

CITY NEWS

The Last Bastion of a Waning Hobby

From the late 1800s until the 1970s, Nassau Street in the Financial District was the stamp-collecting center of New York City. At one point there were as many as 50 stamp dealers in one three-block area.

It may say something about the declining popularity of the hobby that there remains but one street-level stamp shop in New York City—Champion Stamp Co. on West 54th Street.

That's where I took my mother's stamp collection to be appraised last week, ahead of the once-in-a-decade World Stamp Show, being held in New York City for the first time since 1956. It runs at the Jacob K. Javits Center through June 4.

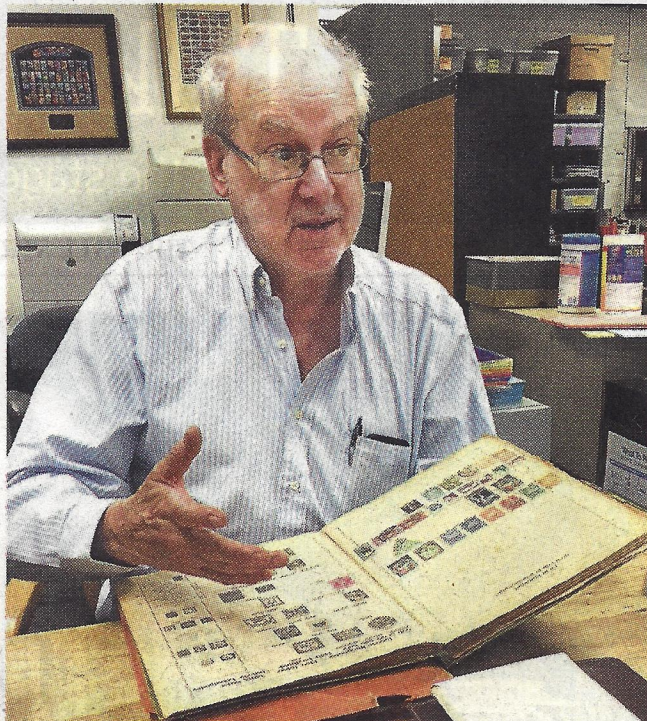
Not that I was hoping to find a scarce "inverted Jenny" stamp among hers. Much less the world's rarest and most valuable stamp, the 1856 British Guiana one-cent "penny magenta" stamp. Purchased in 2014 by shoe designer Stuart Weitzman for \$9.48 million, it's on display at the show.

Why didn't I take my own stamp collection to be valued? Apart from the fact that I can't find it at the moment, I was a feeble stamp collector.

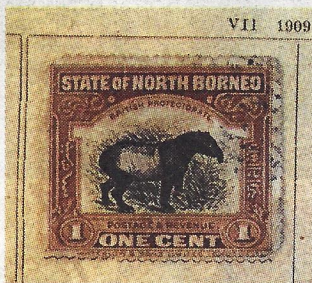
Indeed, it constituted an early taste of failure. I simply didn't have the gumption, pun not necessarily intended, to soak envelopes to pry free the canceled postage stamps and then allow them to dry.

And on the rare occasions I accomplished that task, I lacked the dexterity to attach those flimsy, sticky tabs to their backs that would make them adhere to the placeholder images in my photo album.

"Hinges," Bruce Hecht, the buyer at Champion Stamp, told me was the proper term for them. "Back



Bruce Hecht of Champion Stamp Co. with an album given to the author's mother in 1932. Below, two stamps from the album.



in the day there were two hobbies—stamps and coins. Younger people today have a very short attention span. They need instantaneous gratification. If you're a stamp collector, it's not something you can do in three seconds."

Arthur Morowitz, the owner of Champion Stamp, joked that Xanax is to blame for the demise of stamp collecting. "In the old days people would say, 'You need to relax. Get a hobby.' Xanax has put us out of business."

Champion, with shelves full of stamps filed by nation, seems to be doing fine. Mr. Hecht retrieved a small loose-leaf binder with the 1893 Columbian Issue—a set

to some higher-denomination, vintage postage stamps. "The printing quantities were very small. Stamps that were common then are common today."

Many of Champion's customers collect by country or topic—trains, birds, planes, mushrooms, movie stars, hearts. "Whatever it is," he said, "you will find collectors who go for that."

The moment had arrived to examine my mother's album. It was actually her uncle's album. He gave it to her in 1932, when she was eight years old.

"There may be some value," Mr. Hecht said as it turned the brittle, brown pages.

I held my breath.

"If it were mine to sell," he added, "it might be worth between \$100 and \$200 retail."

He pointed out a faded, three-cent stamp depicting George Washington that he said was from 1850. Despite its antiquity it has little value. "It's a common stamp in used condition," Mr. Hecht said.

But I've probably already received \$200 worth of value just leafing through its pages. The stamps ranged from a 1907 "un centime" stamp from the French possession of Réunion (the stamp helpfully included a picture of the island surrounded by the "Océan Indien" in case anyone needed help locating it) to a 1909 "State of North Borneo" stamp of a tapir—a large herbivorous mammal with a snout.

One can only imagine how transporting those images must have been in an era when travel abroad, let alone to exotic locales, was far from common.

"People talk about emotional value," Mr. Hecht said. "If I see someone who can't part with it, I'll say, 'There's no price I can offer you for sentimentality.'"

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