

Perfins: Pleasure Island of Philately

By Jo Ro Jung, Jr.

Do you have a sideline stamp collection? Is it precancels, meters, covers? Supposedly all of us have, or will have someday, so let me tell you of a sideliner that is especially interesting and appealing to the person imbued with an inquisitive and adventurous nature. It concerns the collecting of perfins: stamps which have punched initials or designs. Perfins, by definition, are PERForated INitial stamps.

To the very straight-laced collector these perforated stamps are regarded as junk; a waste product of the hobby-unless of course said collector is in need of a certain stamp to fill that blank space in his album, then automatically a perfin is of use to him. So, all of you pessimists, lend an ear; we've got news for you -- a collection of perforated stamps is loaded with history and adventure. It's only fair, however, to point out to profiteers that perfins are collected for the pure enjoyment received. They have little monetary value, but are measured instead by the fun and satisfaction you will obtain from such a unique collection.

The history of perforated stamps began in England during the year 1868, only 28 years after the first postage stamp was issued. As time passed, many other countries sanctioned their use, even for official purposes. Finally, in 1908, the U. S. added an amendment to The Postal Laws and Regulations permitting the alteration of postage stamps while yet in mint condition. Today, stamps of no less than 90 nations may be had in perforated condition and at least one country, Paraguay, has issued a postal duty stamp in perforated condition only (Scott #37).

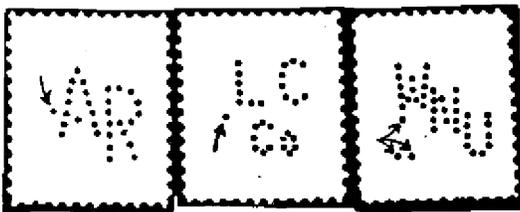
Canada, to the U. S. collector, is undoubtedly the most popular foreign country represented via perfins. Great Britain, although identification is unusually difficult, is probably second choice. The British perf collectors call their perfins SPIFS: Stamps Perforated with the Initials of Firms.

The perforating of postage stamps, either in the form of letters, numbers, symbols, etc., was instituted as a means of identification in order to aid and restrict their use by the purchaser and to insure against theft. The perforating is done by each firm or individual with their own personal perforating machine. The only legal specification to be adhered to is that each punctured hole shall not exceed 1/32 inch in diameter and that the whole area occupied by the identifying device shall not exceed a 1/2 inch square; the holes must be at least 1/32 inch apart and so arranged as not to weaken the paper.

All designs for private markings are prepared by the perforator manufacturer following the recommendations and suggestions of the customer. Where possible, trademarks or special letters are adapted for the design. Each design is sold by the perforator manufacturer under agreement that it will positively not be duplicated except on order from the original owner. This insures a positive reference file of machine serial numbers and enables the manufacturer to tell at once by what machine, and its owner, any stamp has been punctured.

Discussion regarding the number of perfins in existence is useless; the number being almost inconceivable. Here in the U. S. alone there is

evidence of at least 5,000 distinctive designs and initials. Railroads, governments, banks, and several individuals are typical users. However, despite the numerous U. S. designs which have been issued by the perforating machine manufacturers, there is no perfin that has a duplicate type. This is consistent even with the larger business houses who employ an extra perf system to identify their home office design from that of branches in other cities. Accepted procedure in this example is to employ one or more extra holes, or "position dots," which are located at a specific point in relationship to the original design or letter. The most common users of the "extra perf" system are American Radiator, B. F. Goodrich, General Electric, International Harvester and New York Life Insurance Co.



The first perforating machine in this country was made in 1887, 21 years before the perforating of U. S. postage stamps was permitted. It was placed on the market by the Cummings Perforator Company of Chicago and New York and was used almost exclusively as a canceling device for business forms and documents. With the advent of the postal decree of 1908, the perforators automatically became the logical choice for perforating postage stamps. The machines looked very much like an early letter press, except that the hand wheel has been replaced by a lever arrangement. Connected to this lever through a cam arrangement, is a rigid steel bar which holds a number (5 or 10) of male dies; these male dies, having inserted steel pins which form the design or lettering to be reproduced, do the actual work of perforating the stamps. Directly below the male die is located the female die consisting of a hardened steel plate in which a duplication of the design is drilled; the centers of the holes, corresponding exactly with the centers of the pins of the male die. A system of guides assures the die of moving in a vertical plane thereby eliminating the possibility of breaking off any pins on the male die by striking the female die plate. There is in addition a mechanical device which aids centering the stamps

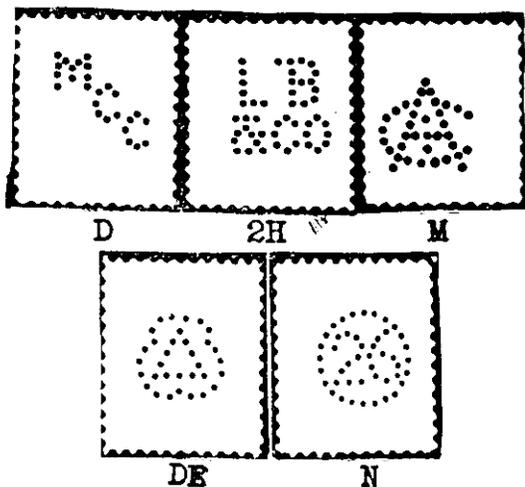
as they move forward one row at a time. The larger machines have a table wide enough to accommodate a standard sheet of stamps and will perforate 20 to 40 stamps per stroke, through 2 to 4 sheets.

Basically there are three types of perfin collectors, although "Perfinners" collect them in any manner found most desirable. The punches may be collected as TYPES-which consists of collecting any one stamp of any issue or denomination having a different initial or design; at the most only one or two of each "type" is required. ISSUES-these are most popular with the beginner. Here one attempts to get as many face-different stamps of one type with the same punched symbols. The size of this sort of collection is governed by the number of different types chosen and is much more attractive to the eye than one consisting of types only. STRIPS-or partial covers. Unquestionably this form of collecting is very interesting and reliable since the user of the perforated stamp can usually be immediately identified by the return address. If one chooses, the entire cover may be made collectable. Attention to perimeter perforations can be considered but are ignored by most collectors. Watermarks, color differences, and other minor face varieties are disregarded.

In addition to these three basic collections there are practically unlimited opportunities awaiting the topical fan. Such fields as railroads, colleges, banks, and insurance companies are very attractive. The searcher will also find much to ponder over when one considers that perfins have written a definite chapter in the postal history of our country. The progress and expansion of our rail system is evidenced via perfins. There are perfin collectors in this country who can produce perforated stamped covers of smaller railroads which have long ago been incorporated while weaving the great rail network that links our country. Yes sir, if you are inquisitive, perfins will take you back to the "long ago."

Identifying perfins is in itself an adventure. Three simple factors satisfactorily describe just about every perforated stamp in existence: 1) The letters or the geometrical design itself. 2) The configuration of the letters or designs is next considered and checked against a code symbol. For example, H-one horizontal line; 2H-two horizontal lines; D-

letters arranged diagonally; A-letters forming an arc; M-a monogram, and so forth. 3) The final step gives the height of the various types in millimeters; such measurements being made from the center of the topmost hole to the center of the bottom-most. It may be wise to mention along with identification the collecting of "minor varieties." Such varieties include stamps which have been carelessly perforated in a position other than normal. These



include inverts, invert obverts, sidewise up and down, inverted diagonal up and down, etc., and far into the night.

Such varieties are prolific when one considers that there is a perforating machine which can perf sheet stamps which have been folded in six layers. Facing the issues squarely, don't collect the "minor varieties" unless you can remain alive on one meal per day and sleep one hour out of twenty-four. You'll soon find it impossible to continue such a collection and sooner or later you'll be forced to limit yourself to collecting the stamp having the perf in the normal position thereby placing the remaining ones among your duplicates. If you must hunt down the oddities go after the "illegals" - those perforated types that do not exactly meet the specifications as set forth by the post office department.

Perfin collecting is one of the few almost virgin fields wherein it is possible to build an imposing collection at a minimum of expense. Your collector acquaintances should be glad to trade or give you the stamps which they regard as useless and would otherwise discard. Dealers and accumulators are

usually happy to dispose of these punches for a few cent per hundred, Cheap mixtures are also an excellent source of supply. It is also worthy of note that this field of specialization is almost unknown so far as exploration is concerned. Research in this branch of stamp collecting is actually wide open.

Since 1908, of all the postal stamps issued by the U. S., the Official, Postage Due, and newspaper adhesives are the only ones that cannot be found in legally perfed condition. The Schermack type III stamps themselves are a complete and challenging field of endeavor. Se-tenant perfin varieties are also much sought after. The most widely known of these varieties is that of the National Bank of the Republic, of Chicago. Its perforating machine was constructed so as to place a different letter on each of the ten stamps in the sheet's horizontal row; i.e. NBREPUBLIC. The NBR letters are higher than the others in the row. Other se-tenant items occur as "mirror images"; these being caused by folding the sheet of stamps before perforating. Here pairs may be found showing the design in the normal position on one stamp but inverted on the adjoining one. Such items, although of little significance, do represent an interesting album page.

Occasionally a stamp is found that has been punched by more than one company. At the present time at least two examples are known. Such items are absolutely fascinating despite the fact that all too little is known about them; certainly it is reasonable to assume there are others as yet undiscovered.

About now you are wondering just how the stamps are mounted and just what style album is best. Well, there are as many ways of mounting as there are collectors. Most use blank album pages, except for the strip collectors who usually employ a scrap book or filing box. In nearly all cases, the usual mounting is accomplished by the old reliable hinge. For single stamps some prefer to mount their perfins face down on black paper in order to show the perforations. Others mount the stamp face up and illustrate the design nearby together with its identification. Still others exhibit two copies, one face up and the other down, again with a dark background to set off the design. It is understandable, therefore, to state that mounting possibilities are limitless, and a well planned collection is truly a beautiful sight. Naturally your pages should run A, B, C, etc.

Designs and numerals are usually mounted after the letter Z.

Perfins never fail to attract attention in a stamp exhibit. More than one exhibit of perfins has received a high award in a stamp show. And if you care for an outstanding exhibit collection, be on the look-out for the "finds." If you have access to the February 12, 1951 issue of Linn's Weekly check me on the illustrated short note, "U. S. Freak," which was discovered in far off Sweden. It is a "paper-fold" variety of the old regular U. S. 1917-19 issue; five cent blue which Scott lists as #504. This "find"

is strictly a perfin bearing the initial "NPB." A quick reference check reveals that this freak was perforated and most surely used by the National Park Bank of Brooklyn, New York. It is reasonable to assume that it was certainly a non-collector of perfins who allowed this stamp to slip past him, probably ending up in a mixture which turned up in a far distant land. So, give it some thought friend; these perforated stamps will provide adventure for the most ardent stamp collector-and the greatest incentive for starting such a collection is provided by the fact that you have a veritable "pleasure chest" already in your possession: your duplicate stamps.