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I Still Like Stamp

Here's the story behind the biggest stamp find of recent times by the

MAYBE YOU remember me. A couple of months ago, I bought some Dag Hammarskjold commemorative stamps and found a printing error that made them worth an estimated \$500,000.

Overnight I became the world's most famous stamp collector. Then the United States Post Office did something never done before in the history of philately: it deliberately flooded the market with misprinted stamps. My rare stamps were still worth more than 4 cents apiece—but not much more.

"What a hobby!" I told my wife Roslyn. "I quit! I've skipped lunches to buy stamps, and you and the kids have gone without things—just for my hobby. And when the 97-million-to-1 chance comes along and I find a rare stamp, they change the rules in the middle of the game!"

So I quit collecting stamps. I'd gotten into it five years ago when my two oldest boys joined the Scouts. Roz and I decided we weren't going to ask other people to help raise our children—we have five boys—so I became assistant scoutmaster and Roz a den mother. As Cub Scouts, Larry and Bobby had to start some sort of a collection.

"I like stamps," Larry said. "I get to know geography and history and famous people—and I like the colors." I shrugged—what difference would it make?

I bought them a cheap album, and every time I had some extra pocket money I'd pick up some stamps for it. Gradually I began to feel the romance of stamp collecting. I'm a guy of ordinary education who has never been far from New Jersey and, by headline standards, have never done much. But with stamps, the whole world opened up to me. I started collections of U. S. commemoratives, U. N. issues, and Israeli and other foreign stamps.

"You're wasting too much time and money on stamps, Len," my wife would say. I couldn't argue about the time—I'd visit post offices once or twice a day and spend evenings poring over my buys. But I had a good argument about "wasting" money:

"Stamps are your insurance policy, honey. I can't get regular insurance because of my bad heart. But these stamps increase in value every year. They're like a trust fund for you."

"Why not sell some now?" she asked. I shuddered. A dealer sells. But a collector *collects*—nothing more. When you hear that a fine stamp collection is on sale, you can bet the owner is either bankrupt or dead. My collection would provide security for my family—but only after I couldn't provide it myself.

IN TIME, I found rarities and made good buys. Among others, I have plate blocks of 8-cent stamps for which I paid 32 cents; they are now worth \$1.25. I have a plate block of 3-centers which cost me 12 cents and now sell for 75 cents. Figure that out on a percentage basis and you'll see that philately is fun—and a good investment.

But for me it was just fun. I still remember the day John Glenn made America's first orbital flight. I was watching television when they announced the Post Office had put on sale a special astronaut issue. I jumped out of

By **LEONARD SHERMAN**
as told to Jack Ryan



Sherman holds Dag stamps that almost netted him a fortune.

my chair—a first-day issue to coincide exactly with an historic event! I called my friend Stan Sussman, a collector himself, and we camped at the post office until 11 p.m. making up first-day-of-issue envelopes. We figure our particular cancelled 4-centers are already worth \$1.25 apiece. But the really big kick was in being in on that great moment personally.

Something like that comes rarely, so months later when I was studying my sheets of Hammarskjolds I wasn't expecting another bolt of lightning. But there it was. A line of white ran through the yellow and tan of the stamp; the 4¢ lettering should have been white but was yellow; the yellow had been printed upside-down. An inverted printing—the first in the U. S. since 1918!

"Roz! Roz!" I yelled and began babbling like someone who has had a dream come true.

"How much is it worth?" Roz asked, practically. I had no idea, so I called Stan. "The only way to learn that is at an auction," he said. "Supply and demand determine the price. But it should be worth a good price."

Collecting!

collector who lived its triumph and its heartbreak

We had no idea of its real worth, and I was so fascinated by having such a rarity that I couldn't do much but study it for days with Stan. Then a news story broke from Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. A collector there, Gerald Clark, also had bought an inverted sheet. He had only 19 left, however, when he discovered the error. Even so, he had an estimated \$200,000 worth of stamps. When the newspapers learned I had a sheet of 50 in mint condition—well, I was off on the tail of a tiger.

I was answering telephone calls from Honolulu and replying to letters from West Germany. People with worthy causes asked for "just one stamp—you have so many" or wanted me to buy their "rare stamps." But most of the thousands who contacted me did so just to wish me well.

ILIVED in a collector's dream—and nightmare. Sure, I had the find of a lifetime, but I couldn't keep it. The Sherman family simply couldn't afford to keep stamps like the Dags. I had to assure my five boys of a college education, and Roz had skimped on herself and the household too long. And there was that insurance business, too—no, this time I'd have to sell.

A newspaper reporter called then and told me the Post Office had just ordered millions of misprinted Dags to prevent "speculation."

"You must have that wrong," I said. "Misprints are a part of philately, and no government has ever commemorated a mistake . . ."

But he cut off my lecture on the history of stamp collecting because it no longer held true. I tried to get an injunction to stop the Post Office from devaluing my stamps. It was a race against time. While the legal mills ground slowly in New Jersey, the presses in Washington worked overtime. Finally I got my injunction and halted the misprinting—but only after some 350,000 inverted Dags had been rushed to the postal windows.

I had lost—lost thousands of dollars, 15 pounds, and a hobby. "Look," Stan told me, "you've met some great people. You've had plenty of excitement—and you still have your stamps. They're authenticated original misprints and still worth something, yet not so much that you have to sell them right away."

"You go on collecting," I told Stan. "Me, I'm through."

Three days ago I was driving past the local post office. Well, I thought, I do need that new block of U. S. Education stamps. After that I'd put the albums in the basement. Two days ago I went back to buy \$5 worth of U. S. commemoratives.

"I'm back collecting," I told Roz. "I don't know why, but I am."

"Good," she said. "Now we're back to normal."

I was up until 2 this morning with the new stamps. They are fascinating. They made me realize that there is one thing nobody can take away from a stamp collector or anybody with a hobby—the sheer love of it.



Misprint shows clearly when photographed through filtered lens.

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