

Topicals & Thematics — The Best Recruiting Tool

As the new editor of *Topical Time*, journal of the American Topical Association, I find myself thinking quite a bit more about topicals than normal, and it strikes me that topicals and thematics are, almost without question, the best tool we have for recruiting more new and different faces into our wonderful hobby. After all, in the world of collectibles we're all topicalists. The topic we started out with is stamps.

The challenges of our hobby as it stands now that we are well into the twenty-first century are different than those faced by earlier generations. While there are still many who are eagerly involved with the hobby at all levels, attracting new collectors is much more of a challenge than it used to be. A good deal of finger-pointing has been done at the United States Postal Service for its apparent policy to give far more significance (and number of stamp issues) to American pop culture than to legitimate historical figures and incidents. This, I believe, is misplaced blame.

While I do lament the fact that significant anniversaries are passing us by each year without so much as a USPS nod, that is not what is making it more difficult to attract new collectors. That distinction belongs primarily to the fact that finding stamps on incoming mail is becoming more and more difficult each year, as personal communication migrates to the Internet and hard-copy mail is limited primarily to bills, advertising promotions, donation solicitations and eBay purchases. Even the vast majority of those items are mailed without stamps, being franked either with meters or bulk-rate permits.

Without day-to-day contact with stamps there is no sense of significance developed towards them, nor

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is there the affinity of familiarity long afforded to postage stamps. This is a situation caused by progress, not a failure of USPS.

I truly believe the key to attracting more and different people to our hobby now is finding ways to appeal to the natural collector inside, as there is no shortage of people with a collector mentality. No one who collects sports cards doesn't love sports. The same is true for toy collectors or record collectors and their respective areas. There are even many people who don't yet know that they are collectors, yet they save trinkets or other items related to various interests. Appealing to these areas of interest in those peoples' lives, ranging from ethnicity, culture or profession to other hobbies and leisure pursuits, and then tying those interests to stamps is a natural form of outreach.

Without question, topical or thematic collecting is the easiest way to turn a non-collector into a stamp collector. It can even give us established collectors entirely new areas to pursue with zeal! Those of us who are lifelong collectors of postal history or specialized areas of stamp collecting can easily find areas of interest within the limitless world of topical collecting. As with any collection, we are free to pursue these areas as casually or intently as we wish.

Topical collecting in some form or another has been around since the beginning of stamps. However, at a time when stamp subjects were limited primarily to either monarchs or dead presidents, there was comparatively little choice of topics. Nonetheless, collectors formed collections showing a particular individual, those printed in one color, or specific types of postmarks.

Despite this early type of topi-

cal collecting it's only been during the past sixty years or so (since Jerry Husak founded the American Topical Association in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1949) that topical and thematic collecting has truly taken root, grown, and become a highly respected collecting area of its own, and now one of the greatest areas of expansion within the hobby.

For those of us who grew up within a more traditional hobby model, including collecting United States, worldwide or by country, filling spaces in printed albums was how we got our start. Completion of most countries is an unreachable goal for most collectors with average means, and many of us felt constrained by the limitations (and, for that matter, comfort) of a printed album. But every collector ends up with material for which there is no space, and it is from this material that great new collections are formed.

Covers, photographs, ephemera and many other collectible items end up in our collections because they interest us for some reason. Maybe there is no printed space in an album, but we find those items interesting enough to keep. I'll hazard a guess that much of this material, if examined, has some topical or emotional connection to each of our lives.

For example, the item shown sparked at least a short-term topical collection for me, several years after the fact. That item is a trimmed-to-shape postmark from a Special Delivery cover. Unfortunately, I was the one who trimmed the cover as a child, hinging it in my album. I don't know why I didn't just soak it off at the time. The item — which appears to be dated October 8, 1926, mailed from Johnstown, Colorado — was sent just three days before my grandparents' wedding. It likely was from my grandfather to my grandmother.

For years the misfit traveled around

Topic vs. Thematic

Many collectors use the terms "topic" and "thematic" interchangeably. While there are definite similarities between them, the two terms refer to slightly different forms of collecting.

Someone forming a topical collection might choose to save stamps with animals, space, fish, or architecture. That same collector may eventually wish to narrow his or her topic down to cats, planets, trout and skyscrapers on stamps to make it more manageable. As long as this collector continues to save these topics on stamps — or even as they are depicted in postmarks and other postal ephemera, it's still a topical collection. All materials are related directly to the chosen subject, or topic, with that subject as a design element.

If that collector wishes to study further and tell the *history* of space travel, the *migration* of certain cat species, the *history* of trout or the *development* of the skyscraper through research, stamps, and other materials that advance the story, then he or she is on the way to becoming a thematic collector.

Thematics leave more open to an individual's own interpretation than the strict collecting of topical material that simply depicts the desired subject. So, for example, our trout stamp collector would suddenly begin collecting stamps and covers that might picture or relate to fishing gear, flies, boats, licenses, or even various types of people who have relied on the trout as a food source. These additional items all help to tell the story of trout and their relationship to people and civilizations.

in my album until, as a teenager, the motorcycle attracted my attention. Since I wasn't allowed to own a real one, I could pursue as many as I liked on stamps. While motorcycles on stamps didn't turn into a lifelong topical, it did stimulate my interest for a time, and it did lead me to other topics that I still pursue.

Those stamps that have some sort of connection to us or our interests will surely attract our attention. This is where the USPS comes back in to the picture, only cast in a more positive light. Each year's stamp program offers scores of additions to different topical collections. This year's stamps alone have fed into topical collections of actors, poets, movies, dragons, chefs, puppets, television, horses, dogs, snowmen, flags, Lincoln, cartoon characters, dolphins, bears,

playing cards, steamboats, lighthouses, musical instruments, fish, birds, and dozens of others.

The ATA has started a rather bold push called "Buck the Trend." By re-vamping the organization, publication and devoting resources towards growth, the group hopes to reverse the trend towards declining membership in philatelic organizations. As the largest thematic group in the world with the largest-circulation magazine devoted to topical and thematic collecting, I'm sure they can do it!

For more information about the ATA, write to American Topical Association, P.O. Box 8, Carterville, IL 62918-0008, e-mail americantopical@msn.com, or visit www.americantopicalassn.org.