

OPUNTIA

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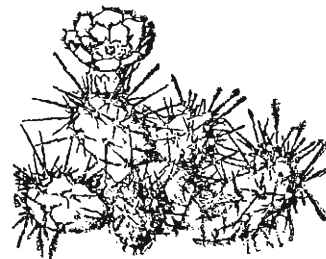
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Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: John Held Jr, Phlox Icona, Pascal Lenoir, Peter Netmail, Joseph Major, Diane Bertrand, Jose Roberto Sechi, Ficus Strangulensis, Martha Shivvers

TO THE EDITOR
[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Sheryl Birkhead
25509 Jonnie Court
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

2003-02-22

I presume you've seen the Torcon 3 World SF Convention progress report with the fanzine and fanwriter ads. My personal philosophy is that if you have to advertise ... but there's no rule against campaigning. It's just somehow unfannish.

[No more unfannish than many people voting for ANSIBLE every year as a fanzine even though it is a publishers' gossip e-zine. Or voting an historical novel by Connie Willis as best SF novel. Or bloc voting a local Trekzine as best Canadian fanzine. (Bloc voting is legal; that's how we elect governments.) So advertising is hardly an offense against fandom given that Hugos and Auroras are no more representative of quality than the Academy Awards or the Nobel Prize.]

2003-09-24

FROM: Lloyd Penney

2003-02-11

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[Re: Harry Warner's estate and disposal of his zine collection, for which he did not leave proper instructions] I suspect it is the lawyer pushing to sell the collection that is the main obstacle. He is the executor and it is his legal obligation to realize the maximum possible from the estate. If the disposition had been in the will [Harry only attached a letter to the will which had no legal validity] there would not be any problem. The fact that this may also result in a larger payment to the lawyer — I also imagine that the church Harry left everything to did not argue, but legally they have no say in anything.

[Well said. One thing I became conscious of as executor of my mother's estate is of how many things I am legally on the hook for if I get it wrong. It prompted me to re-write my own will recently and make certain the dispositions of my estate were inside the will. Lawyers have an additional obligation over and above a layman executor such as myself because they are expected to know the law and will be held to a higher standard. In actual practice, if I mess up something, I will only get a bureaucratic letter dinging me for extra estate taxes or whatever, but a solicitor could easily wind up before the Bar Association review board. In Canada, a solicitor's fee for probate and other estate work is a percentage of the estate, so that poor people pay little or nothing and the wealthy are nicked for a sizeable chunk. Only fair.]

I know the reason for the decision to ban clubzines from Aurora Award [Canadian SF awards] consideration, namely the bloc voting of the Toronto media SF club in question. Their clubzine is a polished product. The club has employed that bloc vote to say thanks to the editor for her hard work. This is an indication that not only do they not understand the function of the Aurora Awards, but that fandom outside the club does not vote in sufficient numbers to offset this bloc. After three years of this, abusing the Auroras enough to have all clubzines disallowed, the club took the next step and placed a two-page ad in a Torcon 3 progress report, recommending their clubzine and one of the club's chief correspondents for the Hugo awards.

[It would be fun if American Trekkies or Buffy fans made the same discovery, that voting in the fanzine category is low enough that a local clubzine could win a Hugo if the members bloc voted.]

I understand the reason for disallowing the clubzines from Best Fanzine, but it's a shame that other clubzine editors have been disqualified because of the actions of a few. Certainly their good works can now be covered under Fan Achievement (Organizational), but if the Toronto club

realizes that, they'll bloc vote for their clubzine under that category and the problem will not be solved. Other organizational activities such as convention management and special shows will go unrecognized. I think the club should be confronted by the Aurora organization and asked not to bloc vote, but I doubt that will do anything. We need more people to participate in Aurora voting so a bloc will have less influence.

[Bloc voting is legal in both Canada and the USA. Several years ago, the Americans disqualified some Hugo votes because the fees had been paid by a single series of money orders, but had the bloc taken that to court, the World SF Convention would have lost.]

[Meanwhile, in Canada, we seem to have gone from the frying pan into the fire, as the Aurora for Best Fanzine this year went to a Website. The Hugo fanzine awards have been plagued for years by domination of a handful of zines, one of which was a semi-professional magazine and another of which is primarily distributed online.]

[I suppose the best method around the problem is to establish yet another category in the awards, Best Clubzine. It would be fun to watch the Trekkies and Buffy lovers slug it out in the balloting, and probably very profitable to the awards presenters.]

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY: SAINT PIERRE AND MIQUELON AND THE INVASION OF 1941

by Dale Speirs

I am a member of the apa Point of Divergence, devoted to alternative history. I have been accumulating alternative histories that I will now occasionally recycle in OPUNTIA to a wider audience.

Two Obscure Islands.

If you want to have fun with a trivia question at some party game or for a tavern bet, pose the following question: "How many sovereign nations are there in North America north of Mexico?".

The average person will respond that there are only two, Canada and the USA. Some people will note that Kalaallit Nunaat is part of the continent, and therefore is either Inuit or Danish, depending on your political sympathies towards what the People From The South refer to as Greenland. Bermuda is considered part of North America by some as well. Very few people will know that France is a North American nation, or even believe it when you tell them.

Off the southern coast of Newfoundland are the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, an integral part of France, whose population of 5,000 people is heavily subsidized by the central government.

Just as Newfoundland was Britain's oldest colony, so St. Pierre and Miquelon are France's oldest colony. Newfoundland gave up its independence as a Dominion when it joined the Canadian Confederation in 1949, but St. Pierre and Miquelon still cling to the old country. The fishing industry is a remnant of what it once was, and the islanders basically survive because of French subsidies. In Paris, the St. Pierrais and Miquelonnais are cynically referred as the world's most expensive Frenchmen. The main occupations are government paperwork and smuggling, the latter done today with aircraft and high-speed boats instead of schooners with black sails.

John Cabot discovered the islands in 1497. They were settled originally because of the excellent fishing and because the ice-free harbour was used to provision the sailing ships that came from Europe to fish the nearby Grand Banks. Over the next few centuries the islands changed hands numerous times between England and France, and not until 1816 did they become a permanent part of France. The advent of the steamship crippled the economy of the islands, since fishing ships could go straight to the Grand Banks from Europe and did not need to stop at a harbour. The subsequent decline in the fishing industry finished off any hope that St. Pierre and Miquelon would ever be self-sufficient, and since that time they have relied on government subsidy.

A Vichy Backwater.

Fast-forward to 1941. The war in Europe is not going well. Canada and Newfoundland (then still an independent nation) had been in the war since 1939. The USA was neutral, and inclined to be sympathetic to the Vichy government while at the same time leaning to Britain in support against the Germans. In St. Pierre and Miquelon, there was political strife. The government administrators, businessmen, and clergy were Vichyards, while the majority of the population supported the Free French under Charles de Gaulle. Both sides conducted political campaigns that might have exploded into open violence anyplace else, but in the closely intermarried colony had to be kept at just below the boiling point. The Vichyards arrested a few agitators or fired them from government jobs. The Resistance published underground papers and posters that stung the Vichyards.

Watching them carefully, sometimes almost hysterical with nerves, were the Free French, Canadian, American, Newfoundland, and British governments [1]. On the one hand, the islands were too insignificant to start a full scale clash over. The islands had no military significance since there were no fortifications, garrisons, airfields, or deepwater harbours. On the other hand, the Vichyards had a shortwave transmitter that was of use to the German U-boats raiding the North Atlantic.

The Newfoundland government was foaming at the mouth to annex the islands (as they still are today) but none of the other powers would allow that. The Canadians were too cautious to touch off a diplomatic incident by invading the islands and offending both Vichy and Free French. The Americans wanted to forget the whole thing but couldn't.

The Newfoundland government had asked London on 1940-06-19 for permission to take over St. Pierre and Miquelon. They wanted to head off the rival fishing fleet, stop the smuggling, and preempt Canada from taking it over. However the Newfoundland government cooled off a bit when their representative Raymond Gushue (Newfoundland Fisheries Board) visited the islands and reported back that the inhabitants " ... would rather fight than be associated with Newfoundland." The main objection seems to have been that the islands were across from the poorest part of Newfoundland and they did not want to be drenched in poverty if taken over by them [4].

De Gaulle solved the whole matter, to his satisfaction at least, by sending Free French destroyers to St. Pierre and Miquelon in December 1941 and evicting the Vichyards. From a practical military point of view, the islands then became a backwater for the rest of the war. With the radio transmitter under Free French control, there was no more value in the islands, especially once the USA finally entered the war after Pearl Harbour.

"First Things First", Said The Philatelists.

Whenever any government is overthrown, the first thing the new regime does is issue postage stamps. The Free French occupation was no exception to this rule. Existing stocks of stamps in the island post office was overprinted. One batch was overprinted "Noel" and given to sailors of a Free French submarine that later disappeared at sea, yet the stamps still managed to appear on the market. Everything else was overprinted "France Libre / F.N.F.L.". The abbreviation stood for 'Forces Navales Fracaise Libres'. The stamps were issued under circumstances for which the phrase 'sharp practice' was too mild. They were to be sold at four times face value to raise funds for the islands. Many found their way to the philatelic market under suspicious circumstances, and the money flowed like water everywhere except in the riverbed it was supposed to go in. It was no surprise that one of the principals in the stamp affair subsequently served a prison term and was sent into exile. Forgeries of the overprinted stamps were plentiful then and now, as only a few hundreds of the originals were issued.

"A Tempest In A Teapot", Said Mr. Roosevelt.

The diplomatic repercussions continued after the Free French takeover of the islands.. The USA was divided between Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, who wanted the Free French evicted and

everything put back the way it was, and President Roosevelt, who preferred to ignore Foggy Bottom and treat the St. Pierre and Miquelon incident as the minor sideshow it was, in the hope that it would soon be forgotten. Churchill, who had to deal with de Gaulle, once remarked that the heaviest cross he had to bear was the Cross of Lorraine.

Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King had been in power for decades and always worked on the principle that doing nothing about everything was the best policy. He was harassed by his cabinet ministers, who wanted him to Do Something Fer Crying Out Loud Willya, while simultaneously he had to remind the Americans that Canada was not their errand boy. Canada had maintained diplomatic relations with Vichy France after 1940, while Britain left. It was thus important to the latter that the former continue to be in a situation where they could keep an eye on things and supply intelligence to Britain. Canada was also worried about Quebec relations, especially the staff on CBC Radio French, if there was war against Vichy.

The diplomatic problems essentially arose because Britain considered Vichy France a threat, while Canada and the USA, safe across the Atlantic, were not as concerned and hoped that Vichy influence might restrain Germany. This view started to change with the Vichy concessions to Germany in spring 1941, and a report by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in August that

coded messages and weather reports were being sent out by radio from St. Pierre and Miquelon. The Canadian government told the islanders that they wanted them to 'voluntarily' allow the RCMP to place an inspector on the islands with agreement to monitor and censor radio broadcasts, the implied threat being a takeover if they refused.

Charles de Gaulle and the Free French needed to legitimize their government in exile with as many colonial governments as possible supporting them. The General moved first, and ordered occupation of the islands using three Free French destroyers out of Halifax, Nova Scotia. He quickly held a plebiscite on December 25 and 26, 1941, in which the islanders voted for Free French. This made it difficult for the USA, that is Hull and the State Department bureaucrats, to insist St. Pierre and Miquelon be transferred back from a democratic self-government to the Vichy dictatorship. Roosevelt didn't care, Churchill was quite relieved, but Hull was obsessed by the issue [2]. Hull would soon be gone from office, a combination of poor health and the preference of Roosevelt for other counselors on foreign policy. The American general public, those who knew about the affair, supported the liberation and condemned Hull. Some Americans, such as Freda Kirchwey, editor of THE NATION, sent telegrams of support to the islands, replied to with thanks by Vice-Admiral Emile Muselier [3].

Hull had made an unfortunate remark about the “so-called Free French” and was subsequently bombarded by letters and telegrams addressed to “the so-called State Department”.

The Most Likely Alternative.

Canada lands Mounties on St. Pierre and Miquelon, with a destroyer on ‘routine training maneuvers’ outside the islands’ territorial waters to ensure a proper reception. The Mounties convince the Vichyards to ‘voluntarily’ provide assistance with their enquiries respecting the radio station. Since the Mounties are civilians, there is no official violation of the islands’ sovereignty. No foreign troops tread on Vichy France soil.

Meanwhile, in Nova Scotia waters, another group of Canadian warships intercepts the Free French destroyers as they leave port. The Canadian admiral in charge of the task force suggests to the Free French that they should turn south, not north or east, and provides them with an escort. The Free French ships are followed until they get the idea they will not be able to reach St. Pierre and Miquelon.

Back at the islands, the Duty Inspector takes charge of the radio transmissions. All messages are accepted without question, but are not necessarily transmitted as received. The U-boats in the North Atlantic soon notice that the weather reports are suddenly

unreliable, and the coded messages make no sense at all. -8-
Some of the Miquelonais have their names added to RCMP lists for future consideration.

The Vichy government protests, but Prime Minister King buries them under his non-committal blather. Cordell Hull also squawks but both King and FDR ignore him. The convoys suffer a few less casualties than they did in our timeline and Britain gets more supplies than it would have otherwise.

The German and Vichy protests are brushed aside on the grounds that the legal government of St. Pierre and Miquelon is still in place and functioning. Only the radio station is under the supervision of a Mountie, to which the Vichyards agreed voluntarily.

The Newfoundland Alternative.

In November 1941, the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary and Newfoundland regimental units come ashore at night. The Vichyards are separated out and held for deportation. The remainder of the population is told they must sign a loyalty oath to the Dominion of Newfoundland or be deported. The raid was in strength. All the private boats were confiscated. The food stores and gardens are inventoried and guarded. It is clear to the population that any resistance will be met with full force.

As more Newfies flood the islands, Churchill is blazing away at the Newfoundland government. He is angry not at the annexation itself, but at the defiance of the Newfoundland government in upsetting international diplomacy. The Germans have threatened to occupy other Vichy colonies in retaliation. FDR is not happy either, and it goes without saying that Cordell Hull is having conniptions. Mackenzie King responds as usual; he waffles thither and yon, waiting to see how things go before daring to venture a public comment.

The Newfies are unrepentant and refuse to budge. The issue is not resolved by Pearl Harbour but certainly gets pushed into the background. Militant islanders are isolated into internment camps on the far side of Newfoundland for later deportation. Attempts at sabotage and resistance are responded to by wholesale expulsions of families. It becomes clear that the Newfies will find any excuse to clear out the residents and replace them with settlers from Newfoundland. By war's end, the islanders all happen to speak with a Newfie twang, as the original inhabitants are gone. Newfoundland refuses to return the islands to France after the war. When Newfoundland joins the Canadian Confederation in 1949, the islands come with it, and Canada certainly does not intend to return them.

The Free French destroyers slipped out of Halifax and head to St. Pierre and Miquelon. They never make it, as waiting U-boats take

them out. Some survivors make it ashore in lifeboats. They are, of course, interrogated by Canadian and American security forces. The information reveals that De Gaulle cannot be trusted; he will not be acknowledged in the future as a Free French leader. Other officers advise De Gaulle that they will not accept his orders without prior approval from elsewhere. History books record De Gaulle as a minor contender to the leadership of the Free French who was removed from power in early 1942 as a result of a failed raid. The war goes differently as a result, but that is another story.

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The Default Standard.

From the beginning, post offices of the world preferred that postage stamps be applied on the upper right of the envelope. In the 1867 CANADIAN POSTAL GUIDE, it was stated how to position a postage stamp [2]: “*Stamps should be placed on the front or address side of the letter, and on the right hand upper corner.*” This raises a point I don’t recall seeing discussed in philatelic literature, namely how was it that mail standardized in the form of stamps and postmarks in the upper part of the envelope, the address tending to the lower right, and the return address to upper left. The vast majority of letters sent, both before and after the advent of postage stamps, follow this template.

Yes, there have been lots of letters that violated the principle and still made it through, but that only demonstrates the error tolerance of a human-operated postal system. It seems to me that the standard format of addressing arose because the majority of humans are right-handed. Whether addressing an envelope or sorting it, the cover will be held with the left hand. Further, it will be instinctive for most people to hold it by the bottom or the side of the left. Therefore the address will flow to the right from the middle of the envelope.

A mail sorter will find it easier and faster to add the postmark by moving in the canceller from the right, and therefore the majority of handstamps would be in the right half of the cover. If only a few covers are being postmarked, then it is no extra labour as to where the handstamp is placed, thus the many covers with postmarks on the left side. If a large volume of covers must be got through in a hurry, then sorters will instinctively or per instructions take a handful of letters, fan them out, and quickly postmark them in the exposed corner. A fan of letters would commonly be held in the left hand, so therefore the upper right corner would be exposed for cancelling.

Although the vast majority of letters are properly franked, there are always enough non-standard covers that postal administrations must, from time to time, remind people where the stamp should go. The Italian Post Office used a machine slogan in 1955 to encourage the public in this regard [5]. Post offices were plagued over the years in particular by people using stamp positions to send a message, known commonly as “the language of stamps”, mostly for romantic purposes. Tilting or inverting a stamp was not a problem if the stamp was in the correct position, but many languages of stamps required placing stamps in odd corners or edges, something the posties object to because of the difficulty in postmarking the stamps [6].

It wasn't just posties who objected to non-standard stamp positions. The New York Society of Self-Culture, a group of wealthy socialites with too much time on their hands, decreed in their 1906 book on etiquette that stamps should only be upright in the upper right corner [9]. The full text is worth quoting: "*By the exceeding neatness of its appointments, and by the careful distinctness of the address it bears, an envelope signifies at a glance whether the author of a letter within is a well-bred and well-educated person. A stamp pasted on askew, or upside-down, or in the wrong corner, a blot, a smudge where the fingers pressed the gummed flap, and a direction in indecipherable hieroglyphics are the strong but silent indications of an untidy or uneducated individual. It is an important detail to place the stamp exactly and squarely in its own proper corner ...*"

Decades later, in 1952, another etiquette book stated emphatically: "*Place the stamp neatly (never upside down) in the upper right-hand corner of the envelope with a narrow edge of the envelope showing at the top and the right side.*" [8].

Origins Of Stamp Position Codes.

The use of stamp position as a code obviously dates no earlier than 1840 or whatever subsequent date that postage stamps were introduced into a country. As an aside, sealing wax codes were

sometimes used on stampless covers, where the colour of the wax had some meaning [7]. Collecting covers with stamp position codes is difficult primarily because it is impossible to tell if the stamp is tilted or inverted because a code was being used or because the sender was sloppy in affixing it.

The type of position code most familiar to philatelists is the "language of stamps" code used for romantic purposes. There is no consistency in these codes, partly because there was no central authority promulgating the code, and partly because codes had to be changed from time to time as they became known to the wider public. Illustrations of stamp position codes are found on postcards, which sender and receiver could agree to use as their secret code. Often lovers would make up their own codes.

A code could involve not only the position of a stamp (tilted, upside down, etcetera) but also where it was located on the envelope (upper left, bottom centre, and so forth). As an example, a Victorian-era code varied the meaning of an upside down stamp from "stop correspondence" if on the upper right corner of the envelope to "affection and love" if at upper left to "I belong to another" if level with the addressee name [22].

One German code from the early 1950s used pairs of stamps to increase the possibilities, such as both stamps inverted, or one

stamp upright and the other tilted right [21]. This is rare though, since most people only use one stamp to pay the postage. A Canadian code from 1917 also used multiple stamps, an example being two 1-cent stamps in the upper right corner meaning "My love for you has doubled" or, if in the upper left corner, "You have a rival" [25]. This would be impossible to differentiate from a cover paid by two stamps only because that's what the sender had on hand.

The aforementioned Canadian code, which appears to have been compiled by someone naive about postal regulations, also used torn stamps. A stamp torn in half, then placed in the upper right corner with a slight gap between the two halves, meant "Our friendship is at an end". Placed likewise in the upper left corner of the cover meant "You have broken my heart". This code would certainly be easier to recognize, especially if part of a correspondence. One wonders, though, about how many of these covers were discarded by stamp collectors as not worth saving. Did the posties intercept such covers as fraudulent use of two uncanceled halves of used stamps?

Romance And Position Codes.

There were numerous codes published. The tables below shows the meanings of some of the more common stamp positions.

Stamp position	Meaning	Country	Time period	Reference
upside down stamp on upper right of cover	Stop correspondence	USA	1800s	22
	Remember me	Austria	late 1800s	7
	Kiss to receiver	England	1890s	20
	My heart is given to another. Write to me no more.	England	early 1900s	24
	You are very cruel.	Canada	1917	25
	Do you remember me?	England	early 1900s	26
	Do you remember me?	England	1911	28
	Eternally yours	Germany	early 1950s	21
	Never come back	Switzerland	1927	27

Stamp position	Meaning	Country	Time period	Reference
tilted left on upper right of cover	I love you	Austria	late 1800s	7
	Do you love me, dearest?	England	early 1900s	24
	I love you	France	early 1900s	7
	A kiss	England	early 1900s	26
	I am faithful to you	England	1911	28
	I am provoked at your long silence	Canada	1917	25
	My heart belongs to another	Switzerland	1927	27

Politics And Position Codes.

Separatists and irredentists early on used the idea of the upside-down stamp as a form of political protest. From a philatelist's point of view, this may be difficult to collect on cover as one cannot assume that every envelope with an upside-down monarch is an actual political cover, for many inverted usages were undoubtedly just sloppiness on the part of the sender.

Popular English folklore during the late 1800s had it that to put a Queen Victoria stamp upside-down on an envelope was to express a wish to have her beheaded [12]. (During much of her reign, the monarchy was unpopular and the veneration of her that we associate with the Victorian era did not develop until her later Jubilee years.)

It was commonly believed to be a serious offense to affix her stamps upside down and punishment would follow [10]. One commentator wrote in 1897 about: "*... the seriousness with which an old clerk warned me when, fresh from school thirty years back, I had, with a lad's indifference, stuck a stamp on a letter wrong side up, that I was liable to be fined L20 for the offense.*" [11].

In Haiti, after an 1888 coup deposed the president, stamps bearing his visage were used upside down [14]. In the late 1800s, Russia began to pressure the Duchy of Finland to quell incipient nationalism. From 1892 on, the use of Finnish stamps was severely restricted, and Russian stamps had to be used for mail going outside Finland. One method Finns used to object to the compulsory use of Russian stamps was to stick them on upside-down [1]. The Irish nationalists of the 1910s mailed letters with the King's head upside down [13].

The USA also has protest covers. In 1935, some Americans who didn't like the current administration suggested in a New York City newspaper that people put their stamps upside-down on letters to signify themselves against the President [4]. An Idaho small-press magazine published by a right-wing group, called FRONTIERSMAN, not only habitually mails its publication with upside down Flag stamps but calls attention to them by framing the stamp and labelling it "Nation in Distress". In American prisons, some prisoners have been disciplined by the warden for mailing letters with upside down stamps [16 and 17]. In 2000, a federal prison warden in Colorado fined one of the inmates \$500 for mailing his tax return to the IRS with two upside down Flag stamps. Another prisoner who mailed personal letters with upside down Flags was put on punishment detail, then sent to solitary confinement, and finally had his incoming mail blocked.

Secret Codes.

With the advent of postage stamps, writers had an additional method of communicating information via a secret code, either by positioning the stamps in a certain way or by using a combination of different stamps.

During World War Two, some philatelic military personnel must have been attracting the unwanted attentions of censors who questioned why peculiar combinations of stamps were used on cover. Some philatelists got around this by attaching a label explaining to the censor that it was philatelic mail. An example was a 1943 cover sent from USA to New Zealand by a philatelist writing to a U.S. Army officer [3]. A label was placed on the cover which read: "*Notice to Army Examiner: The stamps used on this letter are not for a code. These covers are returned to me for philatelic purposes.*"

The World War Two records of the Office of Strategic Services (precursor to the CIA) show they were concerned that stamp dealers and collectors who plastered their covers with stamps might be transmitting information through stamp codes such as position, type of stamp used, or markings. Nothing was ever proven in any espionage case [15].

Miscellaneous Codes.

I don't know why, perhaps currency controls, but a stamp position code was published in Germany before World War One for postcard traders [23]. Examples of this code are: tilted left in upper left corner of cover = "I collect only foreign"; tilted right at bottom centre of cover = "No", and tilted right at middle right edge of cover = "Your cards delight me".

Unconscious Codes.

Stamp positions are not always deliberate but often predictable. In the early 1950s, U.S.P.O. authorities captured a fugitive because he always placed stamps on letters crosswise, so as to leave a small triangle of the envelope at the upper right corner [18]. Many people instinctively place high rate postage with the largest value stamp at right, then stamps declining in face value in order going left.

Stamp Codes In Fiction.

In my collection of philatelic fiction, I have a marginal item, a mystery short story by Michael Gilbert titled "The African Tree Beavers" [19]. Here is the opening paragraph of the story, the rest of which has nothing to do with philately or postal history: "*Like many practical and unimaginative men, Mr. Calder believed in*

certain private superstitions. He would never take a train which left at one minute to the hour; he distrusted the number 29; and he refused to open any parcel or letter on which the stamp had been fixed upside-down. This, incidently, once saved his life when he refused to open an innocent-looking parcel bearing the imprint of a bookseller from whom he had made many purchases in the past but which proved, on this occasion, to contain three ounces of tritoluene and a contact fuse."

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