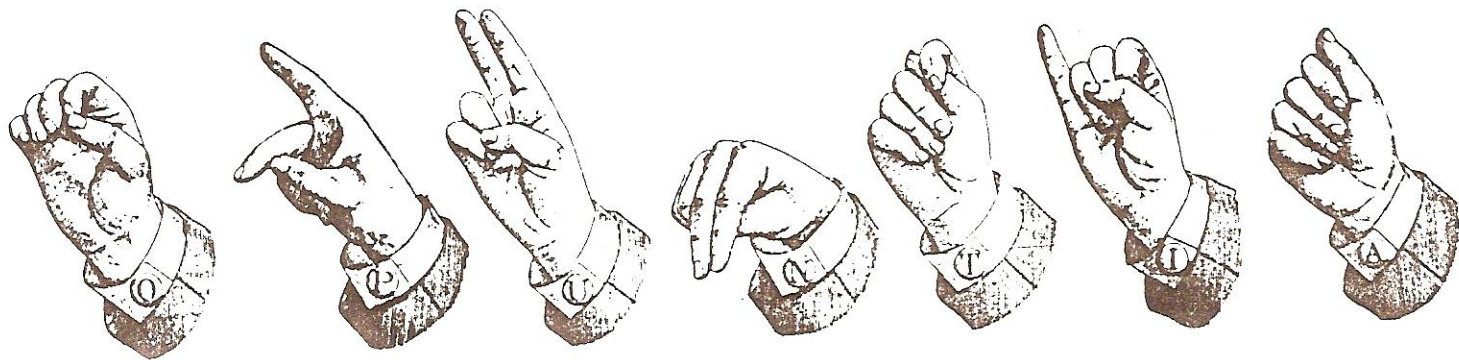


# OPUNTIA

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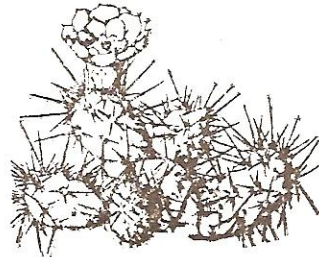
Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

**COVER ART CREDIT:** The word 'opuntia' spelled out in sign language as used at the Ontario Institute For the Deaf and Dumb in 1894. From the May 12, 1894, issue of the TORONTO GLOBE, page 3

**I ALSO HEARD FROM:** Henry Welch, John Hertz, Chester Cuthbert, E.B. Frohvet, Pascal Lenoir, Ficus, Teddy Harvia, Giovanni StraDA DA Ravenna, Karl Hofstatter, Lloyd Penney

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's  
remarks  
in square  
brackets]



FROM: Milt Stevens  
6325 Keystone Street  
Simi Valley, California 93063

2001-12-19

There are many cases where the origin of a particular story idea is known, but no action is taken regarding it. George Lucas has said that he used Joseph Campbell's THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES as one of the sources for STAR WARS. Michael Moorcock also used that book in a different way in some of his stories. Campbell has never attempted legal action against either writer. Of course, Campbell's book is a scholarly discussion of mythology and not a work of fiction. By outlining the elements of many mythological stories, Campbell couldn't very well stop people from creating new mythological stories.

Since the Jedi Knights are just really sciencefictionalized samurai, there isn't really a lot of originality in the concept. By nature, SF

writers are always borrowing ideas from this place and that, and frequently from each other. A general concept or a basic idea isn't the sort of thing you should be able to own. Since SF writers need an endless supply of names for aliens and planets, I'm sure they have already used every sound we can easily pronounce and a few that we couldn't.

Every prominent work seems to attract some people from aus voodverk to claim they thought of the idea first. With RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, an executive of the Garner Ted Armstrong Church claimed to have written a script years earlier in which an archaeologist is looking for the Ark of the Covenant. Considering it has been lost for several thousand years, I can't think who else would be looking for it.

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead 2002-01-08  
25509 Jonnie Court  
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

I hope to see the names of the CUFF candidates in some future issue of OPUNTIA.

[The name, sole candidate, and winner is Colin Hinz, originally of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and latterly of Orillia, Ontario. He will come out west to Calgary for Con-Version / Canvention.

Canfandom don't waste their time with voting and other effete democracy stuff like that. In the absence of active "Me! Me! Pick me!" fans, usually the previous winner ends up selecting the next one by fiat. However, the picks have all been good ones in the past few years, and there can be no doubt about the qualifications of CUFF winners, such as Garth Spencer, Murray Moore, or Lloyd and Yvonne Penney, to name a few. Colin Hinz is a zine publisher from way back in the 1980s, which constitutes ancient history in Canfandom. I'll be on the lookout for him at Con-Version.]

FROM: Harry Warner Jr 2002-01-26  
423 Summit Avenue  
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

I took alarm when I read Don Mabie's article on Shadowland and came across the idea that "true reality can never be known with certainty". This is altogether too close to the Korzybski theory of general semantics that had such a bad effect many years ago. While A.E. van Vogt was writing Korzybskian fiction and many of us were trying to stay awake while reading SCIENCE AND SANITY, nobody's day was complete unless he had achieved at least a dozen thalamic pauses, remembered the numerous levels of abstraction every time he happened to see a cow and tried to manufacture an improved structural differential.

[Fortunately the avant-garde has no more impact on history outside the arts than do SF fans have on technology. I have no patience with people who bleat about different levels of reality. Evolution long ago weeded out any sensory organs that did not accurately report reality. Eyes see true reality because if they don't then that individual will be abruptly removed from the gene pool sooner or later. Samuel Johnson had the best refutation for people who argued for different realities; he simply kicked a rock lying on the ground and sent it flying, saying "Thus I refute them".]

FROM: Carolyn Clowes 2002-01-24  
547 Dover Road  
Louisville, Kentucky 40206

Crank letters are now seen as threats, and the harmless everyday ranters may well get a visit from the FBI. I feel for that pre-WW1 author whose fan letter threatened a personal visit to discuss her astral life. One day, shortly after my Star Trek novel came out, the doorbell rang. My dogs rushed to greet the potential bringer of treats. On the porch were five young persons, novels in hand. "We looked you up in the phone book and wanted your autograph", they said. If they'd found my address, they also had my phone number and could have called first. I was gracious as possible, just out of the shower with the head wrapped in a towel.

The dogs outdid themselves by licking up the strangers and offering their best chewed bones, which finally sent the kids on their way. God, that was scary!

FROM: D. Young 2002-01-05  
Box 1644  
Milan, Illinois 61264

Re: Teddy Harvia's observation that a valid cartoon character must have four fingers instead of five. Wouldn't it be possible to draw a Kentuckian with five fingers instead of six and still have said drawing qualify as a cartoon?

FROM: Joseph Major 2002-01-11  
1409 Christy Avenue  
Louisville, Kentucky 40204-2040

There was a big Tolkien fandom in the 1960s, yet few if any came on to our fandom. All these fan fiction fans who were going to hone their writing skills on the basis of not having to expend energy creating characters and backgrounds have not burst into SF writing. The current Harry Potter and Tolkien fans will create enthusiastic and large fandoms, but those won't come into fandom either.

## **THIS JUST IN ...**

compiled by Dale Speirs

Once a week I go to the University of Calgary Library to catch up on the current periodicals. I jot down interesting references, one per 3x5 index card, most of them for future use in some article I might write. A few examples are as follow.

de Bruxelles, Simon (2002-03-04) **A better class of dust falls on National Trust.** THE TIMES (London), page 3

Studies on bookshelf dust in British stately homes shows that most dust on books derives from clothing fibres of upper garments of occupants. Footwear dust seldom rises more than 20 cm above the floor. Most dust settles at the hip to shoulder level. Only very fine dust can float to the top shelves. Dusting may damage books over a long period of time because the duster erodes the paper edges.

Gornitz, V., S. Couch, and E.K. Hartig (2001) **Impacts of sea level rise in the New York City metropolitan area.** GLOBAL AND PLANETARY CHANGE 32:61-88

Although sea level rises due to global warming are usually quoted as x metres per century, this is misleading and may cause coastal dwellers to think they are safer than they actually are. The real and present danger is that storm surges, beach erosion, and wetlands submergence will increase. The 100-year storm starts showing up every second decade, and

beaches erode faster than they can be restocked by artificial engineering. Better get ready to tie up the boat in Idaho.

Hayes, Brian (2002) **Statistics of deadly quarrels.** AMERICAN SCIENTIST 90(1):10-15

The distribution of wars over the past 130 years reveals no clear pattern. The two World Wars were the only magnitude-7 wars, and account for 60% of all quarrel deaths during the last 130 years. Clashes of titans are far more dangerous than series of brushfire wars.

Ruddiman, W.F., and J.S. Thomson (2001) **The case for human causes of increased atmospheric CH<sub>4</sub> over the last 5000 years.** QUATERNARY SCIENCE REVIEWS 20:1769-1777

Geochemical records indicate an increase in atmospheric methane starting about 5000 years ago. This may be due to large-scale flooding for rice culture in paddies. It is not correlated with climate or other potential agents.

Foster, D.P., and H.P. Young (2001) **On the impossibility of predicting the behaviour of rational agents.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 98:12848-12853

One reason was economics isn't very good at predicting the future is that its axioms are based on the principle of the

rational agent, the idea that humans will act to what is best for themselves in a rational matter. As pointed out in this paper, it is impossible to predict the actions of others, not even in theory, because the opponents can observe you and alter plans for their next action. Instead of logical extrapolation (Hitler and Stalin are allies, therefore Hitler would never invade the USSR) we are continually slam-dunked with wild cards.

Kamstra, M.J., L.A. Kramer, and M.D. Levi (2000) **Losing sleep at the market: The Daylight Saving anomaly.** AMERICAN ECONOMIC REVIEW 90:1005-1011

This study examines why equity markets usually drop after Daylight Saving Time begins. The conclusion is that the loss of sleep makes traders more confused.

de Boer, J.Z., J.R. Hale, and J. Chanton (2001) **New evidence for the geological origins of the ancient Delphic oracle (Greece).** GEOLOGY 29:707-710

Authors' abstract: "*Ancient tradition linked the Delphic oracle in Greece to specific geological phenomena, including a fissure in the bedrock, intoxicating gaseous emissions, and a spring. Despite testimony by ancient authors, many modern scholars have dismissed these traditional accounts as mistaken or fraudulent. This paper presents the results of an interdisciplinary study that has succeeded in locating young faults at the oracle site and has also identified the prophetic vapour as an emission of light hydrocarbon gases generated in the underlying strata of bituminous limestone.*"

Speirs: To put it in cruder language, the Greek oracles made their prophecies after sniffing gasoline.

## THE HISTORY OF ILLEGIBLE POSTMARKS

by Dale Speirs

It isn't just philatelists who complain about illegible or smeared postmarks. Second only to stamp collectors, judges have complained about unreadable dates that wrecked a court case. Nor is it the case that illegible postmarks are anything new, for complaints go back as far as postmarks themselves.

It should be noted that illegible postmarks are not to be confused with pen-marks and manuscript cancellations. Particularly in the 1800s, stamps were often neatly cancelled by a few strokes of a pen, or had a name and date written across the stamp. This was usually the case where post offices did not have proper postmark handstamps or wands yet. Pen-marks are a legitimate study [15], and not to be condemned as are illegible postmarks, where the

postie could have neatly cancelled the stamp with a device but chose not to.

Not in the same category as messy postmarks either, even though they caused as much anguish to philatelists (neither judges or the general public noticed), was the British Post Office habit of marking registered letters with a blue cross on the face of the cover. This practice began in 1878 and, properly done, would quarter the envelope with the blue lines to make the covers recognizable as registered to the postie. Many covers were sloppily crossed with blue crayon by posties, ruining stamps and creating decades of philatelists' complaints [30].

### Postmarks And Poison.

What must be one of the greatest instances of misplaced optimism was reported in England in December 1856. Lord Campbell, sitting as a judge in Court of Queen's Bench, had complained to the British Postmaster-General about smeared postmarks which resulted in dismissed cases of parties who otherwise might have been convicted. The PMG's exact reply was not given in the press [1], but Lord Campbell said it was "*... highly satisfactory, and hereafter complaints against the Post Office in reference to the stamping of letters would be unnecessary.*" That statement is funny enough on its own, but outright astonishing when it was learned, even as Lord Campbell was sitting back in relief at a job

well done, the most famous court case in history involving postmarks was about to erupt.

Madeleine Smith was a young Scotswoman in Glasgow who had been carrying on a torrid love affair with a man not approved of by her parents. She eventually met another man to whom she became engaged, and broke off her relationship with the first man. He would not take a hint, however, nor would he return the hundreds of indiscreet letters she had written him. He died suddenly of agonizing stomach pains in early 1857, revealed at the post-mortem to be caused by arsenic. She had given him a gift of chocolate about the time he died, at a rendezvous arranged by a letter received a few days previous.

The autopsy gave prosecutors reasonable cause to search the dead man's lodgings, where they found more than 500 letters written by Smith. It took them ten days to read through them all [2]. The case was to hinge on one particular letter in which she asked him to meet her. It was established that he had received from her a gift of chocolate at that meeting, and about the same time she had purchased arsenic at a druggist, ostensibly for rats. Anyone buying poisons had to sign the druggist's ledger book by law, so the date she bought the arsenic was known for certain. The problem faced by the prosecutors was that the letter was undated. There was no way to prove if the tryst was arranged

before or after she bought the arsenic [3]. Only two people knew the exact date they had met: the dead man and Madeleine Smith. One couldn't talk and the other wasn't saying. Unfortunately the postmark was illegible. Had it been clear, and the date readable, it would have meant the difference between hanging and undisputed innocence. If it could be proved that Smith had bought the arsenic before sending the letter arranging the meeting, then it was premeditated murder. If, however, the postmark showed she bought the arsenic after the rendezvous, then she was innocent.

The case was a national sensation, and reported verbatim in many newspapers [4]. But due to that undeterminable date, the jury had to render a verdict of "Not Proven". The judge made a few nasty remarks about the Post Office in his summing-up. One consequence of the Smith trial verdict was that the Post Office sent up a Postal Surveyor named Anthony Trollope to re-organize the Glasgow post office [5]. Yes, that Trollope, the famous novelist, whose day job was with the GPO. The Glasgow postmark, with a cancel numbered '159' and a rectangular date frame below it, has become a collector's item [35].

### **Courting Relief From The Post Office.**

Illegible postmarks are often a deciding point in many court cases, usually where someone didn't mail an application form or

payment in by the due date. As an 1897 editorial in the NEW YORK TIMES remarked: "*And it is always the letter about which some question arises that fails to carry the desired information. The depravity of inanimate objects takes good care to illustrate itself in every such instance, and the result is innumerable trials of patience and temper.*" [21]. Since almost all companies or government agencies date-stamp their incoming mail, the courts expect common sense to prevail if the date received was only one or two business days after the deadline and the postmark was illegible.

Sometimes the timelines are more extreme. A Canadian example was Hergert Electric Ltd. versus The Minister of National Revenue, where an application for a tax rebate was received a month late [19]. The Canadian International Trade Tribunal heard the plaintiff testify that he had mailed the application on December 12, 1992, prior to the deadline of December 31. Revenue Canada did not receive the form until January 28, 1993. Had the postmark been legible, the matter would never have arisen, as the delay would be blamed on the postal Christmas backlog. Unfortunately the postmark was a handstamped blur. The court ruled in favour of Hergert Electric, saying that while the date couldn't be made out, the fact that it was a handstamp cancel demonstrated manual sorting, with all its attendant delays, especially given the time of year. Appeal granted.

## There Is Never Any New Thing.

Complaints about illegible postmarks were common enough in the 1800s, and were a reliable topic for newspapers [9, 21]. Parcels usually get the worst of it because they are always handstamped. In 1856, a naturalist sending marine specimens from the British seaside town of Tenby reported that his package had not fared well, much less the unfortunate sea anemone inside [34]. He wrote: *"I tried a cardboard box, well padded with weed, wrapped it in paper, and committed it to the tenderness of a paternal Government and a reformed Post Office, with this warning inscribed in majestic calligraphy: "WITH CARE: LIVE ANIMALS!". I thought the Lacedemonian brevity and the note of admiration might have their effect. But, it is painful to confess, Post Office clerks appear to be imperfectly versed in the rudiments of zoology, or perhaps they pay slight attention to the literature of inscriptions. At any rate, they stamped my missive with a vigour which completely squashed the cardboard box."* In thinking this over though, I wonder if the postie was unfairly blamed, as it may have been rough handling during transit and heavy parcels dumped on top of the anemone parcel that squashed it, not a full-strength hand cancel.

The advent of philately increased the volume of complaints. In 1898, for example, one disappointed stamp collector in Montreal complained: *"I'd like to meet the galoot in the Milwaukee P.O.*

*who evidently cancels the letters with his feet, and probably uses a shovel to put ink on. He spoilt a strip of three nice 8-cent Omaha stamps, the first I got."* [10]. This was perhaps best illustrated by a 1949 cartoon showing British posties using a Rube Goldberg device to cancel letters. This consisted of a rotating wheel with hobnailed boots spiked along its circumference as cancellers, and ink being liberally splashed on them out of jugs [25].

Nothing ever changed. Egyptian parcel postmarks were so heavy in many cases in 1949 that an ultraviolet lamp had to be used to identify the stamp underneath. Their ink was a equal parts mix of boot polish and paraffin wax [24]. In 1953, an editorial remark in GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY complained about British postmarks that: *"... the quality of hand postmarking seems to depend on the mood of the operator. Some of the hand cancellations which we have seen on previous occasions can hardly be attributed to anything else but a deliberate attempt to spoil the covers."* [14]. In South Africa circa 1983, a collector remarked that *"... I cannot understand why our Post Office employees have to actually dance on a stamp sometimes two to three times or throw their whole weight behind the cancellation hand mark in an effort to deface the stamp. ... our stamps are defaced with monstrous smudges of ink and careless behaviour resulting in the obliteration of their beauty."* [22]. This comment was echoed a couple decades later

in the January 2001 issue of SCOTT STAMP MONTHLY, where a letter to the editor described a cover nicely franked with commemoratives that had been cancelled in the normal way, then scribbled over with a ballpoint pen, and finally scribbled on by a black marker [20].

### Attempted Remedies.

The response of postal officials to complaints about postmarks has been variable, not only from one country to the next, but within the same country. Some postmasters will replace damaged philatelic covers, while others of a more bureaucratic mind get huffy about it and disclaim any liability.

In 1897, the American First Assistant Postmaster General sent out a stern letter of instruction to posties advising them that: *“Legible postmarking is of the greatest importance to the public as evidence before the courts, in business transactions conducted through the mails, and in fixing responsibility when mail matter has been improperly handled by Postmasters and other postal employees. The frequency of complaints in regard to defective postmarking makes it necessary for the department to adopt severe measures to remedy the trouble. Much of the postmarking, especially that at the smaller offices, is a reflection upon the Postal Service. The figures of the stamp must be carefully adjusted at the beginning of each day, and then a clear impression*

*must be made in a book especially kept for the purpose, so as to afford evidence of the discharge of this important duty.”* [21].

The British Postmaster-General was quoted in 1949 on the subject of over-cancelling that “... *some excess of zeal may have been shown, but hardly to a blameworthy extent.*” [26]. A year later, the Canadian Post Office admonished its staff in its internal bulletin: *“While the Dept. wishes its revenues to be safeguarded beyond all doubt at all times, yet it is not desired that the stamps be utterly defaced.”* [27]. The results, or lack of, rather, were predictable. A 1951 issue of STAMP COLLECTING magazine showed one cover that, notwithstanding the British PMG’s remark of 1949, did definitely show blameworthy zeal. A cover with a Festival of Britain commemorative had nine smudged handcancels on and around the stamp. The stamp was then completely blacked out by smearing an inkpad over it [28].

In 1961, the Italian Post Office, under fire from stamp collectors, set up a cancellation control bureau, officially Service XII, Postmark Department, Ministry of Posts, Rome [11,12]. Collectors were invited to submit examples of heavily cancelled stamps, which would be investigated and the offending post office warned. As a nice piece of irony, a special postmark was used in larger cities to publicize this campaign. It would be a nice piece of postal history to have a cover with this postmark on it smudged.

In Australia, a philatelist who complained about red crayon scribbles on his incoming foreign mail received a refund on the stamps [17], in one case out of the postmaster's own pocket.

In any large organization, there are always problems getting people on-side. The best that can be done is, as the British Postmaster General replied in 1949 to a question in the House of Commons, "*Compliance with the standing instructions is under constant check with a view to improvement.*" [29]. Five decades later, the matter was still under advisement. A 2001 interview with a Royal Mail bureaucrat quoted him as sharing the concerns about bad postmarking [37]. He said: "*We have provided charts to sorting offices to display acceptable and unacceptable cancellations. We share the concerns of collectors and it's something we have to keep working away at. The operations people say it's the role of a cancellation to stop the stamp from being used again. With a little more care and attention both needs can be satisfied. As a department we are disappointed, I wouldn't try and persuade you otherwise.*"

### **The Grass Is Always Greener In The Other Country.**

Those complaining about illegible postmarks often hold up other national post offices as paragons of virtue, or at least neater workmanship. As, for example, the complaining Englishman

writing: "*Compare the smudges that emanate from England with the cancellations of Canada, Switzerland, France or any other important country!*" [13]. (Pause for the sound of loud laughter from Canadian philatelists.)

Henniker Heaton was a British M.P. in the late 1800s best remembered by postal historians for his long struggle to get the Ocean Penny Postage. He also interested himself in other aspects of postal operations. On August 16, 1895, he had the following exchange [36] in the House of Commons:

"*Mr. Henniker Heaton (Canterbury): I beg to ask the Representative of the Postmaster General (1) whether he has observed that the postmarks on letters, &c., are frequently so smudged and indistinct as to be illegible and useless; (2) whether this is due to the imperfections of the machines employed; (3) whether he has noticed that the American postmarks are invariably clear and distinct; and (4) whether he will order that the American machines shall be adopted in the British Postal Service?*

"*Mr. Hanbury: The matters mentioned in the first three paragraphs are already engaging the attention of the Postmaster General. American stamping machines have been tried, but it has been found that they are by no means free from objection.*"

Many people believe that machine cancellers were introduced to speed up postmarking of mail. In fact, their main purpose was to produce legible postmarks [6]. The British Post Office first began using machine cancellers in 1857, partly in response to the Madeleine Smith trial, usage was not common until 1860.

As proof that you can never please everybody, philatelists desire that their stamps receive a nice date cancel, but the general public prefer the date away from the stamp so it can be read clearly in case of legal concerns. In 1903, a British M.P. raised this issue in the House of Commons, asking the Postmaster General to ensure that postal clerks did not use the date stamp as an obliterator [40]. The reply to the House was that the Post Office was working to solve this problem by increasing the use of machine cancels.

While machines reduce the number of smeared postmarks, they are only as good as the people who maintain them, and smeared machine cancels are not unheard of. Machine cancels have not only the date, but usually a slogan. Complaints about smeared slogans are nothing new. In 1931, Lady Cust was writing an indignant letter about this to the editor of THE TIMES [7]. In 1948, one report said that as many as 60% of first-day covers for the British Olympics that went through one slogan canceller had stamps stripped off or scraped by the postmarker [16].

As late as the 1960s, some businesses and banks were in the habit of dating their correspondence as “Date of Despatch as Postmark”, which of course had no value if the postmark was illegible [8]. Probably though, the main thing that killed that bad habit was a few adverse court decisions against companies who didn’t put the date on the letter itself.

### Ink Problems.

A prime example of over-inking was a 1982 Australian cancel where the ink soaked right through the letter inside and came out onto the back of the envelope [18]. This may have been due to excess ink on the canceller, or it may have the wrong ink was used.

An example of the wrong-ink problem is the case of the Porelon ink introduced by Canada Post in 1993 for use in inkjet postmarks. It was later decided to use this ink for handstamping as well, and in late 1995 ink pads were distributed to postal outlets. Complaints soon arose that the ink smeared easily, took too long to dry, was sticky and got on posties’ clothing and skin, and, worst of all, would penetrate through the envelope and spoil the contents. Over time, the ink would spread along the paper fibres, and what might have been a readable postmark at time of

cancelling later became an illegible blob. Replacement inks were authorized November 15, 1995, and the Porelon withdrawn [39].

### The Posties' Side Of The Story.

To be fair to postal workers, illegible postmarks may be the result of rushing or lack of proper training. The scribbles with crayons which particularly raise the ire of philatelists are usually the result of a faint original cancel. In the blur of mail being sorted, a postie will quickly do as he has been trained, and cancel the stamps. That many stamps go through uncanceled is of no import, for postal workers are indoctrinated that stamps should be cancelled. With millions of letters processed per day at main sorting plants, it is not surprising that some go through uncanceled, leaving it to the lettercarrier at the final destination to do the scribbling. It is stated policy of the U.S. Postal Service and other countries that if a postie sees an uncanceled stamp on a letter, it must be cancelled by a pen or marker [32].

It is also the case that many handstamps are made of soft rubber and wear out quickly to smeary lines. Perhaps more commonly, repeated impacts on a rubber stamp will distort the shape, such as circular cancels becoming egg-shaped [33]. Ornate handstamps are not common now in daily use, but those that feature closely spaced lines or letters tend to pick up fluff that sticks in between the raised lines and adds to the blobiness [31]. Postal clerks

should, of course, keep their handstamps clean, but this is a regulation honoured more in the breach by too many posties.

One British Postmaster General, defending his postal workers in 1904 before the House of Commons, said: *"At the same time it should be borne in mind that postmarking is generally done under conditions of great pressure, and the public would not, I am sure, willing submit to any curtailment of facilities in order that additional time might be given to making clearer impressions. In many cases, too, the bulky and uneven nature of the contents of letters and parcels makes a clear impression difficult."* [41].

For stamp collectors seeking good cancels, advice from experienced postal clerks is to present the items at the counter for handstamping [38]. The stamps should be placed low to just catch the machine cancel but not enough so that they are missed and attract the attention of crayon-wielding posties. Handcancels should be placed on the lower edge or bottom left corner so that machine cancels will not run over them.

One example of justifiable heavy-handed cancelling was reported for a Nyasaland cover mailed 1963 February 12 with the Tobacco Congress commemorative. This commemorative was not to have been issued until February 18, and was mistakenly sold early. So as not to delay the mail, even though the stamps were nicely

dated by a machine cancel, another postal clerk who caught the mistake used heavy dabs of ink to obliterate the stamps and render them unusable for philatelic purposes [23]. While ruining them as soakable stamps for an album page, the cover did make an interesting item of postal history.

### **Classifying Illegible Postmarks.**

I feel safe in saying that I am a pioneer in collecting illegible postmarks and am probably the only philatelist who is not upset at getting a new example, albeit I still prefer a nice date cancel on a stamp if given a choice. After accumulating enough examples to justify sorting them out into categories, I was faced with the problem of how to do so. Unlike regular postmarks, in most cases one cannot determine the origin or date of a blob or scribble, so they can't be grouped by town. It could have been applied at the post office of sending or of receiving or any point between. This is why it is often useless to complain to a postal clerk for letters received from out of town, as he will just say that it must have been the originating post office that did it. The originating post office, of course, will say that it must have been the receiving office at fault.

I decided it was not practical to classify illegible postmarks by ink or writing instrument type, such as crayon, felt pen, or ballpoint pen. The same clerk may use different writing instruments

depending on what is lying about

handy for that scribble. I finally concluded the best method was by the shape of the scribble, since there are only a few distinct types of hand movements that are used in scribbling. I therefore group illegible postmarks into the following categories:

- 1a) Blobs: Over-inking of handstamp or machine.
- 1b) Blobs: Worn-out canceller, where the lines of the cancel have worn flat or spread out, occasionally merging with adjacent lines or letters.
- 1c) Blobs: Dirty or plugged cancels, mostly commonly seen from rural post offices where the handstamp hasn't been cleaned since it was received.
- 2) These are pen marks where the scribble is drawn without lifting the pen from the paper.
  - 2a) Sinusoidal, smooth: Wavy line with smooth curves.
  - 2b) Sinusoidal, jagged: Wavy lines but with sharp peaks and troughs.
  - 2c) Check marks
  - 2d) Dabs or slashes: single line only.
- 3) These are pen marks where the pen is lifted from the paper once or more.
  - 3a) Dabs or slashes: Multiple lines, usually in a chevron.
  - 3b) X marks

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- 11] Ostrow, P. (1962-08-10) Official figures of the Gronchi error. PHILATELIC MAGAZINE 70:573
- 12] Anonymous (1961-11-03) Can't we do better than this? PHILATELIC MAGAZINE 69:778
- 13] Gibbons, R.K. (1965-08-20) Smudged British mail. PHILATELIC MAGAZINE 73:552
- 14] Anonymous (1953 August) Coronation cover damage. GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY 26:141
- 15] Belfast, Peter (1954 May) Pen-marks are worth collecting. GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY 27:103
- 16] Anonymous (1948 September) Olympic covers damaged. GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY 22:4
- 17] Harrison, G. (1978 April) A.P. makes good. STAMP NEWS 25(4):30
- 18] Anonymous (1988 March) A case of overkill. STAMP NEWS 36(3):14
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- 20] May, R.D. (2001 January) More USPS shame. SCOTT STAMP MONTHLY 19(1):82
- 21] Anonymous (1897-06-16) [untitled editorial] NEW YORK TIMES, page 6
- 22] Izamis, D.A. (1984) No respect from postal workers. SA PHILATELIST 60:48
- 23] Mewett, N.C. (1989 December) Mutilation increases collectability. SA PHILATELIST 65:309
- 24] Anonymous (1949-02-05) Ubique. STAMP COLLECTING 71:395
- 25] Lance, ? (1949-10-01) Any GPO except Horncastle! STAMP COLLECTING 73:43
- 26] Anonymous (1949-11-26) Ubique. STAMP COLLECTING 73:293
- 27] Anonymous (as F.D.) (1950-04-08) Canada, and how! STAMP COLLECTING 74:83
- 28] Anonymous (1951-05-25) Horror corner. STAMP COLLECTING 76:315
- 29] Bullock, M. (1949-07-29) Letters and parcels (postmarks). PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES HOUSE OF COMMONS (GREAT BRITAIN) 5th series 467:179
- 30] Hamilton, P. (1953-01-02) Blue pencil anniversary. STAMP COLLECTING 79:545
- 31] Ehrmann, E.C. (1973-09-20) Parcel post: philately's step-child. STAMP COLLECTING 121:195,197,199

- 32] Schraer, P. (2001 March) More about USPS canceling policies. SCOTT STAMP MONTHLY 19(3):12
- 33] Lake, Ken (2001 March) That egg-shaped postmark. GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY 31(10):45
- 34] Anonymous (1856) Sea-side studies: Part 3. BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE 80:472-485
- 35] Patrick, D. (1976-12-27) Trial raises interest in cancel. CANADIAN STAMP NEWS 1(14):20
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- 37] Robinson, Barry (2001 December) Royal Mail is keen to improve cancellation quality. GIBBONS STAMP MONTHLY 32(7):44-46
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