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Philately: Pointless Pastime or Potential Pursuit?

The United States Postal Service delivers hundreds of millions of letters every day. Nearly all these letters end up in trash cans and recycling bins. Many Americans may never do anything more than quickly glance at the stamps they receive, let alone think about the importance of the little postage stamp. Stamp collecting, also known as philately, has been a hobby for nearly two hundred years, but in current society is disregarded. Today, most people consider stamp collecting to be a hobby for senior citizens sitting around card tables, moving little bits of paper around with tweezers in a musty-smelling book. This image deters many people from considering philately as a hobby. It also leads many people to think that collecting stamps must be boring and uninteresting. Additionally, people assume that something that is nothing more than a glorified sticker could have any worth. And if they do recognize the importance of the humble postage stamp, they quickly disregard the idea of a collection due to the vast work involved in amassing hundreds of stamps. It is understandable to make these assumptions about stamp collecting based on some elements of truth in these judgments, but there is so much more to stamp collecting than most people realize. Despite appearing antiquated and unexciting to outsiders, stamp collecting is an enjoyable pastime that anyone can do, a fulfilling way to spend one's time, a leisure pursuit filled with great value, and a hobby that can be started with ease.

A common stereotype associated with stamp collecting is that the few individuals left who are still interested in this hobby are elderly individuals. However, my experience indicates that this is not the case. Early on in my collecting career, I was in search of meeting people who shared my level of enthusiasm for stamp collecting. I had felt somewhat uncomfortable talking with people about philately as I thought that only older people who were not my age would understand. Eventually, I chose to attend a stamp convention I had heard about online that was happening nearby. The moment I entered the large gymnasium filled with enthusiastic philatelists, I was immediately taken aback. I assumed I would be the only kid in the room but all around, hundreds of people of all ages bustled about buying, selling, and talking about the same thing: stamps. At one booth, a mother helped her fascinated eight-year-old son sort through a box of stamps, helping him find the ones he might like to add to his collection. Further down, a group of teenage guys convened, looking at one another's recent stamp purchases, chatting and laughing as walked among the crowds of shoppers and vendors. Along the far end of the room, there were hundreds of tri-folds filled with interesting historical information on particular stamps. Groups of adults intently browsed among them, occasionally calling another person nearby to share something they had discovered. Despite such great differences in age and maturity, every person at the convention was drawn to philately. My initial surprise when I arrived was due to the assumption that I and many of the rest of the world shared about the types of people who collected stamps. With the rapid advancements of technology, stamps often appear to be a relic of the past, slowly dying away as email and texting take their place. This sense of antiquity is largely why stamp collecting is associated with older individuals who grew up using them. With this notion gone, I began to feel a lot more comfortable with the idea of

collecting stamps. My experience at the stamp show proved to me that you do not have to be aged and retired to collect postage stamps. On the contrary, stamp collecting is for all ages.

Additionally, stamp collecting as a hobby is often ignored due to the idea that it is a boring and uninteresting pastime. At first glance, these little pieces of paper may seem unexciting and lacking in any interesting information, historical or otherwise. I realized this rather early on in my time stamp collecting. Many years ago, I was helping my grandparents clean out their attic one summer day. The idea of spending the day surrounded by dusty and long-forgotten objects in a hot attic space was not exactly something I enjoyed doing. Nevertheless, I pressed on, digging through box after box of memorabilia. It was at the very bottom of one of these boxes that I discovered what is now one of the greatest pieces of my entire stamp collection. Initially, I thought it was nothing more than an old piece of paper that had somehow fallen into one of the boxes. However, as I turned it over, I immediately realized this was something of value. It was an unsent envelope that was addressed, stamped, and dated to around 1945. My eyes came to the sender, and I was surprised to see my great-grandfather's name. Three of my four great-grandfathers had died long before I was born, and I didn't know very much about any of them. And there I was, holding something seventy years old that had been in the hands of my great-grandfather. Filled with curiosity, I began to ask the older members of my household questions about my family history. That single envelope enabled us to locate the house where my great-grandfather had lived at the time. I learned from my grandmother, who was her daughter, about his life during World War II; something I would never have thought to ask about otherwise. An old, partly torn envelope led me to think about all those who came before me and the incredible history my family has. In a way, the envelope has helped me bridge the gap between the past and present as well as helping me to better appreciate

the family I have now. It is now one of the most treasured pieces in my collection. Finding and collecting stamps can be far more interesting and even life-changing than many people realize. The things that can be learned from these little pieces of history make this hobby well worthwhile.

Another common misconception about postage stamps and collecting them is that with so many stamps in the world, individually they must be worthless. This couldn't be further from the truth. I have discovered that the value of both individual stamps and an assembled collection can be surprising. A few years ago, I was going through my collection, in search of any particularly interesting stamps and to estimate how many were in my collection. As I was digging through a pile of unsorted ones, a pair of stamps caught my eye. Unlike the others, their paper was much older and more yellowed. Surprisingly, they were still attached to one another. Distracted by the task at hand, I set this pair of stamps aside to investigate later. After several days' worth of counting and sorting, I concluded that my collection consisted of around ten thousand individual postage stamps valued at anywhere from several hundred to several thousand dollars. I was amazed to realize that it was not because I owned a large number of expensive stamps but because I simply had acquired so many in my collection. As I happily surveyed my newfound wealth, the old pair of stamps I had set aside earlier caught my eye. Unable to contain my curiosity, I decided to do some research. I discovered that the pair of stamps I had were worth around fifty dollars, more than twice the amount I had paid for the whole bag of stamps that I had found them in. It really was a profitable day for my hobby. Like other hobbies that involve collecting, such as baseball cards, value is often found in the unexpected and ordinary.

A further deterrent for potential stamp collectors is the time involved in acquiring a decent-sized collection. As a person who has been collecting for only a few years, it is not as difficult as it may initially seem. When I began collecting stamps, I was driven to have a big collection. I went around to all my friends and family, asking them to set aside any stamps they acquired in the mail for me. By doing this, I was able to jumpstart my collection quickly and fuel my excitement for my new hobby. It also proved to be a good way of bonding with friends that I had not done previously. Involving others in my collection had many unexpected results. Relatively early on in my time collecting, I was visiting my aunt and uncle's house for the holidays. In passing, I briefly mentioned that I had started collecting stamps. Immediately, my uncle stood up and said, "I have just the thing for you." He opened a closet, pulled a huge book from one of the upper shelves, and handed it to me. As I opened it up, I discovered that every page was filled with beautiful stamps from a stamp collection that my uncle had when he was a boy. My uncle told me that he didn't collect stamps anymore but would be honored to pass them to a new generation that loved collecting. Thrilled, I took the collection home and added it to my own. The stamps I acquired from family and friends constitutes around a quarter of all the stamps I currently own and I am honored to be able to own them. Being able to care for and enjoy something that I know someone else owned and loved before me is an incredibly rewarding feeling. Acquiring stamps for your collection is not something that has to take decades and definitely not something you have to do alone.

Although there are many misconceptions about stamp collecting, I have learned that it is for all ages, can be a fulfilling hobby, that you can discover unexpected treasures, and is easy to do. The stories I have shared and the things I have experienced are not just things that can only happen to me, but to anyone willing to give this wonderful hobby a try. When I reflect on my

collection of stamps, I see the many years of enjoyment I have had assembling it, the incredible span of history that my collection encompasses, the connection that I have made to my own history and being able to share it with others. It is truly fascinating how much history and worth a single, humble postage stamp contains, just waiting to be discovered. So next time that little square of paper on an envelope catches your eye, consider beginning this new hobby yourself.