

Buying Covers

by
Mike Prero

Buying covers, as opposed to scrounging for them yourself, goes all the way back to the earliest clubs (United Matchonians, etc.) in the 1930s. There's no doubt, though, that today that option is being exercised much more frequently...not surprising, given the curtailed availability of covers from the traditional business outlets. And, it's not just an option that is being used more by novice collectors to enable them to get a "toehold" in the hobby. Veteran collectors are always seeking to find those particular treasures which have so far managed to elude them, and collectors in general are more willing to buy what they need, especially since trading has declined as well.

As a collector, you have three basic avenues open to you for buying covers: auctions, local accumulations from non-collectors, and bulk-buying within the hobby. Auctions give you the opportunity to zero in on specific categories and, in some cases, specific covers—a bundle of 25 Railroads, an 8-cover Union Pacific Matchorama set, a stack of American Ace boxes numbered from 2600-2650, etc. You know pretty much what you're getting, and you can be assured of the quality, since lots have to meet certain standards and be labeled accurately.

All of the big conventions and swapfests feature large auctions, and many of the regional clubs have very successful mail auctions with their bulletins (which is good, since those auctions are what keep these clubs afloat financially). The RMS Convention auctions, which are the largest in the hobby, and Sierra-Diablo's Bulletin auctions are examples. Additionally, there are a few private mail auctions from specific collectors, such as Don Fisher's *Matches n Stuff*, which entail fairly large catalogs, with pictures, being mailed out to prospective customers. Also, of course, within the last couple of years, matchcover auctions have become available electronically, through the internet, as well. The downside of auctions is that this is the most expensive of the three buying options. You can always hope that no one else will be bidding on the lots you want, but that's not the normal way of things!

The second approach entails you canvassing your local area for accumulations that are available outside the hobby, from non-collectors—the senior citizen who has just moved into a trailer park and no longer has room for that big bag of matchbooks gathered from years of vacations, etc. In order to find these sources, you have to advertise. Take out a small classified ad in a local advertising circular and then wait for the calls to come in. Where I am, for example, we have a weekly publication called the *Penny Pincher*, which is almost entirely made up of ads from people in the community either looking to sell or buy

particular items. I've tried this approach several times over the last 15 years and have found some pretty good buys. You'll get some responses from people who think they're going to make a killing with you, of course; you just screen those out. Most will be more than reasonable, and you'll probably be surprised at the number of people who will just give the matchbooks to you outright, glad that they mean something to someone besides themselves. It's important to mention your pricing right at the initial call.

Be sure to explain that, unless there are some very old and very unusual types in the accumulation, the matchcovers are only worth a few pennies each. You don't want to drive all the way out to the person's house only to find that his or her expectations are way out of line with yours. The downside of this option is that much of what you're going to come across will be junk—struck, glued, bobtailed, nationals, and, of course, lots of dupes. Non-collectors don't have the same standards that we expect within the hobby. Still, I've always found that this approach is worth the time and trouble you put into it. Upside: it's the cheapest way to go, and you never know when you're going to stumble across a real treasure trove.

Bulk-buying [*my own term*] entails buying part or all of another collector's collection. Here, we're talking about purchasing anywhere from a hundred to hundreds of thousands of covers at a time. There are three ways of doing this. If you have the money, you can simply buy entire collections that become available from time to time. You'll probably be bidding against a few other buyers, but, here, you're bidding for the whole tamale, not individual lots. Another way is to contact a specific collector who you know is selling off his collection, usually piecemeal, and offer to buy specific numbers or specific categories. Here, the collector, perhaps because of age, is phasing out his collection. You write for details, determine the bulk price for covers, and, when you reach an agreement, you send a check and wait for the covers to arrive (the buyer always pays the postage, by the way, unless your specific agreement calls for something else).

The other way you have open to you is to buy in bulk from a person who handles estate collections within the hobby. Here, someone has been delegated to sell off the collection of a deceased hobbyist, with the proceeds going to the family or whatever destination has been designated. There are several people within the hobby that handle estate sales; the biggest source I know of is Bob Hiller, Santa Ana, CA. He usually has several collections available at any one time. You can contact Bob, or any person in a similar position, tell him what you're looking for, find out the bulk price of the covers in question (based on an average price per cover), and order what you want. Downside to the bulk-buying method: you're using a shotgun approach to try and find what you want. Upside: the price is intermediate between auction prices and buying local accumulations, and you can be assured of getting quality, collectible material, not junk.

Over the years, I've used all of the buying methods described above, and, as I've tried to indicate, there are advantages and disadvantages to each. Personally, I've found that I prefer the bulk-buying method. It's especially advantageous to a collector, such as myself, who collects in many different categories. I purchased some 2000 F-S Banks and a 1000 F-S Motels this way, for example, and I found lots of covers that I could actually use in my own collections—and I don't even *collect* Motels! But, I knew there would be many conjunctives in areas that I do collect [AAA, "Duncan Hines-approved," manumarks I always look for, etc.], and the rest is excellent trading stock.

If you're thinking of buying covers, whether on a regular basis or just occasionally (perhaps when trading has slowed down, or you just feel it's time for a quick infusion of new material), think about what you want, how much you're willing to spend, and where you're going to look. Contact some experienced collectors and get their recommendations on the best auctions, what's currently available, reliable people to deal with, etc....*good hunting!*