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# Book Reports

Northwest Philatelic Library, Inc.



## HIDDEN “GEMS”

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Starting the inventory of the NPL collection over a year ago, I came across an unexpected find – a 1923 **First Edition** of Scott’s *Specialized Catalogue* [U.S.]. Since then, we have found other historical “treasures” that were buried and largely forgotten in the tightly-packed stacks. I was immediately intrigued by this small book and decided to prepare this review.

The visual contrast between the 1923 First Edition of the *Specialized Catalogue* and today’s edition is striking. The 1923 edition is the size of a deep checkbook, with a simulated leather cover with gold embossing. The paper is significantly thicker than the paper used by Scott in its companion 1923 *Standard Postage and Stamps Catalogue*. Its 67 pages are printed on one side only, using the same font size as the current edition. Only general postal issues are included in the compilation. Today’s Scott No. 1 is Scott No. 28 in the 1923 First Edition.

The edition’s explanatory introduction is two pages in length, whereas 72-pages are devoted to the same purpose in 2004. There are no photos or illustrations of the stamps themselves.

These differences notwithstanding, it is easy to see the genesis of today’s *Specialized Catalogue* in the 1923 edition. Each stamp series begins with printing specifications, i.e., plate and pane size. The organization for each stamp is: basic issue information [e.g., denomination, color], varieties, and cancellations, much like current editions, except no dates of issue or earliest known use are provided. “Type” design and printing differences are illustrated in detailed drawings, a practice continued today. Stamp values [called “prices”] were established “... after careful analysis of market conditions, and consultations with many of America’s leading specialists.”

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I compared the 1923 and 2004 editions for differences in the amount of stamp detail reported. I randomly-selected two stamps for this purpose: the 5-cent Jefferson of the 1851 issue [Scott Nos. 34 and 12, respectively] and the 1-cent Washington of the 1912-14 Washington-Franklin issue [Scott Nos. 355 and 405, respectively]. My hypothesis was that there would not be much content difference between the two editions regarding the 5-cent stamp since it was issued in 1856, but that there would be significantly more information about the 1912 1-cent stamp in the 2004 edition. The results of this non-scientific test were mixed. The 5-cent

Jefferson coverage is quite similar between the 1923 and 2004 editions, the only material difference being limited to the inclusion of double and defective transfers in the 2004 edition.

Surprisingly, the 1923 was relatively complete regarding the 1-cent Washington. The discovery of a cracked plate and a double transfer was all that was added to later editions.



Of what intrinsic value is the First Edition of the *Specialized Catalogue*? Admittedly, I probably wouldn't use it to evaluate my collection, a common usage for a stamp catalogue. I further admit, however, to being a history buff, trying to explain what got us from then to now, and the First Edition supplies this historical perspective.

First, the 1923 First Edition tells us of the unmistakable impact of philatelic research on what we know and appreciate about a stamp. Beginning principally as purely descriptive compilations in nature and scope, led to studies that are now considered classics. The scope of philatelic research has expanded over time to include more analytical investigations that use new tools to look at new and different things about a stamp. Advances in science and technology, e.g., chemistry and metallurgy, have contributed to this research shift.

Historical perspective also reveals the influence of advances in information technology. There may be relatively fewer collectors today, but they communicate faster and more completely than they did in 1923. Today's discoveries of new varieties, auction results, and stamp production statistics, for example, are capable of being communicated almost instantaneously, to a wider audience, and in more detail. I offer regards to the compiler of the First Edition, Eugene N. Costales, for the conditions he must have faced in that undertaking.

Finally, a note about prices. CVs in very early catalogues tend to be relatively low, some enviously so. The 1923 First Edition is no exception. We only wish those prices were available today; yet, at the same time, bemoan that today's stamp values have not increased enough! Here's how to look at this in a different light. A dollar in 1923 is "worth" \$10.94 in consumer purchasing power in 2004. The 1923 edition shows a price of \$7.50 for an unused \$5 Franklin in the Washington-Franklin series [today's Scott No. 524]. If the value of that stamp was tied only to overall consumer inflation, the stamp today would have a value of \$82. Yet, stamps have their own markets, imperfect, inefficient or otherwise, and today's *Specialized Catalogue* lists Scott No. 524 at \$200 mint and \$400 never hinged - a larger increase than would be caused by general inflation alone.

We have discovered other historical "gems" in our Library. You may find them an interesting read, perhaps for the same reasons I did, or for other motives that better suit your sense of history. Think about your collection today and imagine what it might have looked like back then. Would you have gone about things differently?

## EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Sometimes it is useful to try to think basics. For example, what is the purpose of a stamp club? Basically, it's to help members acquire as many desirable stamps and covers as they can afford (or a little over).

What, then, is the purpose of a philatelic library? Is it to intellectualize the hobby? I don't think so. The key, it appears to me, is to help members make their collections as interesting to them and others as can be, at little cost.

Is that all there is? No! We can group other benefits under the heading of sociability and friendship, I'm sure.

So, what might a well-rounded philatelic organization strive to achieve? How about an aid in (a) acquiring material, (b) supporting a library, and (c) making it fun for everybody. Do you buy that?