

# Reminiscences

By Michael Rogers



## Discoveries sometimes come in especially unusual ways...

I'm a huge fan of taking our inventory to stamp shows. Call it "wave the flag" or a "meet and greet." Whatever, it's a fine way to make friends and introduce ourselves. Sure enough, specializing in China and Asia means we carry a unique product line. At a show, maybe one dealer had a few sets of China, maybe another dealer had a little Asia here or there, but hardly anyone could hold a candle to us. Not that I was snooty about it.

Our first Los Angeles SESCAL show was at the Ambassador Hotel, now torn down. All we knew when we signed up was we had a corner table. Upon set-up, I realized our corner pierced the aisle in front of us too closely. As I alerted the show manager about the size of the crowds that came to my booth at other shows, he cackled that I was blowing my own horn. I resigned myself to the inevitable. Forty five minutes into the show, the fire marshal threatened to close SESCAL down if my situation wasn't remedied. Quick thinking on the part of the show management—to the consternation of the other booth holders—my booth was carried to the front of the hall, creating a "super booth" size and placement that I retained for over twenty years!

SESCAL was the place to be. Los Angeles and environs was home to wonderful collectors. Terry Chang, Carl Kilgas, Danny Ko, and Henry Nyi were but a few of many fine collectors there. As I made my plans to man a booth at SESCAL, I received a treasured invitation to join Henry Nyi and family in Chinatown for a traditional meal. Afterward, Henry's daughter complimented me for enjoying insects, eel and monkey. Ah, I knew better than to inquire as to what I was eating.

From 1995 to 2004, we held public auctions at SESCAL. Lots would be shown for viewing on Friday and Saturday with

the auction held on Sunday. Often folks would bring material to us, asking our opinion.

In October 2002, an elderly gentleman walked up to our booth and gingerly pulled out of his folder an immensely rare stamp which I had read about but never seen, accompanied by a 1980 Stanley Gibbons certificate. He had a used example of the 1901 British Offices in China B.R.A. 5 cent on 1/2 cent inverted surcharge. Choosing to speak to my Chinese employee, he showed the stamp and certificate, asking for an evaluation.

Then I was blown away by my employee. He knew enough to open the *Chan Catalogue*. Then he looked to the wrong line, telling the collector the catalogue value for the normal stamp (\$480) instead of the invert (\$4,500). The collector looked crushed, saying that in 1980 he had spent \$1,000 for it. Then he turned around and left. Three customers chased him. I thought I would never see him again.

Quietly I said to my employee: "that B.R.A. invert is terribly rare. Perhaps only one pane of 25 exists. How could it catalogue only \$480?" To which my guy starts yelling that the stamp "was on eBay all the time." Knowing that nothing would be accomplished talking to a closed mind, I walked away.

I assume my guy glanced at the B.R.A. stamp, concluding it to be the normal. Had he listened to the collector or viewed the certificate, he would have been as excited as me.

Instead, he entertained only the first thought that occurred to him. Working a show booth can be mentally draining, but he had several clues along the way that he was in error.

Sunday: My job at a show auction is tending to the back rows. The retail booth

is open so I pay attention to both. As luck would have it, the same elderly gent was sitting alone in one of the back rows, watching the Sunday auction, so I sat next to him. I said that my thinking was he probably sold his B.R.A. invert given those guys were running after him when he left my auction booth. No, he said, he was so disappointed, he put the stamp back in his folder. Still had it.

I introduced myself saying, in all my years experience, I had never seen it, meaning it was pretty rare. Put it in my auction and I'll give you a \$2,500 reserve. He was unwilling, saying he would rather take my employee's opinion for fact. I said do it my way and there's no risk. He got testy and said some impolite things. I said, "OK, plan B, what do you want for it?" So he offers me the stamp for a thousand dollars and I'm thinking to myself "this is crazy, why not go with the \$2,500 guarantee, and then if it doesn't sell at auction...but the guy's mind was made up, like a rock.

So I excused myself, reaching for a bill of sale, and paid him.

When I arrived home, I reached for the phone, and told the story of the acquisition of the B.R.A. invert to someone I had been selling China to for many years. He is the kind of guy that enjoys a good story.

I had spent some time researching the stamp, trying to figure out an appropriate price. Auction sets a price but I knew this collector would enjoy the stamp without fighting for it.

My company finally sold this example of the B.R.A. invert at auction where it achieved \$7,250. When I was but a teenager, my grandmother gave me some advice. She said that people get along swell so long as they are reasonable and keep their minds open. ☒



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## A dealer who also collects has more fun because he has two lives to live

Collectors are often surprised seeing me on their side of the counter, rubbing shoulders at a stamp show, with wantlists for my own collections. I'm all over the board: I collect things like Great Britain Queen Elizabeth II because family came from England and I can relate to QEII, and Liberia because it's challenging. I'm after topicals and I like U.S. first day covers like the Rice cachet. I even have a GB *Alice in Wonderland* collection of fantasies!

I seek out specialist dealers as a priority for any area I pursue. They will have the choice pieces that stand out. A specialist dealer knows the material intimately so there's never something miscatalogued. That still leaves plenty of room for shopping with general dealers. I tend to collect "soup to nuts," meaning I want real depth: single stamp, cover, proof. Whatever I can find. I really enjoy placing philately within the life and times of when the item was issued.

What rings my bell these days is my U.S. and World Wide Airpost collection.

I had become a China dealer quite by surprise in 1982. Prior to the one big purchase that changed the course of my career towards that, I was issuing pricelists on Zeppelin and Airpost flight covers. I enjoy this material very much.

As time went on, I'd come across nifty flight covers and such that I'd squirrel away for the airmail collection I would have one day. Then, a few years ago, one of my long time friends spoke of a collection he contemplated selling. It was exactly what I needed. He had a six volume set of the long out of print *Scott Publications International Air-Post Album*.

When I think back on it, I know the \$3,000 I paid was for the albums, because I had no use at all for the stamps within. The albums were the prize! The pages are

laid out just like an International album: airmails, semi postal airmails, airmail officials and so forth. The albums run through 1960. If there were later supplements, I'd surely like to purchase those pages.

Have you ever seen a *Sanabria Airmail Catalogue*? It's amazing! Nicholas Sanabria recorded just about every airmail variety imaginable. It goes far beyond Scott listings, into labels, essays, official perfins and more. The prices are crazy: some are higher in 1963 dollars than today's retail. Quantities are noted.

I carry around a 1963 edition *Sanabria* in which I have noted the appropriate Scott catalogue numbers, and placed check marks on the stamps I have. I'll collect what I want to, when I find it. When it's a worldwide collection that you're playing with, some countries are more fun than others.

As you can imagine, I see a lot of stamps. I set a goal for myself to collect as far back as I could mint never hinged stamps. I'm collecting the world, and that's a lot of stamps. I don't have a hard and fast rule on gum; more important are good centering and a fresh appearance.

When we think of airmail stamps, flight covers naturally follow. Whether by Zeppelin, catapult, rocket, flimsy or pigeon, it's flown. A Trans-Atlantic may first have travelled through China and been censored in Hong Kong. Just because a stamp says "airmail," it doesn't mean the item it's attached to ever flew: I'm looking right now at a newspaper from Tonga that is franked by a 10 shilling "Coin" airmail stamp tied to a wrapper.

I like figuring out a commercial cover. Its rather like a detective story. Whether the cover is valuable or not isn't the determining factor for inclusion. Being online give us the ability to research cover



A familiar scene at many shows: Michael Rogers behind his dealer table.. But he equally enjoys it when he's on the other side at others' booths!

markings plus the sender and addressee. Foreign words can be translated now that it's so much easier.

Criteria for inclusion in my collection is that it must be made out of paper and fit on the page in my Scott album. Criteria for YOUR collection is whatever rules please you. Isn't that what stamp collecting has always been all about?

Rather quickly, I realized I was growing beyond my original six Scott Air Post albums. I remembered the Scott brown International album, with brown binders that were rather similar to my Air Post binders. This new edition was offered by Mel Goldberg at his old Subway Stamp Shop. Upon receipt of a sample brown binder, I was pleased to realize it had twice the capacity of the former. Subway also now makes personalized labels in the color of the album. Thus, each of mine read on the spine "Michael / Rogers / Air Post" Cool!

Tell you a funny thing though. When I attend stamp shows with my *Sanabria* in hand, some dealers are mystified that I lead off my wantlists with the countries starting with the initial "A". "What, don't you want to see China?" Sure I do, and I smile. ☒