

HOBBY HISTORY

The Rise and Fall of the American Matchcover: III

The great art work of the earlier years of the industry had already disappeared by the 1960s/ It was all razzle-dazzle now, and Universal was the best there was in that department. Jewel, Jewelite, Signet, Foilite, Filigree, Florentine, Cameo, Silktone, Uniglo, Matchtone, and Rainbow all appeared within some short twenty years. Universal cornered the market on high-tech, flashy, eye-catching covers, and its trademarks became collecting categories in and of themselves.

And then, more rapidly than it had all began, it was over. Looking back with hindsight, the writing was on the wall by the late 1970s. From 1975-1978, five U.S. match plants closed. For the observer, It was difficult to tell, though, whether that was an omen of disaster or simply restructuring to more efficient system. From 1980 on, however, it's obvious now that the industry was in a catastrophic downward spin. From 1980-1990, eleven more match factories closed, and in the early 1990s the closures continued. By 1994, out of a once vibrant and thriving American match industry, only three domestic manufacturers survived: Bradley Industries (Atlas Match Corp.), D.D. Bean & Sons, and Diamond Brands. What had happened?

Change. Change was inevitable, of course. Someone once said that the only thing that never changes is change. It's constant. Unfortunately, as with most other parts of the aging American industrial complex, the match manufacturers in the United States could not adapt to the current conditions, which were ever-increasing production costs and steadily decreasing demand.

American workers simply couldn't work for the wages received by their peers in Third World

countries. Hence, as the price of American matchbooks increased annually, the gap between American and foreign production costs became greater and greater. Eventually, the gap became untenable, and the American match industry collapsed.

Making things even more complicated is the continual trend toward an international economy rather than a national economy. American corporations build production centers elsewhere to cope with production costs, and foreign corporations, recognizing the stability of the American government and economy and the excellent investment opportunities that this country affords, either buy out domestic businesses or establish their own companies here. Thus, the once sharply defined boundaries between U.S. and foreign business interests have become increasingly blurred. International joint ventures, mergers, takeovers and buyouts, etc. make it more and more difficult to identify products as 'American' any longer. The automobile and the matchbook are typical examples. American vehicles typically have foreign parts now. Universal Match was taken over by Swedish AB in the early 1980s and for a couple of years tried having its matches made in Belgium.

Helping all this along, the decline of the cigarette was the second major factor in the fall of the American match industry. With all the various anti-smoking campaigns on private, local, state, and federal levels, millions of potential smokers (and matchbook users) quit or never acquired the habit. The continual hassle over smoking and non-smoking sections in businesses and working areas, the then already-to-be-seen ban on smoking in many public buildings, and the advent of cheap, disposable lighters, all clearly pointed to a decline in the American matchcover.

All of that happened some ten years ago. Did it spell the demise of the hobby? By no means. However, it has necessitated various 'shifts' in how we do things as adjustments are made to the new circumstances. Since it's significantly more difficult to find new matchcovers now, there is a

greater emphasis on buying...and a greater emphasis on combing local communities for private accumulations, ...and a greater emphasis on collecting in small categories now that almost all of the Fancies are no longer being produced, ...etc.

And, the American match industry certainly isn't dead, and at least the Casino and Cigarette categories are seeing annual avalanches of covers, so all is not grim, but, still, one has to lament the passing of bygone times.