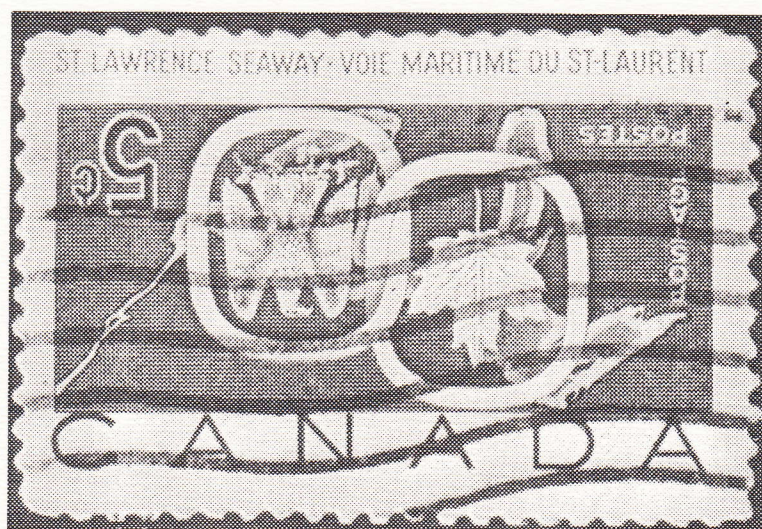


LES CAHIERS DE L'ACADÉMIE

The "INVERTED SEAWAY" of 1959

OPUS V



by Larry McINNIS

Académie québécoise d'études philatéliques

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The first Canada-United States joint stamp issue was the modest 5-cent Canadian two-color stamp to mark the June 26, 1959 official opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway. A 4-cent stamp with an identical design was issued the same day by the United States.

There were differences, of course, but outside the design.

- The Canadian stamp is perf 12. The U.S. stamp is perf 11.
- The inscription (in red) at the top of the Canadian stamp is St. Lawrence Seaway - Voie maritime du St-Laurent. On the American stamp, also in red, it's St. Lawrence Seaway.
- There's the obvious, of course : One has Canada in red at the bottom and the other has United States.
- In the centre, blue, design of the Canadian stamp, there's "postage" and "postes", the first vertical and the latter horizontal. On the American stamp it's "postage" vertically.
- In the lower right of the main design of the Canadian stamp is 5 ¢ while it's 4 ¢ on the American stamp.

That takes care of the obvious differences. They're necessary differences, considering the requirements of two different countries, one officially bilingual - Canada - and one officially unilingual - the United States. And it seems forever that the U.S. postal rate has been lower than Canada's, which is reflected in the design.

There's another important difference in the design that is minor, but importantly Canadian - the hidden date.

On the Canadian stamp, the date, 1959, is tucked among the waves of the southwestern end of Lake Erie, just to the lower left of the oval showing the American eagle. On the U.S. stamp, there are only waves.

A pre-issue article in the June 1959 edition of "BNA Topics" stated the designs had been announced simultaneously in Ottawa by Postmaster General William Hamilton (PC-N.D.G.) and in Washington by the U.S. Postmaster General, Arthur E. Summerfield.

"Except for the necessary differences in captions and denominations", the article said, "the stamps are identical in design, the result of the co-operative efforts of Canadian artists A.L. Pollock, and Gerald Trottier, and American artists William H. Buckley, Arnold J. Copeland and Ervine Metzl."

At the time, PMG Hamilton said the joint stamp issue "salutes the opening of a new link in a vastly improved channel for such trade and a powerful source of hydro-electric energy for both our nations."

PMG Summerfield said, "These beautiful new stamps worthily commemorate this great development, which will mean so much to world trade and peace."

It's doubtful the comments of either had any bearing on reality, since the Seaway is not a hydro-electric source, nor has it contributed to world peace.

The United States Postal Service delivered 126,105,050 stamps, each one boringly like another.

Canada Post ordered only 40 million of its version, but took delivery of 40,110,100 from the printer, Canadian Bank Note Co.

Each was not boringly like another.

On Aug. 20, 1959, it was discovered some Canadian Seaway stamps were different - quite different.

Some either had the inscription inverted, as the Canada Specialized Stamp Catalogue claims (that means the red), or the main design (blue) which is more commonly accepted, visually if not technically.

Whichever, it was Canada's first - and only - invert. It's not the most valuable Canadian stamp by any means, but it's certainly the most interesting, if only in its story.

There can be no argument whatsoever that it is Canada's most valuable invert, and it's the rarest, most scarce and so on. The only invert can easily fit these claims.

Which leads to the natural question : How scarce is it ? How many were there ?

Let's see what we can determine, from history, and from information received as recently as mid-June 1986.

The first discovery was made in Winnipeg, appropriately the place of business of Kasimir Bileski, who was to be a major factor in the history of the inverts from then on.

PMG Hamilton estimated that only 300 copies of the invert got out to the public. On Oct. 8, 1959, he said such an error would never happen again.

" The printer has adopted an ingenious printing technique to guard against errors in the future, " he said.

He was right. There has never been another invert, not from the Seaway stamp printer, Canadian Bank Note Co., nor any other printer. There have been other errors in other stamps, however.

The Seaway invert saga started Aug. 20, 1959 when an office boy for a Winnipeg firm was sent out to buy 30 5-cent stamps. He went to the nearby sub-post office at the T. Eaton department store.

On his return to his office, three of the 30 stamps were placed on envelopes and put into the mail immediately.

As more were to be placed on envelopes, a secretary noticed that no matter which way they were handled, part of the stamp design was upside down.

Every office has at least one stamp collector. The collector noticed the error and went to Eaton's to see if more inverts were available. None were.

In the meantime, the secretary had sent off a fourth envelope franked with an invert, leaving a balance of 26.

The stamps were printed in sheets of 200, divided into four panes of 50.

The " Winnipeg find " now accounted for four mailed and 26 saved, for a total of 30. It must be presumed that the other 20 in the pane were sold in singles or small quantities over the Eaton's counter and went out, the error unnoticed, on regular mail.

On Sept. 11, 1959, a pane of 50 was discovered in postal stock at Winnipeg. H.R. Yorke, director of postal services in Winnipeg, reported it was returned to Ottawa.

On Sept. 12, 1959, the Canadian Press newsgathering service, reported that a pane of 50 inverts had been discovered at Peterborough, Ont., by a postal clerk, Melvin Deschamps. It was returned to Ottawa.

That would account for the two panes that came into the possession of the national postal museum, about which you'll hear more later.

K.E. Eastman, Canadian Bank Note's assistant plant superintendent, said in 1959 that a full sheet of 200 stamps would be in error.

So let's look at one sheet of 200.

Two panes totalling 100 stamps were discovered in Winnipeg. That leaves 100 more. A pane of 50 was discovered in Peterborough and

sent to Ottawa. That leaves 50.

In early August 1959, the inverts turned up in Picton, Ont., and, in fact, may have been the first discovery.

An invert on a postcard and another on an envelope show a cancellation of Aug. 10, 1959.

It indicated at least a pane at Picton.

It's believed that 25 of the inverts were used on Aug. 10 to send out mail from the local Bank Of Nova Scotia.

On the other 25 in the pane, here's what seems to have happened :

The "finder" kept a mint single, gave away a mint single and kept a dated used single.

That's three, leaving 22.

Of the remainder, a mint block of 12, a mint block of 4, a pair and two singles, plus two used - for a total of 22 - was sold for \$ 21,250 by J.N. Sissons Ltd of Toronto to Bileski.

Let's add up. That's 30 accounted for in Winnipeg and 20 out there somewhere, for a pane of 50. Another pane of 50 was sent from Winnipeg to Ottawa. That makes up half the sheet of 200.

There was a pane in Picton, 25 sent out on bank mail, 22 sold through Sissons to Bileski and three kept by the finder, which accounts for a total pane of 50.

There was a pane returned from Peterborough.

That's the other half of a sheet, for a total of 200 errors accounted for.

On Sept. 15, 1959, the head of the Ottawa philatelic bureau, J.R. Carpenter, reported that an Ottawa collector had brought him a block of six of the inverts.

Nothing more is know about this. It should, perhaps, be discounted. Think about it : How many collectors, finding a major error such an invert, would run to a postal official and turn it in ? It's not plausible.

What is curious, too, is PMG Hamilton's Oct.

10 statement that only 300 copies of the invert got out to the public.

Was he considering the two panes of 50 each returned to Ottawa, meaning 300 were out there somewhere ? We've only accounted for one sheet so far, including the two panes returned to Ottawa.

It was curious arithmetic, but pure politics.

If, indeed, some naive collectors turned in six inverts, there was clear indication of yet another pane, and therefore another sheet.

Personally, I doubt that six were turned in.

That should have been the end of the accounting. Hamilton was in error and only one sheet got out, half of which went to the public and half returned to Ottawa.

It's not the end of the story.

Following an article I wrote on the Seaway invert, I received a letter from the well-know American philatelic writer, Herman " Pat " Herst, Jr. He had been a dealer for years and played an important, if unknow, role in the Saga of the Seaway Invert.

Herst wrote to me to ask why no one had ever written about the " Joliette find " of the invert.

As I've said, Herst was a well-known dealer who was a frequent visitor to Canada.

No long after discovery of the inverts became know, a collector in Joliette wrote to Herst, stating he had received a bill from a local utility company that had an invert on it.

Herst told me he wrote to the utility company to determine if they had any left, or where they got them. He admits that his American English was no match for the utility's French, and he wrote to the Joliette collector to say so.

Herst's story from then is interesting, but confused by the memory of an aged, ill person.

Herst told me he met his collector contact in 1961 at North Hatley, during the annual meeting of the British North America Society, which he had just joined.

Herst reported his contact had a vertical strip

of 10, which he wouldn't sell. What he had was 20 envelopes, each with an invert affixed. They had been placed on the utility company's bills, but had been "liberated" before mailing.

Herst told me he bought 20 covers for \$ 900 each and offered them for sale at \$ 1,000 each at the BNAPS convention. There were no takers, so he took them back to New York.

A dealer in New Jersey bought them all.

As an interesting aside, Herst said that although he had "sweated" the stamps off envelopes, never once has he seen a Seaway invert offered for sale by a dealer or at auction with a comment about no gum or disturbed gum.

Calculations at this stage indicated the "Joliette find" has a strip of 10 retained by the finder, one found on cover, and 20 on envelope sold to Herst.

The left 19 unaccounted for, using Herst's calculations.

An article about this, written by me, in the May 19, 1986 edition of Linn's Stamp News, brought a quick response from Jean Lépine, proprietor of La Boutique philatelique, in Joliette.

On June 16, he wrote to tell me that he had read the article, and he could provide the epilogue, at least about the "Joliette find".

Here is his story.

Rolland Perreault, accounting clerk for Donat Piette Ltée of Joliette, bought a pane of 50 Seaway stamps at Joliette's main post office to use for mailing his monthly statements.

"As he was mailing his monthly statements to customers," Lépine said, "two friends came in - Bertrand Vanasse and Henri Lafontaine."

One, or both, realized something wrong with the stamps.

On June 16, 1986, Perreault told Lépine the story: three stamps had already been used on mail that had been posted when the error was discovered, 17 stamps were on window envelopes ready for the mail and 30 were left.

It was Vanasse who sold the stamps on

cover to Hearst in North Hatley, at \$ 900 each. Herst was out by three in his recollection when he said he bought 20.

It's interesting that Herst bought 17 inverts attached to envelopes at \$ 900 each, yet managed to sell them in one lot at \$ 1,250 each.

The others involved in the Joliette find were not such astute businessmen.

Perreault sold his 10 stamps in New York at \$880 each, U.S. funds (\$ 912 Canadian).

Lafontaine literally gave away his 20 stamps to Bileski at a mere \$ 525 (Canadian) each.

One of them, obviously not Lafontaine, wrote to Bileski on June 13, 1961. "I read in your advertisement of Mekeel's, June 2 (1961) that you bought almost 90 per cent of all the inverted Seaway stamps. Did you ever know that a sheet is supposed to have been found here in Joliette? I think that most of it has not yet been put into the market. I never saw that sheet mentioned anywhere."

Whoever wrote the letter complained to Herst that he never received a reply.

Now we know why. Bileski bought nearly half the Joliette find at half the price the others were getting.

Canadian Bank Note's assistant plan superintendent, K.E. Eastman, knew errors would affect full sheets of 200.

We've accounted for 200, in Winnipeg, Picton and Peterborough.

Now we know of 50 in Joliette.

Where are the other 150 from that sheet?

And what of the 17 stamps sweated from envelopes by Herst? He told me, "There is little doubt in my mind that the ones I got off cover were regummed and sold as mint, for I have never seen any offered with tampered gum."

So what of the 100 we've been told were returned to Ottawa, 50 from Winnipeg and 50 from Peterborough?

I'm told that a pane of 50 is locked away in the vaults of the Bank of Canada.

Half a pane was put on display at Le Salon de la philatélie, a show sponsored by La Fédération Québécoise de Philatélie, held at Complexe Desjardins Jan. 23 to 26, a Wednesday to Saturday schedule.

For the record, it's reported that the upper half of the pane is in the Royal Collection in London.

Early Saturday morning, Jan. 26, the half-pane was stolen by armed robbers.

Official reports, confirmed by postal officials, indicated that two men wearing ski masks to cover their identity, one of them armed with a shotgun, approached the exhibit about 1 a.m. Jan. 26.

A postal official who was involved at the time recently described what happened from reports he received.

There had been much publicity about the display, setting the value of the half-pane at \$500,000, which was not unrealistic at the time. It was the grand era of philatelic investment.

During the day, there was one security guard for the exhibit. After hours, there were two guards. Neither was armed.

The postal official, who was involved in the 1980 show, recently recalled the event.

He said the unarmed security people were quickly intimidated by the armed robbers. One produced a screwdriver and attempted to dismantle the frame where the half-pane was displayed. It proved to be too little for such a job.

He then produced a hammer from a jacket pocket and proceeded to break the glass of the frame.

The exhibit was then removed and the pair made their escape.

The escape was interesting, according to my informant. By the time the robbery was complete, not only the special guards, but other guards had assembled. For every advance they made, they were confronted with the masked bandit and his shotgun.

The robbery was a complete success.

Was it ordered by a collector who could afford to hire professionals, much like stealing a famous painting ? Does the collector look at it today and gloat, as Midas did with his gold ?

One postal official told me he thought the robbery might have taken place after the publicity surrounding the highly-valued Seaway invert, probably by " some kids who thought they could sell it quickly. "

I don't subscribe to that theory. The invert might have been the most valuable item on display, but it would be the hardest to sell.

The half-pane was mounted on some material that would make a true philatelist cry. It was, in effect, struck to a surface that made it a permanent museum display and worthless for the philatelic market.

Even Pat Herst couldn't do anything with this block, was the way one museum official put it.

There is no doubt in my mind there were two sheets of the Seaway invert, 400 stamps. The " Joliette find " proves there was more than one sheet of 200.

Where are the other 150 stamps, the other three panes ?

It's Canada's most intriguing stamp. It's not the most valuable, but it's the most intriguing.

In the best times, at the top of the speculation boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a copy of the Invert would easily fetch \$14,000 or more.

It's different today.

On Dec. 7, 1986, John W. Kaufmann Inc. of Washington, D.C., in its " Gems of Philately " auction, brought \$ 6,875 for a mint never hinged copy of the invert.

But how about this ?

An invert on cover, described in the Kaufmann catalogue as value based as used copy off cover, brought \$ 11,550.

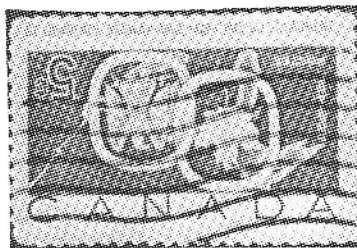
I found this interesting because such a prestigious auction firm had chosen to ignore the fact the stamp was on cover and instead valued it as

though it was just a used copy.

At the Feb. 14-17, 1961 auction of Harmer, Rooke & Co., auctioneer Ezra Cole (now a high-class dealer and agent in his own right), got \$ 2,800 for a " superb, on cover, lightly cancelled copy " of the invert.

This was at the time Herst was paying \$ 900 on cover, uncanceled. He would have done better to have his contact in Joliette have them postmarked there.

It is surprising that no Canadian specialist has done a study on the Seaway invert. Awards are given at shows to those who exhibit a replating of the one-penny rose of Britain in 1858, but no one has been able to track down the missing, or anaccounted for, 150 Seaway invert stamps.◊



*Written especially
for AQEP,
January 1987.*