

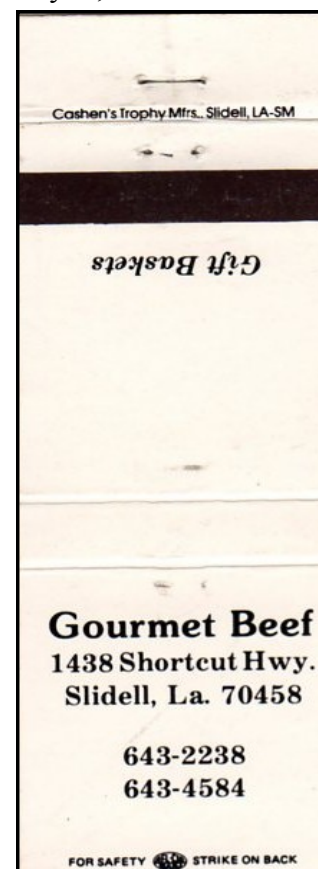
Zip Codes...and The Questions They Inspire

Good grief! Where to begin? I mean, given the fact that there are, theoretically, 99,999 possible zip codes, and, theoretically, even more actual covers, what with errors and such, we're talking about a large 'small' category....We'll hit the basics first.

As with Towns and County Seats, Zip Codes, apparently by popular consensus, are collected in 20-strike only, although I have heard of at least one collector who collects them in all sizes, and there's certainly nothing to be said against that. I would guess that the whole convention of collecting in 20-strikes started as a mere concession to the fact that that size is the most predominant in the industry and thus the easiest to obtain. And, again as with Towns and County Seats, in order for said 20-strike to qualify as a collectible Zip Code, it has to have one address only—no multiples.

And what about collecting 5-digit zips as opposed to 9-digit zips? I haven't met up with any collectors who require the full 9-digit number, but some collect them as a separate collection. I have it on good authority, though, that those 9-digit zips are quite rare on covers. They're a much newer innovation, for one thing, so they haven't been around as long. And most businesses that would put zips on their covers in the first place...don't bother to put the full zip code in any event. So...I haven't even attempted to start in on such.

Is there the usual prohibition against using struck covers? No more so than in any other category. That's always up to the individual collector. I certainly am not above saving a struck cover that I need, but it's always with the (hopeful) intent that an unstruck example will someday replace it. The thing to always keep in mind, I think, is that you don't want to load down any collection with a lot of struck covers. It brings down the quality of the collection, certainly, and perhaps the value, as well. Even if you, as an individual



collector, have no qualms at all about routinely collecting struck covers, other collectors do...and eventually, since almost all collections go up for sale in the end, all those struck covers may impact the selling. Of course, we could go 'round and 'round about which is better: a collection of 2,500 quality covers or 3,000 quality and struck covers—but that's a subject for another discussion.

But back to Zip Codes! Now that I've actually been collecting them for the last couple of years, I can see a surprising, and perplexing, problem. And that is....while you would think (I did!) that getting at least the first 25,000 would be fairly easy, considering that there might be four times that amount possible, and considering how many covers are actually in circulation (just within the hobby) at any one time, in actual fact, it's not easy at all! It's darned hard!

Why? Well, judging from my own experience, one can sift through thousands upon thousands of covers over a period of time and still not make significant inroads into your collecting goals...because... it turns out that instead of seeing an even, representative sample of zip codes across the country, you keep seeing the same relatively few zip codes over and over again...Not necessarily the same covers, but the same zip codes.

Well, why is that? I offer my best guess...but that's all it is...and I start with yet another question. All those covers that circulate within the hobby and flow in and out of the hobby, where did they come from? Why, out of all the hundreds of millions of covers that have been produced, are they and their like the only ones to survive? Those chosen few (relatively!) survived because of accumulators and collectors. Out of all those hundreds of millions of covers, they were culled out to be saved—saved as mementos, saved as collectibles—but saved!

And how did such accumulators and collectors decide which covers to save? Availability. They chose what they had access to. Thus, an accumulator living in Chicago would gather largely Chicago covers, while the collector in Houston would gather largely Houston covers. And, although such covers might later be traded to others, often across great distances, still it was basically local covers being exchanged for local covers.

But from which localities? Metropolitan areas, for the most part. Not only were such areas the greatest outlets for covers, but they also harbored the greatest number of accumulators and collectors. Thus, while occasionally running across that never-before-seen zip from some small town in Montana or Idaho, you'll see zip after zip from places such as Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago. Of course, those large cities may have 20, 30, 40 or more different zips, but the point is, those zips are going to be a lot more common within the hobby than zips from the smaller towns and hamlets.

Would that be the only reason for such frustrating inequities in the world of Zip Codes? No. Veteran collector Terry Rowe also points out all the zip codes that cover basically residential areas, thus having little to no chance of ever being seen on covers. (ouch! There go my dreams of having a perfect 100,000 collection!). And, as a depressingly accurate verification of all of this, Terry's been collecting zip codes for at least ten years and currently only has a grand total of 11,772 (I shouldn't say 'only'...that's three times the amount I have...but set that figure against my initial dream of 100,000 and it's...depressing! So, I gather my original estimate was somewhat...unrealistic.)

Is my enthusiasm dampened with this unexpected revelation? No! I figure I'll have just as much enjoyment putting together a harder-to-get collection of 30,000 (?) as I would an easier-to-get collection of 100,000. (See? That's me!—Always positive, always upbeat!...But, [sigh!] I sure would have liked to have completed that 100,000 collection!)