

## ETHEL B. McCOY—The Lady and Her Stamps

by Ken Lawrence

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### *Ethel Bergstresser Stewart McCoy (1893-1980)*

Ethel Bergstresser was born to wealth and privilege, which she represented with grace and generosity as a benefactor of ballet, opera, and orchestral music, and as a promoter of poetry. The twice-widowed stamp collector’s legacy is among the most storied in American philately. The American Philatelic Research Library is an appropriate beneficiary of her confidence that our hobby will survive and prosper as an intellectual and cultural project, not merely as a monument to acquisitive pride.



This photograph from the *Airpost Journal* report on the 1937 convention of the American Air Mail Society helped bring Ethel B. Stewart (later McCoy) to philatelic prominence

Ethel’s father, Charles Milford Bergstresser, was a co-founder with Charles Dow and Edward Jones of Dow Jones & Company. He was the partner whose initial investment financed their firm when it began in 1882. Bergstresser named their newspaper *The Wall Street Journal*. After Dow died, the surviving partners sold the firm to Clarence W. Barron in 1903.

Bergstresser’s wealth was estimated to be about \$2 million at the time, equivalent to about \$74 million today. He was 45 years old then, and Ethel was nine. To his comment on his decision to retire, “I expect to take it a little easy from now on, but The Street will always interest me,” a reporter remarked that he had made his fortune there. Bergstresser replied, “That was easy. Did I not have several panics to help me?” He died in 1923 at age 65.

A June 1912 passenger list from the luxury liner RMS *Olympic* offers a glimpse of Bergstresser family life after Dow Jones. It lists 18-year-old Ethel and her parents of North Branford (misspelled in the ship’s roster), Connecticut, as first-class travelers with forward berths who had boarded the ship at Southampton, England, for the voyage to New York. *Olympic’s* sister ship, the RMS *Titanic*, pride of the White Star Line, had sunk off Newfoundland just two months earlier.

In July 1917 the elder Bergstressers announced the engagement of their daughter to Bert A. Stewart of New York and Newton, New Jersey. In common with his fiancée, Stewart too was born to wealth as scion of the R. A. Stewart & Company’s founders. The firm manufactured stamping and dating devices for businesses. Though not a stamp collector himself, he encouraged and indulged Ethel’s passion for her hobby.

The passenger list for RMS *Olympic’s* westbound return trip from Europe included the young socialite Ethel Bergstresser and her parents—today we remember her as Ethel B. McCoy, her name at the time of her death in 1980



American Passengers – Forward	
Name	Residence
Charles Adams, 50	
Clara Adams, 42	
Arnold Augier, 40	
Harry Barley, 33	
Edna Barley, 24	
William Barstow, 34	
Charles Bergstresser, 54	
Ellen Bergstresser, 47	
Ethel Bergstresser, 18	
William Bruff, 57	
M. D. C. 20	



Ethel B. Stewart joined the American Philatelic Society in October 1934 as member No. 12788, later becoming life member No. 514. She joined the American Air Mail Society in August 1935 as member No. 1657. Her arrival coincided with the dawn of a golden age for women of means in philately.

Catherine L. Manning was curator of the National Philatelic Collection at the Smithsonian Institution from 1922 to 1951; she became the first woman to hold elective office in the APS, serving as vice president from 1935 to 1937. Travel writer and opera star Sybil FitzGerald built a magnificent airmail collection that is now the pride of the British Library. Pennsylvania widow Clara Adams was famous among airmail collectors as “the world’s champion first-flightier.” In 1935 Connecticut heiress Katharine Matthies began to gather what became the finest collection of Civil War patriotic covers ever known. Louise S. Davis (later Hoffman) of New York made a name for herself as an airmail specialist. A youthful Barbara R. Mueller of Wisconsin was making sure that these women’s achievements did not go unrecorded.

Ethel became well known for her collection of Columbian, Trans-Mississippi, and Pan-American Exposition stamps (which included 1¢, 2¢, and 4¢ invert errors). She exhibited her airmail collection at Saint Petersburg, Florida, her second home. For fun she collected precancels and palm trees on stamps. The Siegel firm purchased and sold these collections.

At the May 9-17, 1936, Third International Philatelic Exhibition (TIPEX) in New York she earned a silver medal for her exhibit of United States 20th century postal history and a bronze medal for U.S. commemorative stamps. Another leading woman collector, Caroline P. Cromwell of New York, won the silver-gold medal—today called vermeil—the top award in the commemorative category.

Also in 1936, Bert Stewart bought the famous Inverted Jenny error block of four previously owned by Arthur Hind from New York dealer Spencer Anderson for \$16,000, and presented it to his wife as a surprise gift shortly before he died of a heart ailment in September at age 47.

At the time of his death, besides being president of his family’s eponymous New York firm, Bert was also president of Hill-Independent Manufacturing Company of Philadelphia; president of the Fulton Specialty Company of Elizabeth, New Jersey; a director of Superior Type Manufacturing Company of Chicago; and a director of several other rubber stamp concerns. According to his *New York Times* obituary he also headed the Newton Theater Company in his home town.

After her first husband’s death, Ethel served as treasurer of the Stewart firm. She worked at her office three days a week until her retirement, when she became its board chairman. Meanwhile her philatelic achievements and fame flourished. In July 1937 she became the first life member of the American Air Mail Society and the first woman elected to the AAMS board of directors.

The block of four Inverted Jenny errors became Ethel’s favorite stamps. William T. Robey, the original purchaser in May 1918, recalled:

From the time I sold the sheet until this past summer [1937], I had never seen one of these stamps. Then, Mrs. Ethel B. Stewart, a widely known collector from Newton, New Jersey, who owns a block of four, was in Washington and I had the pleasure of meeting her. Mrs. Stewart had her stamps with her, and once again I had in my hands part of the original sheet that I had purchased for \$24.00.

The Collectors Club, of which I am a member, was having a meeting that evening and I invited Mrs. Stewart to accompany me to the meeting. She accepted my invitation and took her stamps with her. Mrs. Stewart very graciously exhibited these stamps and there were many present that evening who had never seen any of the stamps before.

Another leading lady of the hobby, Florence E. Kleinert of Allentown, Pennsylvania, took Ethel’s exhibit, now enhanced by the addition of the Inverted Jenny block, to the 1938 dedication of the Franklin Institute at Philadelphia during National Air Mail Week, to the 1939 New York World’s Fair, to the 1940 Postage Stamp Centennial exhibition in Washington, and to the 1940 APS convention in Buffalo.

From 1939 to 1941 Ethel served as AAMS vice president, the first female elected to that office. Her philatelic prominence persisted for the rest of her days, including two decades of service as a director of the Essay-Proof Society. Her other affiliations included the Collectors Club of New York, Society of Philatelic Americans, Bureau Issues Association, American Philatelic Congress, Precancel Stamp Society, American Topical Association, and the Saint Petersburg Stamp Club. She was a Fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society London.



The block of four 24¢ Inverted Jenny stamps from Positions 65, 66, 75, and 76 in the original sheet of 100, with a vertical guide line at the center, which Bert Stewart gave to his wife, Ethel, in 1936—he purchased the block for \$16,000 from Spencer Anderson, a New York dealer, following the death of its previous owner, Arthur Hind



Walter R. McCoy (1880-1952)

In 1941 Ethel married collector Walter R. McCoy, a specialist in United States Bureau Issues. Friends teased them that he had married her for the airmail error block and she had married him for his rare Orangeburg coil (the 3¢ George Washington coil stamp of 1911 with gauge 12 perforations, Scott 389).

At the Centenary International Philatelic Exhibition (CIPEX) at New York in 1947, Ethel exhibited “The Trans-Mississippi Issue of 1898 Specialized” and Walter exhibited “A Collection of Bureau Issue Plate Numbers from Number 1 to Date.” Both won first (highest) awards in their respective classes.

Walter edited the *Collectors Club Philatelist* from 1939 to 1942, and the *American Philatelic Congress Book* from 1945 to 1950. He served terms as president of the Collectors Club and the APC. After Walter died in 1952, Ethel endowed an annual award in his name for the best *Congress Book* article of the year. Both McCoy's are profiled in the APS Hall of Fame.

At the Fifth International Philatelic Exhibition (FIPEX), Ethel entered “U.S. Pan-American Issue of 1901,” which won a gold medal and the Arthur E. Summerfield Trophy for the best 20th century United States collection. At the Sixth International Philatelic Exhibition (SIPEX) she again exhibited “The Trans-Mississippi Issue” and again earned a gold medal.

When she died in August 1980, friends recalled that Ethel B. McCoy had frequently brought joy to fellow hobbyists by presenting them with handsome needlepoint handbags that she crafted as gifts and door prizes. But her greatest gift to all of us was the ownership title to the four stolen Inverted Jenny stamps that she transferred to APRL in 1979. This sale of the Position 76 stamp will support APRL's mission as she would have wished.

**The Stolen McCoy Block**

The year 2018 will mark the centenary of the first air post stamp issued by the United States Post Office Department, the red and blue 24¢ Curtiss JN-4H “Jenny” biplane air post stamp of 1918, Scott C3, and the unintended variety with the center vignette inverted, Scott C3a, colloquially known as the Inverted Jenny, the world's most famous error stamp.

Almost 62 years have passed since the worst philatelic felony involving that stamp, which has never been solved. On September 23, 1955, at the annual convention of the American Philatelic Society in Norfolk, a thief or thieves stole the Inverted Jenny block of four that collector Ethel B. McCoy had loaned to the APS for the enjoyment and appreciation of show-goers.

Three of the four stamps have been recovered, one by one, as time has passed, but the criminals responsible for their absence have not been identified. Although whoever perpetrated the heist probably died years ago, the whereabouts of one stamp from the block has not been reported since the theft.

Title to the missing stamp belongs to the American Philatelic Research Library. If it can be recovered, the APRL will benefit from the monetary value that a sale might realize, and the entire hobby will benefit when we celebrate the reunion with our lost treasure. Happily, one previously missing stamp from the block was recovered last year and is featured in this sale.

**The Original Block of Four**

As George Amick told the story in his 1986 book *Jenny! The exciting story of the world's best-known error stamp*, Ethel Stewart McCoy's first husband, Bert Stewart, acquired the block of four from New York City stamp dealer Spencer Anderson in 1936 for \$16,000, a very large sum during the Great Depression for an item that might be worth millions today if it were still intact.

The McCoy block comprised Positions 65, 66, 75, and 76 from the sheet of 100 stamps discovered by William T. Robey in 1918. Amick correctly believed the block had previously been owned by Arthur Hind, an industrialist whose collection was best known for the fabled British Guiana One-Cent Magenta stamp of 1856, sometimes called “the world's rarest stamp,” which was recently in the news when Stuart Weitzman, the shoe designer, bought the stamp for \$9.5 million in a Sotheby's auction. In that respect McCoy's Inverted Jenny block came with an aristocratic pedigree.

Ethel McCoy exhibited her block “proudly and often” until it was stolen. Despite the presence of armed guards at the exhibition, there were no witnesses to the theft, no suspect, and few clues to pursue. Her insurance company paid \$15,000 for the loss, with the stipulation that in the event of recovery, she could regain ownership by reimbursing the insurer.



Arthur Hind, who owned the block later sold to Bert A. Stewart as a gift for his wife Ethel





### The Emergence and Recovery of Position 75

Whoever made off with the block separated it into individual stamps, so the first glimpse of a missing McCoy following the theft occurred in July 1958 when Chicago stamp dealer Louis John Castelli Jr. sent a single Inverted Jenny on approval to Raymond and Roger Weill, the well-known brothers whose New Orleans stamp shop catered to a wealthy clientele.

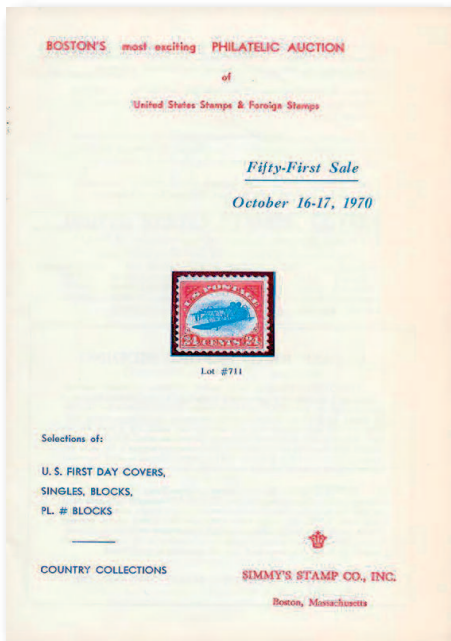
The Weills had bought and sold more Inverted Jennys than anyone since Eugene Klein bought the full sheet from Robey and sold it to Colonel Edward H. R. Green in 1918. They recognized Castelli's stamp as Position 75 from the stolen McCoy block, even though it had been altered. Along the right edge someone had blunted the perforations and scraped or abraded the tips to remove evidence of a vertical red guide line.

The Weills immediately notified the Federal Bureau of Investigation about their deduction. The FBI agreed that the stamp was a stolen McCoy, but was powerless to act because the stamp was then worth less than the \$5,000 federal minimum for jurisdiction under laws concerning interstate movement of stolen property.

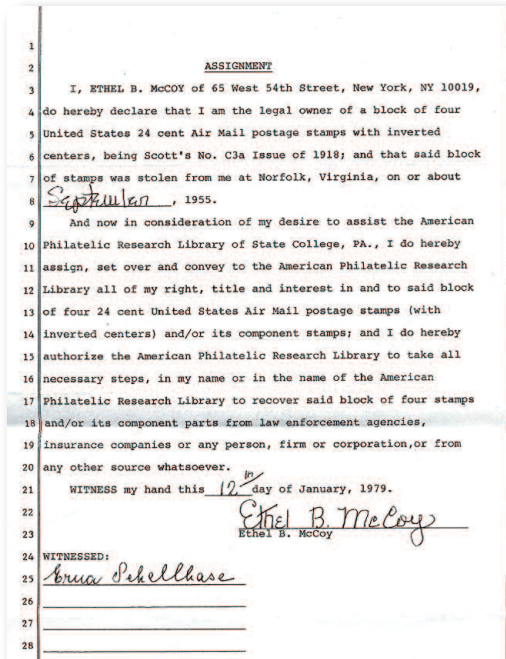
At the FBI's direction, the Weills returned the stamp to Castelli with a curt cover letter that said, "We are sorry that we cannot use the U.S. 24¢ Airmail with inverted center which you sent us for offer. The stamp is, therefore, being returned herewith and we are refunding your postage costs."

Twelve years passed before the same stamp appeared again. Amick reported the sighting as follows:

These matters rested until 1970, when the stamp appeared in an October 16-17 auction offering by Simmy's Stamp Company of Boston, its picture gracing the cover of the catalog. Simmy's reported afterward, in its published list of prices realized, that the stamp was sold for \$19,000. Who had consigned it, and who bought it, the company says it is unable to say. Somehow, however, it found its way back to Louis Castelli.



The Position 75 stamp (lower left in the block) appeared on the cover of Simmy's Stamp Co.'s October 16-17, 1970, auction catalogue



The McCoy block was stolen in 1955—in 1979, Ethel McCoy assigned the title and all rights to the stamps to the American Philatelic Research Library

Despite the wisdom of proverbs, the third time was not a charm for Castelli. In September 1977 he offered the stamp to Las Vegas motel owner Robert L. Faiman for \$16,000, which Faiman agreed to pay subject to a Philatelic Foundation certificate of authenticity. The PF experts identified it as a stolen McCoy, and once again the FBI was notified. By that time the value had increased enough to establish federal jurisdiction. The FBI took custody of the stamp and renewed its investigation.

Castelli told the FBI that he had obtained the stamp from another stamp dealer, Ben Enlow (the FBI's phonetic spelling), in the 1950s, in exchange for a block of four rare \$5 Columbian commemorative stamps of 1893, Scott 245. Castelli had no paperwork for the transaction, and Enlow was deceased, so the FBI was unable to verify Castelli's story or to gather new evidence about the theft.

On January 12, 1979, at the urging of APS Executive Secretary James T. DeVoss, Ethel McCoy assigned all of her rights, title, and interest in the stolen block of four stamps and/or its component stamps to the American Philatelic Research Library. She was 85 years old and in declining health, with no desire to participate in a legal custody battle, but eager to support the hobby and the library. She died on August 17, 1980.

In January 1980 the Justice Department filed an interpleader complaint in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, to establish ownership of the stamp and to relieve the government of further responsibility for it by settling the conflicting claims (if asserted) of defendants APRL, Faiman, Castelli, one Victor Spilotro, The Philatelic Foundation, Ethel McCoy, Roe Insurance Company, and John Doe.



After the FBI recovered the Position 75 stamp from Chicago stamp dealer Louis J. Castelli Jr., John W. Kaufmann featured it on the front cover of his September 21, 1981, auction catalogue—it sold for \$115,000, for the benefit of APRL

annual convention in Atlanta. The stamp's notoriety may have contributed to the \$115,000 realization, which was earmarked to support library operations.

Robert Faiman died in 1998 at age 68. His *Las Vegas Sun* obituary began, "Many stamp collectors spend their lives dreaming of obtaining a treasure like the 'inverted Jenny' — the rarest of all U.S. issues. During his life, which included 60 years as a philatelic hobbyist and dealer, Bob Faiman owned two of those 1918 24-cent airmail stamps that the U.S. Postal Service erroneously printed with the Curtiss Jenny airplane upside down."

The article did not say whether Faiman counted the McCoy invert as one of his two. (Readers need not remind me that Scott C3a is not our country's rarest stamp, nor that the Bureau of Engraving and Printing produced it for the U.S. Post Office Department.) Louis Castelli died in 2004 at age 82, the last of the characters who played important roles in that stamp's drama.

#### *The Emergence and Recovery of Position 65*

"Meanwhile," George Amick wrote, "a second McCoy invert had turned up." He reported:

It was not immediately identified as such. The stamp was in the collection of Marcel Lutwak, a Chicago businessman and a connoisseur of philatelic material. Lutwak had suggested to a well-known philatelic official in the spring of 1981 that he might be willing to donate parts of his collection to the APRL as a tax write-off, beginning with a Jenny invert, and this information was duly relayed to James DeVoss. It was not until 18 months later, however, that DeVoss succeeded in contacting Lutwak personally in order to discuss the proposed gift.

Lo and behold, when they met at the Plaza Hotel in New York City on November 19, 1982, Lutwak presented his stamp to DeVoss, who immediately recognized it as Position 65 from the stolen McCoy block even though perforations along the right edge had been altered to remove traces of the vertical red guide line. What an amazing coincidence! Immediately after APRL had recovered one stolen McCoy stamp, a philatelic philanthropist arranged to donate another one that the library already owned.

DeVoss was pleased as punch at this turn of events, but when he informed James H. Beal, chairman of the APS Stamp Theft Committee, of the library's stroke of luck, Beal informed him that the stamp was still stolen property and needed to be turned over to law enforcement authorities for proper investigation and legal transfer. After consulting APS attorney and APRL trustee George M. Martin, DeVoss reluctantly relinquished the stamp to the FBI.

Here is Amick's account of the investigation that ensued:

In Chicago, agents questioned Marcel Lutwak. He asserted that he had bought the stamp before 1974 from a seller whom he knew only by his first name. The FBI had no reason to charge him with anything, and in fact, no one connected with the case has suggested that Lutwak's role was other than an innocent one. Of the Chicago collector — who has since died — [FBI agent and APS member] Earl Sumner said, "We believed him

The complaint described Victor Spilotro as a man who had represented himself as the stamp's owner on May 30, 1971, but he was otherwise unidentified. A Chicago man by that name, Victor P. Spilotro, who died in 1997, was frequently in the news as a Chicago mobster, one of four brothers active in the criminal underworld, two of whom were murdered in 1986 gangland killings.

If the persons were one and the same, who would have guessed that a high-ranking Chicago hoodlum had declared himself to be a philatelist with a claim to the stolen McCoy invert? Both Spilotro and Castelli were residents of Northbrook, a Chicago suburb, but Castelli told the FBI he knew no one named Spilotro.

"Roe" stood for the insurance firm whose name Ethel McCoy had forgotten, served by a published legal notice, and John Doe "being a name representing any and all other potential claimants as yet unknown." The PF had never asserted a claim on the stamp, and McCoy had already transferred her interest to APRL. Castelli claimed he owned the stamp, and Faiman wished to buy it from him. Relying on the evidence of sworn affidavits and "the time-honored rule that title cannot pass through a thief even to a bona fide purchaser," the court ruled on January 30, 1981, "that the Stamp rightfully belongs to Library."

Upon taking possession of the recovered Inverted Jenny, the APRL consigned it to John W. Kaufmann, who sold it at his September 25, 1981, public auction during the APS



to be an innocent purchaser of stolen goods.” Said James DeVoss: “From my very first telephone conversations and our personal meeting in New York on November 19, I had the distinct feeling that he was honest and sincere in his dealing with me... My feeling was that any person who knowingly purchased stolen property would never have offered to donate it to the APRL who already had title to the item. Such a person would probably have destroyed the item and disposed of the evidence, thus the APRL would be the big loser.”

All the players in this skit are dead — Lutwak, DeVoss, Martin, Beal, and Sumner — so I cannot question them about their story, but it does not pass the smell test. Which of my readers has forgotten the name of a dealer who sold him or her a five- or six-figure rarity, and kept no documentation of the purchase, yet plans to claim a tax deduction after donating it to a nonprofit organization?

Lutwak’s absent-minded attitude regarding the provenance of his Inverted Jenny contrasts sharply with the U.S. Revenues reference stamp collection he had donated to The Philatelic Foundation in 1981 when he needed a tax deduction to offset the gain he had realized from the sale of a Chicago hotel. A 1990 article by Peter A. Robertson on the PF website reported, “The collection was formed over a number of years and Mr. Lutwak indicated prices paid for many of his better stamps, and when and where he acquired them.”

(A few years after these events Lutwak or his heirs sold the rest of his collection to Andrew Levitt, who placed key items with favored clients and consigned the balance to the Daniel F. Kelleher auction firm for a January 20-21, 1988, name sale.)

If those questions are insufficient to raise doubts, consider other aspects of Lutwak’s career. His name is best known to posterity as the lead petitioner in a U.S. Supreme Court case styled *Lutwak et al. v. United States* decided in 1953. He and two others had been convicted of conspiring to arrange sham marriages and thus to obtain “the illegal entry into this country of three aliens as spouses of honorably discharged veterans.”

The evidence showed that Lutwak, a World War II veteran, never lived with the woman he had pretended to marry in Paris in November 1947. They separated as soon as they returned to the United States and went through the motions of a legal divorce to establish a record of her citizenship not long afterward. Lutwak also recruited two women veterans to perform the equivalent service for two European men. In upholding their convictions, the court held “this record fairly shrieks the guilt of the parties.”

Perhaps that was merely Lutwak’s youthful indiscretion when he was a struggling 27-year-old research chemist, but it might suggest he had a propensity to circumvent or violate rules that others were expected to obey, and expected not to be penalized for his infractions.

Another stranger-than-fiction event occurred in Chicago not long after the FBI had taken possession of the stolen McCoy invert that Louis Castelli had offered to Robert Faiman in Las Vegas. On February 16, 1978, a doorman at the front entrance to Lutwak’s residence on Lake Shore Drive let in two robbers posing as workmen. When Lutwak’s maid Sophie Blass, who spoke only Polish, answered their knock at the door to his 14th floor luxury flat, the men grabbed her, threw her down on the bed in the master bedroom, and bound her hands and feet with tape. From an open safe in the living room, they absconded with an album of stamps valued at \$250,000 to \$300,000 and jewelry worth between \$50,000 and \$100,000. After the men departed with their loot, Blass freed herself and called the police.

On March 6 police in Hollywood, Florida, arrested John Matarazzo and Carol Stinelli and charged them with theft of Lutwak’s collection. United Press International reported, “A spokesman for the Hollywood Police Department said the two were linked to another couple, Daniel and Judith Ward, arrested last month.” Finally, on March 14 the Associated Press followed up with this report datelined Chicago:

Two upstate New York men were being sought today on warrants accusing them of stealing a \$200,000 stamp collection from a North Side apartment.

Named in the warrants Monday were George Greenidge, 28, of Kingston, N.Y., and William Tyrell, 29, of Schenectady, N.Y.

FBI agents arrested two other men in Miami as they tried to sell a stamp book stolen Feb. 16 from a high-rise apartment.

I found no further reports on any of the six accused, but I think it is fair to infer that the FBI eventually returned the collection to Lutwak.

Several details of that heist require willful suspension of disbelief. Either that, or an A-list cast of actors to lend plausibility by performing the caper as a comedy. How did thieves know that they could enter and leave Lutwak’s residence so easily? that his maid would not understand their conversation? that a valuable stamp collection and jewelry were kept in his apartment? that his safe would be open?

Could this crime have been staged as a scam to collect insurance, which failed because an inept team of thieves and collaborators not only lacked the ability to pull it off, but did catch the attention of wire service reporters who distributed their stories to newspapers and broadcasters from coast to coast? On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a multimillionaire real estate tycoon being involved in such a scheme.

Be that as it may, by the time Marcel Lutwak handed the McCoy invert to Jim DeVoss when they met at a New York hotel in November 1982, the stamp had been stolen twice, but that aspect of the stamp’s odyssey had not been reported until my report appeared in the September 2014 *American Philatelist*, adding a fresh page to the McCoy legend.



DeVoss’s analysis that identified the stamp as Position 65 was persuasive. On December 6, 1982, less than three weeks after the New York meeting, the FBI announced the recovery of a second Inverted Jenny from the stolen McCoy block, and returned the stamp to the APRL two days later. The APS has exhibited it every year since then at its annual convention exhibition, and in many other venues as well. It has probably been viewed by more people than any of the 99 other Inverted Jennys, maybe by more than have viewed all the others combined.

*The Re-emergence of Position 76*

The other two missing stamps from the McCoy block had not been seen since the 1955 theft. In November and December 1988, the APRL trustees offered a \$10,000 reward for the return of each stamp, but no one came forward to claim it. Finally in the fall of 2014 Donald J. Sundman, president of Mystic Stamp Company, offered a \$50,000 reward for the recovery of a stolen McCoy Invert. In tandem with Sundman’s pledge, APRL President Roger Brody announced that the library would pay \$10,000 for information that led to the successful recovery of one of the stamps. News media publicized the reward offers throughout the United States and in some foreign countries.

On the afternoon of Monday, April 4, 2015, I received an e-mail message from Lewis Kaufman of The Philatelic Foundation in New York City, accompanied by an embedded high-resolution scan of a 1918 red and blue 24-cent Curtiss Jenny airmail error stamp with inverted center, Scott C3a. He wrote, “Could be pos. 76, Reperfed at left to remove guide line. What do you think?” Position 76 is the lower right stamp of the McCoy block of four.

Kaufman’s e-mail posed a challenge: If I could confirm The Philatelic Foundation’s initial judgment that the recently submitted stamp really is position 76, it would help secure a welcome homecoming to the APRL, and probably activate an occasion to disburse up to \$60,000 to one or more individuals who helped recover the stolen stamp.

*Identifying the Position 76 Stamp*

My method of identification is traditional. By studying traits that are as unique and distinctive as features of human fingerprints; by identifying many points of similarity that are not found on other stamps; and by plausibly accounting for any dissimilar points between the subject stamp and a previously obtained reference, an expert can state with virtual certainty that the stamp does or does not match the reference photograph and therefore is properly identified.

In this instance, the shape of each perforation tooth on two sides of the stamp and its location in relation to the printed design confirmed Kaufman’s analysis, as did the placement of the blue airplane vignette in relation to the red frame that surrounds it. No other stamp position matches these features. The perforations at the top and left do not match those on the old photo because they had been altered, as Kaufman had written, to remove the vertical guide line printed in red ink at the center of the sheet.

My answer was “Yes!” Another outside expert whose identity was not disclosed to me was more technologically inclined than I. Using Photoshop software he overlaid the new color image on the old black-and-white image, which proved to be perfectly congruent. (The outside expert was later revealed to be Scott Trepel, president of the Siegel firm). After due consideration, the PF issued a certificate that authenticated the newly discovered stamp as Position 76.



The APRL has kept the Position 65 stolen McCoy stamp ever since Chicago businessman Marcel Lutwak presented it to Col. James DeVoss for the APRL in 1982, and has exhibited the stamp at every annual APS convention since then



Position 76—the stamp offered in this auction—was skillfully reperfored at top and left to disguise its identity as one of the stamps in the stolen McCoy block



### ***The Spink Announcement***

On April 15 the stamp auction firm Spink USA distributed a news release that began:

Spink USA is proud to announce that on 1 April a recovery was made of a long-lost 1918 24c Jenny airmail with center inverted when a prospective consignor, who had inherited the stamp, delivered it to their auction galleries for sale. After careful expert examination the rarity was determined to be position 76 in the pane of 100 subjects. This position is the bottom right stamp from the famous McCoy block of four, which was stolen out of its exhibition frame in 1955 during the American Philatelic Society convention in Norfolk, Virginia... Position 76 recovered by Spink had been reperforated at right and most of the gum had been removed, so the pencil position numbers written on the gummed side had been lost, making identification a challenge.

Actually, the left edge has been reperforated, not the right, to remove the vertical guide line, but the image that accompanied the Spink notice was digitally outlined in a way that seemed to make all four edges appear to have been altered. The top perforations also have been altered to disguise its origin.

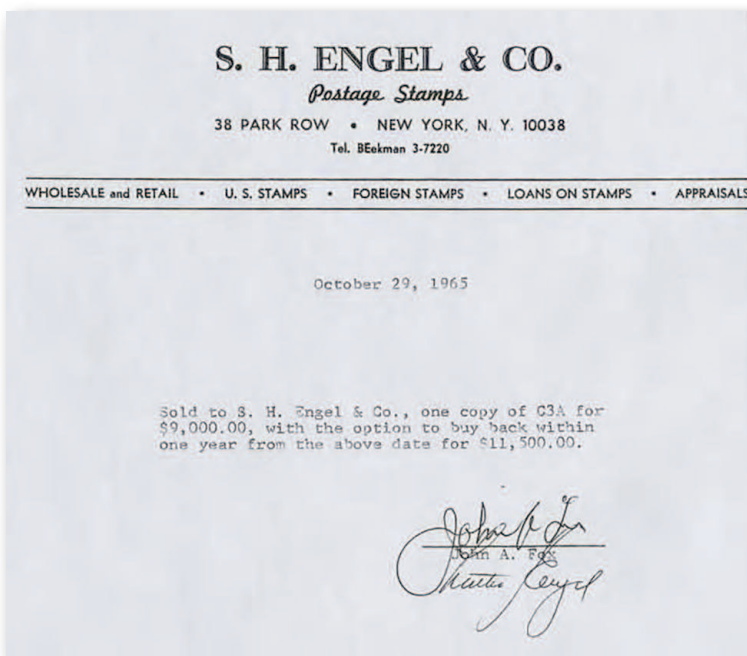
The release continued:

George Eveleth, Head of the Philatelic Department said: 'This is one of the most exciting events in my 38 year career in the stamp auction business.' Once legal matters are settled Spink USA will be returning the stamp to its rightful owner, the APRL."

Eveleth did not return my calls for additional information, but an Associated Press article by Jennifer Peltz added, "The would-be consignor, a man in his 20s who lives in the United Kingdom, said he'd inherited the stamp from his grandfather and knew little about it, said George Eveleth, head of Spink USA's philatelic department. He said authorities had told the auctioneers not to release the name of the consignor, who is in his 20s."

That report seemed to suggest that the missing stamp might have been lying in an affluent collector's album overseas for the past two or three generations, but there was reason to believe that it might have been lurking closer to home for most of those years.

This 1965 receipt accompanied the Position 76 Inverted Jenny stamp when a young man from Northern Ireland delivered it to Spink USA as a prospective consignment



### ***A Possible Link to John A. Fox***

Spink shared with reporters an intriguing document that accompanied the stamp, but cautioned that the two are not necessarily related. It is an October 29, 1965, typed receipt on a sheet of New York stamp dealer's letterhead stationery that reads, "Sold to S. H. Engel & Co., one copy of C3A for \$9,000, with the option to buy back within one year from the above date for \$11,500.00," and is signed by John A. Fox and Nathan Engel. The Scott Catalogue value for Scott C3a at that time was \$16,000.

The firm that bought the stamp was founded by brothers Solomon, Henry, and Nathan Engel in 1955 with Nathan as its president, and dissolved as a business in 1998, according to New York Department of State records. In this transaction, Engel effectively acted as a pawnbroker by lending money to Fox with the stamp as collateral. Nathan Engel died in 2009 at age 89.





John A. Fox, the New York stamp dealer who obtained a loan from S. H. Engel & Co., evidently using the stolen Position 76 Inverted Jenny as collateral

John A. Fox is a notorious rogue of American stamp hobby lore, but in 1965 he was admired throughout the hobby and the stamp trade. There would probably have been no reason for Engel to suspect that anything was amiss in this transaction, or to guess that the stamp might have been stolen. In retrospect the Engel firm performed a valuable service by documenting the stamp's whereabouts a half century ago.

From the late 1930s to the early 1960s Fox was one of the best known, most widely admired, prosperous and flamboyant New York philatelic auctioneers, but in 1966 he had been censured by the American Stamp Dealers Association, and the APS had expelled him from membership for "unethical conduct and conduct unbecoming a member."

Stamp trade insiders had become aware that Fox had sold fake classic United States and Confederate covers to wealthy collectors for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Robert A. Siegel had held an invitation-only gathering of elite clients at the Collectors Club clubhouse to inform them of Fox's activities and to show them how to spot his deceptive products. But the broader philatelic community was not properly informed until almost a decade later.

This was the cascade of events that brought Fox down:

First, as "a legendary ladies' man" in the words of fakes and forgeries expert and Purdue University professor Varro E. Tyler, Fox had been named as corespondent in a divorce action.

Next, the Internal Revenue Service had brought suit against him to recover unpaid taxes. Finally, in a 1968 lawsuit, a Denver businessman had won a \$1.43 million judgment against his former wife and Fox after he discovered that his stamp and coin collection, valued at \$1.1 million, had gone missing from his safe, and that Fox had paid the ex-wife \$100,000 for it in 1965.

The consequence was a sheriff's sale of Fox's philatelic stock on January 3, 1974, in New York City for the benefit of nine creditors. Missouri collector Creighton C. Hart attended the sale and reported on it in the journal of the United States Philatelic Classics Society. The auctioneer advised prospective bidders to ignore the lot descriptions when bidding, and cautioned them that there would be no warranty as to the genuineness of any item. With experienced collectors and dealers in attendance, stamps and covers sold for small fractions of the prices they would have realized had they been genuine.

Even after Hart's report, some of his loyal customers refused to believe that Fox had intentionally created and sold fraudulently altered and forged stamps and covers. But after Fox died in 1988, a box of photo-engraved zinc counterfeit postmark devices was discovered in the basement of his Floral Park, New York, home office. They are now in The Philatelic Foundation's reference collection; the Classics Society reproduced and published proof strikes of each device in 2008.

Considering the subsequent disclosures and the timeline of Fox's fall from grace, I think the 1965 Engel-Fox document probably does refer to the Position 76 Inverted Jenny. Keeping in mind the immense scope of Fox's forgery operation, it is not hard to imagine that Fox might also have trafficked in stolen property if given the opportunity.

#### *Irving Adams's Story*

Irving Adams is a Pennsylvania stamp collector and dealer who frequently visits the APRL and volunteers at the APS. In 2013 he had been the subject of news reports that portrayed him as the victim of a philatelic crime. New York police had arrested his wife, Elena S. Adams, on charges of conspiracy and criminal solicitation. An undercover officer from the Brooklyn district attorney's office posing as an assassin for hire said she had offered a stamp collection and jewelry valued at \$60,000 to kill him. The Adamses had met at a meeting of the Collectors Club, and had been married for two decades.

According to the Kings County District Attorney's office, Elena Adams pleaded guilty to the conspiracy charge on August 15, 2014, and Judge Danny Chun sentenced her to serve 1½ to 4½ years in state prison. Meanwhile, after moving from New York to Pennsylvania, Irving Adams was my informant about the time his wife was entering the penitentiary. Shortly after my *American Philatelist* article about the McCoy heist and recovery of two stamps from the block appeared in September 2014, he told me a story that he thought might shed new light on one of the missing McCoy Inverted Jenny stamps.

In the late 1970s Adams had been working on Wall Street in New York City, and was personally acquainted with some of the stamp dealers on Nassau Street, the historic home of the North American stamp trade. Lee Gilbert, one of the old time insiders, told him that "John Fox fenced a C3a," implying that Fox or his supplier had acquired the stamp illicitly.



Later, during the 1980s, Adams spent time at the S. H. Engel & Company stamp firm, and became friendly with the owners, Henry and Nat Engel. Adams said Henry Engel told him that their firm had bought an Inverted Jenny and had kept it in the Engel family. The document released by Spink confirms that they did acquire one stamp that fits the description.

As scarce as the famous inverts are, Adams speculated that both stories might have involved the same stamp. By then, Fox's reputation as a shady character had become widely known, so Adams suggested to me that if the Engel brothers had innocently acquired their stamp from Fox, it might nevertheless have been a stolen McCoy. The document lends credence to Adams's deduction.

Adding up the evidence, these are my provisional thoughts: After having been ostracized by ASDA and APS, Fox's burden of debt and declining reputation probably precluded his ability to buy the stamp back from Engel before the late October 1966 deadline. But did he really intend to buy it back, or was pawning it simply his way of exchanging it for cash in a veiled transaction?

An excerpt from a December 12, 1988, letter that Ohio philatelic scholar Richard B. Graham wrote to Varro Tyler adds possibly pertinent grist. Graham was the postal history columnist for *Linn's Stamp News*; Tyler was gathering information for his book *Philatelic Forgers: Their Lives and Work*, published by *Linn's*. Graham wrote:

I recall asking someone once, who, up to a short time before, had total faith in Fox's complete honesty, but had his eyes opened the hard way, why Fox, up to a year or so previously, one of the most highly respected dealers in the business, was peddling fake covers and not paying his bills. The reply was that Fox was an inveterate (and heavily losing) gambler and he had generated huge debts that way to some people with underworld connections. He was told to pay up or risk ending up in the East River in a cement overcoat!

If that story was true, one can imagine stamp dealer Fox being offered a deal he could not refuse: convert a hot stamp into cash.

#### ***The Recovery of Position 76***

Providence could not have timed the return of the Position 76 stamp to its rightful owner more appropriately than the way it actually occurred. The international exhibition World Stamp Show-NY 2016 had long been anticipated as an event that would showcase and celebrate the Inverted Jenny.

During the show Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries sold the finest known copy of the stamp, Position 58, for a record price of \$1,351,250, and sponsored the appearance and flight of an original Curtiss JN-4H biplane. Schuyler Rumsey sold another Inverted Jenny at auction, and boothholder Harry (Sonny) Hagendorf of Columbian Stamp Company displayed two of them at his stand.

The most sensational announcement was that Keelin O'Neill of Northern Ireland, the young man who had brought the Position 76 stamp to Spink, was present in person at the show, his identity revealed to the public for the first time. He told reporters, "My grandfather gave me a box of stuff two months before he passed away. I wasn't aware I actually had a stamp in there. He never really pointed out to me what it was."

The box contained old records, an antique clock, and the single stamp. O'Neill did not know when or how his grandfather had obtained the stamp. He speculated that it might have turned up at a "boot sale," explaining, "cars pull up in a field and sell all their stuff out of the back of their car. So I used to go with him when I was a kid."

The stamp was on a stock card inside an envelope along with the Fox-Engel transaction receipt, which must have suggested to him that it might have been worth a significant amount of money. He "did a little bit of research" about it and then contacted Spink in London. The London office of Spink referred him to the firm's New York branch. O'Neill had already planned a vacation visit to the United States, so he took the stamp along and presented it there.

Spink USA submitted the stamp to The Philatelic Foundation for an opinion. After verifying that the stamp was Position 76 from the stolen McCoy block, the PF notified the FBI. "Once I was told that it was stolen, I wanted to give it back to the rightful owner," O'Neill said.

At a public ceremony at the show on June 2, held in front of the iconic Curtiss Jenny biplane, APRL administrator Scott English, who is also the executive director of the APS, presided and accepted the return



Group photo at World Stamp Show-NY 2016. Standing in front of the Curtiss JN-4H biplane are (left to right): Larry Lyons of The Philatelic Foundation; Keelin O'Neill of Ireland, who inherited the stamp from his grandfather; Donald Sundman of the Mystic Stamp Company; Scott English, administrator of the APRL; Preet Bharara, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York; Diego Rodriguez, assistant director in charge, New York Field Office Federal Bureau of Investigation; and Roger Brody, president of the APRL. *USPS photo by Daniel Afzal*

of the stamp. Besides English, speakers included Roger Brody, president of the APRL; Preet Bharara, United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York; Diego Rodriguez, assistant director in charge of the New York FBI field office; and Larry Lyons, executive director of The Philatelic Foundation.

Donald Sundman presented O'Neill with an oversize check for \$50,000, the reward for the return of the stamp. Later, the APRL's \$10,000 reward for information that led to the stamp's return was awarded to Spink USA, which paid for its legal expenses out of the amount and donated the balance back to APRL.

After considering eight sale proposals, on March 21 of this year the APRL announced that the library had reached an agreement with Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries to sell the stamp.

**A Personal Note**

During my 20-plus years as a civil-rights activist in Mississippi I devoted much of my time to investigating murders of my 1960s predecessors whose killers had gone unpunished. Previously secret documents I unearthed and made public contributed to awakening public interest, which in turn prompted successful prosecutions of the white-supremacist who had shot and killed NAACP leader Medgar Evers in Jackson in 1963, and of Ku Klux Klan members who had murdered Freedom Summer volunteers James Earl Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman in Neshoba County in 1964.

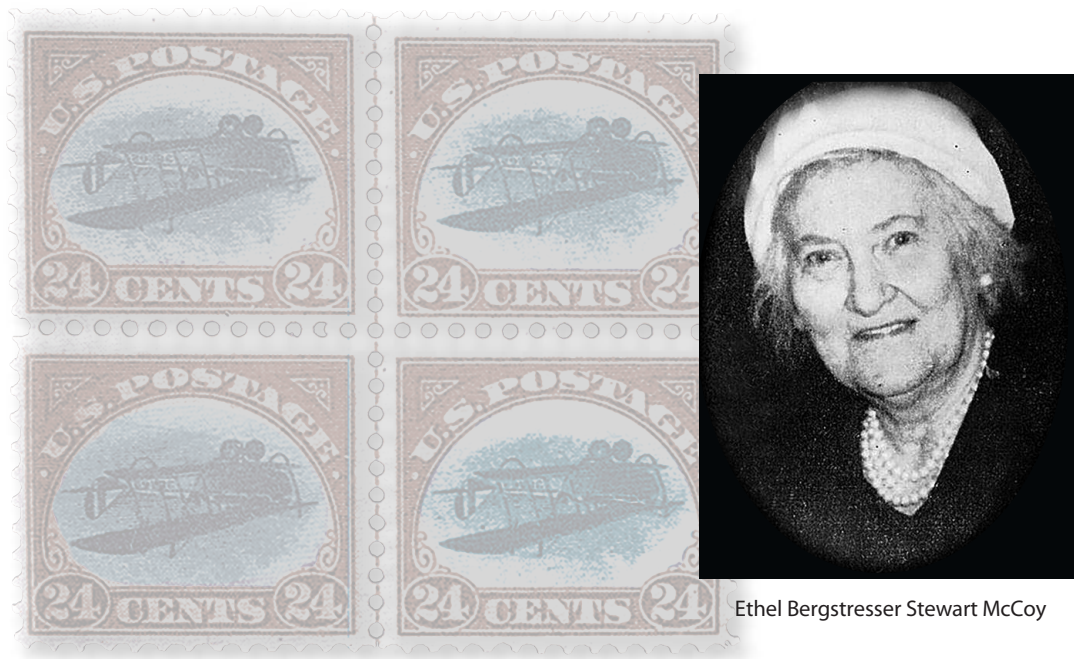
By the time I was elected to the APS board of directors in 1991 and moved to Pennsylvania in 1993, my penchant for studying unsolved crimes that most people had forgotten directed my attention to the McCoy theft. For the next two decades I checked every Inverted Jenny that made an appearance at auction or in other public views to see if any of them might be an unrecognized missing McCoy stamp.

Finally, in 2012 I submitted a formal proposal to the APRL trustees, which recommended that a substantial reward be offered to a person or persons who provide information to APRL that leads to the recovery of one or both of the missing stamps. After the trustees approved the proposal in principle, APRL president Roger Brody appointed APRL trustee Rob Haeseler, my friend for more than 20 years who died earlier this year, to chair a committee that crafted the specifics and published the reward offers.

These actions and the attendant publicity have generated widespread interest in stamps and stamp collecting among members of the public who have had scant previous contact with or awareness of our hobby. We all are beneficiaries of that. I am especially grateful to Don Sundman and Mystic Stamp Company for their generosity in offering the \$50,000 reward that made it work.

We may never solve the mystery of who stole the McCoy block, or where the stamps have been hidden since 1955, but one more task remains to be done. We must continue the search until the Position 66 Inverted Jenny returns to its rightful owner, the American Philatelic Research Library.

Parts of this narrative and the author's biographical sketch of Ethel McCoy previously appeared in the September 2014 and June 2016 issues of *The American Philatelist*, monthly journal of the American Philatelic Society.



Ethel Bergstresser Stewart McCoy