

What's in YOUR attic?

Finding Treasures

We launch a new column by a lifelong postal history expert.

Fred Schmitt



As postal history finds go, this cover appears to have it all—an unusual routing, a wartime use, early international airmail, high value definitives, perhaps even enough sex appeal to make a willing buyer stand up and shout. What do you think?

Thinking back quite a while ago, I remember reading in an issue of *STAMPS Magazine* from the late 1930s the words of a well-known stamp dealer who remarked that, “Most, if not all, of the ‘great finds’ of good old covers have probably already been made. So don’t expect to find stashes of old correspondences and covers in your grandparents’ attic anytime soon.”

Those words were said over 70 years ago—and let me say this: they’re as false today as they were then. I can’t begin to tell you how many “finds” of good postal history have been made during my career that spans the second half of the 20th century and well into the 21st. Good finds of philatelic material, though they take place infrequently, continue to be made.

Certainly, the choicest discoveries of early 19th century stampless and stamped mail are not very prevalent anymore, but just as covers from that era were not really thought of as classic material even as late as the 1920s, the

important covers being discovered today—many of which date to World War II and before—are tomorrow’s classic rarities. Some of them could fall into that category right now.

Families everywhere have made a habit of saving old letters—usually with original envelopes. They did it in the mid-1800s and especially with soldiers’ mail during every war—and they’re still doing it today.

I remember, 30 and 40 years ago, looking at a lot of WW II-era censored covers and thinking they weren’t very valuable—but maybe they will be someday. That “someday,” in countless cases, has come. Postal historians are hungry to pore over every kind of wartime use—and will pay a premium for material that, though it looks quite common, bears an unusual return address, censor marking, or destination. Richard Helbock, well-known modern era postal historian, notes that unlisted military and/or foreign destination postal rates are still being discovered. For instance, a cover from an obscure Pacific island with an unlisted (undiscovered) postal rate to the U.S.

can sometimes be worth hundreds of dollars or more.

The cover shown above was found in a dealers’ box at a small bourse outside London 20 years ago. A collector purchased it for under \$25. Aside from all its exotic features (airmail, censored use, sealing wax, WW II era, etc.), it is franked with three British 10 shilling indigo definitives (Scott No. 251), each now worth \$25—but a lot more on a cover like this. Value today: well over \$150.00. Like earlier “classics” in earlier eras, a cover that sextuples in value over a 20-year span is one with a viable future!

In coming columns, we’ll explore lots of discoveries—some of them quite a bit more valuable than this one. ✉

[Editor’s Note: *Fred Schmitt has been in the stamp business since he was a teenager acting as a conduit for the stamp dealers on New York’s Nassau Street over 50 years ago. You may reach him at fred@fredschmitt.com, or by writing to him at: P.O. Box 387, Northport, NY 11768.*]