

True Value of Stamp Collecting

By Richard Pederson

Reflecting back upon those years when I was growing up, my first inclination is to think that things were much simpler than they are now. Upon further thought, I am not so sure whether they were simpler or we just had a different set of choices as to what to do with our time. Most of the activities that were available to us as children, are still available as choices, but for most of today's children, the activities that we treasured are barely within their consciousness. Organized sports replace sandlot baseball and football games. Television and movies replace reading. Do-it-yourself video and computer games replace board games played with the family gathered around the kitchen table. Hobbies such as stamp and coin collecting are largely the province of those above the age of fifty.

I am certainly not against progress or change. I have designed and developed computer software for the last thirty years and have enjoyed every minute of my work. Still, I am not certain that all change is good. Those Saturday nights spent playing Monopoly® or cards with my parents and/or friends while eating freshly popped popcorn fostered family values and close friendships that seem lacking in many of today's children. Sandlot sports were almost a year-round, daily activity that helped keep each of us in shape while developing our skills in sportsmanship without undue pressure. Today's sports activities are frequently over-organized, are excessively competitive, and often place children under extreme pressure. It seems as if we have lost sight of the fact that the real purpose of those sports activities should be for our children to have fun. Books, such as Mark Twain's (Samuel L. Clemens) Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, widened our vocabularies, strengthened our skills in spelling and grammar, and provided wholesome entertainment. Many current video games emphasize violence and do little to promote a child's education or stimulate their imagination.

Perhaps the worst development of all is the virtual disappearance of hobbies for children. Sometimes, I believe that I learned more from stamp collecting than from any other single thing that I did as a child. To this day, my favorite category in trivia games is geography. I learned more about the world from stamps than I ever did from geography books in school. When I got a new stamp from some unknown or far away place, I would immediately look that place up in the dictionary or encyclopedia. I would learn its location, population, size, neighboring countries, crops, products, history, capital, leader or ruler, history and any other facts that I could find. The beginning stamp albums of the day sometimes simplified my task by summarizing this information and by providing pictures of the national flag and coat of arms. After learning what I could about the country, I mounted my new found treasures within the album. I learned that Thailand was once Siam, that Iran was Persia, and that, in 1955, the sun really never did set on the British Empire. Figure 1, Tom Sawyer and World Stamps,

pictures a copy of Mark Twain's novel "Tom Sawyer" with stamps of Persia (Iran), Thailand (Siam), and the British Commonwealth laying on top of the book.

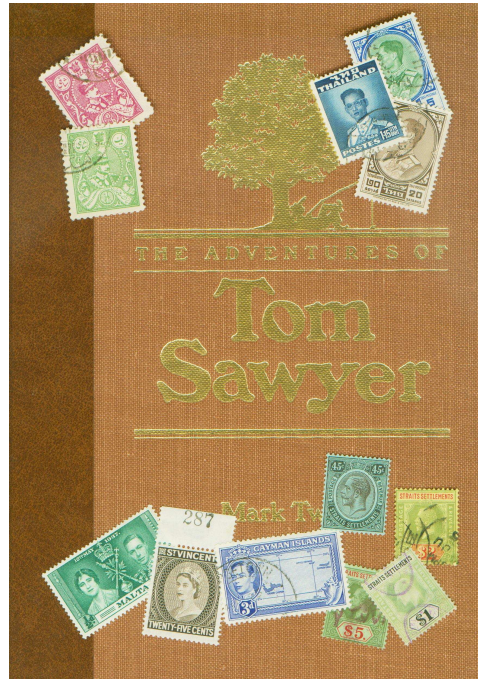


Figure 1. Tom Sawyer and World Stamps

In addition to teaching me geography, stamps also increased my knowledge of history and the world's peoples. I learned about many historic events, I saw pictures of ancient civilization, and saw pictures of noteworthy people, both past and present. Stamps helped me understand different cultures, religions, and beliefs. Through stamps I refined my organizational skills as I mounted my collection and stored my duplicates. I developed research skills as I tried to decipher complicated issues such as the Washington-Franklin issues and began to understand facets of postal history. Purchasing, selling, trading, and cataloging my stamps also increased my mathematical skills as I was constantly tabulating values.

It is hard to conceive of any activity that children participate in today that provides as many benefits as stamp collecting did to many of those in my generation. I believe that parents today are just as concerned as ever about the well being of their children. Maybe we as stamp collectors have not done an adequate job of conveying how the children of today could benefit from our hobby. We need to make stamp collecting fashionable, to show parents that their child will have an advantage in school and in life if they pursue a hobby such as stamp collecting. After all, what parent does not want to give their children every conceivable advantage in today's competitive world? Within the stamp collecting hobby, there is too much emphasis on the worth of stamps rather than the value that stamp collecting brings to people. Consider a common stamp that has poor centering, has a torn corner, and has a hinge mark on the back. Despite those defects, an

almost worthless stamp still has almost limitless value as a teaching tool and a stimulator for a child's imagination. Each and every one of us should do our best to see that the special educational value, which is unique to the stamp collecting hobby, once again becomes a part of our children's lives.