

# Introduction: The Lure of Philately

## Beginnings

I first met Michael Casper over coffee – or more correctly, across a coffee counter. The year was 1995, and I was a fledgling doctoral student in geosciences at Cornell University, and he was running a coffee shop in Ithaca’s Collegetown. Excellent though his lattes were, I soon realized that Michael had much grander dreams. I soon discovered that he was a Collector in the most grand sense of the term – one with the acumen and aesthetic sense to seek out the finest possible specimens to fill a collection.

My encounter with his Quests, as I truly consider these collecting enterprises to be, began late one evening, a few months after we first met. I had already gotten into bed when the telephone rang, and Michael urged me to come see something marvelous he wanted to share with me. A bit groggy, I reluctantly set off on the fifteen-minute walk over to his coffeehouse. I arrived, not really sure what to expect, only to see Michael pointing enthusiastically at a small scrap of newspaper he had cut out and taped to the coffee counter. It was an advertisement from a dealer in meteorites. Someday soon, he announced proudly, that was going to be him, advertising meteorites of his own. I blinked. He had brought me all that way late in the evening to see **that**?

A few days later, I arrived at the coffeehouse to see the door propped open. His new “doorstop” was a giant Gibeon meteorite, intact, looking the absolute picture of what I had envisioned meteorites to be. My jaw dropped. Within weeks he was on the road, in search of more specimens. He quickly learned the language of meteorites – the two basic types (finds and falls), the different chemical classifications. And within a couple of years, he had become the premiere meteorite dealer in the entire country, and he had even been named adjunct curator of the meteorite collection at Cornell University.

His attention next turned to numismatics, and specifically to the acquisition of the finest quality Morgan Silver Dollars in existence. We more or less lost contact for a few years, during which time his fame in that field spread far and wide, and he amassed one of the most superior collections of Morgan Silver Dollars ever gathered in one place. And then his interest turned once more, to philately. And as depicted in the pages of this book, he has brought together one of the finest collections of the most popular United States postage stamps ever. It is my singular good fortune to have the opportunity to join with him in sharing with you, the reader, the stories behind these stamps. I will begin, though, with the stories behind my own fascination with philately, one that began decades earlier than my first meeting with Michael.

## Memories

Postal stamp collecting suffused my early childhood. I grew up in a philatelic family. Dad kept his treasured stamp albums in a drawer in his desk, and would sometimes bring them out to show me. He had two volumes of international stamps that he had started collecting during his own childhood, hinged onto pages from a stamp album he had purchased in the 1940s. I would pour over the pages, seeing countries whose names have long since changed, or which have gained independence, merged with other countries or fractured into several new ones. Some of the stamps were new, and shiny, with photos or colorful artwork of birds, trees, or gold artifacts. Lots of the older ones had heads of state on them – just the heads, usually of balding white males. Lots of the older ones were partly obscured by black marks that I learned were cancellations, evidence that the stamp was used. Used stamps were almost always less expensive, so that was the kind I started collecting first.

Dad's pride, though, was his collection of U.S. postage stamps. He had started that collection more recently, as an **investment**. So it was **serious**. That album did not have stamps attached to each page with hinges. Instead, each individual stamp had been placed in its own mount,

with each mount hinged on the page, protecting the original gum of the stamp from harm. Dozens of brightly-colored designs flashed by as I turned the pages of the album. The newer stamps were the most glossy and multi-colored, but my eyes were drawn instead to the older ones, mostly of one color. Perhaps it was my early fascination for American history that made the Presidential Issue of 1938 such an object of craving for me. I longed for the day when Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge – the \$2 and \$5 stamps in the series – would be mine, unused, in mounts of their own.

There were other, earlier Commemorative sets that we also out of reach for me – I remember the Columbians, the Panama-Pacifc, the Trans-Mississippi, all of whose stories will be told in this book. In Dad's album, most spaces on each page – black and white, with an image of the stamp that belonged there – were covered over with mounted specimens, often unused. My older brother Kent, too, would work summer days at a tree nursery, and then spend his earnings on stamps. But he was more reluctant to show me his treasures, or maybe I just didn't ask. My older brother Mark, meanwhile, also worked at the nursery and took to stamp collecting as well. Perhaps to avoid competition with Kent (the two were always competing with each other, in academics as well as sports and games), Mark played the rebel in the family, finding his own niche collecting plate blocks of American stamps along with first day issues. As the youngest and least employable, I was entitled to the rejects. Whenever Dad or Kent upgraded their used stamps to new ones, I received the less respectable cast-offs.

The ultimate source of nearly all of these stamps was Edelman's, a corner store in Jenkintown, outside Philadelphia. The store was established in 1926, and is now, as I write this, operated by the third generation of the same family. The store featured stamps and coins, and published their own stamp catalogue every year. I recall how Kent, the future chemical engineer, would make meticulous notes in his catalogue, marking desired specimens and calculating costs. We would venture to Edelman's on Friday nights, once every couple of months. Each of us

would make our requests in the catalogue and someone behind the counter would retrieve the stamps for us. Every year, Dad would buy me a set of the commemorative issues for that year. I also worked backward in the album, slowly purchasing new commemoratives for the 1960s and eventually even the 1950s, though the earlier (and most alluring) ones remained largely out of reach.

Christmas was one of my few opportunities in early childhood to obtain some of the more “top end” unused stamps to grace my Liberty Postage Stamp Album. On several Christmases, Dad (or Kent) gave me a commemorative set or block of four that I had been craving. I obtained a few unused Columbians that way, and no doubt quite a few others. I recall one of the presents quite vividly. I unwrapped a package from Kent that contained a department store shirt box, inside of which was, wrapped in tissue paper...an old pair of PJs my brother had worn for years! I remember waves of disappointment washing over me, and my brother Kent (somehow managing not to laugh) telling me to look further in the package. Underneath the “gift” was an envelope taped to the box. Inside the envelope was the National Parks Issue of 1934, unused. The colors on the stamps were so bright, and the images of the various parks so glorious, that I forgave the trick at once.

Sadly, my days of stamp collecting came to an end all too quickly. My brothers both went off to college and Dad’s attention turned to helping fund their schooling. Outings to Edelman’s ground to a halt, and my postage stamp album was consigned to a second floor closet. Years later, I would rediscover it, and find that the heat and humidity had not been kind to my collection, ruining the gum on the back of many stamps. When Dad finally sold the house a few years ago, the album was nowhere to be found. One part of my childhood memories, though, I do retain to this day. Dad passed his two-volume international postage stamp album on to me, and now it sits on my bookshelf where I can view it any time I wish, without having to seek his permission first.

## Reflections

In writing this book, I returned to many of the stamps of my own childhood, revisiting them like old friends. Some, particularly the 1847-55 Regular Issues Type Set, I had known mostly as black and white pictures on blank album pages. Others, like the Columbian Exposition Issues, had been incomplete and heavily cancelled in my collection. Others, like the back of book releases (Air Mail, Parcel Post, etc.), I had viewed as oddities at the time, my outlook tainted by a sense that U.S. Commemoratives were worthier objects of veneration. I loved them for their pictures and their age. Though I have come to regret it, I never sought to learn their stories. What draws me to philately now – though as a writer rather than a collector – is the incredible tales each stamp can tell. Some of the stories pertain to postal history itself, others to the changing technologies of stamp production, and still others to aspects of American and world history celebrated in the stamps' designs.

Within the pages of this relatively brief work, I will share a few of those stories behind some of the most popular U.S. postage stamps, as an invitation to you, the reader, to consider taking up the pursuit of stamp collecting. Or, if you are already involved in philatelic endeavors, I encourage you to reflect on the rich potential your stamps can offer to learn about American history and culture, as a way of enriching your collecting experience. Stamps are windows on other times, places, aspirations, and values. The 1893 Columbian Exposition Issue, for example, both commemorates events in the life and explorations of Christopher Columbus and, at the same time, promotes a World's Fair that was held in Chicago that very year. U.S. Airmail stamps, on the other hand, celebrate a new transportation technology that could carry mail across the country in a matter of hours rather than days or weeks. Behind those stamps are the exploits of the pioneer aviators that made Airmail possible – men such as Art Smith, a famous barnstormer who performed at the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915 (another world's fair commemorated by U.S. stamps). Eleven years later, he became the second pilot to lose his life on an Airmail run, when his plane went down at night over Ohio.

The tale of the earliest US postage stamps starts many decades before the first airplane began delivering mail, at a time when Manifest Destiny was gospel. James Knox Polk was President, and in his single term in office the nation would add 810,000 square miles of territory – about a quarter of the land area of the contiguous United States today. With the addition of Oregon territory and lands in the Southwest formerly owned by Mexico, the United States would at last stretch “from sea to shining sea.” For a nation of such vast distances, consistent mail delivery service was vital. On March 3, 1847, Congress passed a law approving the issuing of the very first United States postage stamps. It is with that historic moment in postal history that our story begins.