

Reminiscences

By Michael Rogers

The Unforgettable Herman Herst

I came to know the legendary stamp dealer and author Herman Herst through his prolific writings. As a teenager I was immersed in philately and was a voracious reader. A great many thousand articles appeared in stamp magazines and books that recounted his career of more than half a century. Possessing a fine wit, Herst was a welcome guest speaker at clubs and banquets.

“Pat” acquired his nickname because he was born on St. Patrick’s Day. His philatelic career began on the fabled Nassau Street in New York City in 1933, relocating to Shrub Oak in 1946. Pat’s retirement in 1973 to Boca Raton, Fla came the same year that I moved to Winter Park, Fla.

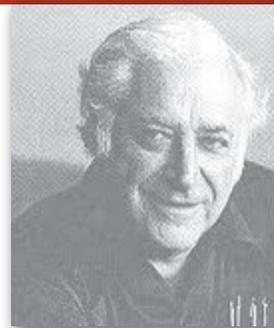
They tell me a stamp dealer never really retires. Pat remained active in philately with numerous articles and lively public speaking. Because of his great fame and impeccable reputation, many sought his advice when selling their collections.

About the time I met Pat in the mid 1980s, I owned a flourishing stamp shop which was going great guns. I’d buy most anything which came my way; my mantra being “once collected, I’d find a buyer for it.” The abiding rule of buying was always to be nice. If I met a hostile seller, I’d either figure out a way to do the transaction softly or I wouldn’t do it. Most times someone abrupt is just nervous.

Pat contacted me about this time, wondering if I was interested in a footlocker of worldwide postal stationery. The man knew how to capture my interest. I was told the container was packed tight with material, mostly unused with some cancelled to order. Condition was uniformly very fine, as these were assembled as new issues, though from the 1940s-60s. Certainly there were thousands and thousands from countries the world over.

Was I interested? You bet! My thought was “Do the deal, don’t do the deal. To be invited in on a transaction with Herman Herst: WOW!” Pat said I had a reputation for closing the deal with very tough peo-

Herman “Pat” Herst, Jr., certainly one of the most famous individuals the American hobby has ever known!



ple and this was a toughie: I was the sixth dealer he had invited in to attempt to do business with this seller. He would collect a 10% commission of my purchase price as his fee for bringing buyer and seller together. The five dealers before me had seen and walked out empty handed.

Not a collector herself, the seller had inherited a vast accumulation of stamps and postal history decades before. An accomplished career-woman of high intelligence, she now was contemplating parting with the gift from a dear friend. Naturally she was cautious

I arrived in Boca Raton early just so I could have the chance to sit with Pat and his engaging wife Ida. Then we went to the seller’s home. Though I wasn’t invited beyond the living room, I gazed upon stacks of old envelopes near and beyond. It was tantalizing. The footlocker was open and so I sat on the floor to best gauge the contents.

To Pat’s shriek of “Get up!” I replied “you never get to see these and I want to get real close to appreciate their beauty.” It’s true. Those days, there weren’t the postal stationary catalogues that we have today. I tilted my head towards the seller to see her clasp her hands together and hear her approval.

Then Pat’s gaze was diverted towards a stack of 19th century covers leaning on one wall, not part of my transaction. Picking up a few, he said “Dirty, dirty, dirty.” I groaned. Lightly, I brushed his hand, whispering to him, apologize, or else we’re going to get kicked out of here. He didn’t apologize but she missed nothing so I was able to make my point. When you’re invited into someone’s house, it’s not polite to criticize anything. I could

envision those other dealers leaving for such insensitive behavior.

I was having a grand time going through the footlocker, seeing material not often found. Walking through a collection, trying to calculate the right price to pay, there are several issues to consider: the materials availability, its condition, its popularity and how to merchandise it.

I knew I would do really well with postal stationary if I could figure a way to merchandise it. To my mind, this material was a natural extension of any stamp collection. I could take it to stamp shows and do well.

I could sense Pat was getting restless after two hours. I sat back and smiled, saying that I was real pleased with what I’d seen. I made an offer of \$6,000. I really don’t know who was more astonished, Pat or the seller, but the offer was accepted. We did the paperwork and I wrote the check.

On the way over to Pat’s home, he said I was a darned fool for paying so much. I smiled, saying I got the lot and he was getting \$600 on top of that so he should be real happy.

Pat thought me daft later because when I arrived home and emptied the footlocker, I found some absolute gems that had been squirreled away and not seen when I calculated the purchase price. I got on the phone and sold them, then backtracked a reasonable purchase price for these beauties. Off went an additional \$3000 check to the lady, and Pat’s \$300. To be perfectly honest, I was thinking about those spiraling columns of old covers in her home and looking forward to a future visit when I wrote the three grand check. As for Pat, he called me crazy! ✉