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Collectin' 'n Tradin'

by
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While I'm not exactly an old geezer (yet), things certainly have changed since I first started collecting in 1983. The great giants of the industry—Universal, Lion, Ohio, Diamond, etc.—were still cranking out the matchbooks and matchboxes by the millions; All of those great Universal Fancies were to be seen everywhere: Jewels, Sports Jewelites, Matchoramas, Foilites, Uniglos, Filigrees. Ah! Those were the days! (and keep in mind that that wasn't even the industry's peak period) A collector could go into just about any business, certainly hotels, motels, and restaurants, and rightly expect to come out with handfuls (if not more) of great matchbooks or boxes. Who woulda thunk that that was the industry's last gasp before its collapse a few years later? Oh, the industry is still there today, but it's a mere shadow of its former self. Only three domestic manufacturers exist now: Diamond, Atlas, and D.D.Bean.

The covers certainly aren't as numerous today as they were then, and the great variety of types is gone, as well. Even when a collector wants to order his own covers made from a manufacturer, he or she is locked into that sad red, white, and/or blue ink format, and any graphics will either be the same colors or B&W—simply because today's production costs are so expensive that the manufacturer can't afford to produce anything better unless the order is big enough to justify the additional expense...and that leaves the individual collector, or even a club, with the bottom-of-the-barrel line of matchbook design. You know, sometimes I'll be looking at a current cover and I'll begin to wonder what those artists over at the Crown Match Company would say if they could see today's crop of matchcover graphics. The poor guys would probably be shaking their heads and telling each other how glad they are they didn't live long enough to see the decline.

But, bewailing the obvious isn't going to get the baby bathed, so what does *today's* collector do under *today's* conditions? Well, if you really think about it, hobby-wise, only two basic things have changed: 1) today's collector definitely has to work harder to obtain covers, and 2) it isn't as cheap as it used to be.

Everything else is relatively the same. Yes, the variety in today's covers is pretty dismal; yes, the Fancies are basically gone (except color-photo covers); and, yes, covers aren't available in the quantities that we 'veterans' were used to. But, let's take a look at how *today's* collector contends with such problems.

You want variety? You want Fancies? Do you long for Foilites, Jewels, Uniglos, Satins, and the like? Miss the Woodies, the Ten-Strikes, and the Features?—Well, they're still there! New ones aren't being produced anymore, but thousands of varieties of the originals were produced...and I know you don't have all of them. So, you just have to try harder, search longer, and...if necessary...be prepared to pay more. From my own point of view, the trying harder and searching longer is all part of collecting anyway. If today's collector has to resort to *buying* more than ever before, that's a shame, but more and more collectors (or would-be collectors) are seeing that as their only alternative. That's *not* their only alternative, of course; it's only their *choice*. There are other ways, even today, of obtaining covers.

1. The slowest and oldest method is still the surest method—do the leg work yourself and go find your own covers. New covers are still out there. Just look at the various bulletins that have a "New Finds" column—listing after listing of new covers found at various outlets. Many hotels, for instance, still have covers, but they're no longer distributed to the rooms or available on the lobby counter. Instead, they're in the bar or the exclusive restaurant on the top floor. Night clubs, bars, taverns, liquor stores, minimart gas stations, tobacco shops, etc. are almost all guaranteed to have matches available. Granted, when you ask that clerk or attendant for some matchbooks, you never know what you're going to end up with. Perhaps they'll be blanks; perhaps they'll be generic 7-11 covers, or maybe they'll be a brand new cigarette set. You just keep asking for some every time you go in. For example, I have a fellow teacher at school who always looks out for matches for me while I save my stamps for him. For the last several weeks, he's been giving me a weekly baggie of the new Winston metallic 20-strike covers. He gets a handful for me every time he fills up with gas. And, by the way, it certainly doesn't hurt to tell that attendant or clerk that you, indeed, are a collector. People will usually go even farther out of their way to help you out once they realize how serious you are. So, especially if you're a General collector or just out for trading stock, this is a good way to obtain covers.

But, it's not the only way to get covers, nor is it necessarily the best way. A lot depends on the personality and the particular circumstances of the individual collector. If the collector doesn't drive, for example, it's difficult to get out and scour the community. Then again, the collector may not have the patience for this approach. Or, as in my own case, one may simply not have the time to pursue this method.

2. A much more efficient and, to my mind, enjoyable way of obtaining covers is to scour the community looking for accumulations and old collections. One veritable master of this method is Loren Moore, CA, who lives right down the freeway from me. I usually drop by for a short visit every Sunday on my way down to browse in my favorite book stores, and I constantly drool over what Loren consistently comes up with—cartons, boxes, bags, chests, cans, albums, suitcases, etc.—all of matchbooks—he's gone through hundreds of thousands of them...by using this method. The main downside of this method is that you have to be willing to *buy* these accumulations and collections, but it's almost always substantially cheaper to buy this way than in auctions, through eBay, from individual collectors, etc. And, of course, you have to be able to drive out to look at them, pick them up, and so on, but this is normally done within your local community, so we're talking short jaunts here.

Our discussion continues in our next issue—stay tuned

...and don't be shy about sending in your own observations, thoughts, and experiences on the subject.