

PUTTING A STAMP ON HOUSTON

By John Germann



The 1969 stamp commemorating Apollo 8 featured an image of the first photograph of earth taken from space.

Nineteen forty-five was a year to remember on the national, state, and local level. For our country, it marked, of course, the end of the worst war the world had ever endured. For our state, it saw Texans celebrating the centennial of statehood. And for Houston stamp collectors, it witnessed the founding of the

Houston Philatelic Society. (Technically stamp collectors are called philatelists; please note, not philanderers!)

Thousands of collectors live in the Houston area. None of their interests are exactly alike, for stamp collecting is an exceedingly wide-open and democratic hobby. Anybody can do it and they can collect whatever fascinating little pieces of paper that they want – from countries around the world, or from one country/region, or from historical lands that no longer exist. Some like to explore the printing and usage of one stamp in exceptional depth. Others gravitate toward stamps showing topics like birds, Elvis, paintings, civil rights, Texas, the Red Cross, religion, science, or the scouts; basically a limitless variety of such topics exists. Some enjoy stamps which, in their engraving or their aesthetic design, are miniature works of art. Others pursue covers (i.e. envelopes) with markings from the Republic of Texas, wars, post offices that have been closed, navy ships, Antarctic expeditions, dirigibles, and the like.

This reflection of history and the world around us, combined with the democratic nature of stamp collecting, account for the hobby's worldwide appeal. Add to that the stories that relate to stamp-collecting – such as the



Spectators enjoyed the show exhibits at the Houston Y Philatelic Society show at the Houston YMCA in 1949.

All images courtesy of John Germann.

millions of dollars paid for rarities, the conversion of assets into paper-thin stamps which refugees smuggled out of oppressed areas, the errors of design or production (sometimes fabulous, like that of an upside-down airplane), the use of stamps as propaganda – and you have elements of romance and intrigue, equally enticing and equally universal. Then there is the challenge and thrill of the chase in searching for “that special item” with the help of friends, stamp dealers, auction firms, and online entities. The hobby is an exceptionally educational endeavor to boot, allowing for virtual, armchair experience of far-flung travel, of cultures, and of history. The inherent fun in stamp collecting can appeal to penny pincher or trillionaire, child or senior citizen, bon vivant or homebound. Something of personal interest can be found within everyone's reach.

Stamps of the Houston Region

Our nation's stamps have honored Texas and the Houston area multiple times. In 1936 portraits of Texas' founding

fathers, Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston, started the parade, gracing a stamp commemorating the creation of the Republic of Texas one hundred years earlier. Nine years later, ap-



propriately, the Lone Star flag stamp appeared, marking the centennial of our statehood. Sam Houston reappeared in 1964, memorializing the 100th anniversary of his death.



This cover celebrated the stamps issued to commemorate Texas's centennial of statehood in 1945.

Texas independence likewise resurfaced, in 1986, in the form of a stamp celebrating the sesquicentennial of the Battle of San Jacinto. Other Texas stamps have featured Lyndon Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson, Sam Rayburn, the Alamo, and animals like the whooping crane, armadillo, mockingbird, and jackrabbit.

Houstonians in particular can take pride in the accolades accorded to Sam Houston. But we can also point to the early 1969 stamp acknowledging the *Apollo 8* moon-shot mission, one of our proudest moments, by reproducing the first photo of the earth taken from space (one of the author's all-time favorite stamps).

Houston area personalities have also graced American stamps. As early as 1981 a commemorative stamp marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Mildred Ella "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias of Port Arthur, one of the finest athletes of the twentieth century—male or female. In 2011 two other Houston women in two very different fields helped carry Americans' mail. Houston's eminent pioneer



legislator/orator/constitutionalist/civil rights advocate, Barbara Jordan, made her appearance in the "Black Heritage" series of stamps. Shortly thereafter the "Latin Music Legends" series recognized the enormous singing and song-writing talents of the Lake Jackson-born star, Selena Quintanilla-Perez.



Even more recently, in 2012 an "Earthscapes" issue replicated aerial images of diverse U.S. landscapes. One of those stamps pictured the goings-on in an industry historically vital to Houston's economy – two tug



boats "wrangling" barges in the Houston Ship Channel. And surely more will come. For example, currently a move is afoot to persuade the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee of the United States Postal Service to approve the issuance of a stamp paying respects to our famed heart

surgeon, Michael DeBakey. Keep your eyes open and your hopes up for this and many others.

Houston Philatelic Society History

Stamp collectors have existed since Great Britain issued the world's first postage stamp in 1840, and Houston had its share of them a century later. Some local collectors had begun gathering at a downtown bicycle shop on Thursdays to gab about stamps and to do some buying, selling, or trading. However, philately, the study of stamps and postal history, did not take a formally organized approach in



Great Britain issued the world's first stamp. The letters are all different on any single sheet. In this block of six, the stamps came from rows L and M, columns D, E, and F. The printed page ranged from AA at the top left to TL at bottom right. Imagine what great fun it would be to reconstruct a full sheet!

Houston until 1944. Twenty-three charter members gathered at the Central YMCA at 1600 Louisiana at Pease, where they produced a constitution for the "Houston Y Philatelic Society" in 1945. In 1956, the group dropped the "Y" from its name; from that time on it has been known as the Houston Philatelic Society (HPS).

The original 1945 constitution for the Houston Y Philatelic Society called for a board of directors, consisting of three officers plus three directors, all elected by the membership. Bradfield A. Beard was elected first president, with E. C. Kline serving as vice-president, and Ruth Struwe handling the duties of secretary and treasurer. The three original directors were J. T. Fincher, Harry W. O'Kane, and George Rodgers. The club's first show, held at the "Y," premiered in the spring of 1946, with Beard collecting the top exhibit award. The society grew quickly. In 1947, it joined the American Philatelic Society, the major national philatelic organization, and five years later became a full-



The original Houston Y Philatelic Society logo.



Brad Beard (center in checked shirt) with some of the society's founding fathers and mothers.



Members of the HPS work with Girl Scouts in the 1960s as part of the club's on-going commitment to community outreach.

fledged chapter; in 1950, it also joined the state society, the Texas Philatelic Association. At the end of 1948, the membership roster stood at seventy-four. The annual show became ever more popular, and almost 300 collectors attended the 1951 show.

As Houston has grown, so has the Houston Philatelic Society. Membership is now about 100. The original three-man officer corps has grown to four, with the roles of secretary and treasurer divided. The board of directors has also grown; the number is flexible, but currently consists of eight members. The \$1 dues in 1945 have risen to \$7 (no horrendous inflation here!).

Over the last sixty-eight years, the venues for HPS meetings and shows represent an interesting slice of Houston history. The club met at the downtown YMCA into the 1980s, when it relocated to the Central Presbyterian Church on Richmond Avenue. From October 1999 to date, it has held its meetings at the West University United Methodist Church.

Its show venues were also diverse in type and in location. The YMCA hosted the Houston Philatelic Exhibition (Houpex) until 1955, when the Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church on Main Street kindly offered its facilities. The



The visitors to the beginner's booth at a recent show illustrate what a diverse group of people take an interest in stamp collecting.

Hermann Park Garden Center, the Rice Hotel, and the Albert Thomas Convention and Exhibit Center were followed by a string of hotels, including the Continental Houston Motor Hotel, Albert Pick Motor Inn, Shamrock Hilton Hotel, Stouffer Hotel, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Astro Village Hotel, and Adams Mark Hotel, followed in 1994 and 1995 by Trading Fair II on the South Loop East. Sandwiched in among these were shows in conjunction with the state society in 1967 at the Rice Hotel and the national philatelic organization in 1993 at the Astrodomain Expo Hall.

Finally, in 1996, on the fiftieth anniversary of the society's first

show, the show moved to the Humble Civic Center—where it has remained ever since, the longest run of any location. At the same time, mirroring the physical growth of Houston, the show was renamed when Houpex became the Greater Houston Stamp Show. A crowd of around 600 attended the show in September, 2012 — a testament to the continuing lure of stamp collecting. They came to view over 1,000 pages of exhibits, shop for stamps with thirty-three dealers, get free stamps and pointers at the beginners' booth, attend a floor auction and meetings, or perhaps just satisfy their curiosity. The beginner's booth, aimed primarily at young people, is considered one of the best in the country.

The twice-a-month HPS meetings include a welcome to visitors, a business segment, door prizes, auctions, presentations on aspects of philately by members themselves, and lots of swapping, comparing, sharing, story-telling, and "good old" camaraderie. HPS has something for just about everyone, from the casual to the serious stamp collector. Its website includes the program for organizational meetings, notes on the annual show, and membership information. The club produces a quarterly newsletter, *The Perforator*. Plus, the club has had a long history of outreach — introducing the pleasures of "stamping" to orphans, to veterans, to prisoners, and to youth in scouts and schools. Those of us in the Houston Philatelic Society have many different collecting interests but we all understand what a valuable tutor and rewarding companion the pastime provides us, for a lifetime.

For more information on the Houston Philatelic Society, visit www.houstonstampclub.org.

John Germann, like many collectors, was attracted to the wide world of stamps when he was young and particularly enjoyed the history and culture that they displayed. Although he shelved his collection while in college, stamps, history, and culture have been an integral part of his and his wife's lives ever since. John joined the Houston Philatelic Society in the mid-1970s and recently retired from teaching history for forty-four years at the Kinkaid School.