

# Seeing is Believing in a Philatelic Purchase

by John L. Leszak

Every day I receive calls, emails and assorted lists of stamps from well-intentioned people who would like to sell their stamps. No matter how detailed their descriptions, if I have even a remote desire to buy their material, I always close with the following statement, “Your material sounds interesting, but I’d have to see it in order to make an offer.” Many people tend to make extensive lists with Scott catalog numbers neatly tallied on each page. I often wonder why they take so much time to compile such listings yet they fail to include such vital information about the actual stamps. Numbers and catalog values are meaningless without crucial words like never hinged, regummed, thin, or crease. Even when those words are included it takes a visual inspection to determine the extent of the quality or the defectiveness of an overall collection. Last week I received a call from a man who proclaimed that he had a United States collection that consisted of stamps totaling over \$100,000 in catalog value. With a fancy number like \$100,000 one would expect some high powered stamps. Thus, I asked him if there were any zeppelins, high value Columbians or classic 19th century in the lot. He responded, “Ah, no.” I then asked him point blank what he considered as the shining jewels in his \$100,000 collection. He hesitated for an instant and proceeded to tell me that a Legends of the West souvenir sheet was included along with several sets of Bicentennial souvenir sheets. Somehow, the luster of a “\$100,000 collection” fades when the caller can’t identify some solid items that have universal appeal. It turned out that this misguided man had hundreds of thousands of stamps cataloging less than \$1 each and he expected to sell them for \$25,000 because he wanted to buy a new car. Most of the stamps in his \$100,000 collection were

regular issues and commemoratives soaked off incoming mail [Picture to left] from the last 20 years. That’s the kind of stuff that should be sold to packet makers in bulk and the subject of catalog value shouldn’t even be a consideration.

Some people truly become infatuated when given a catalog. They’ll catalog every single common stamp until they’ve arrived at a fanciful total catalog value. One of my dealer friends recently purchased a “collection” that the owner claimed had a catalog value of \$37,000. My friend bought the lot for \$200. He’s an honest dealer and he certainly didn’t steal the lot: it consisted of common worldwide stamps; none had a catalog value of more than 25 cents and in some cases, there were nearly 1,000 of one kind! I don’t know about other dealers, but I truly believe that more than ten of any stamp in inventory is a lifetime supply! One thousand of a common stamp is certainly a statement of excessiveness. My friend hopes to pass the lot on to an aspiring packet maker.

I often receive calls from people who swear that they have Scott U.S. #1 and #2 for sale. I like to ask them how and where they acquired such stamps. Their response is usually, “The stamps have been in the family for years,” or they profess to have found the stamps in an old desk. In actuality, they have copies of Scott #948a and #948b that have been trimmed out of the #948 souvenir sheet. I could



hypothetically talk on the phone with these people for hours regarding the purchase price of actual #1s and #2s. But seeing is believing and at a glance, I can dismiss their wishful thinking and get back about my work. In the mid-1980s I received a call from a man who asked if I bought used Columbian stamps. I told him that I might be interested, but he'd have to bring the stamps to me. Several hours later, a panting man arrived at my office. He had lugged three huge boxes to my old sixth floor office! It was the man who had the Columbians for sale. As I looked through each box, I was disappointed to discover that each box contained tens of thousands of 2 cent Columbians on paper! I shook my head and said, "you have none of the high values here, this is the common mutt of the litter." Then I added, "Too bad they still weren't on the original envelopes because then I could've done something with them as postal history." The man looked at me like I was some kind of insane con man. He confidently confided that he had looked the stamps up in a book at the library and that he knew that he had close to \$25,000 worth of stamps. Then he coyly added, "Besides, I spent all winter tearing these stamps off envelopes because the book says that they're collected only as used and unused, so don't give me any of that postal history BS." I have encountered far too many people who place common Washington Franklin heads into the album spaces of the more expensive varieties. They have this misguided notion that since a stamp is in a particular space, it's that particular stamp. The numbers and columns look great on their important looking inventory lists. However, upon examination, one can quickly discern that their ability to discern a coil stamp from a sheet stamp is greatly impaired. Frequently (especially when there's a full moon) I receive calls from people who believe that it is the duty of all dealers to buy anything and everything that's philatelically related. If I bought everything that was offered to me, I'd be out of space in a week, out of money in two weeks and out on the street shortly thereafter. All buyers must look at philatelic material from the standpoints of want, need and resale. Last year, I met a man who had a really nice 1920s advertising cover for sale. It was from a local coal company and I had several customers in mind for it, so I paid \$2 for it. The man was so ecstatic about the \$2 that he asked if I'd be interested in more covers. I said, "I'm always interested in more covers if I feel that there's potential for resale." The man said that he indeed had more covers and could go home and bring me back about 20 shoe boxes worth of covers. I encouraged him to do so, and about three hours later he had returned. "I've got the covers in my trunk. I figure it to be about a \$40,000 lot," he whispered to me so that my customers wouldn't hear the details.

I went outside to examine the 20 shoe boxes filled with covers. To my disappointment, each box contained the very same advertising cover from the local coal company that I had purchased earlier for \$2! Yes, there were at least 20,000 examples! The misguided man figured that since I had paid him \$2 for one example, then he would strike paydirt by selling me 20,000 examples at \$2 each. I politely told him that I had no more than five customers for such an item, so he had about 19,995 more covers than the market could absorb. He pondered for some time and then asked if I would take four more of the coal covers and pay him \$8. I quickly replied that when I bought the initial cover for \$2, I had no idea that they existed in such quantity. Since the quantity was so enormous, it would take 30 lifetimes to sell them all. Thus, I declined the additional covers at \$2 each. In light of the quantity that was evident, that \$2 cover would soon be a ten cent cover once the news of the extreme quantity was made public. The man apparently found someone gullible enough to buy the lot because in the last eight months, I've had over a dozen people call me about local advertising covers. I quickly ask if the covers are from the same local coal company and they timidly reply, "Yes." Over the years, I've watched numerous flash-in-the-pan dealers come on the scene with a fistful of money, buy every single lot that's offered to them and in a matter of months they fade into oblivion because their lack of cash flow has choked their very existence. I've often said that any fool can purchase a philatelic lot, but it takes a marketing genius to re-sell a philatelic lot. I tend to make offers on about 3 of every 100 lots that people wish to show me. Three percent may sound like a poor percentage, but I still manage to have more covers and stamps in storage than I care to know about. What's your opinion? Would you purchase a substantial philatelic lot sight unseen, based on a total catalog value? As always, your comments and observations are invited.

[This still-timely column first appeared in the June 18, 2004 edition of Mekeel's & STAMPS. JFD.]

**[Editor's Note: In my mind this article is the Part III of the Cover Story in August and September.]**