

The Move to Small Categories

First, what is a “small category?” ‘Pizza Slices,’ as opposed to ‘Holiday Inns’...that’s a small category. If we try to refine it any further, we get into a rather large gray area. Is a category where you can reasonably project a collection of 500 “small,” but 501 “not small?” Who’s to say? I’ve never actually seen any literature in the hobby which attempted to draw such numerical guidelines (*and I can see why!*). It might be that “small” is more of a state of mind. Is “Horses” a small category? Many would say it is, simply because it isn’t one of the widely-collected, traditional categories. Yet, Judi Wittwer, AZ, has over 7,389 in her collection. Be that as it may, I don’t want to open a can of worms here, so we’ll just leave it as “small is the opposite of large!”

Small categories have always held a special place in the hearts of collectors. The large categories, such as Best Westerns, Elks, Uniglos, Matchoramas, etc., always seem to have been the ‘glory grabbers,’ but it’s the small categories that have always had a much more personal meaning to collectors. Collectors tend to be interested in small categories because those particular categories, in many cases, have some special meaning for them. Bob Hiller, CA, might collect Airports because he works at one; I might collect Military because I was in the Army...and so on. Thus, there’s often a special ‘sentimental’ attachment to those small categories that is missing in the other categories.

So, small categories have always been around, but their popularity has skyrocketed in the last fifteen years. Have we become more sentimental? Most of us are just a bunch of old softies, anyhow (*don’t tell my students that!*). No, I don’t think that’s it. The growing move to small categories is a simple practicality.

Almost all of the Fancies aren’t made anymore; Fraternal’s aren’t being issued in their previous numbers; hotel chains are using stock nationals more and more, if they’re issuing any at all...in fact, Casinos and Cigarettes are just about the only categories that aren’t in decline, as far as new issues are concerned. That’s not to say, of course, that the possibility of new major categories appearing on the horizon doesn’t exist (Atlas foils were becoming more common, for example, in the late 80s-early 90s), but collectors have been compensating for these changes by shifting more and more of the attention to the small categories. After all, a small category, such as “Hearts,” for example, isn’t confined by the restrictions found in other categories. If you collect Navy Ships, that’s basically the only area in which you’re going to find those covers. Hearts, on the other hand, are going to be found in all areas...Restaurants, Banks, Cameos, Midgets, etc. [*well, maybe not in Funeral Homes!*]. Small categories cut across all the other categories. This helps to “balance out” the declining availability of the traditional categories.

Collectors are being very inventive in coming up with new categories, as well. Zip codes, old telephone numbers, cattle brands, nickelodeons, and the like are popping up all the time, while others are appearing all by themselves (*Hard Rock Cafes, Planet Hollywood, Camel 30s, etc.*). For *sheer* inventiveness, however, I still vote for the Man Hole cover category!

Actually, this is yet another example of what makes this hobby so enjoyable. Its flexibility allows you to tailor it to your particular likes and dislikes. As your tastes and circumstances change over the years, you can easily modify your hobby right along with them. Next time you happen to be paging through your Hotels, Savings & Loans, or other “impersonal” categories, take a look at what’s actually on the covers.