

The Fun of Acquisition By Richard Pederson

The fun in philately is in the hunt. Stamp collectors, by their very nature, love to acquire new items for their collections, even if they do not really need them. Many of us continue to make purchases when we still have many earlier acquisitions waiting to be integrated into our collections. Although this need to acquire has not changed over the years, the manner in which philatelic purchases are made has significantly changed.

One of the singing groups I followed as a young adult in the late sixties was The Monkees. On a reunion tour in the 1980s, they did a song called "That Was Then, This is Now," bringing up the differences that occur over a time frame of nearly 20 years. Well those differences are also true in philately.

When many of us were young, acquiring stamps for your collection was certainly gone about in a different way than it normally is today. Most of us started out saving stamps off the mail received by our families. Not only was there a great deal of communication (letters, greeting cards, postcards, etc.) through the mail, but much of it contained commemorative stamps. Now, most mail that comes to the home either has no stamps on it or it has a meter or permit. Letter writing has almost disappeared and what little mail that contains stamps has non-commemoratives such as Forever stamps, bulk rate stamps, and the current first class rate and postcard rate stamps. With the lack of stamps on mail, potential new collectors need another way of being introduced to the hobby and building their collection. As a youth growing up in the Washington, DC area, I certainly had a wealth of opportunities for adding items to my collection. Every hobby shop and Woolworth's dime store had an area devoted to stamps and coins. You could spend an hour or more going through their many packets of stamps ranging in price from a dime to a dollar or more. Some larger stores also had individual stamps for sale in addition to most of the collecting supplies a beginning to intermediate collector needed, including hinges, stock books, and stamp albums. Almost every neighborhood of any size had a stamp dealer, either renting space in a hobby shop or other store or operating as a standalone store. Because I lived in a major metropolitan area, on Saturdays and during vacation time, I could hop on the bus and go downtown where the stamp buying opportunities were seemingly endless. Not only were there a number of stamp dealers (Jack O'King is one that comes to mind), but the Woodward & Lothrop (Woodies to us locals) and Hecht's department stores both had stamp departments. The Woodies store, in particular, had an area on the first floor that even made most stamp stores I had been in seem small in comparison. Woodies, unlike the stamp dealers who emphasized Scott Numbers™ and Scott and Harris albums, had Minkus supplements, albums, catalogs, and magazines stuffed with offerings and specials. Although the magazines had a price on the cover, they always threw one in your bag if you made a purchase, which gave me added incentive to spend some of my stamp budget there. For real die hard collectors, like me, when all the stamp and department stores had been explored, you could always go to the Georgetown area of Washington, DC and go through the antique shops. The antique shops always appealed to me

The Fun of Acquisition

because it was like a treasure hunt since you never knew what you might find. The prices at the antique stores ranged from overpriced to bargains since stamps were not the specialty of most antique dealers and some seemed to place great value on any stamps, postcards, or covers that were old and others seemed to think stamps and covers were worthless pieces of paper.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as today, there were a number of publications carrying advertisements for stamps. The difference was that there were many more general hobby publications then and it was not unusual to find advertisements for stamps in the general press (e.g., *Boys Life* magazine, most newspapers). Today there are far fewer general philatelic publications and you are much less likely to find stamp-related articles and advertisements outside the philatelic press.

In those days, there were also more stamp clubs, with many operating in schools, since it was much “cooler” to collect stamps than it is today. Because so many other kids collected stamps, it was very easy to trade duplicates with your friends or classmates in order to build your collection.

Another very popular way of purchasing stamps that was used by many of my friends was through approvals. Where I preferred going to stores to seek the stamps I wanted, many others preferred getting approvals in the mail from companies such as H. E. Harris. The advertisements from the approval dealers were certainly enticing and made my friends feel like they were getting valuable and mysterious treasures for their money, although I felt my approach gave me a much better way of acquiring what I was looking for to fill the spaces in my albums.

Today there are still boundless opportunities for acquiring stamps, but in many ways they are quite different. With stamp stores and hobby shops rapidly disappearing, the closing of Woolworths, and the removal of stamps from department stores, it is no longer possible for many of today’s collectors to go to a local store and make their stamp purchases. Fortunately, there are still other ways to feed your stamp habit. If you prefer buying stamps in person, there are still regular weekend stamp shows or bourses that are within traveling range of most areas of the country. Stamp shows and bourses give you the added bonus of being able to shop at multiple dealers in one convenient location in order to do comparison shopping or to locate hard to find items. Stamp auctions have remained a vibrant part of the industry and provide an excellent method of acquiring stamps and covers for intermediate to advanced collectors. There are many articles in the philatelic press by experts, such as Jacques C. Schiff, Jr., NSDA member and longtime New Jersey dealer and auctioneer, that provide sound advice on how to acquire stamps via auction. It is also still possible to purchase stamps and covers at flea markets and from antique and collectible dealers and those who collect modern U.S. can still make purchases directly from the U.S. Postal Service. For mainstream collectors actively involved in the hobby, there are numerous specialty and a few general philatelic publications (e.g., *Linn’s Stamp News*, *MeKeels and Stamps Magazine*, *Global Stamp News*, *U.S. Stamp News*, and *Scott Stamp Monthly*) that contain advertisements for dealers catering to virtually any collecting area of interest.

Despite these remaining traditional ways of purchasing your stamps, what is becoming the dominant market place for philatelic sales is the internet.

Many dealers no longer sell at shows, conduct floor auctions or mail sales, or sell approvals. Those dealers sell exclusively over the internet, either through direct sales or on-line auctions. Using the powerful search capabilities of the internet, it is possible for a buyer to locate almost any item for which he/she is looking, view scans of the items that are available matching their search criteria (e.g., MNH example of U.S. Scott 428 in XF condition), and purchase the one that fits their budget and is of acceptable quality. The internet also provides a wonderful place to research your stamps and collecting interests. You can use the internet's search capabilities to help identify stamps, determine their value, and find information out about what is depicted on the stamp, in addition to buying and selling stamps.

Because so many of today's collectors buy exclusively via the internet, using sites such as eBay® or StampWants.com™, it is very difficult to get an accurate estimate of just how many active collectors there are. In the past, when a large proportion of serious collectors belonged to clubs and societies and/or subscribed to one or more of the general philatelic publications, it was much easier to gauge the level of serious philatelic activity. Now there could be just as many people seriously pursuing their collecting goals, but since many are not involved in organized philately, we have no way of knowing. Because the demand is still constant or increasing for many categories of philatelic items that are even moderately difficult to find, my guess is that there are still plenty of serious collectors, including many new ones that we, as a hobby, know nothing about.

Even if the internet is bringing a sizeable number of new collectors into the hobby, there are some significant issues that are brought up by this change in the way people collect. People that were brought into the hobby through more traditional means were also likely to receive a better philatelic education by learning from mentors, peers, and their local stamp dealer. Not only did they understand varieties created by perforations (or lack thereof), watermarks, color differences, grills, and other production-related varieties, but they were also more likely to read philatelic publications and hence be more aware of both philatelic news and ways of acquiring stamps, covers, and collecting supplies.

Prior to the internet, stamp collecting was also a much more sociable activity. Now many collectors pursue their hobby without so much as talking to another collector or a dealer. In the past, stamp stores, clubs, and shows all encouraged communication with others engaged in the hobby.

Although times have changed, it is still easy to add new items to your collection. It only requires a little work and ingenuity, two commodities most serious stamp collectors have in abundance. One final word of advice is that if you are one of the lucky ones to still have a local stamp store, please visit it often. There is nothing that surpasses the pleasure of browsing through the many treasures a local store offers while enjoying the added bonus of having the opportunity to socialize with other collectors and a

The Fun of Acquisition

knowledgeable store owner. [Note: This article was first published in the April 2010 edition of *NSDA News*.]