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Rare 'Inverted Jenny' Stamp Stolen in 1955 Returned

by TRACY CONNOR

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It was swiped from a display case at a convention in 1955. Six decades later, a rare misprinted stamp known as an "Inverted Jenny" is being returned to its owner.


Federal authorities announced the handover Thursday at the World Stamp Show in Manhattan, two months after a man who inherited it from his grandfather brought it to an auction house and then waived all claims to it after learning it was stolen property.

"They did the right thing," Manhattan U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara said of the auction house and the man, Keelin O'Neill, who received a \$50,000 reward for the stamp, which could be worth a quarter of a million dollars.

O'Neill, who is from Northern Ireland, expressed no regrets. "It's been a great experience overall," he told reporters, wearing a tie emblazoned with images of the stamp.

The mystery of the missing stamp has long fascinated philatelists. It's a tale that stretches back to 1918 when a collector bought a sheet of 100 airmail stamps at a Washington post office and discovered to his delight that the image of a biplane was accidentally printed upside down.



A 1918 "Inverted Jenny" that has a Curtiss "Jenny" airmail plane printed upside down.  The New York Public Library / via AP

The 24-cent stamps were numbered on the back and sold off to postage enthusiasts, and four of them wound up in the collection of a wealthy New York woman, Ethel McCoy, who paid \$16,000 for the quartet.

In September 1955, she put them on display at a show in Norfolk, Virginia, where they were brazenly stolen despite tight security.

"The thief cut a cord binding two of the exhibit frames and slid back the covering sheet of glass several inches," author George Amick wrote in his 1986 book, "The Inverted Jenny: Mystery, Money, Mania."

Diego Rodriguez of the FBI's New York office said it was a whodunit from the start.

"There were no witnesses, no suspects and very little evidence to pursue," he said.

One of the four stamps, No. 75, resurfaced in Chicago in 1977 and was seized by the FBI; McCoy donated it to the American Philatelic Research Library. Another one, No. 65, turned up in Chicago in 1981 and was donated to library, which had inherited ownership rights after McCoy's 1980 death.

The whereabouts of the last two stolen Jennys — nicknamed as such because the misprinted plane was a Curtiss JN-4 model — remained a riddle.

Fast forward to March of this year, when O'Neill contacted the Spink auction house and said he thought he had found an Inverted Jenny in a box he inherited from his grandfather, who had bought it at a rummage sale.

"I had no idea about the history and importance of the stamp," O'Neill said.

George Eveleth, the head of the philatelic department at Spink, said he at first assumed it was a forgery.

"I didn't take it seriously because I know where 90 of the 100 are," Eveleth said. "The chances of him having the real McCoy, so to speak, were between slim and none."

O'Neill made an appointment to bring the stamp to Spink's New York office in mid-March, but he never showed up.



American Philatelic Society executive director Scott D. English holds an "Inverted Jenny," a 1918 stamp stolen in 1955, that is finally being returned to its rightful owner. © Kathy Willens / AP

Eveleth said he guessed the young man had determined the stamp wasn't real after all. In actuality, Eveleth said, O'Neill got to New York and decided to take a detour, traveling to Florida for spring break.

Two weeks later, he re-emerged in New York, Jenny still in hand, and presented it to Spink. The specimen had been altered at some point in its history, probably to hide its identity,

and Spink's experts couldn't immediately determine if it was genuine.

They brought it to a non-profit stamp society, which was puzzled as well. Outside experts were brought in and they confirmed that this was, indeed, the stolen Inverted Jenny No. 76.

Eveleth said that once the auction house knew it was stolen property, they turned it over to the FBI and broke the news to O'Neill.

"If I had been told something of mine worth hundreds of thousands of dollars had been given to the FBI, I would be pretty upset but he was sort of nonplussed," Eveleth said.

Although the Jenny is being turned over to the American Philatelic Research Library, the rightful owner, O'Neill won't go away empty-handed. He got a check for \$50,00 from the Mystic Stamp Company, which had offered the reward several years ago in hopes of cracking the cold case.

No. 76 is worth at least \$250,000, Eveleth said. Another Jenny sold just a few days ago for more than \$1 million, but the stolen stamp is not in as good condition — although Eveleth acknowledged that its incredible back story could add to its value.

Eveleth called the discovery "incredibly exciting" but noted that there are still many unanswered questions, including who stole the collection in 1955, where the fourth purloined stamp (no. 66) is now, and who had No. 76 before O'Neill's grandfather.

"That's a mystery that remains to be solved," he said.

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