

# Collecting Diamond Safety Firsts

by  
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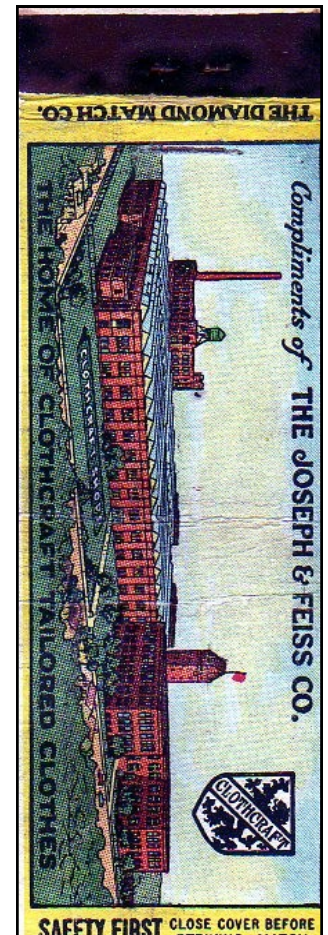
For some odd reason, it's always the Diamond Qualities that get all the glory, but Diamond Safety Firsts are really the sovereigns of the hobby, to my mind. They're old; they're beautiful; they're old; they're still obtainable; and they're old! Within this category, for example, are the famous World War I Knights of Columbus covers and the first U.S. Navy Ship cover issued, the U.S.S. Sirius.



Diamond had begun operation in 1881 and obtained the rights to manufacture matchbooks in 1894. By c. 1896, Diamond was producing its first printed matchcovers. Although six different manumarks were produced by Diamond before the first Safety Firsts appeared in 1915 [See Bob Oliver's fairly definitive article on early Diamond manumarks in the July, 1989, *Sierra-Diablo Bulletin*], it's the Safety First covers that represent the oldest covers that most collectors can ever hope to obtain...and they're tough!

"Safety First" is actually a footer (lower left hand corner of the front panel) rather than the actual manumark under the striker of the cover, but the footers have always been used as identifying features on the very old covers.

Diamond produced its Safety First covers from 1915-1920, so these are really early covers. Fortunately for hobbyists, Diamond was already at the top of the industry, and the Safety First covers were popular and widespread. So, considering that we're talking about covers that are some 100 years old, there are surprising numbers still to be seen within the hobby, and one can only speculate on



how many exist in the general populace but haven't surfaced yet.

These are all extra-long, wide-striker covers. Unlike more modern covers, the staples were normally put in first, and then the striker material was applied over the staple. This means that removing the staple can be a very tricky affair. It wasn't until the 1930s that the industry developed a way to apply the striker material to the cover before adding the staple. Thus, sometimes, a significant portion of the striker is lost if you're not careful when removing the staple—and even then, sometimes it simply can't be helped because of the condition of the striker in the first place. Strikers on these Safety Firsts look as if they were applied by hand. They are often not straight, not evenly applied, and not of consistent width. In some cases, the striker, thus applied, may even obscure part of the manumark. This is just one of the features of these covers that leave no doubt in your mind that what you're holding in your hand is really much more than a matchcover—it's Americana—it's History.

Also, unlike older covers from many of the other long-defunct match manufacturers, Diamond Safety First covers can rightly boast art work so beautiful that it almost rivals Crown's famed Chinese restaurant covers. Additionally, these covers are almost always characterized by the used of several colors, rather than the normally drab two-tone affairs seen on so many other pre-war covers. In other words, Diamond Safety First covers were certainly not the 'cheapies' of their time!

Covers of the caliber of Diamond Safety Firsts are definitely covers that you want to store under the best conditions available to you. For almost all of us, that means in plastic pages. As I've noted in previous articles, I (and I assume most collectors) can't afford to house all of my covers in plastic, but I certainly use it for my old covers, and I highly recommend plastic pages to others.

As you could guess, these Safety Firsts aren't easy to find, and they're even harder to actually obtain, but, number-wise, there are enough of them out there for every collector to have at least a representative few. I only have 97 at the moment [*but I can always hope!*], but Ed Brassard, WA, reported in 1988 that he had 300, and the late Harry Branchaud, whose collection of old covers, I believe, was unrivaled, had several hundred Diamond Safety Firsts and perhaps over a thousand. Only 374 are currently listed. The problem is, then, finding and getting them. Who's got them, and, worse, who's going to part with them? Well, I'm afraid that old adage applies, "Them that has gets!" Basically, you either had to get in on the ground floor (i.e. getting them while they were still in circulation, just like Harry did) or accumulating them through sheer perseverance. Since most of us weren't in a position to take advantage of the first option, that only leaves us the latter...and, as you knew it would be, that's the most difficult course.

For all practical purposes, waiting for an estate sale could see you dead and buried before anything significant happening. Besides, you'd be bidding against those exasperating collectors for whom money apparently means absolutely nothing. The same applies to auctions. So, we return to our second option of perseverance. You just have to keep plugging away it, biding your time, taking advantage of an opportunity here, an opportunity there. That's what I do, and, although it's a very slow and painstaking process and even though I'll never approach the Harry Branchaud level, it's worked for me. And once you get your foot in the door, it's slightly easier because you can trade in kind. I've been searching for years, and, until recently, I had three to trade! What a success story!

