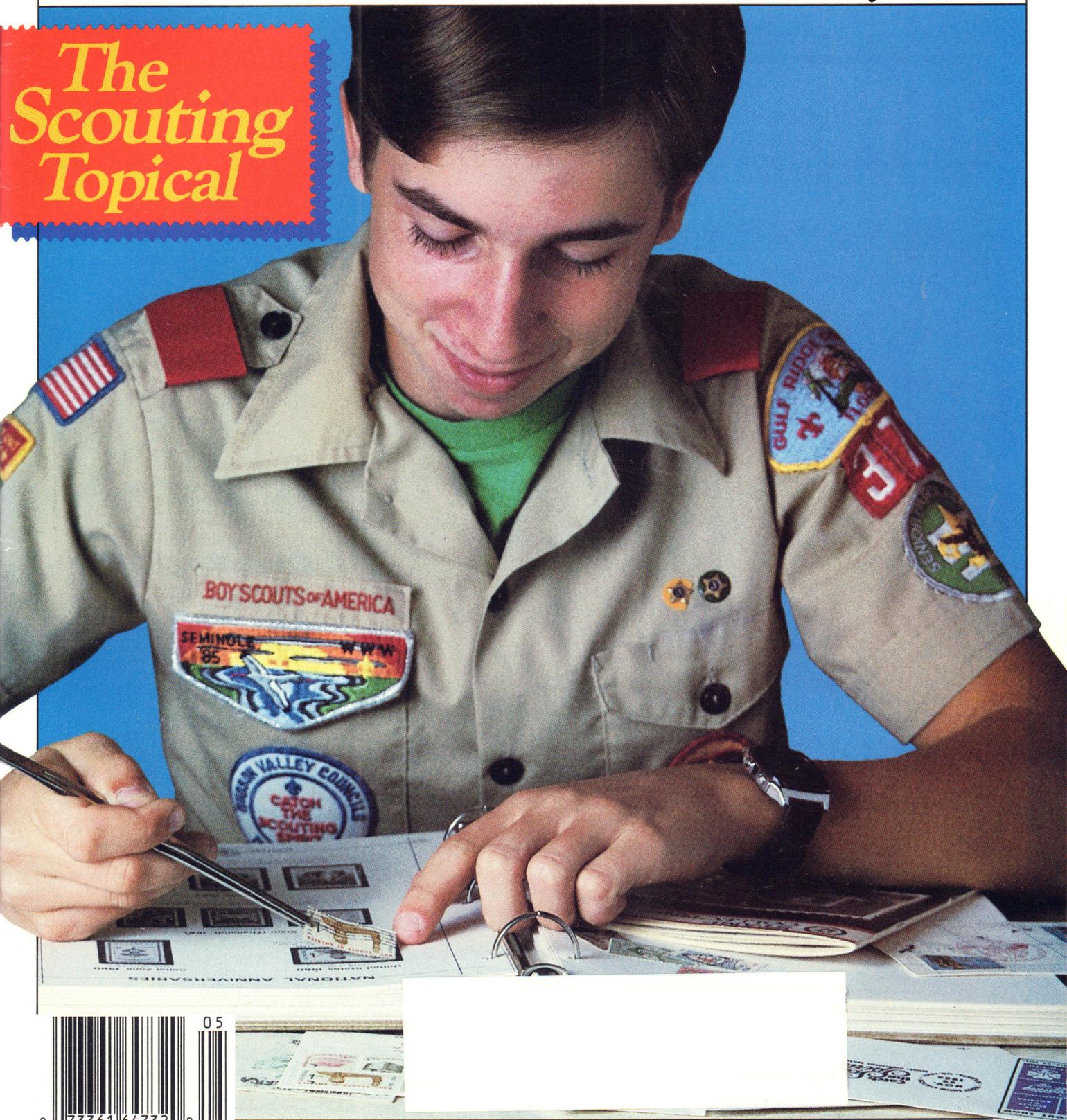


# Stamp Monthly

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*The  
Scouting  
Topical*



# The Scouting Topical

by J.G. Nash

**T**opical collectors of Scouting postage stamps may have far fewer stamps from which to select than do many others, but their chosen topic is richly endowed with colorful history and stimulating controversy. Let's take a look.

Scouting's first stamps — the 1900 Cape of Good Hope issues (Scott 178-80) — are among the world's more unusual. They were conceived under fascinating conditions, in an exotic location, and then produced in a unique fashion. Copies are becoming rarer with time, because the remaining few are literally self-destructing. Some collectors ar-

*Photograph of Colonel Robert Baden-Powell was used to make "first Scouting stamps."*



gue that they shouldn't even be part of a Scouting collection.

To understand how this could be, we must travel back in time to the turn-of-the-century, and join a British garrison in a remote section of southern Africa, where they had been under siege by hostile settlers for more than a year. Bored by enforced isolation, some of the soldiers garrisoned there at Mafeking passed time by designing and producing postage stamps honoring their commander — Col. Robert S.S. Baden-Powell — who was to later start the world Scouting movement. Sons of the soldiers, formed into a Cadet Corps, used their bicycles to deliver this local mail.

Those first stamps were produced photographically, instead of in the way most stamps are made today (by using ink and a printing press). Actually, the process used was like that involved in making blueprints, and, as with those once-popular, engineering drawings, the Mafeking stamps remain very sensitive to certain chemicals and to strong light. They will literally fade away if not carefully protected; many probably have, which adds immensely to their desirability and value (from about \$450 to over \$7,000, depending on condition and style).

The controversy as to whether the Mafeking stamps belong in a Scouting topical collection revolves around the fact that it was to be eight years after those first stamps were produced, before the Scouting movement was officially started.

So do these stamps qualify then as part of a Scouting collection? Proponents argue that they most certainly do, because the father of Scouting (Baden-Powell) appears on two of them (Scott 179-180), and because a youth of the Cadet Corps, who was later referred to as the "first Scout" by Baden-Powell, appears on the third in the series (Scott 178).

The debate goes on.

The second batch of Scouting stamps (which some consider to be the first, since they appeared in 1918, which was after Baden-Powell started Scouting in 1908) are also embroiled in fascinating controversy. Although eagerly sought by topical collectors, these unusual Czechoslovakian stamps (they are also the world's first, die-cut stamps) aren't listed by Scott.

Their questioned status stems from



*Seated in his Museum of Scouting Memorabilia,*

*Scouter Harry Thorsen holds a frame containing (with others) the rare Mafeking stamps of 1900.*

Left and below: The United States commemorates the Boy Scouts on Scott 995, 1145 and 2161.

At bottom: A First Day Cover for U.S. Scott 1145, dated February 8, 1960, is arranged with the official BSA stamp album.



Czechoslovakian history at the end of World War I. That country was then being formed from the turmoil of the "great war," and hadn't yet started an official postal service when the "Czech Scout Post" stamps were issued, in 1918, by the National Liberation Committee. Mail bearing that postage was carried by Czechoslovakian Sea Scouts, who collected a postal fee from the addressee, as indicated by the value of stamps on the envelope. Each stamp carried words proclaiming this to be "POSTA CESKYCH SKAUTU," or Czech Scout Post. Covers are even more highly prized than the stamps themselves, since the officially recorded signature of the authorized Scout carrier was placed on each envelope.

Some of these stamps were subsequently overprinted with "Prijezd Presidenta Masaryk," in honor of the arrival of the new nation's first president. Unfortunately, many forgeries exist.

The first stamp to carry an image of a Scout was a 1925 Hungarian (Scott B85). The first U.S. Scouting stamp was issued 23 years and another world war later. It honored the founder of our Girl Scouts (Scott 974). A scout didn't appear on U.S. postage until 1950, 40 years after the organization had migrated to our shores from England. That 1950 issue (Scott 995) spurred another round of debate, because philatelists noticed that one of three Scouts pictured on the stamp appeared to be saluting with the wrong hand. Closer examination however shows that he is not rendering the Scout salute; instead, shading his eyes as he looks off confidently into the future.

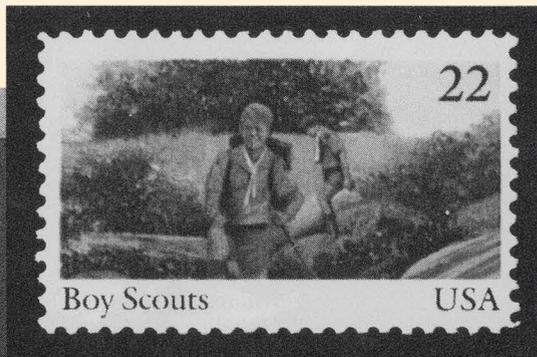
According to Howard J. Kaplan, who submits monthly updates to the *SOSSI Journal* (official organ of the Scouts on Stamps Society International): "Approximately 210 countries have issued stamps honoring the Scout movement or a Scouting event. Collectively these countries have issued over 800 sets of stamps." Curiously, our own country issues far less of them than do others.

The United States has authorized only six issues (including one postal card) which feature Scouting. Three of those pertain to Girl Scouts.

We have already mentioned the first two U.S. issues: the third was not to appear for another 10 years. That 4-cent issue of 1960 honored the 50th anniversary of Scouting in this country (Scott 1145). The same anniversary for our Girl Scouts was similarly recognized two years later, with issue of Scott 1199.

In 1967, the United States issued a 6-cent airpost postal card (Scott UXC7) honoring the 12th World Boy Scout Jamboree, which had been held in Idaho. Although not created especially to commemorate Scouting, a 22-cent issue of 1985 also portrayed American Boy Scouts (Scott 2161). It is the last of the few U.S. Scouting stamps.

The United States may seem to have been slow and low in the production of stamps pertaining to Scouting, but Great Britain —



Baden-Powell's own country — was still slower, trailing even the United States by seven years. The first British issues were Scott 334-336 of 1957, which honored the ninth World Scout Jamboree. Those stamps (which just barely relate to Scouting through secondary inclusion of a small Scout emblem) were also overprinted and used in Bahrain, Qatar, and Muscat.

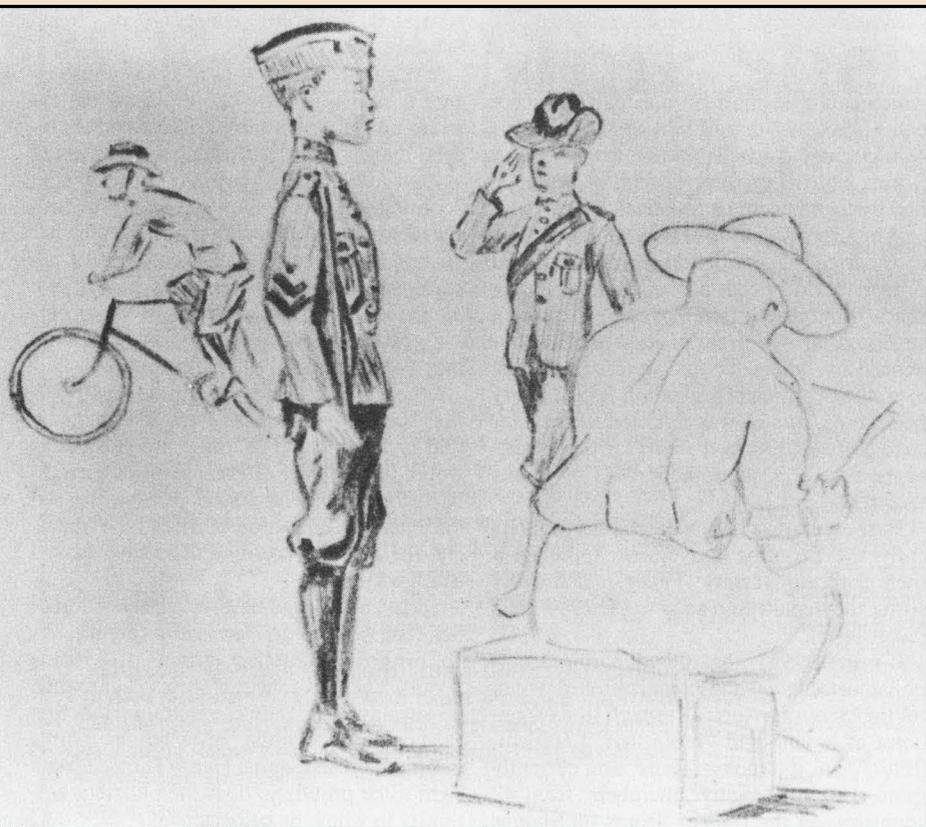
Great Britain has issued only seven additional stamps with possible relation to Scouting. Five of them are in dispute, and for similar reasoning as applied to the 1918 Czechoslovakians. A British postal workers' strike stopped the flow of mail in 1971, at which time the Scouts were again called upon (as they had been in Mafeking and Czechoslovakia) to deliver mail.

Overprinted and/or privately printed stamps were used for the period during which Scouts carried the mail. Should those stamps be part of our topical collection? Some say not; others are anxious to obtain them.

The last issue of British Scouting stamps was in 1982 (Scott 983-984). If you do count their controversial "strike" stamps, Great Britain has only produced four issues, comprising a total of 10 stamps of differing values.

Although the United States and Great Britain have generated relatively few issues of Scouting stamps, dozens of less conservative postal originating agencies, recognizing that there is money to be made by playing to the worldwide population of Scouts (many of whom are budding philatelists),

*Drawing by Lord Baden-Powell shows his "first Boy Scouts" delivering the mail by bicycle, in besieged Mafeking, Africa, in 1900.*



have printed Scouting stamps which were never intended for postal use.

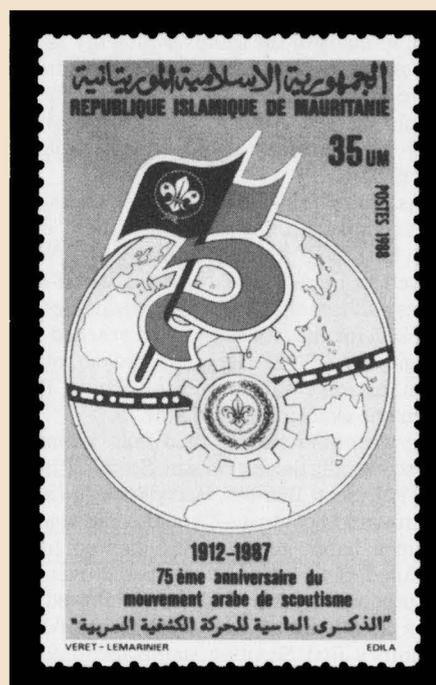
Most of this genre aren't listed in Scott (e.g. Qatar's triangular issue of 1966); some aren't legitimized anywhere. Some of the world's smallest and poorest nations have been responsible for hundreds of stamps picturing the Scouting movement. Liberia, for example, on just one day in 1979, issued 50 different stamps, each of which carried one of Norman Rockwell's famous paintings about Boy Scouts in the United States.

In spite of their questionable status, most collectors would buy those "Cinderellas," except that many of those speculative issues have also been greedily priced too high (e.g., Central Africa's gold foil issue of December, 1984, which carried a face value of around \$5 US).

Even though there are relatively few, generally recognized, Scouting stamps, most of them involve stories as interesting as those we have already told. Unfortunately, there isn't space here to discuss more of them, but it would be inexcusable to leave the subject without mention of a Korean issue of 1957, which shows a Korean Scout and one of Scouting's badges (Scott 245-246). This stamp achieves special status because it is largely a product of one special American's long and continuing interest in Scouting and postage associated therewith — Sarasota, Florida's, Harry Thorsen, Jr.

There may perhaps be another person who, essentially by himself, has made a particular topical what it is today, but none could have been more influential on their

*Benin Scott 654, U.A.E. Scott 277 and Mauritania Scott 636.*





More Scouting topicals include St. Thomas and Prince Island Scott 8830, Syria Scott 1146 and Egypt Scott 1379.



chosen specialty than has Harry Thorsen. Harry could be — should be — called “the father of the Scouting Topical.”

His love affair with stamps started in the 1930's, when his father brought him stamped envelopes from the Chicago bank where he was a teller. As Harry recalls:

“I was about nine or 10 when I began swapping stamps with other kids in the neighborhood. Postage meters weren't yet in use, so many of the stamps which my father brought me were large values. We didn't have any catalogues; all I knew was that a stamp marked 5-dollars ought to be worth four or five other stamps which I didn't have.”

As Harry thinks back to those times, he sees stamp collecting as “my salvation” during long days through which boys were forced to literally sweat-out childhood diseases while confined to a lonely bed. He was hooked for life. As soon as he reached the magic age of 12, Harry, as did so many then, couldn't wait to join the Scouts. He's been one ever since. He is now 76.

It was quite natural then that, when he “discovered” the Romanian Scouting issue of 1921 (Scott B26-30), Harry's two loves — stamps and Scouting — would come together in a happy union, which has not only endured, but grown and prospered over the 67 productive years which have followed.

In 1949, just a year after issue of this country's first Scouting stamp (Scott 974), Harry published his initial book about Scout stamps. He admits that the five-by-eight inch booklet wasn't much — not by today's standards anyway; after all, there were then only about 83 different stamps

which could be considered as part of such a collection; only one of which was from his own country — and that one honored Girl Scouts, not the boys movement in which he had by then become a respected leader.

When the 40th anniversary of Boy Scouts in America rolled around in 1950, it seemed proper to Harry that a stamp should be issued honoring that event. Although surprised at the lack of enthusiasm evidenced by others for his project (including even the Scouting organization itself), Harry persevered, and as was reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, received credit for production of the first, U.S. stamp honoring Boy Scouts (Scott 995).

Harry smiles as he remembers how differently the Scouting movement approached their 50th anniversary: “They pulled every string they could find to get that 1960 issue (Scott 1145).”

It was in 1951, that this dynamic Scout-philatelist created the organization devoted to the Scouting topical, which today can boast at having had “more than 1,600 collectors” in its ranks. There are currently more than 1,600 active members, from 42 countries, on the rolls of Scouts on Stamps

Society International (SOSSI). The society's authoritative catalog — which Harry started with his little pamphlet in 1949 — is now in its seventh edition. It lists over 2,000 stamps, issued by some 200 countries. Quite properly, Harry was the first president of SOSSI.

Thorsen's undeniable influence on Scouting philately inevitably spread beyond our shores. One of his warmest memories is of the part he played in convincing Korean authorities to issue their first Scouting stamp.

Korea's chief Scout, while a guest in Harry's Illinois home, asked Harry's help in persuading the Korean postmaster general to issue such a stamp. Harry wrote to the postmaster, and to Korea's president as well. When those first stamps were issued (Scott 245-246), Korean authorities presented Harry with a treasured plaque, in recognition of the pivotal role he had played.

Inspired and encouraged by that success, other countries sought Harry's help with like efforts. Filed and displayed among the many fascinating items in his extensive collection of Scouting philatelic memorabilia are first-day-covers (FDC's), original art work, and other evidence of Harry's ceaseless efforts on behalf of the Scouting topical.

Because the Scouting topical has become successful, it has also suffered from blatant commercialism. That bothers Harry. He decries the careless issue of what he refers to as “label”: stamps printed only for purpose of sale to collectors; many issues of which were never once glued to an envelope and sent through the mail.

Thorsen is quick toad mit that many of those “labels” are beautiful — he has quite a collection of them himself — but they are separated from his collection of “real” Scouting stamps.

What bothers Harry most about those issues is that boys who can ill afford the expense are too often tempted to buy the colorful “labels,” many of which were priced at several dollars. He suggests instead that Scouting collectors invest the money in covers which, in addition to carrying authentic postage, “tell a story” in their unusual cachets, some of which were even handdrawn by Scouts. His own favorites are covers carrying Baden-Powell stamps, of which he may have the world's finest collection.

When Harry decided to trade frigid Illinois for the palm trees of Florida, he knew that proper storage of his stamp collections would be a problem in that tropical humidity. Although he did convince himself to sell his extensive collection of other U.S. philately, the beloved Scouting collection moved south with him.

Today, as Harry discusses his collection of Scouting stamps and philatelic memorabilia with still another group of visiting Scouts, his eyes reflect a special light when he displays the frame containing the first Baden-Powell stamps, or when he points out the Korean plaque. Harry Thorsen has a right to be proud. So does the philatelic fraternity to which he belongs. □