Stamp and cover fakes and forgeries appear in many forms

By Daniel Piazza

Almost as long as there have been stamps and stamp collectors, there have been fakes and forgeries.

The earliest collector’s guide to detecting them was a 36-page brochure published by Thornton Lewes and Edward L. Pemberton in 1863, barely a generation after the first stamps appeared.

A new exhibit in the National Stamp Salon of the William H. Gross Stamp Gallery will introduce National Postal Museum visitors to the history of this quirky philatelic byway.

Postal counterfeits are stamps or stationery that have been forged in order to deprive the post office of revenue. For example, the 25c Jack London counterfeit shown in Figure 1 was used on a cover addressed to the Internal Revenue Service’s processing center in Holtsville, N.Y. It was detected in the mainstream, probably because it lacks the luminescent tagging of the actual stamps, and returned to sender. The counterfeit is composed of half-tone dots rather than the intaglio lines of the original. Fakes are otherwise genuine stamps or covers that have been altered to make them valuable to collectors. The fake cancel on the 1969 6c Professional Baseball first-day cover in Figure 2 was applied by Gary Westemberger, a part-time cover dealer who found it more convenient to cancel his own covers than have them serviced by the post office. Genuine cancels would have been applied by a machine fitted with a steel die; these were printed by hand using a rubber stamp.

Unlike fakes, which start life as genuine items, forgeries are created wholly to deceive collectors. They can range in quality from amateurish to excellent, and some the best were created by Jean de Sperati.

Born near Pisa, Italy, he learned the stamp forgery business from his mother and brothers before relocating to France about 1914.

In 1943 de Sperati was arrested for exporting rare stamps without a license, but he beat the charge by proving that the stamps were forgeries of his own creation.

The gorgeous 1847 10c Washington with lovely blue cancel that you see in Figure 3 is his; under magnification it becomes clear that the image is lithographed rather than engraved.

George A. Hussey, operator of a local post in
New York City, recognized that many of his customers were collectors of local post stamps. He paid a printer to produce forgeries for him, and between 1862 and 1866 he sold thousands of spurious stamps. On one famous occasion, Hussey dutifully forged the Winsan’s City Post stamps, apparently not realizing that they were a fantasy created by S. Allan Taylor (Figure 4).

In addition to forgeries, Taylor is remembered for his prodigious output of fantasy stamps that often poked fun at himself and fellow philatelists. William P. Brown was a New York City stamp dealer who early on was said to have conducted his business from a wheelbarrow like the one on the stamp at left in Figure 5, while philatelic lore holds that the vignette of the Little Wanderers Aid Society fantasy stamp at right in Figure 5 depicts Taylor himself.

Daniel Piazza is a Smithsonian curator of philately. The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. For more information, visit www.postalmuseum.si.edu.

Data must be submitted on the special Cover Seal Offer form. Copies of the form may be obtained by writing to Cachets, Covers and Seals, Box 29, Sidney, OH 45365, and enclosing an addressed, stamped envelope.

The form also can be accessed on Linn’s web site at www.linns.com.

Philatelic and philanthropic organizations may offer cachets, covers and souvenir seals for upcoming events in this column. Offers marking past events are ineligible.

This free listing will appear only once. Completed forms should be submitted approximately eight weeks before the event being commemorated is to take place.

Collectors ordering cacheted covers, souvenir cards or seals from this column should allow at least six to eight weeks from the date of issue, and even longer for covers requiring a first-day cancel, for delivery.

May 18  Saw-whet owl
Milwaukee Philatelic Society will sponsor a cover for the endangered saw-whet owl in Wisconsin; it is endangered because it is not afraid of humans. $2.50. Carol Schutta, 6814 Southview Circle, West Bend, WI 53090. No. 10 addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) required.

May 19  Mexican gray wolf
Milwaukee Philatelic Society will sponsor a cover for the Mexican gray wolf, exterminated from Mexico, Arizona and New Mexico. Five animals were found in the wild and used to reintroduce the Mexican gray wolf in this area. $2.50. Carol Schutta, 6814 Southview Circle, West Bend, WI 53090. SASE required.

May 26  Fleet Week New York
USPS New Jersey Chapter 90 of the USCS will sponsor a computer-generated cachet for Fleet Week New York, with USPS pictorial postmark for the USS Constitution. $2. Phil Schreiber, 123 South Adelaide Ave., Apt. 3B, Highland Park, NJ 08904. SASE required.

May 31  Civil War
Napex will offer two different engraved two-color Napex show covers, one each for Gettysburg and Vicksburg. Each shows an eagle and text about the battle. $2. Napex Covers, 6025 Sherman Lane, Springfield, VA 22152. SASE required.