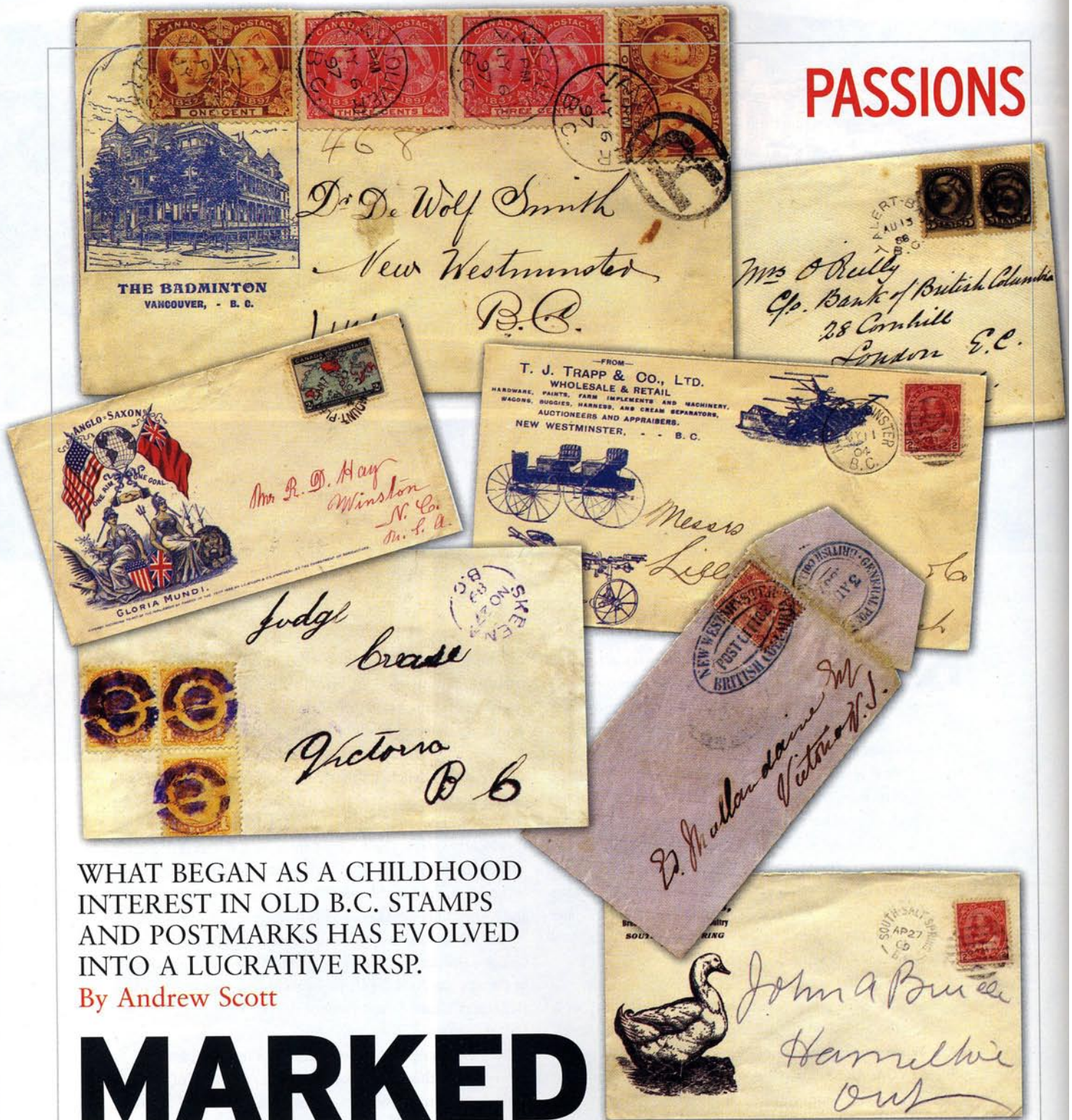


PASSIONS



WHAT BEGAN AS A CHILDHOOD INTEREST IN OLD B.C. STAMPS AND POSTMARKS HAS EVOLVED INTO A LUCRATIVE RRSP.

By Andrew Scott

MARKED FOR LIFE

When I was 13 and recently arrived in Canada, an adult acquaintance presented me with a cardboard box, well-stuffed with mysterious papers. He knew of my fitful interest in postage stamps, the result of a 1950s English boyhood. "My dad collected this junk," he said, "and it's of no earthly use to me. See if you can do

something with it."

I was disappointed when I first looked inside. There was nothing exciting, just hundreds of old, used envelopes and scraps of paper with stamps and postmarks on them. All the markings were from British Columbia, but most were from places I'd never heard of—places

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with strange names like Clo-oose and Hydraulic and Mount Olie. I sorted them out and listed the names, because sorting and listing things was what I liked to do. Then I put the box away. As a budding teen I had more urgent concerns.

Years later I dug the carton out again. By this time, a book about B.C.'s post offices had been published, complete with locations, dates of operation, name origins and postmaster records. Now

the Cultus Lake of the Fraser Valley, home to Jet Skiers and a hopelessly endangered race of sockeye salmon. This Cultus Lake was near Kamloops and had had a post office only from 1913 to 1915. I wrote to the book's author about my find, and he changed the Cultus Lake listing from unreported to rare. I was hooked.

It was not just the stamps I liked—though I can still lose myself in these realms of miniaturized design—but the

America Philatelic Society and the Postal History Society of Canada catered to us—and to other specialists—holding meetings and conventions and exhibitions, and publishing newsletters and journals. An unknown country gradually spread out before me.

Like many collectors, I suppose, I was circumspect about my passion. Most people didn't share or understand the fascination, some found it ridiculous.



THERE WAS A DISTINCT AURA ABOUT THIS MAN'S UNUSUAL ACCUMULATION. IT CONJURED UP A BYGONE ERA—A TIME OF UNION STEAMSHIPS AND GYPO LOGGING OUTFITS.

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someone with a bunch of old letters could see what he had. Later editions added "rarity factors," which let researchers know if a marking from a specific office was common, scarce, rare or—the Holy Grail for collectors—unreported.

Again I was struck by the singular names: Chu Chua, Nickel Plate, Tête-Jaune Cache, Wingdam. Many of the envelopes in the box had been mailed in the 1920s and '30s from tiny communities. Some were from logging camps and mills, like Honeymoon Bay, Stillwater and Bloedel. Mines were represented: Minto, Pioneer, Premier. And canneries, of course, such as Oceanic and Namu. A few of these resource-dependent places no longer exist, but all had sported post offices in their prime. My benefactor's father, obviously, had worked at several of them. The addressees had saved the envelopes for him. Who knows how he'd obtained the rest of the "junk."

There was a distinct aura about this unusual accumulation, a whiff of the exotic and remote. It conjured up a bygone era—a time of Union steamships and gypo logging outfits—and these echoes from the past beckoned me. One postmark in the box was listed by the book as unreported. It was from Cultus Lake, but not

history and geography. I was a newcomer to B.C., an immigrant; collecting and researching postmarks helped familiarize me with the far-flung reaches of my adopted province. Before long I was setting off on physical journeys, too, hitchhiking at first and then driving my '57 Chev along backroads in search of ghost towns and abandoned mill sites. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I was driven also by deeper impulses. My collection was a symbolic subset of our tumultuous world, but one I had complete and reassuring control over.

As my obsession developed, I learned I was a "postal historian" as well as a philatelist. The envelopes I sought were called "covers." There were others like me, and I began to meet them and exchange information and material. A few stamp dealers had B.C. items for sale, and B.C. postal history also showed up at regular philatelic auctions. (Today eBay plays an important role for a hobby that shows few signs of diminishing in popularity. One of the many benefits that this cyber marketplace offers is an opportunity to repatriate B.C. covers mailed overseas, especially to China and Japan, by the province's early immigrants.)

Organizations such as the British North

But the attitudes of others bothered me less as time went by. There was no harm to my odd interests. Quite the contrary. Not only has this burgeoning pastime kept me entertained and out of trouble for over 40 years, it may even help finance my retirement. The collection has increased in value to the point where it requires philatelic insurance, an alarm system and a safety-deposit box for the better pieces.

At first I tried to obtain a postmark from every B.C. post office, but this proved futile. About 3,000 offices have opened their doors over the years, and two-thirds have closed them again. Five hundred offices are rated as rare. More than 150 are unreported. When a previously unreported marking becomes available, all hell breaks loose. Prices for such coveted items have risen sharply, from about \$200 in the 1970s to \$1,000 and more today. They can be dangerous to purchase; where a single one is discovered—in an old album of postcards, perhaps, or some forgotten correspondence—others may lurk. The first purchaser, of course, pays through the nose, while later ones sometimes get great deals. But waiting has its hazards, too: most one-of-a-kind postmarks remain that way.

As I matured as a collector, I focussed

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on certain regions of B.C.: the islands, the coast, the north, greater Vancouver. I sought registered and special delivery covers and those sent to foreign countries, as these carried higher-value stamps and more intriguing markings. For years I had a part-time job as a courier for Canada Post; perhaps as a result I developed an interest in how mail was handled and mishandled, and began acquiring undeliverable, damaged and misdirected covers. My fellow collectors—about 200 in all, mostly from B.C. but a few also from the U.S. and elsewhere in Canada—have parallel concerns: military, ship and railroad

in fact—a five-cent value issued without perforations (the stamps had to be torn apart or cut with scissors)—is among the world's rarest. An unused pair in pristine condition sold in 2004 at a New York auction for \$150,000. A lovely example of that stamp on a cover sold in the same sale for \$37,000. Alas, I was not the fortunate purchaser.

Several much-less-valuable covers from colonial days do form the cream of my collection, however. I travelled to Toronto to bid on them in 1988, when the great B.C. collection formed by Duncan timber magnate Gerald Wellburn was broken up

PRICES FOR RARE POSTMARKS HAVE RISEN SHARPLY. WHAT SOLD IN THE 1970s FOR \$200 CAN FETCH \$1,000 OR MORE TODAY.

mail; obscure rates and routes; covers illustrating the workings of an industry like gold mining or forestry, or some aspect of B.C. history, or the career of an early explorer, or the postal evolution of a particular town.

Try, for instance, to form a collection from all 40 or so post offices that once existed in the area that became Vancouver. It can't be done, as a marking from Dominion Mills, which used to perch on the banks of the Fraser in the southeast corner of the present city, has never been reported. Other postmarks—from Langarra (spelled with two "r"s in the old days), Little Mountain Camp and West Fairview—are exceedingly rare. And 19th-century covers from Burrard Inlet (the city's first post office, located in Maximilian Michaud's old Brighton Hotel in northeast Vancouver) and Granville (as Gastown was known in the days before Vancouver's incorporation) can go for anything from \$500 to \$3,000.

Postal history from the province's colonial era, when Vancouver Island and British Columbia were separate outposts of the British Empire, is a playground for the highest rollers. But the rest of us can watch. Between 1860 and 1871, these two remote Victorian colonies were issued 18 of their own postage stamps. All of them are costly. One Vancouver Island stamp,

and auctioned. Colonial covers are often in rough shape, the consequence of long journeys by pack horse, stage coach and riverboat. Some of mine were carried by the same express companies that handled the gold dust from the fabled Fraser River and Cariboo gold rushes. The history of the province is pressed into their well-worn surfaces.

After many years, most collections reach a zone of diminishing returns. The things I'm missing, for instance, I either can't afford or their current owners have no intention of selling. Just when I needed something else to collect—something inexpensive—Canada Post began privatizing its retail operations, which caused massive confusion for postal historians. Postal outlets sprang up and shut down like bootleggers, and cryptic numbering systems were introduced to organize and identify them. I've tried to keep track and find examples, of course, of each outlet's particular datestamp.

Today's post office names—Sunshine Village, Country Club, College Heights, Tamarack Mall—seem prosaic compared to their pioneer predecessors. But markings from short-lived outlets will be rare indeed in the future. Many will probably end up in the "unreported" category—and may, perhaps, be objects of passionate desire for tomorrow's collectors. ●