

The SRSC Newsletter

The Santa Rosa Stamp Club

Promoting the study, knowledge, and enjoyment of stamp collecting.
APS Chapter #1584



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Editor's Note

Dennis Buss

Once again, Steve Brett comes through with two interesting and closely related articles that comprise this edition of the Newsletter. Steve welcomes your insights, comments, and suggestions regarding the stamp trends article as well as the much-discussed topic of how to revive stamp collecting. If you have a different perspective on either one or both of these topics, put your thoughts on paper, I will be happy to include them in the next newsletter.

Trends in Stamp Collecting

Stephen Brett

Why should stamp collectors or collectors of anything, interest themselves in trends? In two prior club presentations spaced years apart I didn't explore the "Why's" underpinning the study or our interest in trends in our hobby. I presumed we were all interested in this subject but it occurred to me that we may have a variety of reasons for studying philatelic trends. And, we use the knowledge for a variety of actions. And, these actions differ sharply according to our age and stages of collecting.

My Random House Dictionary defines trend as "direction tendency." In a practical sense, the concept of direction for us mortals has an end point—it is not infinite. So, our interest in trends varies by our age and stage in collecting. I certainly didn't think of the trend of stamps in my first 100 stamp packet in 1954. But, when I started to consider spending real money on my collection, the concept of trend bifurcated into two camps: Stamps I really wanted because they intrigued me (and that's the only factor that mattered) and stamps I liked and were said to climb in value over time. In other words, increasing value provided a rationale for buying pricier material. This latter class of stamps stimulated my interest and excitement in checking and rechecking sectors of my collection for pricing shifts (hopefully upward). This is a potent aspect of and attraction to our hobby. It weighs and hopefully affirms our astuteness or tells us to become sharper and study harder. Quite resemblant to sharp financial people. The mature collector is a decision maker. He or she has decided to collect certain countries, in a variety of ways (mint, cancelled, singles, blocks, sheets, topics, covers, and more). When the trend dynamic rears its head, timing becomes a determinant. It becomes a shaper of our collecting methodology. The key word is "when." When to buy, when to hold, when to sell. The intriguing shadings of "when" is allocation - how much? This is when a variant of addiction can rear its head. I recall a funny, but maybe not so funny, bumper sticker I saw on Route 29; "Help me God,



My Husband Collects Electric Trains." I laughed, but then I came to a darker thought. She meant it!

I think we are always on safe ground in becoming smart collectors and that means informed about trends. This comes down to a truism: In life, timing is everything. If you're a collector like me, the stamps I've collected for the fun of it have nothing to do with a desire to get rich from my purchases. They are worth about what I paid for them at Gimbels in Valley Stream 65 years ago (and, truthfully, less in many cases) and I still love looking at them and owning them.

What is at issue regarding trends for many club members is what to hold and when to fold. More importantly if it is the latter, what to fold. The study of trends is important as



it enables us to make informed and intelligent decisions regarding how and where. The same information process also should drive us in growing specialty areas during our mature years. Maturity no doubt leads to collecting sophistication and here's where trends are normally studied since mature people tend to regard the value of money. For many, money didn't fall from trees and they want value for their dollars. Focusing on what I believe are the key interests of our club membership, holding, selling, and specializing, I believe the current relevant trend dynamics are the following:

1. Collectors important to us are not kids. The time of great expansion of collecting in our era came from the baby boomers. They were mostly page fillers. Today's buyers are more mature and want quality, not quantity, and they are willing to pay for it. General collections don't fetch fancy prices.
2. Very high prices are garnered for scarce and high-quality materials at auction and through quality dealers and professional buyers. Grading is the key to solid prices.
3. Specialty collections and philatelic focus trumps generalized average worldwide collections.
4. Stamp collections that attract better pricing are in emerging countries (i.e., countries with growing middle classes with disposable income such as India.
5. The marketing (and hence availability) of vast amounts of stamp material over the internet has drastically changed the philatelic landscape. On the one hand, it has made buying and selling vastly easier. On the other hand, it has increased the amount of material available thus lowering prices in general. To understand these trends, let's review important stamp hobby milestones:
 - A. The Boom of the 1930's
 - B. The war years - the 1940's
 - C. The boom of the 1950's
 - D. The 1970's collecting peak
 - E. The 1980's "Bubble Burst"
 - F. The new era of electronics, computers and the heightened pace of the marketplace.

The greatest overall changes over the preceding decades include the following:

1. The rare stamp pricing explosion especially for highly graded and unique stamps.
2. Complete collections dropping in price replaced by increased specialization and topical collecting.

3. Hobbyists morphing into serious collectors. A dramatic shift from one to the other.
4. The emerging overseas market, especially India, China and South America driven by their new affluence. Forward thinking collectors will also watch Africa.
5. The demise of local dealers. 2020 data shows only 84 retail stamp stores in 32 states and 5 million collectors in the U.S.A. In 1940 there were 57,000 APS members compared to 27,289 in 2022. Its peak in 1991 was 57,000 members.
6. Syndicating extremely expensive stamps, e.g., Stanley Gibbons.
7. Record auction prices for rarities.
8. Emergence of *ebay* that opened the world to sellers. This has the effect of huge supply and a deflation in general values.
9. Technology's role as a boon to stamp identification, stamp finding and specialized knowledge.
10. Phone and on-line bidding.

Many say that the future for our hobby is through technology. Yet, many of us prefer and practice the old ways and only dabble in the new ways. The new generation of collectors will be using technology intensely for buying, selling and researching.

I will close with the suggestion that studying the elements behind these trends is important for maximizing the selling of all or parts of our collections as well as buying material at the right time and in the right places while developing our collections.

Maybe We're Not Selling This Right

Stephen Brett

I suspect I'm not the only guy in his 70's still loyal to Kenmore Stamps, looking forward to their approval service every six weeks. There are layers of nostalgia in this comfortable process. It's all done by mail. So reliable. It's all paper. The friendly and familiar envelope, like a letter from home, colorful inserts with pithy historical and soft-technical script and paper order blanks (what's this heresy? I can use a credit card to pay Not me, here's my check, Mr. Henry Adams. I used to send dollar bills and coins held by Scotch Tape (from my allowance money) before you became so sophisticated at Kenmore Stamps. The enclosed Kenmore brochure creaks with 50's and 60's offers: "Last Vichy Issues," "Occupied Latvian Mints Hard to Get!" "Complete set of Henry Pu Yi -Last Emperor of China." Us baby boomers love this World War II memorabilia, and we actually know who and what these stamps are all about, but they are as relevant to Generation Z as Taylor Swift is to my Rabbi or Cardinal Timothy Dolan, was she the lead singer for Mitch Miller? It occurs to me that we are just not selling this terrific hobby effectively - Kenmore being just one perfect example of a Last Hurrah, likely to fold their umbrella in a few more years.



I've been doing a little nosing around, starting with my grandkids and fanning out and have found practically no youngsters with a hobby. They have their handheld electronics. And they have their interests (ecology, space, global warming, et al) and sports (soccer, baseball, football which they play more than watch, interestingly) and their burden of school assignments. They rarely have money in their pockets because they don't have odd jobs like we had, ergo, little or no disposable income. Everything appears to be programmed and prepaid. The notion of having stamp albums to fill or stamp stores to

visit when one has a dollar or two in their pocket, all is foreign. Mail is mostly junk and stamps to soak are either non-existent or permanently glued to the envelope. So, here's the bottom line: The notion that the hobby starts with an intriguing pile of stamps in one's mailbox and a paper stamp album to place them in is a nonstarter in revitalizing the hobby.

In fact, my first proposal is that we have to sell the notion of having a HOBBY! What has happened to all those hobbies of our youth? Like collecting marbles, bubble gum baseball cards, coins, comic books, building model airplanes? Stamp collecting is not the only hobby that has shrunk. When we were kids, people collected all sorts of stuff. Think I'm kidding? Just check today's cereal boxes. In our time millions collected Betty Crocker presidential spoons, thimbles, porcelain bells, cowboy and space figurines, and, yes, stamps as well as square inches of the new State of Alaska that were available with a box top and 25 cents remitted to General Mills or Kellogg.

Today's cereal box has health tips, celebrity work outs and warnings about global warming. Is that more fun than a rubber figurine of Lassie buried somewhere in your cornflakes and the offer to purchase Lassie's plastic homestead for \$1.00 and two box tops? If the hobby was non-existent, a marketer created and found its audience around the kitchen table or in a den sitting around the boob tube. I suggest that stamp collecting, once the "King of Hobbies," can be reinvented just like plastic submarines filled with baking soda bobbing in a bathroom sink. Millions of kids clipped the mail-in order form for 100 worldwide stamps for a dime, and soon after came the envelope along with \$4.50 of approvals to return in "ten days or less." The fish was caught. Marketing was slick in those days.

Stamp collecting needs re-imagining and repackaging. You tell me, which has more long-lasting appeal? A sad polar bear on a shrunken iceberg or 100 colorful space, wildlife and celebrity commemoratives? All those fabulous and entertaining hobbies of the fifties, 60's and 70's—photography, birding, astronomy, playing an instrument, dancing, painting- by-numbers, radio control air planes, ham radio, plastic and balsa wood models, model rail roading and so much more. Are we to believe all of this has been obliterated by smart phones and tablets?



We need to connect stamp collecting with today's wants and needs. A hobby is something one likes to do in their spare time. It seems that millions are haunted in their spare time today by emptiness. Feelings of aloneness drive people back to an activity that they just left at work. The 9 to 5 work station shrinks to a handheld device or laptop where they feel less lost and more connected. The recreational aspect of "the hobby" (i.e., engaging in creative and artistic pursuit combined with the acquisition of substantial skills and knowledge in an intriguing area) has shrunk to describing one's minute to minute life-feelings, and politically aggressive posturings. No wonder we have a dysfunctional and anxiety ridden society. We don't have the satisfaction of building, creating and performing. We doubt what is served up as fact and knowledge. We crave relaxation.

Stamp collecting always has and continues to answer our basic need for a satisfying hobby. However, the classic collecting format that includes albums, catalogues, stock books, cigar boxes, supplies and equipment, shelves, drawers, and more flies in the face of our transient and portable society. Many youngsters regard car ownership as a yoke around their necks. For someone living with five friends planning a short-term rental in

Portugal, owning a complete set of Scott 2023 catalogues is not an option. Stamp collecting just isn't backpack ready. The hobby may have to evolve into other universal and huge pastimes where one has a great interest and knowledge and love but little to no baggage. For example, millions of people worldwide will answer that art, archaeology, architecture, medieval history, the Civil War, are their hobbies. Do they own a Van Gogh? The Chrysler Building? A mummy case? A suit of armor? I know several birders and not one of them owns an eagle. The point is, collecting may not be in the cards but philately can flourish as a hobby. Ownership may evolve into shares and other forms of ownership, perhaps off-premises like gold. One's collection may take a virtual form, accessible via viewing and electronic inventory. "I collect stamps; do you want to see some of my best material?" This can be a discussion on a jet between two passengers. Expertise is expertise and one doesn't have to brandish 36 leather bound stamp albums to speak for their philatelic know-how. By the way, the 36 albums can be synthesized into 12 DVD's or a single flash drive; "That's my collection" - 2043. The actual stamp is in a repository and if you sell or trade, the stamp(s) are reassigned to the next buyer and it appears on his or her hand-held device when the sale is consummated.

There is a future for our hobby. It may be bigger and broader than ever. We just need to reimagine it and reformat it for today's world. We must trust our judgment and our own personal experience with it; that it has been and can continue to be the greatest of them all.



**The Santa Rosa Stamp Club meets on the first Tuesday of the month
from 6:45 pm to 9:00 pm at the Finley Community Center,**

Cypress Room,

2060 W. College Avenue in Santa Rosa.

Membership dues are \$20 per year.

For information about the club visit our website at

<http://www.santarosastampclub.org/home.html>

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