

Matchcover Enigmas #5

The Frequency of Errors

Errors are inevitable in any mass production method, whether it be large items, such as cars and refrigerators, or smaller items, such as microchips and matchcovers. They may be due to human error, machinery fluctuations, temporary loss of resources, etc. Thus, there are always rigorous self-inspection processes, or quality controls, in place by the manufacturers. At least, one would expect so...but you have to wonder about matchcovers.

Think of items that are produced by the millions and then released into the public realm. Coins and stamps come to mind as examples. While there are some well-known errors that have been found in both areas (I have some error coins, myself, for example), by no stretch of the imagination can one say they are 'common'...because almost all such errors are caught at the source and never enter circulation. Not so with matchcovers.

Why is that? It certainly doesn't say much for the match industry. But, are they the real culprits? Maybe not. In the past, printing the covers, themselves, was often farmed out to independent printing firms--smaller firms, presumably with less effective quality controls. Thus, the match manufacturer supplies the matches, but some contracted printer may print the covers. Thus, the latter may be responsible for a portion of the errors.

However, the majority of errors are to be found from the major match companies of the past—Universal, Lion, Ohio, and Diamond (although Diamond's still around). I'm not an expert on the actual beginning-to-end matchbook production process, but I believe that the major manufacturers had their own printing facilities, and, thus, would stand to take the rap for their own errors.

So the question inevitably arises, "How could so many different error covers be released?" Now, there are different types of errors, and the culpability lessens or rises according to the particular type of error we focus on. If we're talking about errors such as off-center printing, multiple printings, missing strikers, and the like, those are presumably due to a hitch in the machinery or some other source—which doesn't ruin the entire run. Thus, a *few* bad covers are produced, and it may then be understandable that some quality control person isn't checking *every* cover out of those thousands run off. Hence, those errors go out, hidden among all the rest of the perfectly normal covers. OK.

But, when we're talking about text errors, it would seem inexcusable that no one spotted the error before the covers went out—inexcusable because that error is on *every* cover in the run! Yes, some text errors are glaring (such as "Phoenix" being spelled "Poenix"—*That's an actual error coming up in the Jul/Aug 2014 issue*), while others might be much less obvious, such as someone's name misspelled or an incorrect area code, zip code, etc. Still, that text error is on every cover in the run. No one is checking the printed text against what the customer actually ordered?

Is it possible that, rather than do the entire run over again, the manufacturer offered the run to the customer at a significant discount? I don't know. I've never heard of that actually being done. Perhaps one of our senior members who used to work for one of the major companies might shed some light on all this. Any way you cut it, though, there are an awful lot of errors in circulation.

...Although...if we could compare the overall percentage of released errors to actual total number of covers produced, I'd bet the percentage of released errors is almost nothing!