

## STUCK ON THEIR STAMPS

*Originally Published in the April 23, 1992 Syracuse Post-Standard.*

When the Syracuse Stamp Club holds its auction, philatelists shop for bargains and try to avoid bidding wars.

By Shaun A. Lane  
*The Post-Standard*

Before the auction began at the Syracuse Stamp Club, everyone had a chance to view the stamps to be sold.

The members surveyed them with a special interest. They walked around the table, never lifting their eyes from the items on the block. The room was quiet. This was a time to analyze the items, not make small talk.

"There are some things that I'm really interested in tonight," said one Syracusan as he and 30 others circled the table. "I want to make sure I get some good deals." He had his eye on a particular lot, but declined to reveal it. He was resolved to work the room like the veterans: see what is available, inspect it carefully, and do not let anyone else know what you are especially interested in.

Avoiding a bidding war is the goals of most buyers.

The club's monthly auctions operate under simple rules:

1. Minimum bid, \$1.
2. Only members in good standing may submit lots - either single stamps or groups of stamps - for the auction. Anyone can bid.
3. Owners cannot bid on their own lots.
4. Owners set a minimum acceptable bid, which establishes the size of the bidding increments. Bids for lots with \$1 to \$5 minimums increase by 25 cents; 50 cents for starting bids of \$5 to \$10; \$1 for starting bids of \$10 to \$20, and so on. All initial bids of more than \$50 increase in increments of \$5.
5. Lots must be paid for immediately - cash or check only. Anyone who buys a lot that was described improperly can get a refund.

There are nights when auctions are heated. Bidding wars break out, and people sometimes pay more for a stamp than it's worth. On other nights, the auctions are slow and sales are hard to come by.

During a recent auction there are 42 lots offered. Of the 22 lots offered in the first half-hour, 12 were sold, 10 were not. That was well below average.

Usually, said Raymond Stummer, club public relations director, more than 85 percent of the lots shown in the first 30 minutes are sold.

"It's like night and day," said Stummer, a 62-year-old retiree from North Syracuse, "Sometimes they fight like dogs and sell everything. It depends on what's being sold and who's here. There's no rhyme or reason for a successful night."

When things are slow, the auctioneer can be lonely, Philip Poplaski, chairman of the board of directors, learned that night. After the first three lots went unsold, the Liverpool resident said, "I guess the crowd is tougher tonight than I thought. I know there's a recession, but this is ridiculous."

That drew a laugh from the group. Feeling he had loosened the crowd up, Poplaski announced the fourth lot. The initial bid was \$7, and Poplaski started the auction, holding it up for all to see. His eyes constantly scanned the room.

"I'm looking for \$7.50...\$7.50.. I'm looking for \$7.50."

A buyer raised his hand.

"I have \$7.50," said Poplaski sounding relieved. "I have a bid of \$7.50. I'm looking for \$8...\$8.Do I hear anyone for \$8?"

No one bid.

"Eight dollars, going once.. .twice.. three times. Sold for \$7.50!"

One reason for low sales, said John Davis, club president, could be the condition of the stamps. He said buyers base decisions on the centering of the stamp, meaning the perforations should be even on all sides; on whether the colors have faded; and on the freshness of the glue on the back.

"Some people are more particular than others," Davis said.

Davis, who has been collecting stamps since 1927, said the auctions still interest him if there is a good deal. But he has trouble keeping track of what he already owns.

"Quite frankly, I'm not sure what I have anymore," said the 76-year-old Fayetteville resident. "I've been collecting for so long now, and I have so many, I would have to be really intrigued in order to really get into an auction."

The members who auction stamps regularly do so mainly for two reasons. Either they have duplicates, or they need the money.

Buyers look for the deals. The items generally start at half the catalog price.

Newcomers, however, are more interested in expanding their collections, and auctions are the cheapest way to do that.

Even so, they still bet with caution; their wallets still have the last say in everything.

ILLUSTRATIONS: Ray Stummer of North Syracuse shows off a United States Scott No. 239 Columbian Exposition 30-cent stamp issued Jan 2, 1893. It has a catalog value of \$240.

Ed Adkins of Cicero, top, and Ray Stummer of North Syracuse look over their stamp collections during a Syracuse Stamp Club auction.