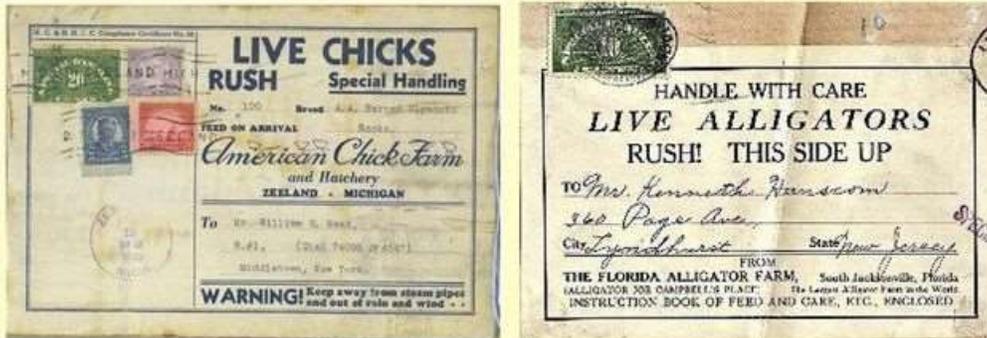




Some of you may already know what I plan to talk about from the title. I call today's program "Stamps for Chicks ..."

"and Baby Alligators".

Collecting the U.S. Special Handling Stamps of 1925-1959



Midwest Philatelic Society

May 5, 2012



Of course, to me, that description can only mean the U.S. Special Handling stamps, produced by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and sold by the Post Office Department from 1925 to 1959.

My Study Began with a Question

Yellow-Green, Wet-Print



Dry-Print?



I got interested in learning more about these stamps after becoming the winning bidder on a small lot of plate-number singles at an auction about a year and a half ago. Among the stamps in that lot were six Special Handling stamps. Those stamps were easily divided into two groups by color. The four stamps of the first group, including the stamp shown on the left, are yellow green and heavily inked – giving them a sort of “muddy” appearance wherein the lathe work of the background is indistinct. The two stamps of the other group, including the stamp shown on the right, display a more normal inking level, making them look crisp, in comparison. The lathe work is more distinct, and the increased ratio of paper to ink in the finished stamp lends a lighter appearance despite the darker green ink used. Consulting the Scott U.S. Specialized catalog yielded only two choices for identification – yellow green wet-printed stamps and dry-printed stamps. Even though that seemed to fit my stamps well, I wondered how I could be sure that the stamps of latter group were, indeed, of the dry-printed variety. We’ll get back to the answer later, but you can decide what you might have concluded. My reaction was to look for more information. Today, I will try to share what I learned with you.

United States Postal Regulations

“On payment of a special-handling postage charge ... in addition to the ordinary postage, **fourth-class parcels** indorsed "Special Handling," ... or which bear the special handling postage stamp provided for such purpose, will **receive the expeditious handling, transportation, and delivery accorded to mail of the first class**. This special-handling postage charge applies to all parcels containing day-old **chicks or baby alligators**, which, because of their character, must be given special attention in handling, transportation, and delivery, as well as to other parcels which the sender indicates shall be so treated. The special-handling charge **does not include special delivery.**”



First things first. Just, what is Special Handling and what did the service mean to the Post Office and its customers? In this excerpt from the Postal Regulations of that era, we can see that it was an expedited service for fourth-class parcels – a sort of upgrade to first class between the Post Office of origin and the destination Post Office, but not from the destination Post Office to the addressee (Special Delivery). Plus, paying the extra fee was specifically required for – wait for it – chicks ... and baby alligators.

About Fourth Class Mail

- Began as a designated category in 1879
- Merchandise, bulky, and heavier items
- Re-branded as Parcel Post in 1913
- Carried as space allowed with priority given to higher classes of mail matter
- Perishable items were a concern for both the mailers and the postal officials
- Live animals – the epitome of “perishable”



The driving force that prompted the creation of the Special Handling service was the growth of fourth-class mail usage. When fourth-class mail became a designated category in 1879, it was pretty much defined as anything that was not first, second, or third class.

Over time, the definition of fourth-class mail became better defined. But, like now, the post office had to compete with the express companies for a share of the business. Then, when an idea that was intended to provide better accounting found favor with the public, Parcel Post became the foundation of a boom in mail-order business, particularly for customers in rural areas. But, its low priority was a drawback for time-sensitive parcels as they were left to sit in the post office waiting for space on outbound conveyances.

Senders would cajole the postal officials into finding space to send out their perishable items. The officials would sometimes relent, in part, because they did not want to deal with boxes of rotting whatever. Therefore, because the Post Office was already providing an extra service, why shouldn't they get paid for it?

Big Deal! – Four Stamps?



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Even for some collectors of U.S. stamps, the reaction to the Special Handling service and its stamps can be something like “There are only four stamps needed to fill the spaces in my album, so, what’s the big deal!”

A More Complete Album Page

How about 15 stamps?
or 16?
or 18?
or more...



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While it is true that the Scott catalog only lists four “Major” varieties, it also lists four “Minor” varieties and two “Other” varieties. In addition there are, at least, five unlisted varieties that have been documented in philatelic literature, bringing the total to fifteen.

Elements Common to All Varieties

- Design
- Flat Plate
- 200-Subject Sheets
- 50-Subject Panes
- Perforated 11
- Green



Before addressing the differences, let's address some elements that are common to all of the special handling stamps.

- They share the same design. In keeping with the practice set with Postage Due stamps, the Special Handling stamps have lettering on a lathe-work background where the only differences are the numerals denoting the denominations.
- All production was performed on Bureau-standard, four-position, flat-plate presses.
- Each plate had 200 subjects arranged in ten columns by 20 rows. Guide lines bisected the printed sheet in both directions. Plate numbers were printed in two places on each of the four sides approximately mid-way between the guide line and the outer row or column of stamps (plate number blocks are collected in blocks of six).
- Sheets were cut along the guide lines to obtain panes of 50 stamps for delivery to the post offices. That means that 28% of the individual stamps have a straight edge.
- Although there is some indication of minor equipment differences, the entire production was perforated 11.
- And, all of the stamps are green. Bureau records indicate that the plan was for these stamps to be the same color as the "ordinaries" (the current regular or definitive issue). We will be looking at four different green ink colors that were used during production of the Special Handling stamps, but if one looks at a random selection of the one-cent stamps of that period, at least that many different shades can be found.

1925 – 1st Printing, Deep Green



- Postal Service act of February 28, 1925
- 21 million stamps printed between April 4 and April 16 using 8 of the 12 plates made
- First Day of Issue – April 11, 1925
- Service began – April 15, 1925



It took only six weeks from Congress' passage of the bill enacting the Special Handling service until the first stamps were released to the public and nearly a third of that time was consumed by the bureaucrats placing the order with the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The shortened timescale likely contributed to the less than imaginative design. The flat rate of 25¢ required only one stamp issue to be produced but a high demand was apparently anticipated. Twelve plates were made, only eight of which saw service. In their haste, one of the first four plates to go to press had defects, giving rise to the next varieties to be discussed.

Intaglio Printing Plate Production



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At this point, a quick review of the plate-making process will help me to better explain the terminology used to describe the defects that occurred.

The engravers prepare a die on which the design elements are cut into a softened steel plate in reverse of the image to be printed. After the die is hardened, a softened steel roll is pressed into the die one or more times to pick up the design. The resulting relief on the transfer roll appears like the finished stamp in that the design elements to be printed are raised above the surface, like the ink on the stamp.

After any needed cleanup, the transfer roll is hardened and then pressed, repeatedly, into the printing plate to produce the required number of subjects for the sheet layout. During this portion of the process, there are occasions when portions of the raised image on the transfer roll fracture and detach from the roll. The result is a colorless area on the stamp where a colored area is expected, called a “**relief break.**” In addition, there are occasions when a hard object gets caught up between the transfer roll and the plate during the rocking-in process creating a colored area on the stamp where a colorless area is expected, this is called an “**extraneous transfer.**”

“A-T” Plate Variety

A broad colorless band joins the “A” and the second “T” of “STATES.”



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The “A-T” plate variety is a relief break resulting in a broad colorless band that connects the upper portion of the “A” with the second “T” in “STATES.” This plate variety was first reported in the philatelic press in January of 1932.

“T-A” Plate Variety

**Another broad colorless band joins the “T”
and the “A” of “POSTAGE.”**



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The “T-A” plate variety includes another relief break resulting in a broad colorless band that connects the upper portion of the “T” and the “A” in “POSTAGE,” as shown in the lower detail. The upper detail shows the defect in “STATES” that is also a part of the “T-A” plate variety. This plate variety was first reported in the philatelic press in March of 1932. At the time, collectors were advised to try to find the variety with “two relief breaks” because they appeared to be much less common. The advice regarding scarcity was true, but a closer examination of the right side of the right serif of the second “T” in “STATES” reveals yet another relief break that is not present on the “A-T” plate variety shown in the previous slide.

“Broken-T” Plate Variety

Another break occurs at the right side of the right serif of the second “T” of “STATES.”



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Previously considered to be a continuation of the progression of the “A-T” relief break, more recently, specialists have noted in the philatelic press that the colorless spot on the right side of the right serif of the second “T” in “STATES” is a distinctly different relief break worthy of recognition as a separate variety.

“Dot-on-the-T” Plate Variety

An extraneous transfer occurs within the second “T” of “STATES”



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Lastly, there is a variety that displays an extraneous transfer within the lower portion of the second “T” in “STATES.” Note that the extraneous transfer is roughly the same size and shape as the “A-T” relief break.

1928 – 2nd Printing, Yellow Green



- 2.8 million stamps printed from January 14 to January 19, 1928 using 4 plates
- New rates of July 1, 1928 made 25¢ stamps obsolete and, in August, all of the 25¢ stamps were recalled from Post Offices



It was nearly three years into the service before there was a need for more stamps. At that time, the ink used was yellow-green in color. The four plates used for this printing were from among the eight plates used during the first printing, but did not include the defective plate. The short period of use prior to the rate change makes in-period used stamps of this variety more difficult to find.

1928 – New Rates, Yellow Green



- 4 plates for each denomination
- Printed from June 22 to July 24 producing about 26, 21, and 16 million respectively
- First Day of Issue June 25, 1928
- New rates effective July 1, 1928



In mid-1928 the rate structure for the Special Handling service was changed from a flat rate for all parcels to a weight-based rate system. The new, lower, rates created the need for the other three denominations represented by the “Major” catalog varieties: 10¢ for up to 2 lb., 15¢ for over 2 lb. up to 10 lb., and 20¢ for over 10 lb. Sizeable quantities of the stamps were printed using the then-current yellow-green ink. Just four plates were made for each denomination and those plates were used to print all of the remaining stamps produced.

First Day Cover for the New Rate



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The 10¢ yellow-green stamp on this First Day Cover did not serve any postal purpose. Its individual use six days prior to the affectivity date for the new rates could not have paid for the service.

1940-55 – “Plain” Green



- Same 4 plates for each denomination
- Printed roughly annually from 1940 or 1941 to early 1955, producing about 9.9, 9.7, and 9.1 million respectively
- The plain green color is not catalog listed



Sufficient stocks of stamps, and the impact of the Great Depression on purchases, allowed for a significant gap in production. When printing resumed in 1940, the green ink of choice did not have the yellowish tinge observed in the first printing of the three lower-denomination stamps. The resulting color is a somewhat darker green, but not nearly as dark as the deep-green ink used for the first printing of the 25¢ stamp. Lacking any better terminology, the color has been described as “plain” green and, with little if any detectible difference, was used for the remainder of the wet-printed stamps.

In-Period, "Permitted Use"



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Victory in Europe had been declared less than two months prior to the July 3, 1945, posting of this patriotic cover with the U.S. Army Postal Service at A.P.O. 122, located in Arpajon, France. As evidenced by the backstamp, it took 24 days for the cover to reach the Post Office in Newton, Kansas. A 15¢ 1940-55 wet-printed, "plain" green Special Handling stamp was used as the only franking; resulting in an overpayment of postage (the proper concession rate would have been 3¢ for surface mail or 6¢ for airmail). The use of a Special Handling stamp for regular postage is in the category of unintended uses, which though not authorized, were permitted or allowed. These are the terms often used when clerks turned their backs and allowed these mailings.

1955 – Light Green, Dry Printing

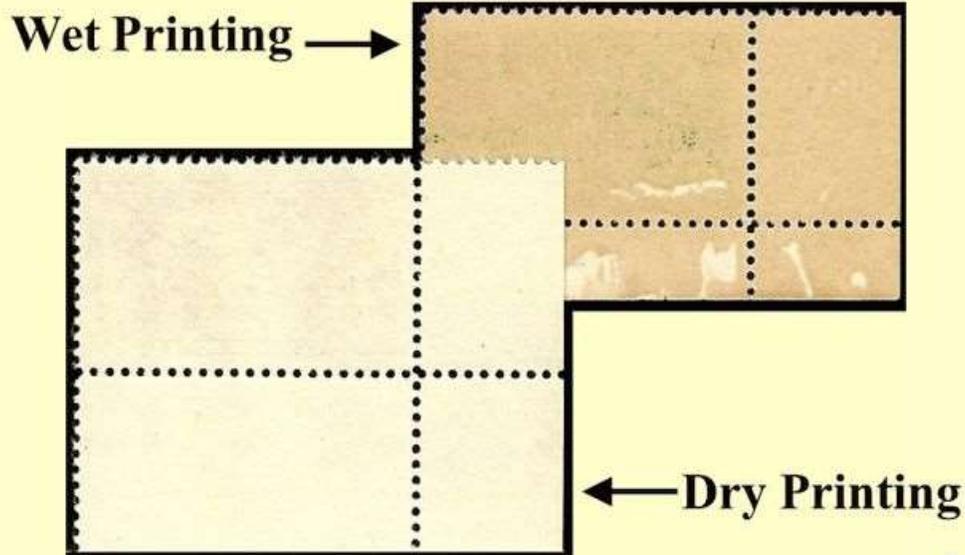


- Beginning Sept. 19 with the 10¢ plates and Oct. 6 with the 15¢ and 20¢ plates, printed on pre-gummed, “dry” paper until Oct. 12
- From delivery records, the maximum quantities for the dry-printed stamps are 695, 860, and 695 thousand, respectively



That brings us to the last of the stamps produced, and the last three of the promised fifteen varieties – the experimental dry prints. The dry-printed stamps are, perhaps, the most misunderstood and most often misidentified stamps of the bunch. Dry-printed stamps, of any issue, employ a much greater pressure during printing than their wet-printed counterparts. The result is that the surface of the dry-print is, typically, harder, smoother, and shinier than the duller, rougher surface of the wet-printed stamp. That has been the traditional method of identification for other issues produced by both printing methods, but it does not work universally for the Special Handling stamps. Many of the 1940-55 wet-printed stamps exhibit the same crisp appearance as the dry-printed stamps. Color is not a definite identification either. In my limited experience, all of the “light green,” or “bright green” if you prefer, stamps I have seen have been dry prints, but not all of the dry prints I have seen are of the “light green” color. Some have the same “plain green” color as seen on the 1940-55 wet-printed stamps.

Wet vs. Dry Mint – Identify by Gum



There was a bit of an “Aha Moment” that occurred when I found my first mint example of a dry-printed Special Handling stamp and turned it over to look for a hinge mark. The gum on the wet-printings was applied after printing the sheet of stamps, while the paper used for the dry-printings was pre-gummed. The wet-printings have a thicker layer of smooth gum that may appear slightly yellowish and may show cracks, grooves or gum skips, whereas the gum of the pre-gummed sheets used for the dry-printings is nearly clear with a matte texture and never shows the cracks, grooves, or skips of the wet-printed stamps’ gum. In addition, the setoff that occurs on many wet-printed stamps is under the gum.

Used – Identify by Design Size



Yellow Green, Wet
36.3 mm by 21.4 mm



Plain Green, Wet
35.8 mm by 21.5 mm



Light Green, Dry
36.4 mm by 21.7 mm

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Differentiating between wet-printed and dry-printed used stamps took a little more effort – I had to measure the size of the designs. The sizes shown here should not be considered to be exact. Rather, they represent nominal sizes observed from several measurements. Neither should the as-measured size of an individual stamp be considered to be static – the size will vary slightly depending on the relative humidity with which the stamp has reached equilibrium. However, the basic concept is valid and the relative differences between the three printings are repeatable. The third dimension, thickness, is not included on the slide, but it can be used to confirm the wet vs. dry determination too. Used dry-printed stamps are thicker than the used wet-printed stamps. Even with my low-precision caliper, the dry-prints measure 0.004 inch or more whereas the wet-prints measure slightly over 0.003 inch.

The traditional, wet-printing process used paper moistened to a content ranging from 15% to as much as 35%, while the dry-printing method used paper with only 5% to 10% moisture content. As the paper takes on moisture it swells, much like a sponge, with the predominance of the swelling occurring across the grain of the paper. As the paper dries, it shrinks, returning to its original size. Since all of the Special Handling stamps were printed with the same sets of plates, their as-printed sizes would be, essentially, identical, but the sizes after shrinkage will differ in relationship to the moisture content at the time of printing. Soaking stamps off of paper merely repeats the swelling and shrinkage process and, therefore, has no significant effect on the size after drying.

One measurement that does stand out, as seemingly contrary, is the width of the three lower-denomination, wet-printed, yellow-green stamps – almost as wide as the dry-printed stamps. It is believed that those yellow-green stamps were printed on stock that was leftover from supplies procured for flat-plate-printed booklet-pane stamps (production of booklet panes was transferred to rotary presses in 1926). Booklet-pane paper was cut with the grain of the paper 90° from the paper normally used for sheet stamps and that would account for the reduced amount of shrinkage along the stamps' width.

Scott Catalogue Changes

2007 U.S. Specialized

- QE1** 10¢ yellow green, 1955
a. Wet printing, June 25, 1928
- QE2** 15¢ yellow green, 1955
a. Wet printing, June 25, 1928
- QE3** 20¢ yellow green, 1955
a. Wet printing, June 25, 1928
- QE4** 25¢ yellow green, 1928
a. deep green, April 11, 1925

2008 U.S. Specialized

- QE1** 10¢ yellow green, wet printing, June 25, 1928
a. Dry printing, 1955
- QE2** 15¢ yellow green, wet printing, June 25, 1928
a. Dry printing, 1955
- QE3** 20¢ yellow green, wet printing, June 25, 1928
a. Dry printing, 1955
- QE4** 25¢ deep green, April 11, 1925
a. yellow green, 1928



During my search for Special Handling stamps, I had to develop confidence in my own ability to identify the varieties because some stamps in collections and dealers' stocks may not be identified in accordance with the current catalog numbers. The Scott catalog underwent a change in philosophy from the "Major" variety being the last stamps produced in the 2007 catalog to the "Major" variety being the first stamps produced and, consequently, the variety with the largest print quantity in the 2008 catalog. Accordingly, "accuracy" of identification depends not only on knowledge but also on the date at which the identification was made.

I Found the Answer to My Question

Yellow-Green, Wet-Print



Dry-Print?



**Not a Dry-Print!
It is a 1940-55, Plain Green,
Wet-Printed Stamp**

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My original question was answered fairly early, but I was inspired to continue pursuit of both mint and used examples of the fifteen varieties shown (No, I have not found all of them. But, neither has the most accomplished specialist.) In the process, though, I stumbled into the discovery of another constant plate variety.

New Discovery – Layout Dot

A constant variety from plate 19557 at position UR 27 (57th subject on the plate), confirmed by examination of the plate proof



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A layout dot on the 15¢ stamp, verified by the National Postal Museum's photograph of one of the plate proofs. This happens to be a dry-print, but examples should exist from the yellow-green and plain-green versions as well and that would bring the total to **eighteen** collectable varieties.

The Service Still Exists

Even though the last stamps were removed from sale September 11, 1959

U.S. Postal Service®
INSURED MAIL RECEIPT

DOMESTIC ONLY
Over \$200

OFFICIAL USE

Postage \$ _____
Insurance Fee _____
Restricted Delivery Fee (endorsement required) _____
Special Handling Fee _____
Return Receipt Fee (endorsement required) _____
Total Postage & Fees \$ _____

Postmark Here

PS Form 3811, May 2007

U.S. Postal Service®
INSURED MAIL RECEIPT

DOMESTIC ONLY
\$200 and under

OFFICIAL USE

Postage \$ _____
Insurance Fee _____
Special Handling Fee _____
Total Postage & Fees \$ _____

Postmark Here

PS Form 3811, May 2007

January 22, 2012 Fee
Up to 10 lb. \$ 7.70
Over 10 lb. \$10.80

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And, what about the service? It is still alive and well. As rates were increased, even in the years immediately following the final printings, the stamps' values became insufficient to pay the higher rates. Rather than issuing additional stamps with higher and higher denominations, the stamps were phased out and, eventually, removed from sale. But, if you insure a parcel today, you will see the Special Handling option on the insurance forms where I have circled it. Current rates are a bit higher, and Priority Mail may be a more cost efficient option, but you can still obtain the service.

Acknowledgement

Most of the information and some of the images used in this presentation come from the work of Robert G. Rufe.

- Exhibit available at:
<http://www.aape.org>
- Personal Web Site:
<http://rgrufe.synthasite.com>



From the beginning of my investigation, I found a willing and enthusiastic mentor in Bob Rufe, recognized as the most knowledgeable person with regard to these stamps. It was his passion for Special Handling stamps that inspired me to investigate them further.

Thank you for your attention. **Opinions expressed may not be valid in all 50 states; your mileage may vary; any rebroadcast or reproduction without the express written consent of Major League Baseball is just fine by me.**

Questions?