proprietary commodities were permitted, at their expense, to have dies and die-plates made for use in printing their own revenue stamps, which was done at that time by private firms under government contract. Within certain limits, they were allowed reasonable latitude in the selection of the design and wording to appear on the stamps. Most

manufacturers, including the Wilmington match companies, quickly availed themselves of this option, first, because the publicity value of having their names and possibly that of their product on the stamps was a very attractive prospect; and, secondly, because by using their own printing plates and by ordering large quantities at one time, they could achieve significant discounts on the cost of printing the stamps.

During 1862 and 1883, for example, there were five companies whose private match stamps were used to pay the tax on matches manufactured in Wilmington. Two of these companies played only insignificant roles, but the other three, plus one earlier company, were chiefly responsible for the formation of that modern industrial giant known first as the Diamond Match Company and later as the Diamond National Corporation.

So keep your eyes open for these little gems affixed to those old boxes that might just be at the next yard sale or flea market you search.