

Mail Bonding

Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat,
nor gloom of night will stop the person who is
passionate about postal paraphernalia.



By Andrew Scott

I WAS PAWING through a box of postcards that some dealer had found in England and then brought back to Canada, where they'd originally been mailed from. There were all types: Christmas and Easter greetings; Canadian views of every kind;

bright, patriotic "war effort" cards; humorous cards with dated, corny messages. Some of the old black and white views of the B.C. coast I put aside. They were actual photographs—a popular style early in the century, when you could get your favorite negative printed on special thick paper with a postcard back.

I came across a rural scene: handsome, twin-gabled farmhouse, awnings over the windows, an entrance pathway with a trellis over it. On the back was a conventional New Year's greeting to someone's British relatives. Then my heart skipped a beat. The card had been mailed from Musgrave's Landing, B.C., in December 1923; there was a clear, readable postmark.

Grinning hugely, I showed the card to my friend Tracy. His face fell, though he quickly gathered himself together and congratulated me. One person's good fortune is somebody else's near miss, I realized. We had been checking out this weekend stamp show together, and if he'd been sitting on the other side of the box, this would have been his lucky day. But Mercury, the messenger god, capricious patron of luck and wealth, of travelers and thieves, had smiled upon me, and my heart exulted.

Musgrave's Landing, a tiny community on the southwest coast of Salt Spring Island, was one of about 170 "unreported" B.C. cancellations—the holy grail for collectors of postal history. In other words, the place was so isolated, the community there so tiny, that a marking from this post office had never before surfaced. Although 20 postcards from Musgrave's Landing might show up next week, for now it was unique. And as long as it remained unique, it would be worth around \$400, far more than I had paid for it that day.

The postcard found a place of honor in my collection of old letters and envelopes, cards and photographs, maps and books about B.C. Originally, I'd tried to collect a postmark from each post office that had ever existed in the province. It was mad-

ness: approximately 2,500 offices had been open at some time and about 1,600 of them had closed again. Some 500 offices are rare by collectors' standards, with fewer than 10 markings known. I was forced to reduce my scope, concentrating just on the Lower Mainland and the B.C. coast. Today only the history of the coast sustains my interest.

Musgrave's Landing now rubs corners with other precious and outlandish bits of Gulf Island history: old business envelopes from R. P. Edwards, "Breeder of High-Class Poultry," carefully illustrated with high-class chickens and geese; a 1908 postcard of the submerged steamer *Iroquois*, with a rare Galiano postmark, Retreat Cove, and a sorrowful message from one of the boat's passengers hoping that "she will not act

Like other stamp collectors, I learned my geography at an early age. If I land on blue in Trivial Pursuit, you might as well just concede.

like this when I board her for home"; a letter dated 1876 (the earliest known piece of regular mail from the Gulf Islands), its stamp canceled with an unusual star design that is also pressed into the red wax that seals the back.

How have I come to fancy such strange and eccentric things? I suppose I must be an example of what stamp-collecting English schoolboys can metamorphose into at age 45. Although I haven't collected stamps for 30 years, I still take pleasure in their intricate, miniature designs. Letters mailed from far-off lands give me an exotic shiver. Like other stamp collectors, I learned my geography at an early age; if I land on blue in Trivial Pursuit, you might as well concede. Collecting fueled my restless urge for foreign travel; I haven't yet given up hope of getting to the places whose stamps I pored over as a child: Madagascar, Mauritius, Montserrat.

When I grew older, however, and moved to Canada, I became keenly aware that my fascination was not shared by my peers. It was important for me to belong, so I put stamps aside and started collecting sports cards instead. Today, of course, as my editor carefully explained, stamp collecting is "right up there with accordion playing" in terms of social acceptability. But it's not easy, apparently, to take the stamp collector out of the boy. My passion went underground. Now, somehow, it has combined with a fondness for poking about in odd

Passions

corners of the province, for exploring the back roads and backwaters, ghost towns and grease trails, and brought me to my present fetish: postal paraphernalia.

My interest in this hobby ebbs and flows, sometimes disappearing completely for ages. But I've been at it now for 30 years, and I suppose I've got a good collection, good enough anyway that the best pieces have to live in a safety-deposit box. But it's nothing compared to the array assembled by Gerald Wellburn, undisputed king of the B.C. buffs, whose colonial postal his-

tory holdings will never be equaled.

Gerry, who died in 1992 aged 92, obtained his material the old-fashioned way. He got to know the children and grandchildren of the original Vancouver Island colonists and eventually acquired many of their family letters. "Stamps have given me a second life," wrote Wellburn, who owned a logging company, "a share in the dainty and the exquisite, which has complemented my outdoor life, spent in the forests of the Canadian northwest." His colonial collection was sold at auction in Toronto in 1988, realizing over \$800,000. I was there, and I bought a few items: an



Post-It Notes

Arcane terms explained. A list of bizarre subspecialties. The best bourses for bona fide buffs.

Postal history, like all unusual avocations, requires a glossary. A "cover" is just a fancy word for an empty envelope; a "front" is a cover with the back cut off. "Colonial" refers to the period before B.C. joined Confederation in July 1871.

Postal history collectors tend to develop bizarre subspecialties. Anything to do with early railroad and steamboat travel, including tickets and timetables, is in vogue. Regional collectors are rife: I'm interested in the B.C. coast; others might specialize in Alberta before 1905 (when it was a territory, not a province), or the history of Winnipeg, or Arctic exploration or the development of gold mining in the Cariboo. Illustrated advertising covers are much sought after, as is everything to do with military history. Some collect post office rates: airmail, registered, special delivery, postage due, for example. Interest in old postcards, especially actual photographs—or "real photoviews," as they're called—has exploded lately. Western maps and books are always relished. And modern specialties are gaining ground: collectors try to follow the complexities of post office privatization; others investigate machine cancellations or follow the meandering of misdirected mail.

Most attics have been cleaned out, although there are, no doubt, a few amazing discoveries still to be made. Collectors trade among themselves, attend bourses (sort of trade shows, where regional dealers bring their goods and set up booths) and patronize retail stamp shops. Most unusual material, however, is acquired through auctions. The leading specialty auction house in the West is Robert A. Lee, 203-1139 Sutherland Avenue, Kelowna, B.C. V1Y 5Y2, (604) 861-1106. Auctions are also held by F. E. Eaton & Sons, 1860-505 Burrard Street, Vancouver, B.C. V7X 1M6, (604) 689-3118; Ron Leith, P.O. Box 430, Abbotsford, B.C. V2S 5Z5, (604) 850-1137; Wild Rose, Box 1442, Edmonton, Alberta T5J 2N5, (403) 437-1605; and Bow City, Box 6444, Central P.O., Calgary, Alberta T2P 2E1, (403) 237-5828.

The leading specialists' organization is the Postal History Society of Canada; information can be obtained from the secretary, 216 Malley Drive, Carleton Place, Ontario K7C 3X9. The Wellburn collection is featured in a beautiful, full-color, coffee-table book (\$195), published by F. E. Eaton & Sons. Information about western Canada's numerous stamp clubs can usually be obtained from retail stamp shops.

Passions

envelope carried during B.C.'s wild West era by Francis Barnard's famous Cariboo stagecoach express, and a very early cover from the B.C. mainland, dated 1860 at New Westminster, just months after the Royal City was founded.

How anyone can fail to love these antique messages I'll never understand. Here, for instance, is a letter written at Skidegate, in the Queen Charlottes, in 1877. "As the sloop is ready to go away," it begins, "I will try and let you know how we are getting along," and goes on to detail the operations of an ancient industry, the extraction of oil from dogfish livers. Here's a rare cover postmarked Cassiar in 1875, with a letter

**Originally, I
had tried to collect
a postmark from
every post office that
ever existed in B.C.,
some 2,500 in all. It
was madness.**

describing one of B.C.'s little-known northern gold rushes in the Dease Lake area. And this old envelope, with a Hastings Mill return address, postmarked Burrard Inlet, 1873, before Vancouver was even a whisper in a speculator's ear.

To me, these tattered bits and pieces are documentary evidence, echoes of a world different not in place but in time. If you take care, you can smell the stale air of the gold mines, sense the hardships of the trail, feel the Chinese storekeeper's loneliness, hear the steamboat passenger's excitement. They reverberate with the mundane and passionate details of those who also once lived where we now live. They rustle with ancestral voices: uncles, grandmothers, chance meetings, fate. At one time such documents were too commonplace to bother keeping around. Now the faded pages are all we have left: paper ghosts.

It is futile, of course, this attempt to hold on to the past. Elegant and fragile, my scraps of stationery are on their own journey. I am but their temporary keeper. The custodians of B.C.'s postal history are an endangered species, perhaps 50 individuals or so, mostly older men. We publish research on some rather esoteric topics and try not to take ourselves too seriously. And often, beneath our professorial demeanor—especially when some recent discovery is excitedly being described—I see a dreaming boy with all the world before him, momentarily, mysteriously, set free. □