



THE YOUNG COLLECTOR

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STAMPING OUT CRIME AND (PRE) CANCELLING INEFFICIENCY

It is always fun to learn how and why odd things in philately came to be. When I began stamp collecting, perfins and precancels baffled me so I asked experts about them. They told me one was produced as a solution to reduce crime and the other to promote efficiency.

What I learned about perforated initials, which are often called perfins, was a surprise to me. They were produced by companies and government agencies in order to prevent theft.

Employees sometimes stole stamps from their employers to trade in at the shops, especially ones which sold cigarettes. Keep in mind this was common way back in the “old days” as just a few cents could buy lunch or dinner and businesses and governments had to spend extra money to replace the stolen postage.

To prevent their property from “disappearing”, various companies and the postal officials made an agreement. Stamps were perforated in a unique pattern so that they would be considered damaged, making them un-resalable, although still usable as postage by company and government offices.

Postmasters were told to look for perfins and refuse to buy them back for resale, which would obviously prevent the pilfering of perforated stamps for lunch money. By this means, they could only be used by a company or government agency which had acquired the perforation machine.

The practice of perforating postage stamps in this manner began in 1868 in Great Britain.

The first company to use them was a drapery firm, George Hitchcock, Williams, and Co.

Interestingly enough, its founder, Sir George Williams, also launched the Young Men’s Christian Association better known as the YMCA.

The earliest known perfin usage in Canada was by the W.J. Gage Company, sometime in 1887. The publishing firm based in Toronto had its initials “WJG” applied to stamps for use by staff on business mail.

Canada’s government used four categories of perfins.

There were Federal Officials, which have OHMS perfins, Federal Departmental Officials, which includes the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation with a “CBC” perfin, Provincial Officials, such as the Province of Saskatchewan with “PS” initials,

and Provincial Departmental Officials, such as the Workmen’s Compensation Board with “WCB” initials.

There are two types of “OHMS” perfins. The earliest type, the “five-hole” has five holes in the vertical bar of the “H” of the initials. The other type has only four holes in the “H” and is therefore called the “four-hole.”



As a collector, it is important to be aware that there are many fake “OHMS” perfins which are floating around on the market and the spurious copies can be difficult to distinguish from an authentic example. Since some of the “OHMS” officials, especially the “five-hole” types, can be expensive, ask a professional for an opinion on them before making an acquisition.

There are also perfins on Canadian revenue stamps. Revenue stamps were used to pay tax on taxable documents such as cheques.

Don’t be confused by punch cancellations when collecting perfins on revenue stamps. Such holes were applied by a punch tool that pierced a stamp after it was affixed to a document.



For a long time perfins were considered as damaged stamps, thereby unworthy of a place in a collection. Eventually, however, they received special attention, with catalogues and albums produced.

If somebody was studying the history and acquiring material of a large company, an amazing addition to that collection would be the firm’s perfins. Perfins on advertising covers make an interesting collection. The use on covers strongly indicates that the perfins are genuine and accompanying advertisements add to their appeal.

Precancels were made to expedite the shipping process for larger companies, especially with bulk lots of mail. Envelopes bearing a precanceled stamp could go straight into the mailbags instead of having to be postmarked in the post office, thus cutting down the amount of handling a letter received before it was delivered to its destination.

Most “precancels” appear mint from the front because of their lack of a regular postal cancellation. The only way to tell if precancels are actually unused is if there is still the original gum on the back. By definition, a precancel is used even if there is gum on the back.



There are over 4,000 varieties of Canadian precancels. There are two main types: “Bar” and “Town.”

The “Bar” precancel mostly consists of lines with no letters or numbers. The “Town” precancels had a numeric code or names of a community printed on the face.

The Unitrade Specialized Catalogue of Canadian Stamps lists 22 types of “Bar” precancels plus 10 styles of the “Town” types.



There were 58 towns and cities for which “Town” precancels were assigned. Precancels were regularly used in Canada into the 1980s. The most modern Canadian versions that I am aware of are on the 1977-82 Floral Definitives.

When a philatelist decides what area of his/her subject they would like to collect, he/she can decide exactly how they wish to pursue it.

Since there are so many different varieties of precancels, there are many different ways of making a collection unique. This freedom makes precancels attractive to many collectors.

If someone is interested in learning about those types of stamps, there is a catalogue, *The Standard Canada Precancel Catalogue*, published by Unitrade Associates.

Since precancels were assigned to Owen Sound, Ont, the city near my home, I would like to find some examples. They would make lovely additions to my Grey Bruce County collection!

Perfins and precancels can make an impressive addition to anybody’s collection. ☒

PIONEERS OF AVIATION

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Today, thousands of people fly safely every day. It has been said that you are more likely to be killed in a car accident on the way to the airport than to be killed in a plane crash. Flying is commonplace, just another form of transportation that brings the world closer. For the most part, we don’t even think about it anymore; and yet, our safety depends a great deal on those pioneer aviators who made the ultimate sacrifice to develop modern air travel. ☒

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