

# BEHIND THE SCENES

by Jay Smith, Snow Camp, NC

"Changes are a coming?" You would have to have hidden under a rock for the last ten years to not know that the eBay online auction and sales venue has had a major impact on the stamp market.

There is some good that can be said about eBay and stamps, however, my observation is that what started out as a good thing has turned into a mess for buyers, sellers, and market values. We stopped selling on eBay several years ago and every day I am glad that we got out when we did. When I hear what sellers (and buyers) have to put up with these days, it boggles my mind how eBay manages to keep any sellers at all. I am also stunned when I see what is in some stamp collections that were primarily built by buying on eBay (let's just say that it's not all good). But, all that is a subject for another time.

What I have noticed is that there is a quietly growing trend that may put eBay (at least their stamp sales) out of its misery, or at least in its place. Two recent announcements suggest that other enormous players in the "online sales venue" world are starting to circle eBay like a pack of hungry wolves.

The first announcement was one that philatelists may not have heard, unless they are also numismatists (coin collectors). Amazon has gotten into coin sales as a distinct market segment! They have invited selected a very limited group of coin sellers to offer their wares on Amazon, in a tightly controlled environment. This is not a free-for-all (like eBay) where anybody can sell any misdescribed item that they know nothing about. The material on Amazon is higher grade, higher values (mostly \$100 and above, sometimes into the major rarity category), and mostly with recognized grading (which is much more typical in coins than stamps). It remains to be seen whether Amazon will be happy with the results. Often these enormous companies become disappointed by the modest (by their usual standards) amount of sales in collectibles. However, we have to wonder if Amazon is looking at stamps as a possible similar distinct sales area. I am making inquiries, but they are very secretive about any such ventures. (One can find stamps on Amazon now, but they seem to be mostly random offerings that would mostly not be of interest to serious collectors.)

The second announcement was even more deeply buried in the online sales industry news and was probably only seen by a few philatelists. The largest online sales company in the world is NOT Amazon. It is not even American. It is, surprise, surprise... Chinese. Alibaba, through its various divisions such as Taobao and several other venues, is the biggest, by far! Most Americans have never heard of them.

Alibaba has created a U.S. venue by the name of 11 Main (as in an address on Main Street). The purpose is to create a high-quality, curated, sales venue in which the sellers are each special in some way and care deeply about their area of expertise. The concept is to reproduce online those small specialty shops on Main Street that are known for quality, knowledge, and deep interest in a narrow area. (Many of those types of "brick and mortar" shops have gone out of business in the last decade.)

11 Main is in the early testing phase and is not yet open to the general public for shopping. All sellers are by invitation only. Whether or not 11 Main will eventually include stamps in their range of sellers is yet to be seen, but my reading on the subject suggests that such types of sellers do fit their business model. If stamps are included, sellers will by present by invitation only and will have to have standards tremendously higher than what we have had to put up with on eBay.

The common thread of these two announcements, whether or not the ventures ever see full success, is that the very smart and very wealthy people running these billion-dollar sales venues recognize that the free-for-all approach on eBay leaves a lot to be desired and they feel that a curated, controlled, quality-oriented, knowledge-valued venue is needed in the marketplace.

It will be interesting to watch what happens. Stay tuned.

[Editor's Note: This article has been printed with the permission of the author Jay Smith, the owner of Jay Smith & Associates. For more information on the Jay's free Philatelic E-News, contact him at [js@JaySmith.com](mailto:js@JaySmith.com) and website [www.JaySmith.com](http://www.JaySmith.com)]

# Fire Service in Philately

Fire Service in Philately (FSIP) was founded in 1976 by Gus Knoeckel, a New York City retired firefighter. FSIP is a non-profit organization, run by a board of annually elected officers, devoted to the study, researching and collecting of vehicle, equipment, and significant events related to fire service depicted on stamps, pictorial fire cancellations and post cards, first day covers, cachet covers, and cinderallas.

FSIP's membership, spanning ten different countries, consists of a diversified group of career and volunteer firefighters, fire buffs, and other individuals who are interested in the fire service and its history. The group is proud to be affiliated with American Philatelic Society.

FSIP's newsletter, *Fire Stamp News*, is issued quarterly to serve as a venue to share knowledge and promote connections amongst members. It contains many informative articles on various fire service subjects including studies of historic fires, fire engines, fireboats, and special unique apparatus. Regular columns include: Do You Know (highlighting a specific fire service stamp), Page from the Past, The Cinderella Corner, and New Issues service of fire stamps which ensures all members' collections are kept current. In addition, we provide Scott Numbers and Date of Issue as they become available.

Annually FSIP holds a member auction, wherein members get to auction their duplicate fire stamps, first day covers, postcards and other materials which enables other members to add material to their collections or fill in album spaces.



**Front Row: John Zaranek, Martha Kush, Don Alford; Standing: Newt Kulp, Ed Flory, Dick Peters, Tom D'Arcangelo**



**Newt Kulp, Mike McDonald both members of FSIP, they are at the show. Mike is going through one of Newt's books on how to mount various types of stamps, covers and fire pictorial cancellations for exhibiting. Newt is also a member of Central Florida Stamp Club and does a fair amount of exhibiting his fire related material, in hopes of bringing awareness of Fire Service in Philately.**

FSIP is also represented in social media and maintains a Facebook page. The page is open to all and has photo galleries of stamps and covers and serves as an opportunity to share information, ask questions, and offer comments in an open forum.

The annual meeting of its membership occurs at the Spring Melt Fire Auction and Fire Memorabilia in Allentown, Pennsylvania, which was just held this past April 12th & 13th. Members gather on Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday to attend the auction and market, hold their annual meeting, election of officers, trade fire stamps and covers, and participate in good fellowship. Previous meetings have also been held at APS shows in Cleveland, Atlantic City, and Columbus.

For all of these services, FSIP membership dues are an affordable \$15 a year and open to any interested. For more information and a copy of a complimentary issue of *Fire Stamp News*, please contact FSIP's president, John C. Zaranek either by email, phone, or post: at [jczaranek@roadrunner.com](mailto:jczaranek@roadrunner.com), 716.668.3352, 81 Hillpine Road, Cheektowaga, NY 14227.