

Reminiscences

By Michael Rogers

A Herd of Buffalo.

I built a house of cards of three mortgages in order to purchase my dream residence on Interlachen Avenue in Winter Park. Closing in 1987, I set upon renovations. In times past, the first floor had been split to accommodate a rental unit. Returning the mansion to its natural elegance meant quite an overhaul. Money sure was tight.

Days after the purchase, a surprise visitor came knocking on my door. Sam Ewing, the finest interior designer in Central Florida, offered his services on my Interlachen residence, and wanted to know my budget. Sam Ewing! I had enough money for one room and his supervision on the rest of the house!

After Interlachen was completed, Sam's partner called saying that her brother had inherited a stamp collection and wanted help. Would I be of assistance? Heck, folks bring us collections all the time, so sure I'll be helpful.

But it wasn't that easy. Her brother came around to my stamp shop, explaining that his grandmother had given him the collection when he was seven years old. He was going up to Tennessee to retrieve some family possessions including his grandmother's stamps. Would I accompany him? We'd drive up and back.

Stands to reason that 99% of the time stamps given to a 7 year old are common and inexpensive. My time was oversubscribed with the stamp shop going great guns and the China business non-stop. Thus I saw no advantage to sightseeing in Tennessee. (I found out later that his grandfather was Governor of Tennessee.)

He was a fine young man, and earnest in his quest. I let him down gently, saying I would enjoy seeing the stamps once in Florida.

Weeks later, he returned, with a VCR tape in hand as he had recorded the collection. I had to wait until I returned home that evening. My eyes widened as I viewed a nice US collection with 1893 Columbians & 1898 Trans-Mississippi



(heavily hinged), then Migratory Bird (Duck) plate blocks, and huge quantities of buffalo plate blocks, and Trans-Pacific plate blocks. Wow!

We got together for an appraisal and offer. The US singles collection would provide easy selling material in the stamp shop. It included a VFNH set of RW 1-30 plate blocks of six, a rare and valuable unit. For this alone there was a buy price in the stamp papers for \$30,000. Then there were almost 450 plate blocks of the 1923 flat plate buffalo #569, and fortunately very few of the more common 1931 buffalo plate blocks produced by rotary press #700. (Apparently the collector was a buffalo topical collector.) And there were almost 500 each of the 1937 20 cent and 50 cent Trans Pacific #C21-2 plate blocks. They were all NH.

After I purchased this accumulation, I set about selling the US singles in my shop. Priced as a reflection of the heavy hinging, these sold easily, which was the aim, for this was the simple part of the lot. Merchandising the plate blocks posed formidable challenges.

What to do with a large quantity of flat plate #569 buffalo plate blocks? Retail for a VFNH example was \$500 vs FVFNH at \$350 and I had 450! My gut told me not to let anyone know the quantities I had. I approached a plate block specialist dealer, offering him twenty VFNH, only to receive a quote of \$150 each which seemed far too low in relation to his retail. He made the point that they might sit in stock awhile. He was hesitant with an inventory of 20 and I had hundreds.

Because of my China/Asia advertising, I was fairly well known, albeit not

in the US marketplace. I placed a two inch ad Linn's classified under "U.S. Plate Blocks" offering the #569 VFNH at \$350 and FVFNH at \$250 plus the C21 & C22 VFNH at \$50 each. After a year of continuous advertising, I sold just about every one!

Ah, the RW1-30 plate blocks VFNH. For a year or so, I didn't do anything with them. I had a \$30,000 price tag on the unit. I decided to stand pat on the price because I had never owned a set. I had a hunch I would never own such a perfect set again. So, this was the price.

One day, two US dealers came visiting. I knew Stan Kopkin very well, the other, not at all. Being a retail shop, not set up to wholesale to other dealers, pretty much all we could do was talk, but then again I did have the RW1-30 plate blocks which I knew Stan would appreciate. Price? \$30,000.

Before Stan could saying anything, the other dealer got up and started shouting how unrealistic my price was. He offered \$18,000, then upped it to \$19,000. Shout, yell, whine. Stan and I sat there amused. I wasn't coming off my price. Stan opined it was a fair price, just not one he wanted to pay because it was unneeded inventory. The other guy got real red-faced.

A couple of weeks later, two of my favorite regular customers came in the shop and asked if I had anything exceptional for their U.S. album. There went the RW1-30 plate blocks for \$30,000. Without hesitation, payment came in the form of American Express. I was pleased this rare and perfect set of RW1-30 VFNH plate blocks found their home with fine folks. ☒

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The Unforgettable Herman Herst

I came to know the legendary stamp dealer and author Herman Herst through his prolific writings. As a teenager I was immersed in philately and was a voracious reader. A great many thousand articles appeared in stamp magazines and books that recounted his career of more than half a century. Possessing a fine wit, Herst was a welcome guest speaker at clubs and banquets.

“Pat” acquired his nickname because he was born on St. Patrick’s Day. His philatelic career began on the fabled Nassau Street in New York City in 1933, relocating to Shrub Oak in 1946. Pat’s retirement in 1973 to Boca Raton, Fla came the same year that I moved to Winter Park, Fla.

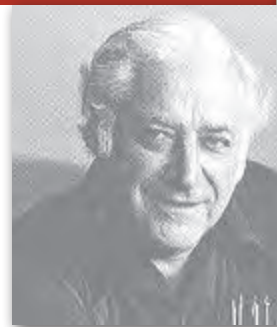
They tell me a stamp dealer never really retires. Pat remained active in philately with numerous articles and lively public speaking. Because of his great fame and impeccable reputation, many sought his advice when selling their collections.

About the time I met Pat in the mid 1980s, I owned a flourishing stamp shop which was going great guns. I’d buy most anything which came my way; my mantra being “once collected, I’d find a buyer for it.” The abiding rule of buying was always to be nice. If I met a hostile seller, I’d either figure out a way to do the transaction softly or I wouldn’t do it. Most times someone abrupt is just nervous.

Pat contacted me about this time, wondering if I was interested in a footlocker of worldwide postal stationery. The man knew how to capture my interest. I was told the container was packed tight with material, mostly unused with some cancelled to order. Condition was uniformly very fine, as these were assembled as new issues, though from the 1940s-60s. Certainly there were thousands and thousands from countries the world over.

Was I interested? You bet! My thought was “Do the deal, don’t do the deal. To be invited in on a transaction with Herman Herst: WOW!” Pat said I had a reputation for closing the deal with very tough peo-

Herman “Pat” Herst, Jr., certainly one of the most famous individuals the American hobby has ever known!



ple and this was a toughie: I was the sixth dealer he had invited in to attempt to do business with this seller. He would collect a 10% commission of my purchase price as his fee for bringing buyer and seller together. The five dealers before me had seen and walked out empty handed.

Not a collector herself, the seller had inherited a vast accumulation of stamps and postal history decades before. An accomplished career-woman of high intelligence, she now was contemplating parting with the gift from a dear friend. Naturally she was cautious

I arrived in Boca Raton early just so I could have the chance to sit with Pat and his engaging wife Ida. Then we went to the seller’s home. Though I wasn’t invited beyond the living room, I gazed upon stacks of old envelopes near and beyond. It was tantalizing. The footlocker was open and so I sat on the floor to best gauge the contents.

To Pat’s shriek of “Get up!” I replied “you never get to see these and I want to get real close to appreciate their beauty.” It’s true. Those days, there weren’t the postal stationary catalogues that we have today. I tilted my head towards the seller to see her clasp her hands together and hear her approval.

Then Pat’s gaze was diverted towards a stack of 19th century covers leaning on one wall, not part of my transaction. Picking up a few, he said “Dirty, dirty, dirty.” I groaned. Lightly, I brushed his hand, whispering to him, apologize, or else we’re going to get kicked out of here. He didn’t apologize but she missed nothing so I was able to make my point. When you’re invited into someone’s house, it’s not polite to criticize anything. I could

envision those other dealers leaving for such insensitive behavior.

I was having a grand time going through the footlocker, seeing material not often found. Walking through a collection, trying to calculate the right price to pay, there are several issues to consider: the materials availability, its condition, its popularity and how to merchandise it.

I knew I would do really well with postal stationary if I could figure a way to merchandise it. To my mind, this material was a natural extension of any stamp collection. I could take it to stamp shows and do well.

I could sense Pat was getting restless after two hours. I sat back and smiled, saying that I was real pleased with what I’d seen. I made an offer of \$6,000. I really don’t know who was more astonished, Pat or the seller, but the offer was accepted. We did the paperwork and I wrote the check.

On the way over to Pat’s home, he said I was a darned fool for paying so much. I smiled, saying I got the lot and he was getting \$600 on top of that so he should be real happy.

Pat thought me daft later because when I arrived home and emptied the footlocker, I found some absolute gems that had been squirreled away and not seen when I calculated the purchase price. I got on the phone and sold them, then backtracked a reasonable purchase price for these beauties. Off went an additional \$3000 check to the lady, and Pat’s \$300. To be perfectly honest, I was thinking about those spiraling columns of old covers in her home and looking forward to a future visit when I wrote the three grand check. As for Pat, he called me crazy! ✉