

Hey Buddy, Got a Match?

by Joe DeGennaro

Hey buddy, got a match? Now there's an expression you don't hear much any more at least not in everyday conversation. However, if you're a philluminist, someone who collects matches, you probably hear it a lot.

Sadly, today collecting in general has taken a real hit. We live in a fast paced world where people spend more time on the computer than they do interacting with other. I'm a philluminist, roughly translated that means "lover of light", and over the last thirty years I've been collecting matches. For twenty six of those years I've been a serious collector and a member of the Rathkamp Matchcover Society, the granddaddy of match collecting clubs.

Like a great many people I picked up matches as a souvenir of a place I had been and threw them in a large basket I had on my coffee table. You might call this collecting but we in the organized hobby call it accumulating. Over a period of time I had accumulated a pretty nice amount of matches since I traveled a lot on business and did a great deal of entertaining. One day while reading a local publication there was an article about people that worked in the Rockefeller Center complex and what they collected. One of them collected matches which really peaked my interest. I tracked him down and invited him to lunch and we have been friends ever since. He introduced me to the world of serious match collecting. Okay, you're probably asking yourself "What is serious match collecting?" It's when you graduate from accumulating a lot of matches in no particular order and organize them by category and put them in albums (we remove the matches first) or some other means of organization. You pick up several to share rather than just one for yourself. It's also when you join local and national clubs, begin trading with others, go to swapfests and conventions. Then you really begin to appreciate the joy of match collecting. It's not a dog eat dog kind of hobby but one where people share and help you in your quest.

I've always been a collector all my life. Stamps, coins, records, first day covers are just some of the things I've had an interest in over the years. I think I trace this back to my love for history. Matches, to me, are a very big part of history! Fire, of course, dates back to the cavemen, but the match as we know it only came to be in the early 1800's. There were many different tries a perfecting a safe and useful match and many failures. Early matches were nothing more than a highly volatile mixture of chemical substances dipped into by a small splinter of wood that had to be rubbed between two pieces of sandpaper to ignite. As one might expect you had to do this very quickly or the sandpaper and possibly your hand might go up in smoke. Early match mixtures contained white phosphorous which, in addition to being highly volatile was also poisonous. Many early match company workers became deathly ill and succumbed to what came to be known as the "white death". In 1910 phosphorous was essentially banned in the United States and chemists from the Diamond Match Company concocted a safe alternative. In a gesture of good will the company voluntarily surrendered its patent rights and made their compounding secrets public.

Year's earlier in 1892 a Philadelphia lawyer name Joshua Pusey, invented what was the first matchbook. His patent was challenged by Diamond Match and after a few years he sold his design to them for \$5,000 as well as a position with the company. In the early 1900's a new idea was born, using the match for advertising. The members of the Mendelson Opera Company took plan white matchbooks and affixed pictures and wrote about their upcoming performance on the front of the cover and even printed information on each match stick. These matchbooks were distributed around town and the performances sold out. The rest as they say is history. Later, around 1910 a salesman for the Diamond Match Company sold Pabst Blue Ribbon an order for 6 million



matchbooks and from then on matches as an advertising median became a phenomenon. With this kind of production “Please Close Cover Before Striking” became the most printed phrase in the English language.

Over the years many match companies came and went and the production of matches became a thriving industry. Since those purchasing matches wanted to get people’s attention any way they could they asked for and got many beautiful designs very pleasing to the eye and, in some cases, almost a work of art. In the early 1970’s the government forced the last real change in matchbooks by making it a law that match companies had to move the striker from the front to the back. Sadly, the advent of the cheap disposable lighter and the many prohibitions on smoking have slowly made the match industry a dying breed. Only time will tell just how long the remaining few match companies in the U.S. can survive in these very trying times.

Matchcover collectors obviously have a big concern about the dwindling production of matches and what it’s affect will be on our hobby. Fortunately, over the year matches were produced in the millions and so there are a great many still available through the hobby for the collec-

tor. Very early casino matchcovers are highly sought after much the same as early casino chips but those from the 1960’s, 1970’s and 1980’s were so overproduced that they’ve become quite common and easy to obtain and thus many collectors look on them with disdain. The growth of casinos around the country in other places than Nevada as well as the enormous building trend in Las Vegas has caused a rebirth of interest in casino matches. Most of the major hotels & casinos in Las Vegas have multiple matches in their restaurants, bars and clubs. Last year while staying at the Bellagio I picked up 15 different matchbooks and matchboxes from that one location. The new Planet Hollywood Hotel & Casino has had almost a dozen matches since it opened last year. Now many of the hotels and casinos are banning smoking and one wonders if that will mean an end to their ordering matches. We collectors sure hope not.

Anyone interested in this still fascinating and rather inexpensive hobby can learn more about it by going to our website at www.matchcover.org or by contacting me at jtdegennaro@cbs.com. We have collecting clubs all around the country and hold an annual convention each year in August. Check us out and you’ll find that matchcover collecting is a matchless hobby!

