

The Winnipeg story: the discovery of Canada's famous Seaway Invert

CHARLES J.G. VERGE

In April 2003, I wrote a substantive article on the Canada 1959 St. Lawrence Seaway Invert error (Scott 387a, Figure 1). The year 2009 marks the 50th anniversary of the issuance of the stamp and the discovery of the inverted-center error.

The information presented here is based on my book, *The 1959 St. Lawrence Seaway Joint Issue and Its Invert*, published in September by the Vincent Graves Greene Foundation (www.greenefoundation.ca). In more than 200 pages, the book details the stories of both the Canadian and United States versions of the stamp, and how they came about.

The Winnipeg discovery story of the



Figure 1. The 1959 5¢ St. Lawrence Seaway stamp with center inverted (Scott 387a). The 5¢ stamp was issued by Canada Post as a joint issue with the United States (Scott 1131), to celebrate the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway June 26, 1959.



Figure 2. Mildred Mason, the secretary who discovered the first reported 5¢ St. Lawrence Seaway stamp with inverted center. Photo courtesy of the Winnipeg Tribune

Canada Seaway Invert begins at 3:30 p.m., August 20, 1959, when Ernest Slutchuk, an 18-year-old office boy in Winnipeg, Manitoba, was sent to the post office in the T. Eaton Co. department store (Winnipeg Sub Post Office No. 23) to purchase 30 5¢ stamps for Rothstein Theatres Ltd. In 1959, the Rothstein Theatres owned a chain of 19 theaters in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Their offices were in the Marlborough Hotel.

On Slutchuk's return, the person responsible for the mail, 20-year-old Mildred Mason (Figure 2), took the stamps and affixed three of them to envelopes ready for mailing. "It happened on the third one," she was quoted as saying in the September 15, 1959, *Winnipeg Tribune*. "Before I put it on the envelope I couldn't get it right side up no matter which way I turned it."

She had broken up the remaining 27 stamps into smaller units. She stopped processing the mail, although she mailed the letters that already were franked, including one to W.J. Johnston, manager of the Rothstein Theatre in Yorkton, Saskatchewan. Johnston and the other two recipients of the letters, the theater managers in Wilkie and

Assiniboia, both towns in Saskatchewan, were contacted but said they had destroyed the envelopes.

A stamp collector in the office went to the post office to see if other Seaway Invert stamps were available. After a thorough search, none was found. The other 20 stamps from the pane of 50 had been sold to one or more postal patrons during the day. Shown in Figure 3 is one of 16 recorded Seaway Inverts on cover. The stamp is from the Winnipeg discovery pane of 50 stamps.

For the Canadian Post Office (CPO), the first inkling of the Seaway Inverts came September 4, 1959, when an unidentified man walked into Winnipeg's main post office and asked to compare the three stamps he had with the post office's stock of St. Lawrence Seaway stamps. This person was likely an agent of Kasimir Bileski, a well-known, long-time local stamp dealer and inveterate philatelic promoter.

On the same day, H.R. Yorke, CPO district director at Winnipeg, sent a letter to J.A. MacDonald, the CPO's director of financial services, in which he stated, "The wicket clerks say that these three Seaway stamps had that portion printed in blue upside down."

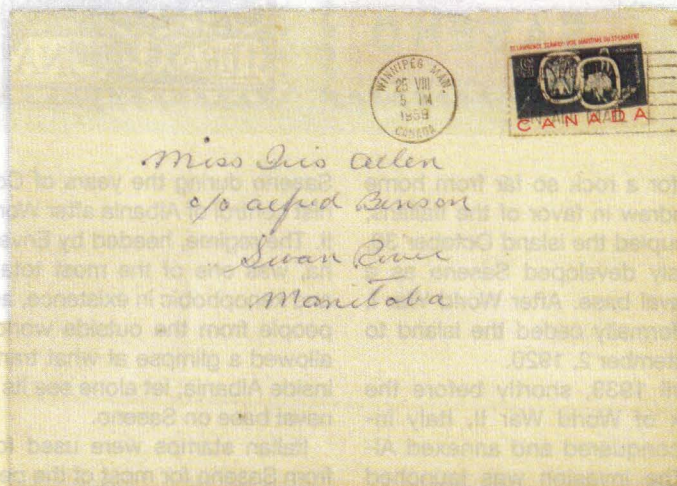


Figure 3. One of 16 recorded Canada 5¢ St. Lawrence Seaway Inverts paid the domestic postage on this cover. The stamp originated from the first pane of 50 stamps with inverted centers discovered in Winnipeg. The cover was mailed from Winnipeg August 25, 1959.

The man claimed to have purchased them at the Eaton's Store. ..."

Yorke informed MacDonald that the unsold stock — fewer than 300 Seaway stamps — at the T. Eaton post office was checked. No Seaway Inverts were found. In addition, "discreet enquiries of the staff of this Sub Office revealed that they had no knowledge that imperfect stamps may have been sold."

The sub-post office made large requisitions of stamps that were filled by the Winnipeg Stamp Depot. To make sure he covered his bases, Yorke checked the stock at the depot, and no Seaway Inverts were found. He hastened to add, "As these stamps are shipped by the Winnipeg Postage Stamp Depot they will be carefully scrutinized."

In his September 9 reply, MacDonald asked Yorke to obtain a photograph of the Seaway Inverts "because the owner of the stamps probably would not want to loan them to us." Yorke obtained two copies of a photograph of a vertical pair of stamps from Bileski and sent them to MacDonald September 11 (Figure 4).

What is more revealing from replies sent to Deputy Postmaster General

G.A. Boyle and D.M. Coolican, president of the Canadian Bank Note Co. Ltd. (CBN), are MacDonald's marginal notes. In a postscript, likely for the attention of Boyle and Coolican, MacDonald wrote, "M. Bouchette of CB Note is checking the six million stamps of this issue in their stock for any evidence of inverted printing." The bank note company was responsible for direct distribution of stamps to the post office depots and, therefore, had stamps on hand to fill requisitions.

Another note stated that four panes (200 stamps) of Seaway Inverts were found at the CBN.

Yorke wrote again September 10, confirming the existence of the Seaway Inverts found by Mason. He said:

"About 12 o'clock noon today, a representative of the Winnipeg Free Press, and Mr. K. Bileski, a well known Winnipeg Stamp Dealer, met with Mr. C. A. Shepard, ... Supervisor of the Winnipeg Postage Stamp Depot. Mr. Bileski had a pair of Seaway stamps (one above the other) and Mr. Shepard examined the stamps. In Mr. Shepard's opinion the stamps are genuine misprints. He examined them closely, back and front, and the misprint is as first reported; i.e., the stamps had the blue portion inverted."

Yorke told MacDonald, "The employees of the office formed a syndicate and placed the 27 mint condition stamps in the hands of Mr. Bileski, who is acting on their behalf on a commission basis." This information was incorrect. Yorke informed MacDonald September 11 that Bileski had only two on hand for publicity purposes. At the same meeting, Bileski told Shepard that he had leads on two of the used stamps. These were later found to have been destroyed.

The local newspapers and radio stations were abuzz with the news. Early information was provided exclusively through Bileski. Originally, the eastern Canadian media reported that a single error was found in a pane of 50. It was no wonder that seasoned stamp collectors and CPO officials initially scoffed at the reports.

Once the CPO confirmed the existence of the Seaway Inverts, Bileski made certain that the news was carried in philatelic newspapers and journals across the globe. He became a promoter of the stamps, just as he promoted any good philatelic news story throughout his more than 80 years as a stamp dealer. He also made sure that his employees and agents scoured Manitoba's post offices for more ex-



Figure 4. This black-and-white photograph of a pair of Seaway Inverts was used by Kasimir Bileski to promote the errors. The photo was sent to Canadian Post Office headquarters.

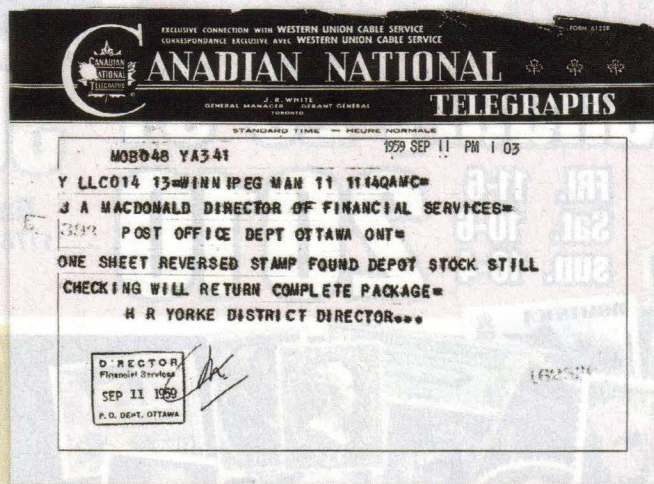


Figure 5. This telegram, dated September 11, 1959, announced the discovery in Winnipeg of a second pane of 50 Seaway Inverts. The pane was found in the Winnipeg depot by postal employee Edward Sirtouski. Photo courtesy of the Library and Archives Canada.

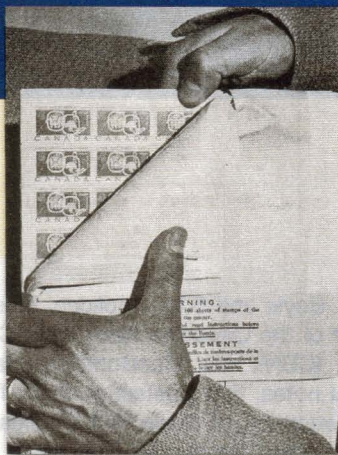


Figure 6. The second pane of 5¢ Seaway Inverts was found in Winnipeg. The pane was broken into two blocks of 25. One was mounted for display purposes and later stolen, and the other is not accounted for.

Photo courtesy of the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada

amples of the error before meeting with Shepard. They found none.

This search caused Yorke to issue a memorandum September 17, warning postmasters in the Winnipeg Postal District not to comply with requests to examine post office stocks unless the requester had proper CPO identification. Bileski was convinced that the remainder of the Winnipeg pane and the other three panes of stamps had been sold in Winnipeg. In its September 10 issue, the *Winnipeg Tribune* quoted Bileski: "...I feel that, by now, all 170 have been used on letters."

The September 10 *Winnipeg Tribune* reported that a stamp purchased August 29 at the Eaton sub-post office was used on a letter to 11-year-old Joan Smith, who was vacationing in Rathwell, Manitoba. The letter was from her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd W. Smith. "Mr. Smith ... says he and his wife clearly

remember commenting on the stamp's queer appearance before they mailed the letter." The newspaper also stated that after an intensive search, the Smith cover was not found.

Two covers posted in Montreal also are franked with stamps purchased at the Eaton office.

On September 11, Yorke sent a telegram (Figure 5) to MacDonald stating that another pane of Seaway Inverts

was found in the Winnipeg depot by postal employee Edward Sirtouski. He confirmed this by letter of the same date and stated that the checking "has now been completed and no further

Large size commemorative-type stamps

100 panes × 50 stamps = 5,000 stamps/section
10 sections × 5,000 stamps = 50,000 stamps/bundle
2 bundles per carton = 100,000 stamps/carton

Small size definitive-type stamps

100 panes × 50 stamps = 5,000 stamps/section
20 sections × 5,000 stamps = 100,000 stamps/bundle
2 bundles per carton = 200,000 stamps/carton

Shown here are details on the size of packaging in which stamps were sent to the field in 1959 by the Canadian Post Office.

imperfections have been found." The second Winnipeg pane find was sent to CPO headquarters the same day under register number 1989, along with the packet of 5,000 stamps it was found in. The pane is shown in Figure

**SAVE
THIS DATE
Come & Celebrate**

**35TH
ANNIVERSARY
Orcoexpo**

**January 29-31
2010**

**FRI. 11-6
Sat. 10-6
Sun. 10-4**

Stamp Show

Embassy Suites Anaheim South
11767 Harbor Blvd., Garden Grove, CA 92840
(Just 1 mile South of Disneyland)
PH: 714-539-3300



**60 LEADING STAMP/COVER DEALERS
FROM THROUGHOUT THE U.S.**

**FOREIGN POST OFFICES
FREE APPRAISALS • SEMINARS
DOOR PRIZES • FREE PARKING**

SPECIAL ZEPPELIN DRAWINGS DAILY

Stephen Pattillo Quality Stampshows
P.O. Box 604 • Fullerton CA 92832
888-995-0548

www.stampshowsteve.com

Sponsored by StampWants.com



6. MacDonald's marginal notes on yet another Yorke letter (September 14) provide information on the size of packaging in which the stamps were sent to the field. The details are shown in the nearby table.

Knowledge of the names of most of the members of the syndicate, the number of stamps each held and how the original Winnipeg find was made became public September 15 in an article that appeared in the *Winnipeg Tribune*. In addition to Mason (seven stamps), Slutchuk and Rothstein (five each), there were two members who wished to remain anonymous (five each). In addition, Rothstein Theatres' film booker, Hyman Swartz, who received 10 percent of all the company's sales, was to share 10 percent of the proceeds from the sale of the stamps.

Unfortunately for the syndicate, who had refused an offer of \$1,000 for each of their 27 stamps, this was the same day that J.R. Carpenter, head of the philatelic bureau, announced that 40 panes (2,000 Seaway Invert stamps) had been released for public sale. This information prompted Bileski to reduce his offer to buy, from \$1,000 to \$100. The syndicate decided to hold on to its stamps and, according to the September 15 edition of the *Winnipeg Free Press*,

Continued on page 67

Complete Canada Mint NH Year Sets

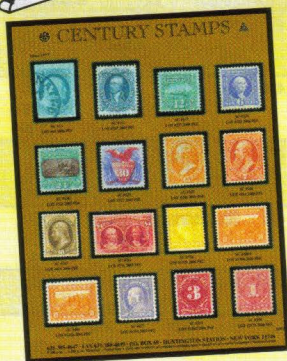
Year	Scott #	Qty	VF	NH	XF	NH	Year	Scott #	Qty	VF	NH	XF	NH
1947-50	274-77,						1982	723C,791,907-23,35,					
	282-93	16	5.25	7.50				40,44,45,50,54-75					
1951-52	303-20	16	10.25	13.50			1983	792,924,27,29,32,37,					
1953	321-34	14	15.75	21.95				43,46,51,976-1008					
1954-57	335-74	38	16.75	21.50			1984	934,1009-44					
1958-59	375-88	14	3.40	4.50			1985	925-26,28,30,33,36,39,					
1960-62	389-409	21	14.50	21.50				41,47,52,1045-76					
1963	410-13	4	10.25	14.50			1986	1077-79, 1084-1121					
1964-66	414-53	41	7.50	9.50			1987	926A,26B,38,42,48,53,					
1967	454-77	28	17.25	22.75				1080-83,1122-54,62-63					
1968-69	478-504	27	11.25	14.50			1988	1155-61,64-65,70,73,77,					
1970	505-31	27	13.15	17.00				87,94,95-1228					
1971	532-58	22	5.75	7.25			1989	939A,1171,74,78,81-82,					
1972	559-610							86,88,91,94A,1229-63					
	594A-99A	57	31.75	39.75			1990	1166-69,72,72A,75-76,					
1973	611-28	18	4.75	5.95				79-80,83-85,89-90,92,					
1974	629-55	27	7.75	10.25				1194B,94C,1264-1301					
1975	656-80	25	10.95	14.25			1991	1193,1302-48					
1976	681-703	23	14.95	20.75			1992	1349-59,63-64,67-68,					
1977	704-51	44	15.95	22.00				71-72,88,94-95,99-1455					
1978	752-79	29	11.25	15.95			1993	1389,1456-1506					
1979	780-90,97						1994	1365,69,73,75-76,1507-40					
	800,806,						1995	1360-61,66,70,74,96,					
	813-46	47	13.95	19.50				1541-90(incl. 1567a Ty2)					
1980	847-77	31	9.50	13.00			1996	1378,1591-1629,813					
1981	878-906	29	7.95	11.25			1997	1630,30A,31-48,48B,					
								49-72,94					

Cat. #'s used are from the 2009 Scott which include changes from the 2008.

Satisfaction guaranteed. Our quality is super! 10 day return privilege. Free Shipping within U.S. NYS residents add sales tax.

Croton Stamp Co.
PO Box 242
Goshen, NY 10924
(845) 294-7361 (after 6:30 PM)
Fax: (845) 294-0552
Email: croton@warwick.net
www.crotonstamp.com

All se-tenant blocks, pairs, & strips are attached. All dollar values, coils, definitives, booklet singles of unique design, & S/S are included in year sets unless noted.



Send \$3.00 Catalog Sent Priority Mail.

Outside the U.S. enclose \$10.00. Limit one catalog per request.

View the catalog online at:
www.century-stamps.com

HOT OFF THE PRESS!

We now have hundreds of GRADED STAMPS in

OUR CURRENT U.S. COLOR CATALOG!

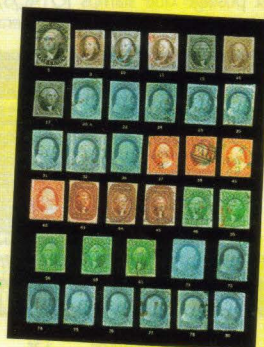
170 Pages!

U.S. Stamps from 1847-1938

Over 3,000 STAMPS!!

• 1,300 enlarged •

If you collect SUPERB, XF or VF stamps, this Catalog is a MUST!



Please rush my catalog to:

Name: _____
 Address: _____
 City: _____
 State: _____ Zip: _____

Because we deliver our catalogs at considerably less than our cost, we must reserve the right to decline orders for successive catalogs, if no purchase is made.

CENTURY STAMPS

32 Years of Quality & Service

P.O. Box 69, Dept. L, Huntington Sta., NY 11746

Phone: 631-385-4647 Fax: 631-385-4699

Or see our listing at: www.century-stamps.com
 email: centurystamps@hotmail.com



Continued from page 35
 "All have agreed not to sell until Mr. Rothstein advises them to do so."

Their patience was rewarded. By September 29, Carpenter's information was discredited, and Bileski was convinced that no more than 300 Seaway Inverts had reached the public, and no more than 52 mint or unused stamps were available to collectors. He offered the syndicate \$1,000 for each Seaway Invert. They agreed to sell 16 examples of the errors. The September 29 *Winnipeg Free Press* reported, "G.C. Kellett, a Winnipeg chartered accountant and spokesman for the syndicate, revealed that three members of the syndicate still hold 11 stamps among them. He said the other members had sold out their interests in the remaining stamps to the three."

Kellett also said that one member had lost \$1,000 on his stamps "because they had been carried in a back trouser pocket between pieces of cardboard. Apparently body heat had caused the stamps to stick to the cardboard, thus lessening their value to a collector." Bileski previously had arranged a sale of the stamps to American collectors "at the normal markup."

The September 30 *Winnipeg Tribune* revealed more about the financial arrangements. It reported that Mason received \$5,500, Slutchuk, \$3,500, and Swartz 10 percent of the sale value. The newspaper also said that Kellett and a friend, likely the stamp collector present at the find, were the other members of the syndicate. Kellett, Rothstein and the friend held on to 11 of the errors. The *Tribune* gave the last word to Mason on the subject: "She praised Mr. Rothstein's 'fine gesture' in forming the syndicate for all six to share in. 'After all it was his money which originally paid for the stamps. I suppose they were his property.'"

Yorke was the center of attention. On September 25, he wrote to MacDonald to report on his investigation of the September 15 report that Seaway Inverts might have been sold at Fort Frances, Ontario. This possibility was the subject of a newspaper report in which Peter Ross of Fort Frances had received a letter with an example of the error stamp paying the postage. His mother, Mrs. Ross, was interviewed and said that she believed she had bought \$1 worth of

stamps and had used them on mail, mainly to England. She said she had no stamps left nor had she received the envelope her son had said he sent to her for safekeeping. Yorke's view on the subject was that "the newspaper report may have been based on misinformation."

Winnipeg also is where the first fake Seaway Invert was recorded. A vigilant postal employee caught it sometime prior to September 24, when it was reported to MacDonald. The sender had cut out the center of the stamp and reversed it. It then was used for postage on a letter to the Book of the Month Club in New York City. The letter was sent to the United States for delivery, with a note requesting the return of the cover and the name and address of the sender. There is no indication in the files as to the results of this investigation.

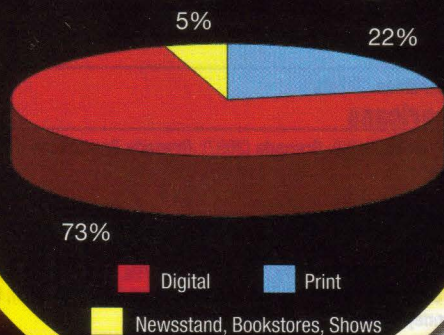
Postal officials took these attempts at jokes very seriously. "This amounts to deliberate mutilation and is a very serious matter," an inspector told the *American Philatelist* (November 1959, page 102). "There is a very heavy penalty if a person is convicted." ■

Scott Stamp Monthly is reaching a larger audience than ever before!



Read Scott Stamp Monthly today at linns.com

**64,510...
and growing**



■ Digital ■ Print
 ■ Newsstand, Bookstores, Shows