

HOBBY HISTORY

The Rise and Fall of the American Matchcover: I

“All good things come to an end,” the saying goes, and that, as we’re all painfully aware, certainly is the case with the American matchcover. To really understand the significance of the decline of the American match industry, one need only view the role that matchcovers have played in the history and development of our society.

When the first phosphorous friction matches were manufactured in the United States in 1836, America’s love affair with the indispensable match began. By 1850, 60 match factories were already open throughout the country. By 1878, two manufacturers dominated the scene: Swift, Courtney, and Beecher and O. C. Barber. In December 1880, after a devastating price war, these two giants and several smaller companies merged to form the Diamond Match Company, and, early in the following year, production of Diamond Match Company’s first matches began.

With the formation of Diamond, and its purchase of the rights to Joshua Pusey’s matchbook in 1894, the American match industry, as we know it, was born. Soon, the matchbook became one of the most common items manufactured on earth, and America was to dominate the matchbook industry for the next 80 years. Along the way, America produced the first matchcover advertising, the first non-poisonous phosphorous match, and the greatest variety of matchcover styles and types that the world has ever seen.

With the appearance of the first matchbook, it wasn’t long before someone recognized the advertising potential of that little piece of blank cardboard. As early as 1893-1894, the initial

Binghamton Match Co.’s famous Piso cover [*see RMS Bulletin, May/June 2000*] already had professionally printed advertising on it [*that’s the one that got Binghamton Match Co. sued out of existence by Diamond for patent infringement*].

Still, we herald that day in 1896, when the manager of the Mendelson Opera Company bought 100 blank matchbooks and had hand-printed messages and pictures of the opera’s leading stars put on them, as the beginning of matchbook advertising. Personally, it’s my opinion that we may all have take in by a Diamond PR job, as far as the Mendelson Opera cover is concerned.

Be that as it may, however, whether because of the Piso cover or the Mendelson Opera cover, by 1896 the face of America was about to change.

It wasn’t long before businesses all over the country were flocking to take advantage of the incredibly cheap, incredibly abundant, simple and effective means of advertising. From cigarette stands and cigar stores to hotels, motels, and restaurants, from lumber companies and jewelry stores to banks and insurance corporations, from soft drink and beer distributors to national parks and zoos, American ingenuity had found a new outlet. So important did this subsequent advertising on matchcovers become, in fact, that the matches, themselves, actually became secondary to the covers that housed them (just as the gum companies initially used baseball cards to sell their gum...only to find out that it was the cards people wanted, and not the gum!).

Moreover, matchcovers took on ancillary advertising quality, as well. Here, they advertised not a product, but rather the pride and the ‘esprit de corps’ of the advertiser. Colleges heralded their sporting teams and school mascots; Navy ships proudly exported their logos and mottos to ports of call around the world; even Uncle Sam extensively used the matchcover to promote loyalty, teamwork, and patriotism at home during World War II.

[Don’t miss part II in our next issue]