

The American Philatelist

July 1992

The Journal of the American Philatelic Society



Add Some Spice to Scout Merit Badge

by Bill Olcheski

Almost every time I meet with a group of stamp dealers or collectors, the discussion turns to the concern that our hobby is dying — that youngsters are no longer interested in collecting stamps. Letters to the editor in the stamp publications seem to reflect the same sort of thinking. I also find it in my letters from concerned readers and in a note I received which said that the Boy Scouts are considering dropping the Stamp Collecting merit badge because of lack of interest. I don't agree with this kind of thinking at all. If the problem is real, then we should be doing something about correcting it before we surrender and close up our albums.

I think we need to look at some of the realities and consider some possible solutions. Let's begin with the concern that young people are no longer interested in stamp collecting. How then do we explain the thousands of Ben Franklin Stamp Clubs in schools around the nations? These kids are active, they are interested, and it is a joy to see them delve into the mysteries of stamp collecting.

I hear from the teachers who share ideas on how to make collecting interesting and who have added to the Ben Franklin program by setting up swap sessions and other programs for the young collectors.

I hear from youngsters who, after discovering my book on *Beginning Stamp Collecting*, write to tell me how much they enjoy using the information I provided to get them interested in stamp collecting. That would not be remarkable if they were talking about a new book. The book sold thousands of copies since its publication in 1976 and is in many school libraries. Librarians write that they have waiting lists for the book — a book out of print for about the last ten years.

I hear from teachers willing to share their ideas. They don't ask recognition;



they just pass on their ideas with the hope of helping other schools. For example, a schoolteacher in Maryland is working with a Ben Franklin Stamp Club during the school year. This summer she is establishing a "stamp camp" which will help hold the interest of the youngsters during vacation time. She will be getting help from some older collectors who will make the camp a great adventure by sharing their collecting experiences.

A teacher in Tennessee went to a stamp show in Nashville. She brought back an inexpensive mixture she had purchased at the show. She told the kids what the show was about and then let them rummage in the box to get a feel for what it would be like to shop at a stamp show.

This same teacher knows the importance of having readable reference books for the young collectors. She said she was disappointed that very few such books were available at the show.

A teacher in St. Joseph, Missouri, said the kids in his club prefer bound volumes because the loose-leaf runs tend to tear at the rings. While I have always been a proponent of loose-leaf binders, I can see where the young collectors might be better served by the bound volumes.

The Boy Scout problem needs to be addressed in more detail. Have the Boy Scouts and the Ben Franklin Stamp Clubs ever discovered each other? Surely the Boy Scout recruiters could find many potential members in the Ben Franklin clubs. Similarly, the club could find many potential collectors in the Scouts. Wouldn't it be nice if the club sent some members over to a Scout meeting to talk about stamp collecting? Couldn't the Scouts send someone over to get the club members excited about the Scouts? Perhaps they might work together on a collection of Scouts on Stamps. Lots of help is available for such a project in the library and the post office, as well as from area clubs and dealers.

I took a look at the requirements for the Stamp Collecting merit badge and I can understand why many Scouts avoid trying for it. The information is *boring!* Instead of asking the Scouts a whole lot of questions about stamps that are mostly technical

in nature, why not consider changing the requirements?

If I were making the rules for earning the badge, I would include requirements like these:

- Scout shall make a short presentation about stamp collecting to his classmates. Emphasis must be on the fun of collecting.

- Scout shall attend at least one meeting of an adult stamp club and report his impressions at the next troop meeting.

- Scout shall introduce stamp collecting to at least one other person as part of earning the badge.

- Scout shall prepare a library exhibit on some phase of stamp collecting for display during October, which is National Stamp Collecting Month.

- Scout shall invite a local stamp dealer or advanced collector to make a presentation before the troop.

While those suggestions are fine for the youngsters, let's not let the adults off the hook. As an experienced adult collector, have you ever:

- Brought a youngster to a stamp club meeting?

- Shared the fun of collecting with a young relative or friend? By this I mean have you ever taken the time to show them your album and share a few duplicates to get them started.

- Had an active program for newcomers that makes them feel welcome rather than tolerated?

- Considered holding a ceremony to honor a Scout who has earned the Stamp Collecting merit badge? If you had such a ceremony, did you remember to invite the rest of the Scout troop to the meeting?

- Made an effort to have your club help Scout troops or Ben Franklin Clubs with donations of catalogues, stamps, and supplies?

I'm sure you have many ideas as good or better than mine. What I hope to provide is a start. I am sick of hearing people say our hobby is dying. If they are right, then it is dying of neglect and the guilt lies with those who fail to do anything about it.