

Did You Know?

Pan American Invert Stamps

By: Alex Gill



On May 1, 1901, the Pan American Exposition held in Buffalo, New York officially opened to the public. The exposition opened with much fanfare and optimism for the new century. Between May 1st and November 2nd, fairgoers had the opportunity to see the newest inventions across 342 acres including telegraphs, lawnmowers, voting machines, typesetters and more. Equally impressive, the fairgrounds' electricity was powered by nearby Niagara Falls.

On opening day, the United States Post Office Department issued a set of six commemorative stamps to promote the event. Each stamp featured an ornate frame with a black and white image of a mode of transit in the center. For philatelists, these stamps mark several key milestones. First, these stamps were the first bi-colored postage stamps produced by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (B.E.P.). Furthermore, these stamps were the first commemorative and bi-color stamps of the 20th century.

During distribution, several inverted errors were discovered at post offices across the country by accident (Scott 294a-296a). Since bi-colored stamps printed in two rounds (the center vignette first, followed by the frame), errors are possible. It should be noted that of the set of six, only the 1-, 2-, and 4 cent stamps featured inverts with the 4-cent stamp having never been placed on sale. By mid-1901, inverted 1- and 2-cent stamps were uncovered at various post offices. Philatelists estimate between 600 and 700 1-cent errors exist and approximately 200 errors of the 2-cent stamp exist, but in two shades. Upon learning of the errors, then 3rd Assistant Postmaster General Edwin C. Madden decided to locate any additional errors and an inventory search by the B.E.P. turned up empty. By late summer 1901, Madden's assistant instructed the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to send any found errors to Madden directly.

Unfortunately for Madden, his request resulted in a major misunderstanding. The B.E.P. understood his request as a large order for additional inverts. In response, four inverted sheets of the 4-cent value were produced, and some stamps were overprinted "SPECIMEN." Between 1901 and 1904, Madden distributed these intentionally created inverts amongst his friends, family and business associates while keeping copies for himself. Upon learning of this impropriety, an official investigation was conducted by the Postmaster General. Madden was later cleared of any wrongdoing as no money had switched hands. Later, a full sheet of the 4-cent inverted stamps was placed in the National Postal Museum's collection and today, no record exists what happened to the remaining copies.



United States Scott 294-299, a complete set of Pan-American Commemorative Stamps

Today, these errors are highly sought after by philatelists who want to own a piece of philatelic lore and who enjoy the beautiful engraving put into these stamps. In 2001, the United States Postal Service issued a souvenir sheet commemorating the centenary of the inverts and exposition through reprinted and diamond-shaped cinderellas stamps valid for postage. It is highly recommended genuine inverted stamps receive a certificate of authenticity to verify the legitimacy of the invert. It is not uncommon for inverted stamps to have been carefully faked. Furthermore, the 4-cent inverted stamps are known to have thins or disturbed o.g. as they were likely removed from mounting paper.