

The Most Expensive Matchbook In The Hobby

No, it's not the famous 1927 Charles Lindbergh cover that we're all familiar with. It's the Washington Crisps matchbook....and that's where the controversy starts! Up to September 1994, the Lindbergh matchbook held the record for the highest price ever paid for a matchbook, going for \$4,000 at the 1991 RMS Convention. In early September of 1994, however, the Washington Crisps full-book, c. 1910 by Diamond, was sold for \$4,001...making it the most expensive matchbook in the hobby.

No one in the hobby had ever seen it before Jim Stauffer offered it for sale at the 1994 convention. Stauffer, an antique dealer and "detective," had stumbled across what could be the greatest find in the hobby in early 1994. While attending an estate sale near Reading, PA, he had a "gut feeling" that the matchbooks [*yes, matchbooks; there were 40 of them in a plastic bag*] were worth something as soon as he saw them. Fortunately for him, it was raining that day, and the auction wasn't well attended. Only one other person bid against him, and Stauffer got the lot for \$26. The matchbooks (all the same, except for the number of matches in them) had apparently been stored in the plastic bag inside a mason jar. All were in mint condition. They were actually leftovers from an antique sale held in 1983. The "Licensed Match" Diamond matchbooks are red and white and feature George Washington's head on the front and back to advertise Washington Crisps, and Washington Oats, Quality Oatmeal, for the United Cereal Mills, Ltd. Co. Half the matchbooks held 20 sticks, some had 18 and 19, and two held 21 (the variations of the times). All are printed sticks. Additionally, Stauffer has identified one of the matchbooks as having a printing error of two dots on the saddle. Convinced that he was on to something, Stauffer began researching the matchcover, the product, and the advertiser. He tracked down old advertisements of Washington Crisps, contacted collectors who had knowledge about old covers, and looked into hobby records thus far.

He dated the cover to approximately 1910, and the Diamond manumark supports that date. Armed with his research and the matchbooks, he appeared at the 1994 RMS Convention, hoping to break the 1991 record-setting price fetched by a Lindbergh matchbook.. He pointed out that the record-holding Lindbergh matchbook was in "almost mint condition," missing one match, and having a crease in the saddle; the Washington Crisps piece was older and in full mint condition.

So, Stauffer asked for a \$4,001 minimum bid when he put one of the books up for auction. There were no takers, although he did sell one for \$165 [*apparently no one at the convention had come prepared to make such a purchase, and certainly not for such a hitherto unknown item*]. Right after the convention, Stauffer sold one of the matchbooks to a Reading, PA, collector/investor for an undisclosed amount. On September 1, 1994, that collector/investor turned around and sold the cover to dealers Morgan Piellers and her father, Al Piellers, for \$4,001. The check was cashed and paid by Meridian Bank on September 6th, 1994...moving the Washington Crisps matchbook into the pages of History.

Of the 40 original matchbooks, 37 were gone by the end of the first year. Having given a few to friends and selling the rest, Jim Stauffer retained possession of the three that he deemed the best (the last time I heard, at least)...the two matchbooks holding 21 sticks and the single error.

Since 1995, I haven't heard a single word about any of the Washington Crisps matchbooks. Its current standing as the single most expensive matchbook is controversial to some, at least, because some believe the entire 'sale' was simply set up to capture that 'most expensive' title. I've never seen any evidence to prove that, however. Also, note...we're not considering the Mendelson Opera matchbook here.