

Yesterday and Today – How Stamp Collecting Has Changed

By Richard Pederson

No matter what era a person became involved with stamp collecting, they are likely to have fond memories of that time period and the circumstances that brought them into the hobby. Having collected stamps since the mid-1950s, I recently reflected on just how much our hobby has changed since then. The way I go about acquiring and selling stamps and covers, the supplies I use to house my collection, the sources of information about the hobby, the way people collect stamps, and even the mix of people participating in the hobby have all undergone changes, with some of those changes being dramatic.

When I first started collecting, there seemed to be a stamp store, hobby shop, department store or similar location, where you could purchase stamps, in virtually any urban or suburban area of any size. There were also large approval dealers, such as H. E. Harris and Kenmore Stamp Company (see figure at right) , that advertised in the general press and other channels (e.g., match covers), so that virtually anyone could easily be exposed to stamp collecting and find a convenient source for acquiring philatelic material. Today, the corner stamp store is gone from most communities. Although we still have many approval dealers, there is little advertising outside of the philatelic press. A



few companies, such as Mystic Stamp Company, still place advertisements outside of philatelic channels, but the amount of exposure to the general public is a fraction of what it once was. Does the disappearance of retail stores selling stamps or the diminished amount of advertising indicate the hobby is weakening or going away? In my view, that is hardly the case. The way people do business has just changed. On-line auctions and stamp stores have largely replaced the local stamp store as a convenient source for stamps, supplies, and other philatelic items. Many of today's collectors do a web search over the internet to locate sources for purchasing stamps. Much information about stamps and the hobby is also disseminated via the internet. In the mid-1900s, when I started collecting, traditional print stamp publications were still booming. There were a number of weekly periodicals that one could look to in order to keep up with what was going on in the hobby. Many dealers, small and large, sent newsletters to their clients containing price lists, advertisements, and philatelic articles.

There have also been dramatic changes in the way people collect stamps. When I started collecting, it was not unusual for people to collect the world and those that did not were often country collectors who collected everything issued by one or more countries. Today, there have been so many stamps issued, it is virtually impossible to collect all worldwide stamps. For many countries, it is also unrealistic to assemble a reasonably complete collection. Collectors have adjusted by collecting in different ways. Now, a much greater percentage of collectors are collecting by topic or theme. Such

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collections tend to be more manageable, can be tailored to a collector's interests, and, because they are not strictly defined by the spaces in a stamp album, allow more freedom in collecting. Many collectors with more traditional tastes have discovered a variety of ways to make their collections manageable. These include limiting collections to a certain range of years, collecting first issues of each country, or confining collections to a certain category of stamps, such as air mails, revenues, postage dues, or special delivery stamps. In addition, there has been a very significant increase in the interest in postal history or cover collecting. One area where the increased interest in postal history is most obvious is exhibiting. Where traditional exhibits were largely confined to stamps, many of today's top exhibits, at both national and international shows, are completely focused on postal history.

The demographics of the people participating in the hobby have also changed. In the mid-twentieth century, the stamp hobby was mostly dominated by white males. Although organized philately is still largely dominated by this same group, if you attend a major stamp show, you are likely to see a more diverse audience that includes more women and a broader mix of ethnic and racial backgrounds. As a member of the American Topical Association, I have noticed that it is an organization that is not only still growing, but also has a mix of participants that appears to be more reflective of society as a whole. Such changes can do nothing but strengthen the hobby over time.

Finally, the hobby has changed in how people go about collecting stamps. With the trend towards less traditional types of collections, many collectors no longer use a stamp album to store and organize their collections. Now, collectors are just as likely to use stock books, approval cards, glassine envelopes, or another form of storage for their collections. Those who still use stamp albums are much more likely to use stamp mounts in lieu of the stamp hinges that were used by most during the first half of the twentieth century. Although hinges are still a good alternative for mounting used and inexpensive mint stamps, some use mounts to achieve an attractive uniform appearance to their collections or because they feel that today's hinges are less peelable and, hence, difficult to remove from albums.

I have only touched on a few of the many ways that our hobby has changed over the years. Perhaps that is one of the wonderful things about this hobby of stamp collecting. Where some hobbies wither and die, stamp collecting adapts. It may not be the same as when we started collecting, but it is still a healthy and vibrant hobby that offers much to an increasingly diverse group of collectors.

[Note: This article was first published in the Second Quarter 2011 edition of *NSDA News*.]