

HOBBY HISTORY

The Rise and Fall of the American Matchcover: II

Still, there was more to these little cardboard covers than their advertising value...much, much more. The matchbook seemed to filter into every part of American society and phases of daily life. As it became polite for men to be ever ready to light a woman's cigarette, matchbooks became part of the American etiquette system and part of the American courting ritual; as it became fashionable for couples to provide personal matchbooks at weddings and anniversary celebrations, matchbooks became part of the society's rites of passage; and as young men marched off to war carrying matches in damp proof matchcovers, matchbooks became part of the country's defense system.

Perhaps most indicative of all, however, was the emergence of the matchbook into the very core of what Americans viewed as the 'ideal' American. Admittedly, matchbooks arrived at this pinnacle on the coattails of the cigarette, but the effect was just as powerful. When Bogie lit up, smoking became the epitome of masculinity; when Becall lit up, it was femininity as its best. Smoking even became a ritualized custom. Death row inmates made it a part of their last requests; dying soldiers breathed their last breaths with a cigarette in their mouths; even sex was no longer satisfying without that 'climatic' final smoke. And it was the matchbook which made all this possible.

In the midst of all this, then, it's not surprising to see that matchcovers enjoyed their golden age from the 1930s through the 1950s. Diamond Match Company had early on proved to be the leading name and the biggest manufacturer in the field and the oldest existing match manufacturer in the United States (and in the entire New World, I believe). But, by the 1930s, Lion Match Company's startling array of beautiful and

ingenious covers had already begun to overshadow the rock of the industry. Not until the ascendancy of Universal Match Company, some 20 years later, would there be such another innovator in the field.

All of the match manufacturers had their own lines and trademarks, but only Lion's were consistently truly different from what the competition had to offer. In 1930, Lion introduced the Feature; in 1934, Lion's Midget appeared; in 1936, it produced the Giant; by 1941, it had brought out the odd-striker and the Display; later came the Eez-L (Easel Back); in 1951, the Contour first appeared; somewhere along here came the Wagon Tongue, and many others, as well.

For many collectors, the 'classical' period of American matchcovers started with the Feature in 1930. The Feature sported an attractive cover on the outside and, on the inside, full-color art work on the matches, themselves. Late, other companies would produce cheap imitations, but there was no comparison to the heavy-papered, artistic creations from Lion. Today, Features are the only covers regularly collected with the matches left intact, and the true connoisseur always specifies "full Features" as his or her preference, meaning these classic gems from Lion Match Company.

By the late 1950s, the last of the great American match manufacturers had come to the forefront. Universal Match Company had started in 1925 and, to be sure, had made some important inroads into the industry prior to World War II. Its 40-strike cover, the 'Royal Flash,' introduced in 1936, proved to be very popular, as did the 'Ten-Strike,' introduced soon after. It wasn't until the 1950s, however, that Universal began to dominate the market. In 1951, it came out with the first modern 30-strike cover, which was an immediate success. In 1956, the 'Matchorama' appeared and quickly became the most popular type of all the color-photo covers put out by any of the match companies. Eventually, 'Universal' became synonymous with slick, professional, fancy covers.