

Columbia - Express 1917, Synopsis

As World War I drew to a close, many countries, including Colombia, issued a distinct stamp for special delivery or express service. Columbia issued a five centavo stamp featuring a messenger, fashioned after the United States' Bureau of Engraving and Printing's first two special delivery issues. The Bureau's stamps featured the designer's nephew, Frederick Pauling, posing for the designer. He stood on one foot for so long that he fell over, and his uncle barely blinked an eye, so it is told.



Original source of design from Perkins Bacon Archives and the issued stamp.

This initial Colombian stamp was perforated 13.5. It was printed in a Kelly green shade. The designer of the stamp is not known. However, the original design source is known, a photograph utilized for the vignette, from the Perkins Bacon archives, the stamp's printer. Their name and "LONDON" appear at the bottom of each stamp.

This stamp is listed in the 1974 edition of the A. Barriga catalogue of Colombia as a definitive issue for urban (urbano) mail. It is imprinted "Correo-Urgente-Urbano," so it was clearly intended for a city special delivery stamp. Only 22,000 were printed according to that reference. A document in the Dr. John A. Knapp reference file, undated and without attribution, notes that the first stamp always had clear-cut perfs. The perforations are 13.5 x 14. A note in the Knapp Collection by an unknown writer commended that "it has been claimed that the El exists also with 11.5 x 14 perforations." No one, including myself and apparently that memo writer, has ever seen this alleged variety, but it is noted here for the record.

I, as well as other special delivery collectors, have long been challenged by this stamp. It is one of the most undervalued of the world's special delivery stamps. Writing in the *American Philatelist* of March 1927 (pages 404-6), Bill Bliss notes, "Colombia's single entry is scarcer than a 20-cent should be." In the late 1940s, Spencer Anderson, a New York professional stamp dealer, so the story has been told, advertised that he would pay \$5 just to see this little stamp, which then catalogued less than 25 cents in the Scott catalogue. None was offered.

I had been forewarned about the rarity of this stamp by my mentor Louis K. Robbins of New York. Lou is a world renown auction agent and worldwide special delivery collector, whose collection, started in 1928, I recently acquired to go along with my own large collection and that of the late Dr. John A. Knapp, of Cheshire, Conn., who had also acquired the Harold B. Billian and Stephen Rich collections of U.S. and worldwide special delivery issues. None of those collections contained other than a single mint copy of this, although they all collected both mint and used copies and covers whenever available.

Mr. Robbins had told me about one cover which he heard existed but did not know its whereabouts. I have told many collectors and dealers, over the 43 years that I have collected United States and worldwide special delivery issues, that I sought that stamp postally used both on and off cover. Until 1996, no covers or used stamps had appeared. Then, at the Westpex Stamp Extravaganza in San Francisco, which I have supported for more than 35 years with a booth, which in recent times was located next to Brian and Mimi Moorhouse, the South American dealers from England. Brian told me that in his upcoming auction, later in that month of May, he had such a cover. It was estimated at \$250 as I recall, and the stamp still catalogued \$2 used. All weekend I thought about my bid, and after making a last minute sale of some long-held material for \$750, I gave Brian my bid of that amount, with a plus to show that I was serious. He assured me that the cover was going to be mine. About four weeks after that Westpex ended, late in May, I had not received that auction lot from Brian; so I called him only to learn that I was substantially outbid. The cover had realized in excess of \$1,100 with

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strong competition, obviously, over the starting bid. I was a most unhappy camper.

Later that same afternoon, U.S.A. time, I received a call from my dear friend Bill Welch, editor of the American Philatelist and a specialist in South American issues, especially the infamous Seebeck produced issues. One of his sources needed to raise money to buy his son a car to go to work since the boy had demolished his car in an accident, and he had such a cover along with a few Santander express items as well. Bill told me that the car would cost \$1,100; I must have been dense and misunderstood, so when I spoke with the gentleman Bill referred me to, I again asked what he wanted for his Colombian E1 on cover-stone silence; "Didn't Bill tell you I needed \$1,100 for the car, so that is the price of my cover and the Santander material" which tagged along. As all good philatelists know, the first time one is offered a rare item you buy it, and the second one you negotiate. The son obtained his car and I had my cover.

The next morning a letter came in the mail from a fellow lawyer and close friend, who collects Colombia in all forms, enclosing a photocopy of her new acquisition, the E1 cover from the Moorhouse sale - strong competition was not the word for it. We had spoken about this item for more than 25 years, and she had never seen one either. At least that cover found a good home and would not hound me on the foreign special delivery circuit for years to come.

The following morning I received a call from another Colombian specialist and dealer, who had talked with Lou Robbins years ago about finding him a Colombian E1 cover and whom I had spoken to for years about such an item. He in fact had one for sale, and since it was at a lesser price than I had previously paid, it too was acquired by me.

Upon checking, all three known covers came from the same source, probably philatelically inspired, but thank goodness someone had the good sense to timely use this tiny philatelic gem in period and to cause the covers to remain available, 80 years later, for a few knowledgeable philatelists.

Still no used single has ever been seen by the writer, nor any of his associates.

With regard to finding the stamp in mint condition, coming back from my first honeymoon, we were grounded at 2 a.m. in Philadelphia, and the airlines kindly said that they would bus us into New York City, our return destination. We refused and were put up in the attic room at the Adelphia Hotel in Philadelphia, the last room available that snowy evening; it had a bed and was warm, and it gave me the opportunity to go to the Earl P. L. Apfelbaum Galleries in the morning, if they were not snowed in, since they still maintained a stamp stock at that time.

Trudging through the snow, without proper protection since we had been in San Juan one day before, we arrived at Apfelbaum's, and I started to look for worldwide special delivery stamps in their counter books. To my great surprise, they had a tropically stained unused with full gum block of twenty-five, and it was priced at \$10.00, 40c per stamp. That purchase occurred in the first week of January, 1964, and all of my special delivery friends received their stamps as a gift. I believe I only had a block and single left after giving out these presents. No more have surfaced since.

Footnote:

1. Letter from T. F. Morris, son of the designer of the special delivery stamp, to the author, October 1, 1961, and given in "United States - The First Bureau Special Delivery Series" by Robert L. Markovits, Congress Book, 1962, American Philatelic Congress.

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The rest of the story...



Block of 25

Largest recorded multiple