

Reminiscences

By Michael Rogers



I'd opened Winter Park Stamp Shop in mid 1978 on tony Park Avenue in Winter Park, using much of my start-up capitalization on fixtures. I could not afford to pay even a part time employee for the first six months. Three months into running the store, I came down with an eye infection in both of my eyes. I remember trying to turn off the store's alarm, squinting through the bandages! There was a clause in the lease where if the store was not open "during regular work days" I would in effect lose the lease. I knew I could trust my customers to pay the correct amount, even if I couldn't verify what they were choosing.

1978-81 were the best years to start a stamp shop because US stamp prices were climbing and we sold more US than anything else. Back then stamps could be included in self directed Individual Retirement Accounts; President Reagan would discontinue the practice in the early 1980's.

I had the right attitude for a start-up: Any inventory other than the 1932 to date that had to be carried every day was given a bench-life of two-three months. Over time the stock grew but we didn't have the luxury of allowing unusual stamps and postal history to sit. A philatelic trade magazine opined that the traditional stamp dealer turned over his stock 12% of the value yearly; I must have been setting records meeting my goals of 300%-400% per annum. Much better a smaller profit and selling it then letting material gather dust.

Occasionally we would do appraisals. One sunny day, a lady set an older album in front of me requesting a written appraisal of a family stamp collection that she had inherited. Much attention had been paid to the US portion while there was scarcely any worldwide stamps at all.

I was stunned at the sight of complete unused sets of the 1893 Columbian and 1898 Trans-Mississippi sets. If that wasn't enough, on the same page as the Trans-Miss's was a complete 1895 1 cent



to \$5 set. Going through the US, I saw an unused 1847 5 cent, classics, set of Zepelins and lots of other goodies! All blazing unused stamps with as fresh colors as just issued.

Though she'd requested an appraisal for insurance, I asked her if she'd consider selling the album. She thought about it and said she had a family friend who was a collector; he'd decide. So I was to come up with an offer. Then it got interesting.

I realized every stamp was stuck to the page like a rock. So I carefully cut the 1 cent Columbian, still on paper, away from the rest of the page. Then I filled a small bowl of water and placed the papered Columbian in it.

It EXPLODED!

Now I'm not a chemist but apparently whoever adhered these precious stamps into the album wasn't satisfied with the gum doing the job so he used some kind of glue.

Now what to do?

So I reached out to Bob Womack, a very knowledgeable stamp dealer who resided close by. I'd seen Bob work his magic before. He wanted the lordly sum of \$50 an hour to liberate the stamps from

the paper, making no guarantees of success. A bargain, as it turned out.

I had a real good buddy in town, a part time stamp dealer, with whom I chatted pretty frequently. We pooled our thoughts on the stamps in the album, knowing the risk would be safely removing them from the pages. We decided to offer the lady \$10,000, half coming from each of us. Her advisor considered the offer daft, as the stamps were still on paper. I could have simply done the appraisal but "I'd rather have an oar in the water than be sitting by the lakeside, wondering what had happened", so I decided to take the gamble.

Over one tense weekend, Bob managed to separate almost all the stamps undamaged, though without gum. The lone casualty turned out to be the \$4 Columbian which, in his pride, he believed the small thin it now exhibited was present before it rested in the album.

I retained for sale in my shop the sets of Columbians, Trans-Mississippi's and the 1895 series. If I remember correctly, the high values were snapped up pretty quickly. I'd not had several before, and they were so beautiful. ☒

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By 1973, I had relocated to Winter Park, Florida, to take a position with John McDaniel. John had a wonderful inventory, strongest in U.S., Western Europe and British Commonwealth. As the premier professional philatelist in Central Florida, top notch collections would roll in and everyone knew him.

John had an office suite on the second floor above trendy Park Avenue shops in the downtown area. The only downside was walking the double decker stairs: folks bringing in cumbersome collections had such a hard time! That aside, the office hummed with activity, not so much with local collectors, but with staff filling mail orders, doing bimonthly mail sales, and preparing for the occasional stamp show.

John was mulling over a problem in 1973: he had an incredible inventory but didn't know how to sell enough of it in an orderly fashion. His means of buying and selling meant he was adding more stock than he needed. He sure wasn't going to wholesale merchandise or place it in someone else's auction for fear it would result in a loss. John was all about "control".

So when he hired me, he was willing to keep an open mind to my ideas on how to step-up sales. I had last worked in a fast growing publicly traded numismatic company with a keen eye on their merchandising techniques. Instrumental in my rise was keeping a close tab on market trends, this before the immediacy of online.

Before I arrived, John was content with one show a month, garnering \$4,000 in sales. My last year there, we did three shows monthly, averaging \$20,000 each. I'd do Chicago, John would head off to Boston. The stock was refashioned in a self-service manner so just one of us could man the table for the entire weekend, helping many collectors at the same time.

John was blessed with a fine staff. Bob Womack was the resident expert on US



and worldwide classical material. He'd come from the metropolitan NYC area, forming the Bergen Stamp Company, specializing in Turkey, of all things. (I imagine it fed his love of dealing with the truly difficult.) A boisterous man of wide interests, Bob would in later years join my crew when I opened my own shop.

There was a sweet lady named "Robbie" Robertson, who kept track of the office work. Absolutely indispensable in those pre-computer days. John kept such a messy desk. Once yearly, he'd go on vacation—so I'd clean off his desk, finding orders to fill and stamps to put away. I remember filling an order that I found one summer buried on John's desk that resulted in the guy complaining to the APS about me(!). John wasn't an APS member so the customer vented his frustration at the only one standing, that is, until he recalled the complaint, realizing I wasn't to blame. Good thing: in almost 40 years of APS membership since, I'd never had to deal with a complaint.

Anyone who was a collector in town knew John. A Mr Gore, whose collection of exceptional quality US was sold in a name sale by Robert Siegel decades be-



Perhaps the best known stamp dealer in Central Florida in the latter half of the 20th century was John McDaniel of Winter Park,

fore, would stop by from time to time. I thought he'd fallen on hard times as he'd lost most of his top teeth and hadn't acquired upper dentures. He thought the cost too expensive. John and I were driving to an appointment and John pointed out a magnificent lakeside mansion, saying that was where Mr Gore lives. We spoke of relative values, how a man who would keep up a lakeside property would not cough up the funds for dentures, if only to chew a good steak.

One day Carl Langford, the mayor of Orlando stopped in. John was out, and I'd not met Carl, so with a flourish, Carl handed me his business card, saying "You can call me 'Mr Mayor.'" I thought to myself, "Well, gee, we're in Winter Park, and even though he's a legend in his own mind, I'd rather be on a first name basis", so I whipped out MY card, and with my best goofy smile, I retorted "You can call me 'Mr Stamp Dealer!'" Carl thought it over for a few seconds, tipped his chair backwards, and laughed out loud, then extended his hand to mine saying "I'm Carl", to which I said "I'm Mike." And that's how we remained until his recent passing. ☒