

Chapter 64

A Look At Other Plate Number Galaxies

All, or even part, of the BEP's postage stamps plate number series can provide the collector with a lifetime of interest and fun. But there are also other fascinating plate number worlds to explore. Before the BEP became the primary US stamp printer, private bank note companies printed postage and revenue stamps. The BEP even had other series of plate numbers. A series exists that we call the miscellaneous series which includes plates to print revenues (including the hunting permit stamps), Canal Zone stamps, Philippine stamps, and many other types of items. Plates that print currency have plate numbers. And we will take a look at the current plate numbering system that has been with us since 1981.

US stamps printed prior to 1894 by the private banknote companies are known to collectors as pre-Bureau issues. The first stamps to have plate numbers were in the regular issue of 1851. It takes courage and a fat wallet to tackle these plate numbers. The stamps are expensive and few plate number copies exist. Plate number copies of many of the plates known to have been used simply are unknown today. Probably the most accessible of the pre-Bureaus are the Columbian commemorative stamps of 1893. There are probably more plate number copies of these stamps available than all of the other pre-Bureau stamps combined. Even so, the Columbians are a tough challenge. The 1c and 2c stamps are the most difficult because of the large number of plates used and they range from scarce to rare to unreported. Given time and money, all of the plates on the 3c through the \$5 values can be located. This first commemorative issue is the standard by which many US collections are measured and any showing of Columbian plate numbers would be an impressive display.

The miscellaneous series of plates includes an incredible variety of items. Some of the more interesting varieties to collectors are the plates that printed the Canal Zone, Philippines, and revenue stamps, especially the hunting permit stamps. Our postage stamp plates have been numbered in the miscellaneous series since 1985 with all plates produced subsequent to plate number 41303, the last number in the postage stamp plate number series. Incidentally, the hunting permit stamps provided the last real plate numbers available to collectors from the BEP. The Canal Zone and Philippines stamps printed by the BEP are very interesting in that they have the look and feel of US stamps of that time since they were designed and printed by the same processes used for our domestic stamps. Philippine stamps were printed by the BEP from 1906 through 1945 and we see all of the paper and perforation changes that occurred on the 3rd Bureau series of stamps. The Philippine designs are very interesting with the inscription 'United States of America' on the stamps and some of the designs include US elements such as personalities significant in US-Philippine history. The Philippine stamps are not expensive and some of the plates can be easily found, but other plates are real rarities. The early Canal Zone stamps were overprints of US issues and stamps of Panama. In 1928, the first Canal Zone design was released and these stamps continued through the 1970s. These stamps are quite attractive and plate number copies are not too difficult although gathering a large showing of these plates is a real challenge.

Complete collections of the plates used to print the hunting permit stamps are easy to assemble with the toughest number being the offset plate used to print the message on the backs of the stamps. This offset plate appeared only on the issues of 1946-50. There are many interesting series of revenue stamps and plate numbers can be found on most of these stamps.

The new plate numbering system in 1981 caused a real revolution in plate number collecting. Old-timers such as myself never thought that the series of plates that started in 1894 would ever end as long as the BEP printed postage stamps. The probable intent of the USPS in ordering the change was to infuse new life into plate number collecting by getting rid of the large size plate blocks, and by including plate numbers on the booklets and coil stamps. For the first time in modern times, offset plate numbers would be available (except on BEP produced booklets). The result was a huge increase in coil collecting with many collectors chasing all the plate numbers. The booklet plates initially did not attract much attention but interest seems to be building in that area. The one area where interest remained very low was the sheet stamps. But this area, in my opinion, has become the most interesting of them all, primarily due to the availability of the offset plate numbers. This has resulted in many issues with plate number combinations, and some of these are extremely challenging. But the lack of collector interest has had many of the scarce to rare items lost by default since few collectors were interested in looking for them. It is possible that there are some number combinations just awaiting discovery. I know that because I have located some number combinations that were unreported by anyone else and the main reason is that there are very few collectors chasing the sheet plate numbers. The major challenges so far in the new plate numbering system are with the sheet stamps and many items are much scarcer than the famous 18c flag coil plate code number 6. Some of the areas with some real plate number rarities are the series of World War II souvenir sheets of 1991-95 and many of the Christmas stamps produced by the offset-intaglio method.

There is an entire universe of plate numbers available for the hobbyist. Even a small part can give a lifetime of collecting pleasure. I urge the plate number enthusiast to find an area of interest and to dive right in. Or, if you are at a stopping point in some project, give something new a try. The fun is in the challenge, the chase, the accomplishment, the acquisition of knowledge, and the new friends that can be found along the way.

The End

