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Cold Cases

Your Challenge: Help APRL Solve Our Hobby's Most Important Cold Case

by Ken Lawrence

Last fall the United States Postal Service released a \$2 stamp to commemorate the red-and-blue 24-cent Curtiss JN-4H Biplane air post stamp of 1918 with inverted center, Scott C3a. Colloquially known as the Inverted Jenny or the Jenny Invert, this is the world's most famous error stamp, and the new issue introduced its legend to a generation of Americans who have scant memory of its history.

Next year will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the worst philatelic felony involving that stamp, one that has never been solved. On September 23, 1955, at the annual convention of the American Philatelic Society in Norfolk, Virginia, a thief or thieves stole an Inverted Jenny block of four that collector Ethel McCoy had loaned to APS for the enjoyment and appreciation of show-goers. Although whoever perpetrated the heist probably died years ago, two of the four stolen stamps have never been recovered.

Title to the missing stamps belongs to the American Philatelic Research Library. If either or both of the stamps can be recovered, 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. In hopes of stimulating that happy result, APRL is poised to announce a big incentive to the recovery of a stolen McCoy Invert.

The McCoy Block

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

Amick's book is the finest reference yet written about this subject and an adventure to read. He began the chapter on the theft with the story of Ethel McCoy herself:

"Ethel B. Stewart McCoy was a woman of many interests. As the only child of one of the great innovators of American business and the wife of two other successful businessmen, she could afford to indulge them." Her father, Charles Bergstresser, was a founder of the Dow Jones financial reporting company. Her first husband, Bert A. Stewart, owned a firm that manufactured rubber



The McCoy block of four 24¢ Curtiss JN-4H stamps with inverted center consisted of positions 65, 66, 75, and 76 from the original pane of 100, with a vertical guide line at the center.

1
2 ASSIGNMENT
3 I, ETHEL B. MCCOY of 65 West 54th Street, New York, NY 10019,
4 do hereby declare that I am the legal owner of a block of four
5 United States 24 cent Air Mail postage stamps with inverted
6 centers, being Scott's No. C3a Issue of 1918; and that said block
7 of stamps was stolen from me at Norfolk, Virginia, on or about
8 September, 1955.
9 And now in consideration of my desire to assist the American
10 Philatelic Research Library of State College, PA., I do hereby
11 assign, set over and convey to the American Philatelic Research
12 Library all of my right, title and interest in and to said block
13 of four 24 cent United States Air Mail postage stamps (with
14 inverted centers) and/or its component stamps; and I do hereby
15 authorize the American Philatelic Research Library to take all
16 necessary steps, in my name or in the name of the American
17 Philatelic Research Library to recover said block of four stamps
18 and/or its component parts from law enforcement agencies,
19 insurance companies or any person, firm or corporation, or from
20 any other source whatsoever.
21 WITNESS my hand this 12th day of January, 1979.
22 Ethel B. McCoy
23 Ethel B. McCoy
24 WITNESSED:
25 Bruce Schellhase
26 _____
27 _____
28 _____

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.

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.



stamps. Her second husband, Walter R. McCoy, was a retired manufacturer of electrical fixtures and, more important, a fellow aficionado of rare stamps, who died in 1952.

The McCoy block comprised positions 65, 66, 75, and 76 from the pane of 100 stamps discovered by William T. Robey in 1918. Amick believed the block had previously been owned by Arthur Hind, an industrialist whose collection was best known for the fabled British Guiana 1-cent Magenta stamp of 1856, sometimes called “the world’s rarest stamp,” which was recently in the news when Sotheby’s sold it at auction in New York for \$9.5 million. In that respect McCoy’s Inverted Jenny block came with an aristocratic pedigree.

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The Emergence & Recovery of Position 75

Whoever made off with the block separated it into individual stamps, and 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 Roger and Raymond Weill, the well-known brothers whose New Orleans stamp shop catered to a wealthy clientele.

The Weills had bought and sold more Jenny Inverts than anyone since Eugene Klein bought the full pane from Robey and sold it to Col. E. 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 next 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 catalogue. 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.

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. 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.

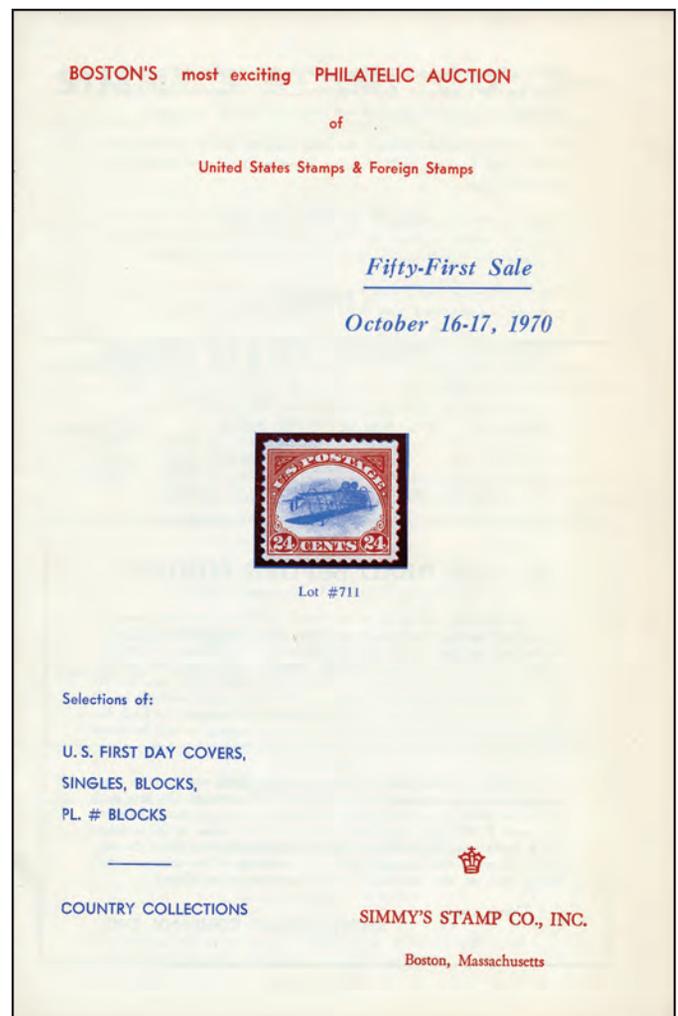
On January 12, 1979, at the urging of APS Executive Secretary James T. DeVoss, Ethel McCoy assigned all of her rights, title, and interest in the stolen block of four stamps and/or its component stamps to the American Philatelic Research Library. She was 85 years old and in declining health, with no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

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Philatelic Foundation, Ethel McCoy, Roe Insurance Company, and John Doe.

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 broth-



Position 75 appeared on the cover of the October 16–17, 1970, auction catalogue by Simmy's Stamp Company of Boston.



After the FBI recovered the position 75 stolen McCoy invert from Chicago stamp dealer Louis J. Castelli Jr., John W. Kaufmann featured it on the front cover of his September 25 and 26, 1981, auction catalogue. The stamp sold for \$115,000, for the benefit of APRL.

ers 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 foundation 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 Jenny Invert, APRL consigned it to John W. Kaufmann, who sold it at his September 25 and 26, 1981, public auction during the APS 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 air mail 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 & Recovery of Position 65

“Meanwhile,” George Amick wrote, “a second McCoy invert had turned up.”

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 APRL as a tax write-off, beginning with a Jenny invert, and this information was duly relayed to James DeVoss. It was not until eighteen 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 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, kept no documentation of the purchase, yet plans to claim a tax deduction after donating it to a non-profit organization?

Lutwak's absent-minded attitude regarding the provenance of his Jenny Invert contrasts sharply with the U.S. revenue 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



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

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 fourteenth-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,

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 until now, that aspect of the stamp's odyssey has not been reported.

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's 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?

I can't avoid wondering if this crime had been staged as a scam to collect insurance, one that failed because an inept team of thieves and collaborators not only lacked the ability to pull it off, but managed to catch the attention of wire service reporters who distributed their stories to newspapers and broadcasters from coast to coast. On the other hand, it's 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

Let's all do our best to spread the word.

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McCoy invert to Jim DeVoss when they met at a New York hotel in November 1982, the stamp had been stolen twice, but until now, that aspect of the stamp's odyssey has not been reported. This publication should add a new 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 APRL two days later. 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 Jenny Inverts, maybe by more than have viewed all the others combined.

Where Are Positions 66 & 76 of the McCoy Block?

The other two missing stamps from the McCoy block have 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. That was the last significant attempt to enlist members of the public to help solve this very stale cold case.

The current APRL trustees say they are committed to launch a more broadly publicized campaign. It's likely that nearly everyone who might have personal knowledge of the theft and subsequent dispersal of the McCoy inverts has died, but perhaps they left behind evidence, or perhaps the stolen stamps reside in estates whose beneficiaries don't know what they have.

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The Author

Ken Lawrence (apsken@aol.com), a former APS vice president and APRL trustee, is the "Spotlight" columnist for *Linn's Stamp News*. In November 2013 the United States Stamp Society awarded him the Walter W. Hopkinson Award for a series of articles in *The United States Specialist* on "Unpublished Air Mail Rates for United States Pacific Island Possessions 1935-1946."