

Chapter 16

How To Find Plate Numbers

Collectors of today may find the BEP's plate number series interesting but some may be discouraged by not having any clear ideas about locating these plate numbers. The main source of supply was the post office, but it is very unusual to find any of these plate numbers in the post offices today. However, occasionally some still turn up. I was in a small town office in east Texas this year (1997) and they were selling the 1c Americana plates of 1975! A collector friend just found a \$5 Americana plate block in a Kansas post office. Always look because you never can tell what will turn up.

It was fun to locate these plates in the post office and probably every collector of plates was able to find post offices where they had much better than average luck. I used to go to a contract station in a drugstore. Their small stock turned over quickly and they usually got the new numbers before any of the main post offices. The lady clerk was not happy to see me when I made my weekly visit since I would ask to see her entire stock. But as time progressed she got used to it and became friendlier. I made some of my better finds at this station. I remember checking booklets of the 11c air mail and finding copies with 100% of the plate number. In the front of the store there was a vending machine for dispensing coils and this machine had a glass cover. I looked at the roll of 5c Washington coils of the 1965 issue and saw 50% of the plate numbers showing. I asked the manager to open the machine for me and he did when he understood I would get rolls of coins and empty it that way if I had to! These events made the chase fun.

But the plate number series of the BEP is history and most are gone from the post offices now. So where do we look for all of those elusive digits? Probably the best source is other collectors, especially for the cheaper stamps. The BIA is a wonderful resource. Try placing ads in the SPECIALIST to make contact with members with similar interests. Trading is the best way to build a collection. All collectors will accumulate duplicates and it is nice to be able to use these to better the main collection. This can be a slow process since we all have lives other than plate numbers and sometimes there is not a lot of time available to peruse other collector's long want lists. But build contacts and network among your collecting colleagues and they may run across the very item you need. I was corresponding with a collector who had a quantity of 1st and 2nd Bureau plates. He was more interested in the 1st Bureau and, since he knew I collected the 2nd Bureau, he sold me his lot of 2nd Bureau which added substantially to my holdings in this tough area.

A good trading philosophy is very important. I believe a collector should always share fortunate finds with his trading buddies. It is very true that if you give, you will also receive. I have been fortunate to make some nice finds in the post offices during my collecting career and I have shared these with my collecting friends. They then remember me when they make a good find and it becomes a truly win-win situation. It

makes the hobby so much more enjoyable when everyone's collection has the opportunity to grow.

Dealers are a great resource for building a collection. Get acquainted with dealers in your area and make your interests known. The dealer never knows what may walk in his door and he may locate a real treasure for you. Contact some of the dealers that advertise nation-wide and let them know you are in the market for your specialty. Some collectors like to dispose of their holdings intact and the dealer can match you with the seller.

Be open to buying collections even if some of the material is duplication. In many cases, buying a collection is cheaper and quicker than trying to locate individual items. In the late 1960s, one of the pioneer plate number collectors died and a minister who was also a collector handled dispersal of one of the most complete plate number collections. This fabulous collection consisted of not only plate singles, but plate blocks of much of the earlier material. Most of the super premium material such as the plate blocks were gone when I contacted the minister. I flew out to California to view the collection and I decided to buy the offset plate singles. I recognized this as perhaps a once in a lifetime opportunity to get a very difficult group of plates with a high degree of completion. I went into debt for a year but this became one of my best buys. I have been able to add few offset plates since buying this collection. I wish I could have afforded other plates but, like most collectors, I do not have unlimited funds for stamps.

Stamp auctions are great places to shop for the more expensive items. This is the place to go for the Graf Zeppelin or dollar value Trans-Mississippi plates. Occasionally some of the 1st Bureau and 2nd Bureau booklet plates appear. The auctions can also have plate block collections. Large lots of commemorative plates can be had for close to face value.

Experience is the best teacher. Just get in there and chase those numbers. You will find methods that work for you. The learning process is part of the plate number collecting fun. Now we will return to the BEP's plate number series and see what havoc is being wrought by those darned 2c offset plates.