

☆ THE CHRONICLES

OKLAHOMA'S STATE FLAG AS A COMMEMORATIVE STAMP

*By George H. Shirk**

Oklahoma continues to be among the forefront of its sister states in recognition and special honors from the United States Postal Service.¹ Two recent stamps especially related to Oklahoma were the Butterfield Overland Mail Centennial Stamp issued October 10, 1958 and the special issue commemorating the opening of the Cherokee Strip on September 16, 1893 which was released for sale on October 15, 1968 at Ponca City, Oklahoma.

As part of the Bicentennial observance, proposals had been received for some time by the Postal Service for a special sheet of fifty different stamps, all in full color, depicting the flags of each state. Commemorative stamps are normally in sheets of fifty, and the fortunate circumstance that the Union is now composed of fifty states gave the proposal wide acceptance. The Postal Service desired to delay the project until the first class mail rate was determined, as such uncertainty necessitated the 1975 Christmas stamps appearing without a denomination value.

Such a sheet of 13¢ stamps bearing the flags of each of the individual states was issued by the Postal Service on February 23, 1976 at Washington, D.C. The stamps are arranged in the order of the admission of the states into the Union.

The first day of issue coincided with the plenary session of the mid-winter meeting of the National Governor's Conference. First sales were made at 11:00 in the forenoon, Washington time. The stamps were later placed on sale that same day in the state capitals of all fifty of the states.

Only stamps postmarked on the first day of issue at Washington bear the special cancellation, "First Day of Issue." The first day cancellation applied at the state capitals bears the special legend "50 States—One Nation" with the phrase "USA Bicentennial" appearing as a second line of the cancellation.

For the first time in history, the philatelic sales division of the Postal Service provided sheets of stamps for special cancellation on the first day of issue as an entire sheet. The full panes were affixed to large white envelopes, with each sheet bearing fourteen "bull's eye" cancellations, so that all stamps

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Several other postal stamps which have commemorated events related to Oklahoma. (top to bottom: first day of issue cover for Oklahoma's Semi-Centennial Stamp of 1957; Oklahoma's Commemorative Semi-Centennial Stamp; Indian Centennial Stamp of 1948; and Will Rogers Commemorative Stamp of 1948)

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would in fact be cancelled, and, in addition, one first day of issue cancellation. Stamps for the unique first day full sheet cancel were sold by the Postal Service at face value, being \$6.50 for the sheet, and no special handling charge or other expense was included.

Locally in Oklahoma City, special ceremonies were held at the state capital shortly before noon on February 23, 1976 with presentation sheets going to Governor David L. Boren and other state officials. At noon sheets of the special stamps were available at the main Oklahoma City Post Office for sale to the general public. A long line of customers were waiting to purchase entire sheets in order that one important stamp, the one with the Oklahoma flag, could be removed and affixed to a self-addressed envelope and thus receive the first day Oklahoma City cancellation.

The stamps were designed by Walt Reed and Peter Cocci was the layout modeler. Both are on the staff of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. The special gravure presses were used.

In order to insure that the full spectrum of color be available, six separate plates each for its own color were required. They printed yellow, magenta, cyan, black, red and blue respectively. Each separate color plate bore its own plate number and thus in the selvage six separate plate numbers may be found. The gravure press prints 200 impressions at one time; and the printed stock is then cut into post office panes of 50 stamps each. By reason of this plate layout arrangement, four separate sets of six plate numbers each are available, one each in the upper and lower right and left corners respectively of the large printing plate. Collectors desiring a full assortment of plate numbers thus searched for four separate sheets, one each bearing the plate numbers at the four respective corners. As each stamp in the sheet is separate and distinct, any one plate number for each of the six separate colors may be found adjoining one of four separate state flags, depending on which post office pane provided the example.

For first day sales, postal clerks could not honor customer requests for the purchase of one or more stamps bearing a specific state flag. Those patrons desiring a particular stamp were required to purchase full sheets.

In addition to the six plate numbers appearing in the selvage, the legends "mail early in the day," "use zip code" and the symbol of "Mr. Zip" are included. The initial printing order sent to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing from the Postal Service was for 250,000,000 stamps.

¹ Shirk, George H. "Oklahoma's Two Commemorative Stamps," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1 (Spring, 1949), p. 89 and "Oklahoma's Philatelic Year," *ibid.*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 1 (Spring, 1958), p. 48.