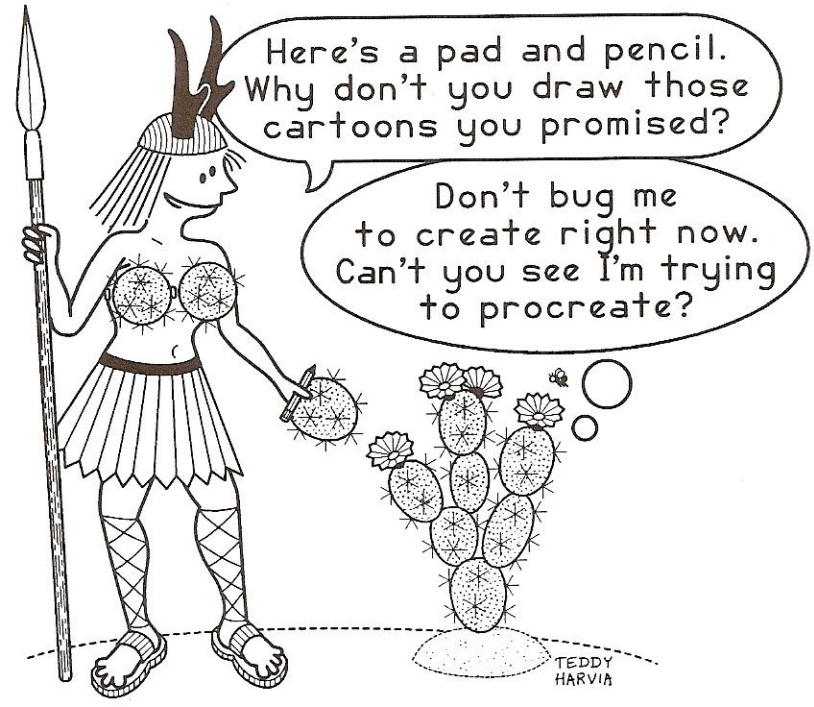
OPUNTIA #41


Here's a pad and pencil. Why don't you draw those cartoons you promised?
Don't bug me to create right now. Can't you see I'm trying to procreate?
TEDDY HARVIA

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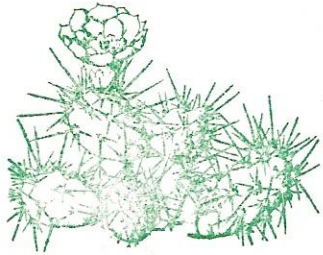
OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for $3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment.

COVER ART CREDIT: The goddess Opuntia has the same trouble dealing with artists as do zine editors. Drawn by Teddy Harvia, 701 Regency Drive, Hurst, Texas 76054-2307.

BACK ISSUES: I've been flattered by several requests in the last few months for back issues of OPUNTIA. Alas, I cannot offer any, as I only print enough for the current mailing list, usually 100 copies. I still have the master layouts for every issue of OPUNTIA all neatly filed away, but it is too much trouble to reprint just a few, and if I do 100 copies it ties up money and leaves copies sitting in the cupboards.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Scott Crow, Sheryl Birkhead, Buck Coulson, Chad Arie, John Held Jr, Michael Waite, Karen Johnson, Ken Cheslin, Lloyd Penney

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
[Remarks in square brackets are the Editor's]



FROM: Harry Warner Jr. 1998-09-28
423 Summit Avenue
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

I can't remember having ever heard or read about a 19th century chain letter. Logic seems to dictate that it would have occurred to someone before this century. I can think of several reasons why it may not have made any great headway in the previous century.

A very large percentage of United States residents lived on farms in the 19th century where they came close to a cashless economy. They raised their own food, and the women manufactured their clothing. They often avoided bills at stores and the doctor's office by bartering their farm products for merchandise and services.

Those people wouldn't have any spare cash to participate in a money-raising chain letter scheme.

Until the 20th century, the cost of mailing a letter took up a greater part of one's income than it did later on. Buying enough stamps to send out five or seven or ten links in a chain letter would have been too great a burden even on people who lived in cities and held jobs.

[I did a study on Canadian postage rates since 1875 that related postage costs as a percentage of hourly wages. See elsewhere in this issue.]

The typewriter didn't come into general use until early this century. Previously it would have been a long and tedious task to copy a letter in longhand. This task didn't seem as forbidding when a typewriter and carbon paper would have greatly reduced the time required.

[At about the same time the typewriter was coming into general use, it was likewise for the hectograph (very inexpensive) and the mimeograph (expensive, but offices had them, and employees used them for personal purposes the same way they use photocopiers and computers today).]

FROM: Ned Brooks 1998-09-30
4817 Dean Lane
Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720

I answered a chain letter a few years ago for SF paperbacks, as I had quite a few that I could bear to part with. I think I got one back and never read much of it, which did not surprise me. I have no idea whether the USA prohibition, which applies only to letters asking that money be sent, has any provision for including other items of indeterminate value under this restriction. In the various attempts to suppress chain letters, was anyone other than the organizer ever charged with an offense that you know of?

[I don't know American law but Canada prohibits chain letters asking for any kind of consideration, whether money, books, or other tangibles. As to people being prosecuted, it is the same as any other minor crime. The Crown Prosecutor is more likely to pay attention to big-bucks pyramid schemes than a paperback chain letter. Since chain letters circulate through the underground economy, they seldom attract attention and when they do, the authorities are more concerned with the instigator rather than the gullible marks.]

FROM: Chester Cuthbert 1998-09-24
1104 Mulvey Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3M 1J5

A letter from Alastair Cameron says he has no objection to having his FANTASY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM reprinted. I have not yet answered his letter, but if you are aware of anyone who might be interested in making a deal with him, please let me know. My age prevents my doing anything about it; distribution of the 500 copies of the original edition took many years.

FROM: Murray Moore 1998-10-24
2118 Russett Road
Mississauga, Ontario L4Y 1C1

Spider Robinson was a guest on The Pamela Wallin Show on NewsWorld [CBC television] this past Thursday. The focus was the subject of his column "The Crazy Years". Robinson invoked Heinlein and Asimov during his 45 minutes. Wallin kept saying 'sci fi'. Robinson, after its fifth or sixth use, advised her politely that sci fi refers to the subject matter of Hollywood movies and television shows. He writes speculative fiction, or, even, SF. After the first commercial, an identifying bar appeared on the screen: "Spider Robinson/Science Fiction Writer".

FROM: Carolyn Clowes 1998-11-20
5911 West Pay Drive NW
Depauw, Indiana 47115

The Circle Of Gold chain letter sounds familiar. I was in New York City in the late 1970s and recall arguing with a friend who sent off $100 through the mail. Her reasons involved something she called grass-roots economics, and she truly expected to get money back. There was lots of publicity when the guys were finally arrested. It's astonishing how many people are taken in and how these things die out only to be reborn. The psychology is fascinating; universal greed, the lure of being included in some secret movement, and a cynical, screw-the-system appeal. Getting money the government doesn't know about, even jamming up the post office or the Internet just for the hell of it must attract some who feel downtrodden and subversive.

[It reminds me of punk rockers who think they are revolutionaries because they play in a bad band and get drunk on weekdays, conspiracy theorists who think anyone in government really worries about the JFK assassination or the Avro Arrow cancellation, or computer nerds who think they are underground because they have an X-Files Website.]

FRAGMENTS FOR A HISTORY OF APAS

by Dale Speirs

I have oddments of references sitting in my files for future histories that may be a long time coming. Amateur press associations, or apas, have been well documented since they began in the late 1800s. I don't expect to make any new major contributions to the history of apas, but I have a few items that might be of interest.

Converging Technology.

It was a time of new devices almost by the day. Cheaper and faster means of getting the printed word on paper and distributing copies were marketed continuously. People worried about the effects of automation, neo-Luddites ranted about how the old ways were the best, and businessmen fretted that they couldn't afford the new technology yet couldn't afford to be without it. No, not the 1990s, but the 1890s. Typewriters, telephones, telegraphs, carbon paper, hectographs, all kinds of stencil duplicators, affordable home printing presses, and cheap wood-pulp paper in abundance.

Small hand printing presses in particular were advertised at prices that made home use a practical proposition. Initially they were bought for short-run work such as posters, business cards, or letterhead. Quite a number of Miltons, neither mute nor inglorious, made use of these cheap presses to publish their own works or bask in the prestige of being an editor. It was then, about the middle to late 1800s, that zines and apas as we know them today came into existence. Zine publishers traded copies with each other. Distribution was an annoying a problem then as it is now, and from that problem developed the apa. These groups use some variation of the hub-and-spoke system, where members send in x number of copies of their zine to a Central Mailer. The C.M. then collates the zines into bundles and sends one bundle back out to each member. Apas also have a tradition of mailing comments, where each member comments on the zines in the last bundle.

Why Doing It Yourself Is Better.

An English amateur printer of 1864 explains why he likes to set up his own type (ref. 2): "*For several years I had a small press in a corner of my sitting room of the size entitled "folio post", and a frame of types contrived to lock up so as to present no unsightly appearance. With a few other appliances I was fully able, at the expense of a moderate amount of time and patience, to multiply copies of any small manuscript or other matter that I needed, and I may add that the art itself is by no means of an uninteresting character*".

"Many persons who have particular hobbies are in the habit of requiring printers, and it is only those who have tried who can tell how difficult it sometimes is to get an ordinary printer to understand and perform exactly what is wanted The man who is his own printer is master of the situation, and can make the types say exactly what he wishes. It is certain that many a new thought, many a better turn of expression, will strike the mind when quietly setting up the types; the printed effect, in fact, appears in anticipation of the proof, and the fewer after corrections are required. Although the amateur compositor works slowly, he is generally by far more correct than the professional workman, and the time lost in setting up is more than compensated by the absence of errors in the proof."

Traveling At The Speed Of Typesetting.

Hobbyists, almost by definition, have time on their hands, and to fill the empty hours take up some hobby. Private printing, via typesetting, might be considered as quite time-intensive. (Although computers may not be as fast as some would say, once configuration, template setup, text inputting, file transfers, cut-and-paste, system crashes, and waiting for bloatware to finish loading are taken into account.) One personal account of private typesetting from 1864 (ref. 1, the author is replying to another, hence the interior quotes) says that: "*As an amateur compositor, and so not to the manner born, I find, after having timed the matter over and over again, that I can*

compose a page containing 1000 letters and lock the page up in its chase in one hour and a half. It is slow work I am aware, but that time includes great attention to the spacing of words, even to the frequent re-spacing of every word in a given line. The lines I compose are three inches, or 18 m's long, but in such writing as [my correspondent] has to reproduce, I presume the lines might be allowed twice that length. If so, and using the n space between each word (which gives great brilliancy to a line of leaded type), I should then expect to place 1000 letters in very little over the hour. I give this opinion after composing and printing upwards of 700 pages with my own hands."

"I am much inclined to think that private printing is not only a very practicable method, but for documents "to go into the hands of gentlemen" the most shipshape of all, for it must be remembered that by this process the copyist has uniform letters already made to his hand, besides which, being correct to a letter, one copy with the other. As "a plan that is simple, neat, clean, and cheap", I should unhesitatingly recommend the printing-press. A press that would print one folio page at a time would be sufficient, and would not occupy much room. ... To take twelve brilliant copies of one folio page I should allow half an hour. ... I should recommend a Small Pica, as being a very bright, and, I think, easy letter for an amateur to print, and I feel sure that any beginner might place 1000 letters in the time I allow myself."

The Future Of Zinedom

Harry Warner Jr mentions on page 2 of this issue the cashless economy of rural areas. For a young farm boy neither mute nor inglorious, printing presses and postage may have been more of a problem than for a city slicker. But many did manage to pub their ish nonetheless. Printing presses eventually became too expensive even for home use (newspaper chains developed because individual papers could not afford to upgrade to new presses) and while there have always been rural publishers in zinedom, the practical difficulties of life on a remote farm were too discouraging for most.

Another reason for the urban concentration of zine publishers is privacy. On an isolated farmstead, Mom or Dad might tolerate your press in the basement, but they would also know all that you publish. There is no sneaking off to a photcopy shop on the way home from school, as an urban kid can do, and keeping the copies of your zine hidden in a school locker until ready to mail. The Internet changes this, as a farmboy can keep e-zine material hidden in the computer, hide it at the touch of a button if Dad walks into the room, and publish over the telephone line. The current difficulties of getting decent Internet service in rural areas will disappear as the Internet service providers are displaced by telephone and cable companies.

Paper is still the best method of preserving information for posterity at reasonable cost. Electronic media have two disadvantages; they are not archival (tapes and disks fade) and they are often not compatible. The last disadvantage is being dealt with by emulation software, although hardware will still be a problem. You can read a paper zine anywhere there is sufficient light, but an e-zine may not be viewable if the disk it is stored on no longer fits a computer slot.

Littera Scripta Manet

One thing I feel no concern over is the future of the written word. Voice commands and graphical interfaces cannot replace words on screen or paper. It is always faster to read than listen, and words can pack more information into a smaller space than pictures. Zinesters of two decades hence may only use electrons instead of ink, but they will still be pubbing their ish.

References.

1) Roffe, E. (1864) Multiplication of manuscript copies. *NOTES AND QUERIES* 3rd Series 6:189-190

2) Anonymous (1864) Multiplication of manuscript copies. *NOTES AND QUERIES* 3rd Series 6:273

LE TON BEAU DE MAROT by Douglas Hofstadter (Basic Books 1997, ISBN 0-465-08645-4) is a 632-page oversize trade paperback, the same size as the average software how-to manual, but less likely to become obsolete. The book covers the art of translation and the many problems presented trying to transfer text from one language to another. Hofstadter uses a poem written in 1537 by Clement Marot, and provides more than 70 different translations of it by himself and friends. The poems are used to illustrate the various hazards of translations.

One can translate literally and still preserve the content of a technical manual. Translating a poem or literary fiction is a different matter. If you preserve the exact content, you lose the rhyme of the poem. If you try to preserve the figurative sense of a piece of literature, you run the risk of culture shock. Hofstadter cites as an example the missionaries trying to convert the Bible into the language of the Inuit. "Lamb Of God" makes no sense in the Arctic where there are none, so the term was converted into "Seal of God". The greatest skill of the translator comes in trying to make a poem carry all the figurative meanings, the rhyme same as the original and the shape of the text similar. Hofstadter cites the hilarious case of a haiku "An old pond/A frog jumping/Sound of water" that a translator rendered as "A lonely pond in age-old stillness sleeps / Apart, unstirred by sound or motion til / Suddenly into it a lithe frog leaps".

Along the way Hofstadter illustrates translations not only in the usual language-to-language route but with illustrations of such stunts as writing a novel that does not once use the letter 'e'. This is hard to do in the original language, yet what if translated into French? Science fiction gets a look-in too, as SF writers must learn how to represent aliens in English. The conventions used in SF to represent a new culture can be considered with profit by, say for example, someone trying to translate Shakespeare so he can be understood by Inuit nomads.

This book could have been shorter by a couple of hundred pages, not by reducing the number of poem translations, but by clearing out the self-indulgent digressions that Hofstadter pads out the text with. But then, padding is to be expected these days, whether SF novels or learned tomes such as this one. It is an inevitable result of the ease of using personal computers. Other than jacking up the cost of books, the only effect on the reader is to force him to skim quickly over large blocks of text. The detail loaded into this book could have been deadening, but mostly goes well, as it supports the discussions on translation.

At the same time I was reading that book, I was alternating with Alberto Manguel's tome THE HISTORY OF READING (Knopf 1996, ISBN 0-394-28032-6), a self-referential book if there ever

was one. This too has self-indulgent portions, but mostly concentrates on the one thing that separates us from all other animals, the ability to send information over time and space by the written word.

The chapter 'Reading Shadows' discusses the origin of reading. This began with evolutionary pre-adaptations that gave us a genuine language, not just a collection of mating cries and alarm calls as used by animals. From there it progressed to the earliest known writing, clay tablets from six millennia ago with a pictograph of a goat and the number 'ten'. The first written transactions were not poems but cash receipts used as tallies by merchants. Like other subsequent technology, from the printing press to the typewriter to the computer, what started out as strictly a businessman's tool was diverted to the service of art and science.

From there Manguel considers such steps in the history of reading such as St. Augustine attracting notice because he read books silently, not out loud as was the custom. Memory used to be a thing prized and taught as we teach reading today. The technology of ink on paper ended any need to work at remembering things. Memory could not last over the generations without loss or distortion, nor even the space of a few years when legal contracts were concerned. "Get it in writing" is a piece of advice that goes back millennia.

Reading is a private act; we shut out the rest of the world when we read. It can be a criminal act; government and church legislate against reading certain books. The prestige of authorship often rests on terrifying authorities by writing words they would rather not be written.

Scribes and secretaries had power that came from the written word and the ability to read someone else's words. Many a wise and ambitious person knows that volunteering to keep minutes-of-the-meetings can be a useful tool in climbing up the ladder of success. Authors communicate to the future, an ability that is astonishing when you consider it. The reader communicates with the past, with authors long gone to dust and their nations vanished.

I found one thing in this book quite moving. It was a photo of a London, England, library bombed out in the Blitz of 1940. The library is roofless, charred beams lie on the floor, and yet readers pick their way over the rubble and browse the shelves. At the right side of the photo, a man in a raincoat and hat crooks his neck to read a title on a book spine. He could be anyone you have seen in any bookshop in the world, but he is in a firebombed library. Other readers are seen behind him, as one in spirit. He is also one in spirit with every other reader around the planet and down through the ages. It is that spirit which is celebrated by Manguel.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COLLECTING

by Dale Speirs

Why do people collect things, be those things books, postage stamps, or hockey trading cards? Why do others not collect physical things but rather prefer to accumulate records of observations, such as bird watchers or train spotters? One traditional answer was that collecting is a sublimation of sex, based, as Freudian dogma always is, on incomplete or partial data, to wit that spotty-faced, obese fanboys are conspicuous as collectors. This assertion can be quickly disposed of, as there are far too many happily-married, good-income collectors with children and of both genders to explain away as stray exceptions.

Classifying Collectors.

Leisure time is a luxury that is not as recent as many think. Hunter-gatherers only have to work a few hours a day on the average to survive, and it is the agriculturists and urbanites who must toil long hours. The latter two groups mostly did not have the time, money, or energy for collecting, save the fortunate few in the upper crust of society. As western society became wealthier, it was possible for the lower ranks to collect things as well. The types of collectors are not stratified by income or status though. Given the time and the inclination to collect, they can be categorized themselves just as they categorize the things they accumulate. Serious leisure time is of three types: amateurism, hobbyist, and career volunteerism (ref. 2). Amateurism is done for the love of the activity and insists on high standards. It is unfortunate that the word 'amateur' has come to mean shoddy or second-rate work. A hobbyist feels no obligation to pursue the activity. Hobbyists are subdivided into collectors, makers/tinkers, activity participants, and players of games. Career volunteerism is altruistic, usually involves delegated tasks, and is not cultural.

Defining The Definition: What Is Collecting?

One must first distinguish between collecting done for essential survival, such as food-gathering, and collecting that has no apparent utilitarian value, such as stamp collecting. Hobby collecting involves the accumulation of similar but not identical things. Stamp collectors do not accumulate dozens of identical stamps and call it a collection. Even if they only collect one stamp issue, within that issue there will be varieties where the printing or perforating is slightly different, or the postmark is different. A collection must have structural unity, based on variations upon a theme (ref. 3). Collecting is therefore not hoarding. We accumulate food or coins as hoards, perhaps dignified under the terms 'assets' or 'investments' but they are hoards nonetheless. Misers are not collectors.

Why Does Collecting Exist?

A basic point of biology that no behaviour exists without a reason based on the evolution of the species. It is not due to the hunter-gatherer nature of the early humans. Gathering is usually done by females, and since there is no predominance of women in collecting, it seems unlikely to be based on this motive (ref. 4).

A better clue to the origin of collecting is based on its main process, that of classifying things (ref. 3). Any animal species must be constantly reacting to its surroundings. Is that other animal predator or prey? Is that plant good to eat or poisonous? Learning by example or instruction from parents does not prepare one for novelties never seen before. Animals therefore develop the technique of classifying everything into a few simple categories that allow immediate response. The more information collected and categorized, the better it is. Humans know from experience that other animals with fangs are likely to be dangerous, whether dogs or tigers. If some alien creature lands on Earth and we are the first to see it, our immediate reaction will be based on how the alien behaves. An alien with long fangs and which snarls at us is immediately placed in the same category as dogs and tigers. That category carries a response command of "Use caution or run away if a fangy thing snarls at you", and so we flee. If the alien has no fangs but contrarily drops its head to the ground and starts munching on the grass, we categorize it as a herbivore. We are not alarmed because we know that herbivores are normally not dangerous if we keep a reasonable distance and do not startle them. Cattle do not attack humans in the middle of rangeland without provocation.

It is therefore advantageous to collect information and categorize it. The value of some information may not be immediately obvious but could come in handy in the future. By extension, curiosity and collecting are outgrowths of this process.

Why Doesn't Everyone Collect?

If collecting is simply an irrational extension of the propensity to classify, it can be seen that most people get enough classification process in their daily lives and do not need the extra amount of process. It would be interesting to have statistics on whether accountants are more likely, average, or less likely to collect things. Unbalanced people such as compulsive-obsessives or true perfectionists do not find collecting a rewarding experience (ref. 4), since collections are usually open-ended or involve things with slight imperfections.

Biology has been usurped by social behaviour because the human race now modifies its own environment rather than react to it. While the basics of behaviour are still influenced by the legacy of

evolution, we are now susceptible to non-evolutionary forces. Collecting in our time is affected by these social forces. Men are more likely to collect because they do not do housework, have more disposable income, and more free time (ref. 4).

Where Is The Fun In Collecting?

A variety of explanations exist as to what collectors seek in their hobbies. It is done for technical knowledge and appreciation, prestige, and for monetary rewards (ref. 2).

Technical knowledge may or may not have direct use, but is perceived as being of some value. Gifted children are more likely to learn from their collections (ref. 4). Learning is not just the details of the actual physical object, but the background of the object. It is a truism that because they learn about the politics and economics of the objects they collect, stamp and coin collectors are generally better educated in history and geography than the general public. Collected items have closure. They exist physically and do not require faith, as in religion, and they are knowable, with boundaries, purposes, and structures. This is in contrast to the modern society we live in. Aesthetic appreciation is an outgrowth of evolution. Food is pleasurable to the taste not because pleasure in itself serves any end but because it encourages a behaviour and ensures that behaviour is repeated (ref. 3). The aesthetic appreciation of stamp collecting is involved in the pleasure of seeing a pattern (the complete set) or colours.

Pleasure reinforces the categorization process of humans where: " *... each collector creates his own unique taxonomy*" (ref. 1). The process of collecting is more fun than the actual completed collection. Collectors usually lose interest in a completed collection or, conversely, one that cannot be reasonably completed. If you are a stamp collector who wants to collect skilling banco errors, you will have no pleasure in it, because there is only one in existence.

References.

1) Dannefer, D. (1980) Rationality and passion in private experience: Modern consciousness and the social world of old-car collectors. *SOCIAL PROBLEMS* 27:392-412

2) Stebbins, R.A. (1982) Serious leisure: A conceptual statement. *PACIFIC SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW* 25:251-272

3) Humphrey, N. (1974) Variations on a theme. *NEW SCIENTIST* 63(908):233-234

4) Neighbour, C. (1995) The psychology of stamp collecting. *AMERICAN PHILATELIST* 109:630-634

HOW EXPENSIVE IS POSTAGE?

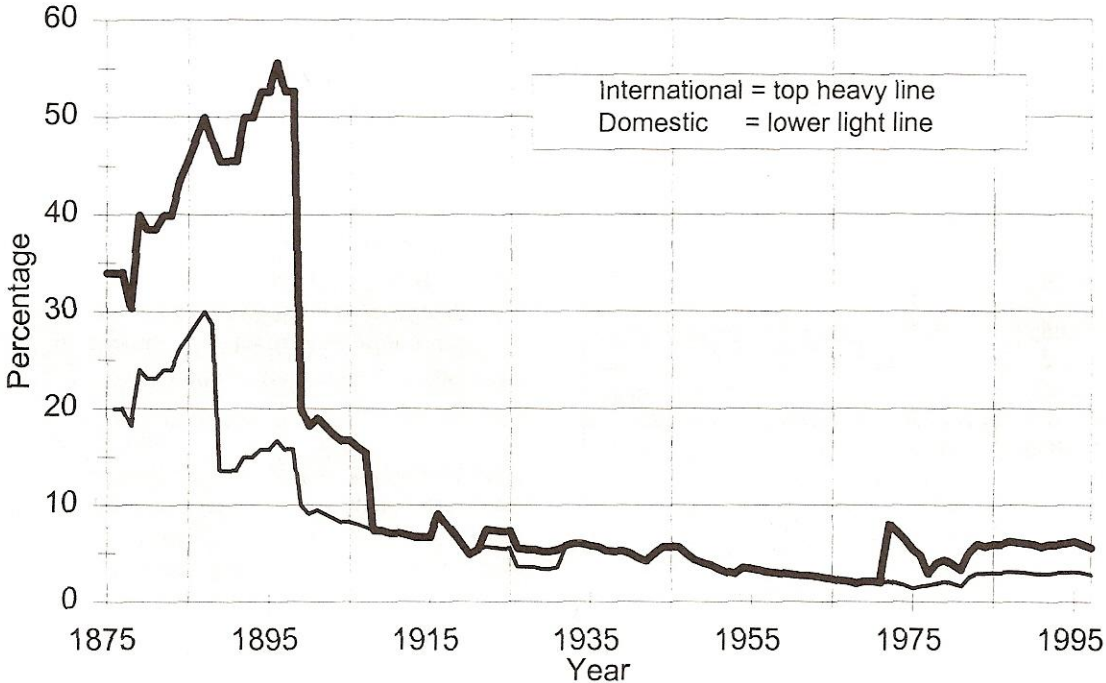
by Dale Speirs

Canadians grumble and complain about the high cost of postage but often forget that while postage rates have gone up, so has hourly income. I have prepared a table comparing hourly wages, domestic and international postage rates, and the percentage of an hour's pay needed for a stamp.

The hourly wage figures are from Statistics Canada. From 1969 to date, the wage is the average for Alberta, and prior to that it is the average for Canada. For 1900 and earlier it is estimated using index figures, as the government did not track hourly wages before the 1900s. The domestic letter rate is for mail from one city to another, and should not be confused with the drop letter rate, long since extinct. Drop letters were those deposited at a post office for delivery in the same city, with a postal rate usually one cent cheaper. The international rate is the rate to Great Britain. Before uniformity was established, the rate varied for different countries. Most Canadian overseas mail was to Britain in the old days, so I used that rate. All rates are for first-class mail at one ounce prior to metrication. After metrication, the weight limit became 30 grammes for domestic and 20 grammes for international mail. Calgary was founded in 1875, so I only went back that far. The original table was year-by-year from 1875 to date, for philatelic publication, but I only include extracts here.

Year	Hourly wage	Domestic rate	% of wage	International rate	% of wage
1875	$0.30	6 cents	20	10 cents	34
1883	$0.25	6 cents	24	10 cents	40
1889	$0.22	3 cents	13.6	10 cents	45.5
1899	$0.20	2 cents	10	4 cents	20
1914	$0.30	2 cents	6.7	2 cents	6.7
1918	$0.43	3 cents	7	3 cents	7
1929	$0.58	2 cents	3.4	3 cents	5.2
1933	$0.50	3 cents	6	3 cents	6
1946	$0.71	4 cents	5.6	4 cents	5.6
1967	$2.40	5 cents	2.1	5 cents	2.1
1988	$12.04	37 cents	3.1	74 cents	6.1
1997	$15.98	45 cents	2.8	90 cents	5.6

Postage as a percentage of hourly wage



It is popular to imagine that in the good old days living costs were cheaper. It is not the absolute value of a thing that matters though, but the relative cost. Postage was extremely high prior to the reforms of 1840, and even thereafter, international postage was still expensive. Often recipients would refuse letters because they could not afford to pay the postage due, an example being sailors in the Queen's Navy telling folks back home not to write because the sailors could not afford 2-shilling postage due letters (ref. 2).

Prior to 1840, postage rates were based on the number of sheets of paper. The envelope counted as a sheet, and therefore letters were sent without one, being folded and sealed with wax. The maximum number of words were jammed on a sheet of paper, and cross writing was popular. Cross writing was first writing in the usual manner, then turning the sheet sideways and writing the rest of the message. Bad handwriting was difficult enough, but one wonders how anyone could read cross-written letters. Complaints from the recipients were common.

"*I have even seen letters from abroad, which, to save postage, were not only crossed throughout, but again written over from corner to corner. Others are crossed with red or blue ink, to show some compassion for the luckless reader.*" (ref. 1).

Postage rates began to decline because of the introduction of the steamship and railroad, which made transport cheaper and faster. For much of the 1900s, postage kept going down, both in absolute and relative rates. During the high-inflation decades of the 1970s and 1980s, absolute postage rates increased dramatically. However, relative rate increases were not that high, and often decreased because the Post Office could not keep up with inflation.

The other major change in the postal system is its increased reliability. Yes, mail still goes astray, but people do not, as was common practice in the 1800s, send two or three duplicates of a letter via different routes in the hope that one copy would reach its destination. Complaints about how it takes a week to get a letter from one city to another today overlook the fact that postal systems now handle billions of letters per day with fewer staff per capita. International mail now only takes a week or two for a letter, whereas a century ago it was normally months.

References.

1) Anonymous (1865) Cross writing. *NOTES AND QUERIES* 3rd Series, 8:525

2) Anonymous (1854) The dead letters for the Baltic. *PUNCH* 26:213

Fandom, that framed us of four elements
Warring with our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The sense of wonder of the WorldCon,
And measure every wandering fan's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,
And always moving as the restless spheres
Will us to wear ourselves, and never rest,
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of the 2003 WorldCon.

To support Toronto's bid to host the 2003 World Science Fiction Convention, send C$20.03 or US$15 to: Toronto in '03, Box 3, Station A, Toronto, Ontario, M5W 1A2.