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Louis Fiset, Editor/Publisher
lfiset@outlook.com

Privately Cancelled Prexie Puzzle

by Richard Matta

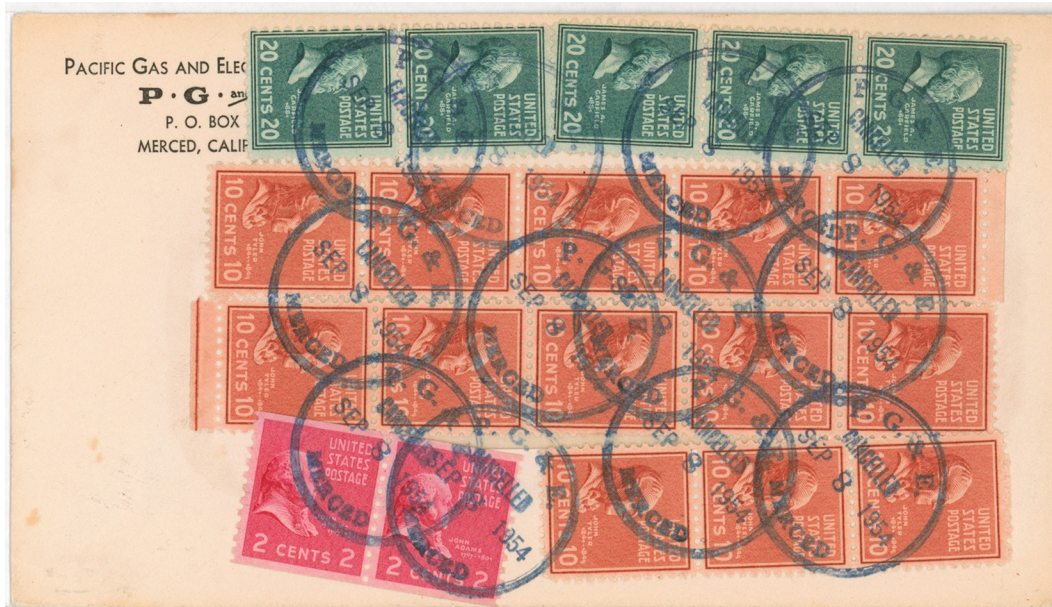


Figure. Unexplained private cancellations on Pacific Gas and Electric Company correspondence; “P.G. & E./CANCELLED/SEP 8 1954/MERCED.”

Attached is a purported “out of mails” item recently purchased on eBay. I understand it is “ex-Shapiro.” It is a standard utility-bill sized window envelope (empty and unsealed) with the corner card “Pacific Gas and Electric Co., P.G. and E., P.O. Box 719, Merced, California,” and bearing \$2.34 in Prexies. The stamps are canceled with a circular datestamp bearing “P.G. & E.” at the top, “MERCED” at the bottom, and “CANCELLED SEP 8 1954” in

two lines in the center. There appear to be no other marks under the stamps. The item was accompanied by a written note:

\$2.34 canx w P.G.+E. private hand stamp – to account for postage on 78 bills left in customers’ mailboxes by PG+E meter readers (no charge on hand over bills) these customers not at home.

The explanation on its face sounds plausible. On reflection, however, there are at least two problems with it. First, the private express statutes (PES) prohibited any private delivery of “letters,” including bills, whether handed over in person or put in a mailbox. (The related “mailbox rule” is not relevant here.)

Second, the PES were clear that letters carried outside the mails should be placed in a sealed envelope with the appropriate (cancelled) postage placed on each item. Specifically:

§ 91.3 Requirements when letters are carried out of mail. All letters enclosed in envelopes with embossed postage thereon, or with postage stamp or stamps affixed thereto, by the sender, or with the metered indicia showing that the postage has been prepaid, *if the postage thereon is of an amount sufficient to cover the postage that would be chargeable thereon if the same were sent by mail, may be sent, conveyed, and delivered otherwise than by mail, provided such envelope shall be duly directed and properly sealed, so that the letter cannot be taken therefrom without defacing the envelope, and the date of the letter or of the transmission or receipt thereof shall be written or stamped upon the envelope, and that where stamps are affixed they be canceled with ink by the sender.* But the Postmaster General may suspend the operation of this section or any part thereof upon any mail route where the public interest may require such suspension. (E. S. 3993, as amended; 39 U. S. C. 500.) [Emphasis added].¹

The last sentence may provide a clue. Interpretive regulations under the PES were only first adopted by the Postmaster General in December 1954, more than two months after the

date of this item. Before that, it is possible the Postmaster General or a local postmaster (with or without approval) may have granted informal exceptions to the single-envelope requirement for accounting or other reasons. Although the 1954 regulations on their face did not provide for exceptions, later regulations (circa 1974) did expressly authorize “alternative arrangements” to the above requirements, perhaps reflecting existing practice rather than new leniency.

The question still remains – what does this item represent? There is little reason to suspect it is a fake, though that remains a possibility. It also remains possible that PG&E meter readers did hand over bills in person without proper postage, and this item really does only account for mailbox deliveries, though that would be a risky proposition for a big utility.

On the other hand, it is possible that meter readers delivered bills either in person or via mailboxes when convenient; if on a rural route, the mailbox might be distant from the meter – a utility worker likely would not take the time to go out of their way to deliver or even to individually stamp letters. It is plausible the meter reader left for the day with a stack of bills; upon returning to the office, the number delivered were accounted for in bulk and any bills not delivered could be sent through the mails later. However, this is mere speculation.

The author invites comments or examples of similar uses, or individually stamped PG&E envelopes from this era. I have contacted the PG&E archivist to see if they may be able to shed light on this, but with the current pandemic and PG&E’s bankruptcy, it is likely not a priority.

¹ 39 C.F.R., Chapter 1--Post Office Department, Section 91.3 (1949). See: <https://tinyurl.com/yyshtjtd> [accessed October 28, 2020].

Commercial/Philatelic Use of a Solo \$2 Prexie

by Bob Hohertz



\$2.00 = 20¢ surface (5¢ + 5 x 3¢) + \$1.65 air supplement (11 x 15¢) + 15¢ registration fee.

This cover, acquired recently on eBay, proved to be an interesting combination of commercial and philatelic use. It was sent from the Milo Bar Bell System, of Philadelphia, to a Mr. Mina R. Sanjana in the Auditor's Office of the Bombay, Baroda & Central India Railway Company.

The \$2.00 franking, made up of three components, correctly pays the 1938, five to five-and-one-half ounce rate going first by surface to London then onward by air to India, with registration fee added.

Surface postage was 5 cents for the first ounce and 3 cents for each additional ounce (20 cents). The air supplement rate was 15 cents per half ounce (\$1.65). Finally, registration cost 15 cents.

This franking, accompanied by the rough opening of the letter at the bottom, suggests a commercial, rather than philatelic, use.

However, there are also several philatelic

aspects to the cover. First, at least two other covers to Mr. Sanjana are known with obvious philatelically-inspired frankings. One was franked with plate number blocks of the first six airmails; the other with a plate block of six of the Lindbergh airmail. One was sent by the Milo Bar Bell System, while the other was not.

A second philatelic aspect is that the \$2.00 Prexie was posted on September 29, 1938, the day the stamp was issued. What are the chances this cover was packed enough to weigh just over five ounces and mailed on the very day a new \$2 definitive was issued? And third, why was a Philadelphia firm posting mail from the first day post office in Washington, D.C.?

While the suspicion is strong that the cover weighed close enough to the full weight to require \$1.85 in postage, but might have fallen somewhat short, it likely held real correspondence. As an example of a very unusual rate, plus being a commercial first day cover, I figure it's worth about what I paid.

1940 Airmail to India: Rate & Route Mismatch

by Louis Fiset



From April 21, 1937 until Pearl Harbor, airmail service from the U.S. to India consisted of transpacific service from San Francisco via Hong Kong or Singapore and onward air service via BOAC to and within India. The postage required was 70 cents per half ounce. Transit time for the weekly service was 10-12 days.

For part of this period, from May 23, 1939 until June 14, 1940, an alternative, transatlantic route was available, from New York to Lisbon and onward by air via BOAC from Europe to and within India. The cost was 50 cents per half ounce for this twice-weekly service. Average transit time on this route was 9-10 days

The cover shown here shows postage paid for the transatlantic service, while the Hong Kong censor marking documents transpacific carriage. The letter was posted on April 1, 1940, transited Hong Kong on April 12, 1940, and reached Bombay on April 17.

The letter was addressed in care of an Italian ocean liner or American Express office, at Bombay. The addressee could not be found, so the letter was returned from Bombay on May 4, arriving at New York on June 21, 1940.

The total transit time for this “around-the-world” cover was 72 days.

More Uprated Return Receipt Cards

by Dickson Preston

It was a pleasure to read Dan Pagter's article "Scarce Uprated Return Receipt (RR) Cards" in the Autumn issue of *The Prexie Era*, with such a fine range of uses on display. Air delivery for return receipts was also available on international mail, as explained by Tony Wawrukiewicz in "Return Receipts by Airmail," in the December 1998 *United States Specialist*. In it, Tony quotes the international segment of the first *Postal Manual* (October 18, 1954); "If

you desire that your return receipt be sent back to you by airmail, you must pay for this return, in addition to the return receipt fee, the airmail postage applicable to a single post card to the country of destination."

Tony shows an example of this usage with the receipt card retuned by air from the independent Philippines, the only example known to him at that time. Here we see another example, an

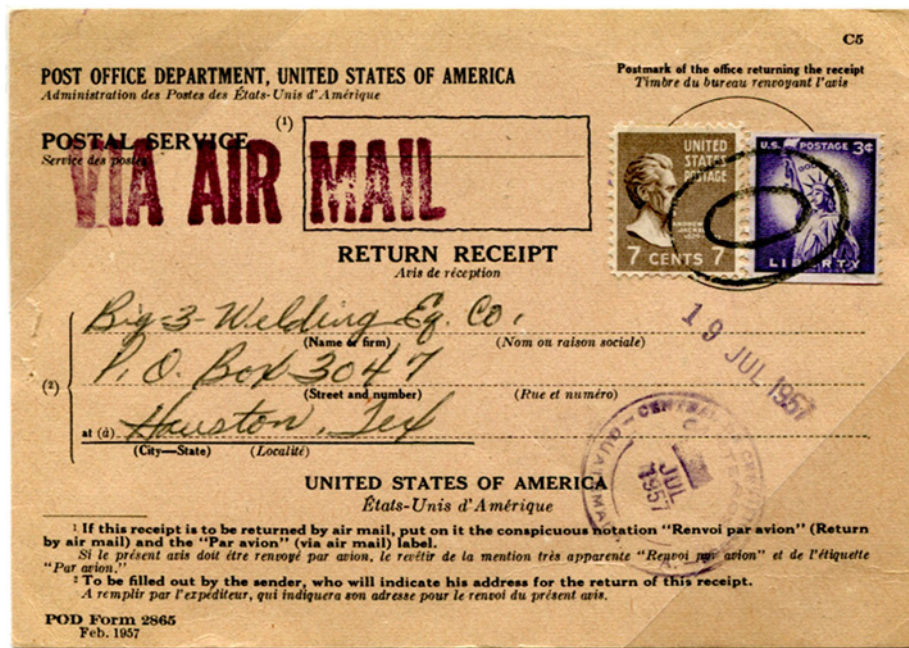


Figure 1. International RR card uprated to pay the equivalent to the foreign airmail postcard rate.

Figure 2. U.S. Domestic RR card uprated to pay the 5-cent airmail postcard fee from New York back to the Canal Zone



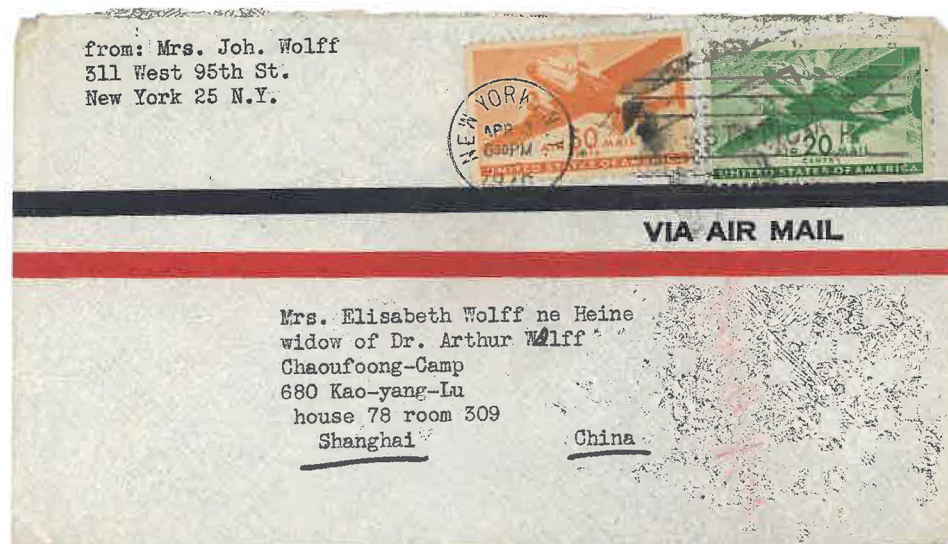
international return receipt card flown back from Guatemala to the U.S. The airmail fee of 10 cents was applied by the sender when requesting the return receipt. This fee was equivalent to the postage for an international airmail postcard to any destination worldwide, in effect from 1954 to 1961. The receipt card was flown from Guatemala in July 1957, arriving in the U.S. 19 July. The Guatemala post office did not cancel the U.S. stamps, which received a dumb oval postmark after the receipt reached the U.S.

Although the Canal Zone Postal Service, as a part of the Canal Zone Government, was separate from the United States Post Office

Department, return receipts could be sent by air between these two postal entities. The example shown is a standard domestic return receipt card flown back from New York City to reach an address in Balboa in 1959. In this case the rate was the 5-cent domestic airmail postcard rate in effect from 1958 to 1963, franked by the sender with a Globe and Wing Canal Zone airmail stamp. Under normal circumstances, Canal Zone stamps should not have been cancelled in the U.S., but for this use it was allowed. Several similar flown return receipt cards from the Canal Zone show that the use of U.S. cancels on these cards was the accepted practice.

Jews in Shanghai

by Jeffrey Shapiro



While small numbers of Jews had lived in China for centuries, many more Jews fled Europe for sanctuary in China, specifically Shanghai, starting in the early 1930s. While the Chinese welcomed the Jews for the talents they brought, the Japanese occupiers and their allies, the Germans, saw the Jews as a threat and insisted the Jews be thrown out of China. As a compromise, however, the Jews were ordered

to move into the crowded neighborhood of Hongkou, where a so-called Ghetto was created.

At the end of World War II, the newly created UNRRA initiated programs to rehabilitate war-torn China, including assisting the Jewish refugees. To alleviate overcrowding of the Hongkou section, in 1946 UNRRA established

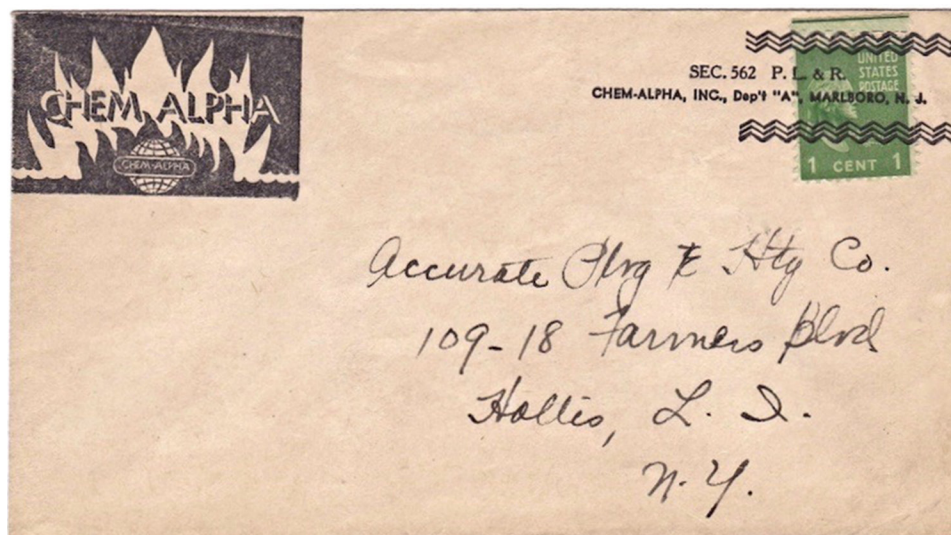
the near-by Chaoufoong Camp, as shown in the illustration. UNRRA and other international relief agencies provided needed nutritional, medical and educational services.

With the imminent takeover of the government

by the Communists, most Jews understood it was time to leave China. As a result, the Chaoufoong Camp was emptied and closed by early 1948. Many of them emigrated to the United States, Canada, Australia and the newly-created State of Israel.

Private Prexie Precancellation

by Stephen L. Suffet



The cover shown above bears a 1-cent Presidential Series sheet stamp paying the minimum 1-cent per piece third class bulk rate. The stamp is precanceled with a nonstandard device applied by the mailer, Chem-Alpha, Inc., of Marlboro, New Jersey.

From the time the third class bulk rate category came into being in 1928, the postal regulations specified that postage had to be paid either “without postage stamps or with precanceled stamps...”¹ The term “without postage stamps” referred to mail bearing permit indicia showing the postage had been paid in money at the time of mailing, and it also referred to mail for which the postage had been paid by postage meter. The term “precanceled stamps” included adhesive stamps sold by the post office with standard precancellations, postal stationery likewise sold by the post office with standard precancellations, and postal stationery

canceled with mailer’s permit postmarks.

As far as I can tell, by the beginning of the Prexie era there was no authority for individual mailers to precancel adhesive postage stamps, other than postage stamps that had already been precanceled and were being used on first class mail.² In fact, an order from the Postmaster General dating back to 1911 explicitly stated, “Stamps may be precanceled only under the supervision of the postmaster or other sworn employee of the post office.”³ Nevertheless, the United States post office in Marlboro, New Jersey, apparently accepted the cover for mailing. On whose authority I cannot say.

Several other examples exist of Prexies precanceled with nonstandard devices applied by mailers. The best known were mailed by or on behalf of the American Philatelic Society. All others are scarce.

I could find very little information about Chem-Alpha, Inc. According to United States Patent Office records, the company was located in Brooklyn, New York, when it filed a trade mark registration on February 19, 1938. At the time, according to the registration, the company dealt in “soot destroyers for oil burning systems, boiler scale removers, water cleaning compounds, etc.” The trade mark registration was published on August 15, 1939, and the trade mark was granted on October 31, 1939.⁴

Some time afterwards, Chem-Alpha apparently moved some or all of its operations to Marlboro, a sprawling township in Monmouth County. On March 28, 1947, the *Asbury Park Press* of Asbury Park, New Jersey, carried a classified ad from the Chem-Alpha Company offering a Brockway 1½ ton truck for sale or trade. The company gave its location on the Freehold–Marlboro Road, what is now known as New Jersey Highway 79.⁵ (Asbury Park is a seaside community, also in Monmouth County, about 20 miles southeast of Marlboro.)

Some time around then it appears the main and possibly the only products of Chem-Alpha were Pickwick Paints, and there is much documentation that the location of the Pickwick Paint Factory was also on the Freehold–Marlboro Road. The one other reference to Chem-Alpha that I could find is a brief notice

appearing in the *Asbury Park Press* on April 1, 1956. The notice reported that the Pickwick Paint Factory, a division of the of the Chem-Alpha Company of Marlboro, had opened a retail outlet the previous week in Asbury Park.⁶ While I could find the Pickwick Paint Factory mentioned several more times in various New Jersey newspapers between 1957 and 1960, I could find nothing else about Chem-Alpha per se. After 1960, I could locate nothing about the Pickwick Paint Factory as well. Perhaps someone reading this who is familiar with New Jersey can tell us what became of either Chem-Alpha or Pickwick Paints, or both.

Meanwhile, this nonstandard bulk rate Prexie cover is among the scant evidence that the Chem-Alpha Company ever existed.

Endnotes

1. *The Postal Bulletin*. June 13, 1928 (No. 14714), p. 2.
2. *The Postal Bulletin*. August 7, 1924 (No. 13540), p. 1.
3. *The Postal Bulletin*. December 6, 1911 (No. 9689), p. 1.
4. *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Volume 507, October 1939), p. 1064.
5. *Asbury Park Press*. March 28, 1947, p.27.
6. *Asbury Park Press*. April 1, 1956, p.8.

No Solo Uses of the \$5 Prexie Stamp? How About FSW (Franked Solely With) Uses?

by Ed Field

To qualify as a solo or a franked-solely-with (FSW) use, a non-philatelic \$5 Prexie cover or tag should meet the following three criteria:

1. Franked only with \$5 Prexies. No other stamps or meter tapes allowed.
2. Be posted between 11/17/1938 and 5/18/1956. No late uses allowed

3. Stamps must exactly pay a plausible U.S. postal rate.

To date, no known solo uses of \$5 Prexie stamps exist either on cover or tag. Lot 751 in the December 3-5 2019 Kelleher Auction was described as a solo use. It showed a parcel piece franked with a single \$5 Prexie, but that



Figure 1.

piece did not satisfy criterion 3, because it was apparently over-franked by at least 2 cents or under-franked by at least 4 cents. (Pagter, 2019). Probably for that reason, it hammered for only \$3500, substantially less than its pre-auction estimate of \$5000-\$7500.

Despite years of searching, I have never seen an FSW \$5 Prexie cover. However, tags bearing \$5 Prexie stamps far outnumber such covers, and the chance of finding a FSW \$5 Prexie tag is therefore greater than for a cover. I show two such tags here. (First class postage was three cents per ounce for the Figure 1 and 2 tags. All rates used for analysis are from Beecher and Wawrukiewicz, cited below.)

Figure 1 shows a tag dated April 30 1953 from a bank in Arvada, CO sent to the Denver Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. It bears a pair of \$5 Prexies and no other stamps. The tag clearly satisfies criteria 1 and 2, so we

must find a plausible combination of weight, registration, and declared value that indicate a total franking of \$10.00. The distance was well within parcel post Zone 1, so the supplemental surcharge was 12 cents per \$1000. Assume the registration fee was \$1.75, including \$1000 postal insurance, the declared excess value was \$60k, and the total weight was 35 ounces. For that combination, the total franking would have been exactly \$10.00 (\$1.75 registry + \$7.20 surcharge + \$1.05 postage). There are several other plausible combinations of weight and value compatible with the \$10.00 franking.

Figure 2 shows a tag dated December 21 1940 from Travelers Insurance company in Hartford, CT to Chase National Bank in New York City. The Zone 2 supplementary fee was 9 cents per \$1000 of excess value. Assume the registration fee was 20 cents, including \$50 postal insurance (perhaps to cover a commercial insurance deductible). As was the

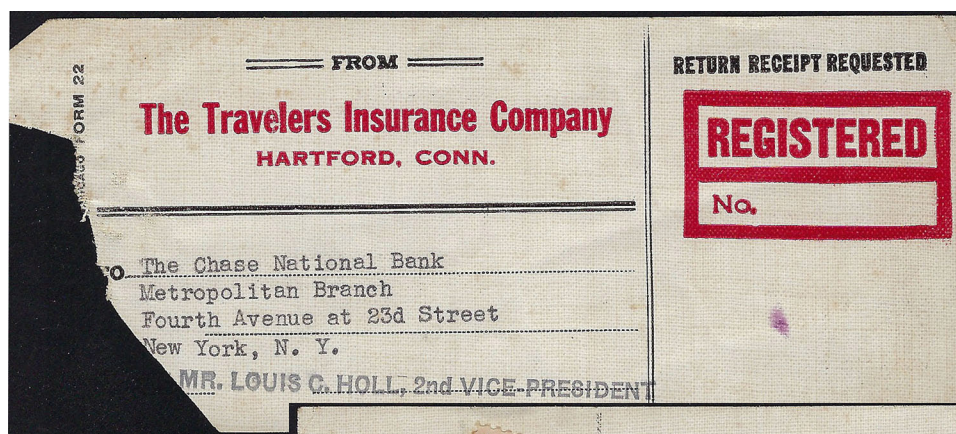
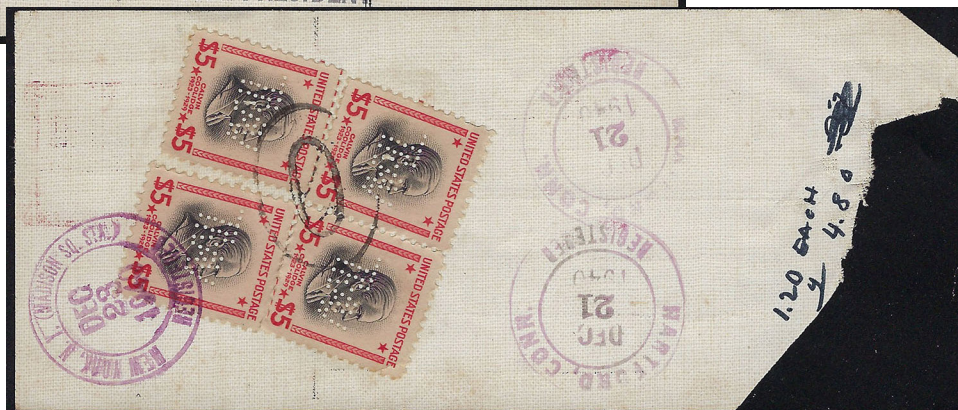


Figure 2.



case for the tag shown in Figure 1, a number of combinations of weight and declared excess value are exactly consistent with the \$20.00 franking. A likely combination is 60 ounces and declared excess value of \$200k (\$0.20 registry + \$18.00 surcharge + \$1.80 postage).

While the rates used for the calculations above are plausible, they may not reflect actual reality. Other combinations of value, weight, and registration fee are certainly possible. Or, the tags might simply have been over franked.

How rare are FSW \$5 Prexie tags? I have collected \$5 Prexie tags for years and have about fifty in my collection. I have seen scans of at least that many more. The two tags shown above are the only ones I know of that are franked only with \$5 stamps and pay a plausible rate*. I would appreciate hearing about any others.

*In the recent Schuyler-Rumsey sale of the Robert Schlesinger collection (Briggs, 2020), Lot 1447 showed an airmail tag from California

to Guam franked only with a block of fifteen \$5 Prexies. Apparently an FSW use. But the tag was not date-stamped and might not have been the only tag attached to the parcel. If the tag was the only one attached, and if the posting date was between 10/1/46 and 1/1/49, the basic registration fee would have been 20 cents and the surcharge 18 cents per \$1000. In that case, a weight of 56 ounces and declared value of \$400k would require a franking of exactly \$75.00. Definitely an FSW use! In my opinion, the italicized rate analysis given in the Rumsey catalog is incorrect. The supplementary fee for \$14-15 million declared value was \$2290, not \$22.90 as assumed in the catalog analysis.

References

- Beecher and Wawrukiewicz, *U.S. Domestic Postal Rates, 1872-2011* (Third Edition)
- Pagter, Daniel, "\$5.00 Prexie 'Solo' Piece Up For Auction," *The Prexie Era* (No. 87 Autumn 2019).
- Briggs, Albert "Chip", "Robert Schlesinger Sale of Prexie Postal History," *The Prexie Era* (No. 90 Summer 2020).