

TALES FROM THE STAMPING GROUND

MEMOIRS FROM THE LIFE OF A
STAMP COLLECTOR & DEALER

by

Viv Martin

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VIV MARTIN as perceived by Tim West, cartoonist,
formerly of the Australian Army Cartographic division

STAMP COLLECTING – THE BEGINNINGS

At the Ormond Church of Christ, Melbourne where my father was the minister, I had a Sunday School teacher named Bertie Blackwell. Every week, at the commencement of class, Mr. Blackwell would show us a stamp from somewhere around the world with a brief story associated with that stamp; then on with the Sunday School lesson. From this stemmed my love of stamp collecting from about the age of ten.

When I began more serious collecting, family friends gave me stamps to get started. Additionally, there was a firm in the C.B.D. of Melbourne that I frequented for the cheap short sets; that is, only the lower denominations. The firm was Wm. Ackland¹ and was upstairs on the corner of Elizabeth and Collins Streets. The most distinctive thing about this shop was the papering of the walls with damaged stamps! By the time I was fifteen, I had penfriends from all over the world and, being male, I was looking forward to the age of being licensed to drive. When I asked a German penfriend about the speed limits in his country, his answer in English (I know no German) was along the lines of, “you may drive as quick as you wish but if you cannot stop as quick as you must, you are in trouble.”

LEARNING AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Years later, this same German penfriend asked for an Australian stamp, a 5d. (five penny) blue Helen Porter Mitchell issued in 1961 which I could not recall; the only one I could find was Dame Nellie Melba. After some research for myself, I found that they were one and the same. Armed with this I was determined to trumpet my new found knowledge to my mother but discovered she already knew this fact, much to my chagrin!

SHARING AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

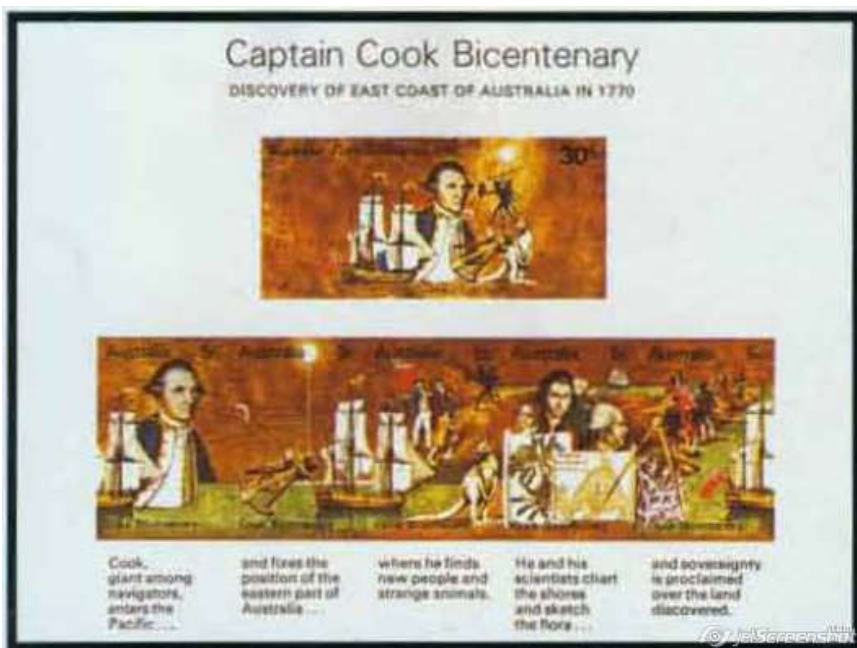
After Freda and I were married in 1963 at Bendigo, with all available cash invested in the house, many of the improvements were done with our own labour including all the fencing. One day, with the nail bag around my waist and while nailing palings to the railings, I was chatting to the young lad from over the road, aged about sixteen. We were discussing the current modern music trends and I taunted him with his possible lack of knowledge of folk like Paul Robeson and Dame Nellie Melba. He responded with an awareness of Melba but I then realised that as a stamp collector he would know that she was commemorated on a stamp. My response was, “Of course, there was a bust of Melba on a 5d. (five penny) blue Australian stamp in 1961.” The young lad then remarked, “Yes and not only that but her head and shoulders as well.” I was practically rolling on the ground laughing with tears streaming from my eyes. Later on when I recounted this to his mother, she said “You didn’t” and he then admitted that he didn’t know any different.



BENDIGO TRAINING PRISON

Around 1971, members of the Bendigo Philatelic Society, were conducting a stamp collecting interest group at the Bendigo Training Prison which was usually once a month in the evening. We discovered that attendees were not necessarily collectors but used any excuse not to have to stay in their cells! In April of that year, 1971, Australia issued seven strips of five 5c depicting various scenes from Captain Cook’s voyages plus a 30c stamp. In addition, there was also a miniature sheet of the strip and the 30c but imperforate. When discussing this with the prisoners, I made the statement that the miniature sheet was valid for postage. This created an almost electrifying response. One

disappeared and returned with the miniature sheet in question while others carried on a further animated discussion about this fact.



We discovered that prisoners could collect mint (unused) Australian stamps but were not allowed to have in their possession decimal stamps that were valid for postage. These were removed and held in trust by the authorities until the prisoner's release.

After a few visits an inmate became particularly friendly and on one particular visit I felt something being put in an external side pocket of my jacket. My hand instinctively went to the

pocket to see what it was. He whispered urgently for me not to take it out. When we left the prison, I inspected and found an envelope stuffed with hundreds of dollars. Goodness only knows what would have happened if this had been seen or it was known what had happened. There was a note with instructions to buy the future issues of Australian decimal stamps and give to his wife with contact details supplied. This was played out until the money expired or I gave the money to his wife; I cannot remember. Note: There was a very low limit of what cash an inmate could have in his possession while incarcerated.

TOO TRUSTING

At one stage of my dealing career, I was trading from a basement under the garage in the back yard. Amongst my regulars were three young lads, two the sons of a local policeman. On one visit from them I spotted one brother, out of the corner of my eye, put something in his pocket. When I challenged him about this, he showed great reluctance in removing his hand from his pocket as it was a mint, unused with full gum, stamp and it had stuck to his sweaty fingers! After I had expelled him from the premises and the other two had eventually departed, I had a close inspection of my stocks and realised that a few choice items were missing some of which were being sold for other people on consignment. I knew the boys names and went to the police station and asked to speak to their father. I was quizzed by other officers but declined to speak only to the father as it was a private matter. He listened to what I had to say, took some time off and we both proceeded to his family residence. On our arrival, the mother took a defensive attitude that I should accuse her sons of such a thing. The father tackled the younger son first by asking if he taken anything, which he admitted. The older brother was then summoned and at first denied it but I had actually caught him in the act earlier. He then claimed it was the first time which the father refuted as, from his experience, when one gets caught, it is not the first time. When the father finally extracted that the sons had been doing it for quite a while, the father asked, "Whose idea was it?" The younger blamed the elder which caused the elder to bluster quite a bit. About this time I think the mother collapsed into a chair; it was all too much for her! They were ordered to fetch their albums and I was permitted to retrieve anything that I believed they would not have purchased. I suspect

that I did not see all that had been stolen, for whatever reason but the father assured me they would not be sitting down for a week! It was left to my discretion if I wished to pursue it further. I elected to talk to my consignee client and we both agreed that nothing was to be gained by pursuing the matter any further. After this event, I had an opportunity to quiz the third lad and although not a party to the stealing he did know what was happening but was reluctant to report his friends.

A MOVING TARGET

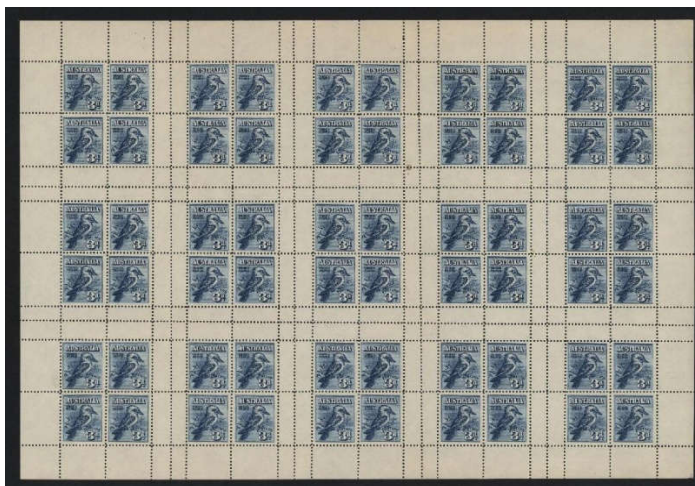
By September 1972, my part time stamp dealing activities became full time. In June 1973 this was combined with a bookshop managed by my wife Freda and myself for eleven years conducted at three consecutive sites in Bendigo. At our peak we employed five full-time and two part-time employees. I also did our own book-keeping in ledgers and journals followed by a Kalamazoo system and then later on our own computer, an Osborne CP/M system purchased in 1982. We sold the bookshop part of the business as a going concern on 7th July 1984, excluding the stamp & coin section and the limited edition books, to La Trobe University Bookshop

THE THREE PENNY KOOKA MINI SHEET



At our first shop site, in Killian's Walk, I was approached by an older collector with a proposition for me to "trade in" a number of mini-sheets of the 3d. (three penny) blue Kookaburra miniature sheet issued by Australia in 1928 for the International Philatelic Exhibition. He had one for himself and the others were spare. Some had the selvedge missing and I explained that they were really now only good for each stamp at a singles price. He reasoned that they had torn off because the very large sheet had been folded for storage and when he broke up the sheet into single blocks they basically fell

apart! I was aghast at what he had done and he then further explained the size of the large sheet and that he only needed one miniature block for himself. I bemoaned the fact that I knew how fifteen blocks composed a whole sheet but had never actually seen the complete sheet. He then volunteered to bring in the other one; that is, a complete sheet! We eventually negotiated on that as well and I think, from memory, I retailed that at \$1,200.00 but in recent times the sheet has been selling for around \$3,500.00!



MOUNTING AND PRESERVING STAMPS

When the use of stamp hinges was still in vogue, before Hagner and Lighthouse promoted the transparent mounts at a reasonable price, Stanley Gibbons produced a very acceptable folded peelable stamp hinge which retailed at 48c per thousand. One young lad evidently still thought this expensive and fronted one day to announce that he had solved this horrendous expense! His solution was to cut up small pieces



of Sellotape and fold these to make the required hinge. When I explained that it was oil based and would soak into and damage his collection making it worthless, he exited the shop a lot faster than he came in!

VALUATIONS

At various times, a friend, Ken Coles, would come in and help out by serving customers interested in the stamps and coins. It was not uncommon for customers to quiz the cost of various items presumably to ascertain what they could afford to add to their collection. Occasionally, we would hear the response from the customer that, "I have copies of those" followed by Ken's jocular remark, "Another free valuation!"

FLOATING CURRENCY

One Saturday morning when, this same friend, Ken Coles was helping with the stamp and coin side of things, a small group of young lads came in with a number of gold coins, sovereigns and half sovereigns, that they claimed they discovered 'floating' in Lake Eppalock. When we queried this, they then claimed that they were seen glistening in the shallows. With such doubtful provenance, we delayed purchasing them but cannot remember with what excuse. At mid-day closing time, Ken and I discussed what action to



take and I went around to the police station to report our suspicions. As I had seen the lads loitering in the street, the police drove me in an unmarked car with my hand over the side of my face so I would not be seen. I identified them for the police and was dropped off at the police station. The police picked them up and interviewed them separately to get the true story. Eventually the police found the "weakest link" and it seemed the boys had broken in to and ransacked a shack in the Axe Creek area and stolen the coins. The last I heard of this case was that the police were having difficulty establishing who owned the shack and coins!

POSTCARDS OF LITTLE VALUE

Prior to opening the Bookshop, I worked for Carlile Bros., Bendigo first as a clerk and later as company secretary and had dealings with a Mr. McDonald who was the manager of Q.B.E. Insurance. When I was operating the stamp, coin and bookshop in Killian's Walk, Mr. McDonald came in one day and described a very common 1d. (one penny) salmon coloured stamp from Victoria, Australia depicting a youthful head of Queen Victoria. I explained that although stamps may appear to be old, they weren't necessarily valuable from age alone. He then stated that he would tell his daughter to throw out or burn the postcards; my reaction was immediate! I proceeded on a lengthy explanation that being on a postcard had many factors that could **add** to the value of a very common stamp! Firstly, consider the postmark; the design may be uncommon or of a place that no longer exists. Then study the picture on the postcard; is it of a place of note, existing or non-existing? Does it depict a person of note; maybe even royalty? Has it been written by someone of note and/or to someone of note; does it contain information confirming an event either personal, historical or both? There are many things to consider when estimating "value" of the humble postcard. Unfortunately, I never got to see the postcards or find out their ultimate fate.

OLD -v- VALUABLE

There were many, many times when stamp albums were presented by the owner believing them to be valuable because they contained items that were old! The most common album seen for many years was published for 'Eta Peanut Butter' about the time when the almost irremovable 'Merino' stamp hinges were being marketed by Coles. I lost track of how many times I tried to explain that if the quantity of stamps printed exceeded the number of buyers then the price would be low. Conversely, if the buyers exceeded the supply, no matter how great, this would drive the selling price upwards.

LICK AND STICK

During this period, many customers became friends and some had young children accompany them. These in turn became well known to me and became keen readers on the bookshop side of our activities and/or keen collectors on the stamp side of our services. One young fellow, whose first name I cannot recall but the son of a local doctor, arrived to proudly show me his latest purchase on the day of release, the first Australian Antarctic decimal stamps. Unfortunately, he had licked them and used their original gum to affix in his stamp album. I had to explain that they were now classed as Mint No Gum



and the future price would be badly affected by this. I volunteered that if he soaked them off, I would buy them at their face value and use them on my mail. He could go and buy another set for his collection from the proceeds which he did.

As an aside to this, it reminded me of a true story told to me early in my career, as a stamp dealer, of a Canadian dealer who floundered out through a snow storm to see a superb mint collection and just before offering a price decided to inspect the back of a few to see if marked with any stamp hinges. He then discovered the same thing in that they had been stuck in with their original gum! It seems that the seller was not impressed with this revelation and the impact on the value of the collection.

THE AUCTIONEER'S LOT

From a very early age, I was a stamp collector (philatelist) and after we were married, I became a stamp dealer. I was reminded recently of a very funny story that I needed to add to these memoirs. For those who haven't started on their own (memoirs), I suggest you start now.

For supplies of stamps for re-sale, I often attended the stamp auctions conducted by The Royal Philatelic Society when they were located at Avoca St., South Yarra. As I have heard repeated again just recently, knowledge is power and many desirable items were purchased from this source for my trading purposes. When the final successful bid was reached at an auction, the auctioneer would ask for the bidders' initials and these were recorded against the lot to collect payment when the auction was finished. This particular day, the successful bidder volunteered "VD" but the auctioneer remembered that there was an early successful bidder with the same initials and he exclaimed, "I'm sorry but I already have VD." This caused a great deal of hilarity and the second bidder had to choose something different for his participation in the auction. Needless to say, very soon

afterwards, at future auctions, registered bidders were issued with numbered cards to hold up when bidding.

THE QANTAS TIME TOP



At the time of the Qantas issue 2nd November 1970, 6c & 30c, I was supplying a First Day Cover service for quite a number of customers. After organising all required at the Bendigo Post Office and with a fair number done, returned to our shop. I received a 'phone call from a Post Office official the next day that I needed to return all First Day Covers as the date was wrong; the month had not been turned over and still read Oct.

When I hesitated, knowing errors can attract a premium price, he left no doubt that things would be difficult in the future if I did not comply. I explained that I could return mine but would have to buy further printed covers to be affixed and re-stamped with the correct date. However, many, not being in my possession, were no longer under my control and it would have to be an individual decision as to whether others would return theirs which many probably did not!

PAID VOLUNTEERS

Over the years we have donated, to various charities, stamps that were soaked off by unpaid volunteers. The greatest mockery, I thought, were the 'volunteers' who helped themselves to stamps for their own personal collection and then proceeded to justify their actions by the fact that they were not getting paid. It just may be that in many cases they were very well paid for their services?

ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES

Experience taught us to be ultra careful when having volunteers from the family help you out. My mother used to spend a lot of time soaking and drying stamps for us. Early in the piece, I noticed that one batch of stamps appeared to have a blistered appearance. It did not take me long to realise that there was more than a pinch of salt in the warm water used to soak off the stamps. Many ladies would know that salt can be used in washing clothes to prevent colour run. The same applies to dyes in stamps. Another story was that someone had an older relative help with this task and they had gone the extra mile by trimming off the rough edges with a pair of scissors!

THE FOUR CHAPLAINS

My father, having been a Chaplain in the Australia Army during World War II, had a copy of this stamp, albeit somewhat heavily cancelled, in his collection. There was also a newspaper clipping with abbreviated information as follows:

Illustrated here is an un-usual stamp from the U.S.A. depicting four Chaplains (or Padres) of different faiths. It



commemorates the Revs. George L. Fox and Clark V. Poling, who were Prot-estants, the Rev. Father John P. Washington, a Roman Catholic and the Rev. Alexander D. Goode, a Jewish Rabbi. When the U.S. transport 'Dorchester' was torpedoed off Greenland in 1943, they helped to hand out life jackets and encouraged panicking soldiers to jump. When all the jackets had gone the four chaplains gave away their own. They were last seen standing with arms linked on the deck as the ship went down, praying together.

The issuance of the stamp was unique because it was issued less than ten years after the men died. Customarily, the Post Office Department (now the U.S. Postal Service) did not issue commemorative stamps until ten years after the person had died. Historically, this may be the first stamp commemorating a Jew. It is undoubtedly, the first U.S. postage stamp designed by a Jew that commemorates a Jew.

¹ William. Ackland, 267 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. 1872-1953. A senior charter member of the Australian Stamp Dealers' Association (A.S.D.A.) who operated a stamp business in Melbourne since 1892 for 60 years, William Ackland accumulated a wealth of knowledge and experience which he shared with his customers, philatelists and fellow dealers. In the 1920s he began regular publication of priced catalogues to advertise his stock. His outgoing mail was characterised by the hand-struck purple oval WM. ACKLAND/ STAMP IMPORTER.