

I'M DOING IT AGAIN

Among the many wonderful possessions that were my mother's, I believe she took the greatest pride in her cut glass collection. It held a place of prominence in the mahogany china closet, which held a place of prominence in our living room. The pieces were spectacular. I believe she bought them in the better department stores and at auctions during the 20s, when life was good. There were bowls, bottles, pitchers, carafes, decanters, plates, platters, tumblers, and vases. They sparkled, and gave off rainbow colors. As a child, I would examine them and wonder how anyone could cut so many intricate designs in something as hard as glass. My mother insisted I be very careful. Not only were they very expensive, they were easily breakable.

After Sylvia and I married, they maintained their place of prominence in the china closet, but soon the time came when we decided to part with the china closet. But what were we going to do with its contents? We came up with a brilliant idea. The cut glass was both beautiful and expensive, and there were a great many pieces. Since practically every other month one of our friends or relatives were getting married, we felt that the cut glass would make the perfect gift. The recipients were pleased to get something so valuable and unusual, and for my cousins who knew and loved my mother, it had sentimental value as well. And little by little, we winnowed down my mother's collection of cut glass.

Skip ahead six decades. It is 2012. Where my mother collected cut glass in the 1920s, I collected plate block commemorative stamps in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s. It was my practice, whenever I needed stamps, to buy a sheet of the latest commemorative stamps. I would then remove the block of four stamps with the sheet number, and carefully place it in a "mint block file" which I had purchased in a store catering to stamp collectors. I had been told that some time in the future, these plate blocks would be worth a lot of money.

On the outside cover of some of the files was printed "US Standard Pocket Stamp File." On the inside front cover, the following appeared: "A WORD OF ADVICE: This mint sheet album will protect your stamps from damage if proper precautions are taken. However, we caution you that certain conditions of high humidity, heat and dampness will cause the gum on the sheets of stamps to soften or to become moist..." It instructed us to make sure that the stamps are absolutely dry, and that our fingers are free of perspiration, and to keep the stamps in the driest, coolest part of the house. I followed this advice to the letter.

When I started collecting, a first class stamp was three cents, and I bought a lot of three cents stamps. In fact, it seems that half my collection consists of three cents stamps. By the late 50s, the price started going up—4,5,6,8,10,13 cents-- and by the 80s, a first class stamp went from 15 cents to 25 cents. I had plate blocks for all of them. And many of them were works of art. In the late 90s, when a first class stamp reached 32 cents, I stopped collecting.

Over the years, I must have collected more than a thousand plate blocks. Putting away a 3 cent plate block meant putting away 12 cents, when 12 cents was a lot of money to me. But it was an investment, which would return many times their original cost. And this was my routine, as I watched the price of first class stamps go up. I was sure their long term value would go up as well. When we bought a safe deposit box, I put all my stamps in it. I certainly did not want anything to happen to my valuable collection.

Some years ago, I felt the time had come to cash in my investment. There was a stamp store in downtown Boston, and I dropped in to find out how much my treasure would bring. The proprietor smiled sympathetically as he told me that they are not worth anything beyond the face value of the stamp. No collectors want them, and if I wanted to sell them, a kindhearted dealer would give me 90% of their face value to take them off my hands. I checked further. It couldn't be true, but it was. There was no market for my plate blocks collection.

The stamps that I treasured, and which I truly believed would be my treasure, was worth no more than what was printed on their face. It took me a while to recover from the shock. This was to be my "yerushe," the inheritance that I would leave my children and grandchildren. At least they were worth something. I also consoled myself by thinking about the pleasure I received as a stamp collector. It was a hobby. I was a philatelist, like President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. I learned a great deal about American history from the stamps. All well and good, but how do I get my money back?

In 2010, Fran and I went to Spain and France. I learned that Europeans are great stamp collectors, so I took a number of my prettiest plate blocks, convinced that European dealers would grab them up. I sought out stamp dealers in Madrid and Barcelona, and to my great surprise, no one was interested. They did not collect mint stamps. I made one sale to a curious dealer for a few Euros. And I gave them away to my French relatives, rather than bring them home.

So what am I doing with my collection of mint commemorative plate block stamps? Just as I gave cut glass as wedding gifts, I gave a number of plate blocks to some Bar Mitzvah boys, supplementing the more traditional gifts. I was surprised and saddened to learn that kids do not collect stamps any more. If it is not electronic, digital or computerized, they are not interested. So I am putting them on the envelopes in which I pay my bills. I put them on the greeting cards I send. I put them on the packages that I mail. No doubt the postal clerks are amazed when they see them. The younger ones may never have seen stamps like them before. The only problem is, they are not self-adhering. Like the old days, I have to lick them.

I am pretty sure there will still be some left as an inheritance for my children and grandchildren, with sentimental, if not monetary, value, along with the remaining (valuable) pieces of cut glass.

11-2-12.