

Sharing Commemorative Honors

Norse-American Stamp

The first instance where Iowa was singled out by a First Day of Issue occurred on May 18, 1925, when two stamps appeared simultaneously in commemoration of the Norse-American Centennial. The occasion marked the arrival in New York, on October 9, 1825, of the sloop *Restaurationen* with the first group of fifty-two Norwegian immigrants to the United States from Norway.

The two-cent Norse-American Stamp had for its central design a ship representing the sloop *Restaurationen*, with a smaller craft in the background, from a photo-engraving. The five-cent stamp had for its central design a Viking ship, also from a photo-engraving. The first issues of the Norse-American commemorative stamps were placed on sale at the following post offices: Algona and Decorah in Iowa; St. Paul, Minneapolis, Benson, and Northfield in Minnesota; and Washington, D.C. The printing was only 1,900,983 of the five-cent Viking ship and 9,104,983 of the two-cent Norwegian sloop variety.

The fifty-two immigrants from Norway who arrived aboard the *Restaurationen* marked the first of more than 200,000 Norwegians who settled in

the United States in the next fifty years. Most of these Norsemen settled in the Midwest — a goodly number of them in Iowa. Winneshiek County has always been the Norwegian stronghold in Iowa, but in seven other Iowa counties Norwegians have represented the most numerous foreign element. As a result, Decorah, where picturesque Luther College is located, was chosen as one point from which to issue the Norse-American Stamp. Algona, for some inexplicable reason (but not because Kossuth County led in Norwegians) was named to share this honor with Decorah.

Project Mercury

In selecting seven points for simultaneous issue, the Post Office Department departed from what already had become fairly established procedure. Only rarely does the Department allow more than one place of issue. The most memorable exception occurred on February 20, 1962, when the Post Office Department signaled the first orbital flight of a United States astronaut (John H. Glenn, Jr.) by the issuance of the four-cent "Project Mercury" Commemorative Stamp.

It was the first time in history that an unannounced United States commemorative stamp was issued simultaneously with the event it memorialized. Designed and printed under tight security precautions, the stamp was distributed well in advance of the flight. . . . A total of 310 million of these stamps was issued to meet the unprecedented demand and 3 million first day covers were can-

celed "Cape Canaveral, Fla., 3:30 P.M., Feb. 20, 1962." Provision was made for collectors to purchase these first day covers through the Philatelic Sales Agency, Washington, D. C., for a limited time, since they could not be obtained in the regular manner.

The actual number of post offices selected was 305 of which five — Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Sioux City, Davenport and Waterloo — were designated in Iowa. These, it will be noted, were the five largest cities in the State.

To avoid any leak, all transactions between the Post Office Department and the Bureau of Engraving were transmitted verbally rather than by letter and formal receipts. All designs, models, and die proofs were arranged and exchanged in hand-to-hand operation. The ingenious lengths taken to insure secrecy through various steps — design, engraving, printing, shipping, distribution of the stamps to 305 Postal Inspectors with sealed instructions as to how they were to proceed was a tremendous challenge that was made all the more difficult by the frequent postponement of Glenn's flight. The stamping of 250,000 envelopes surreptitiously at Washington, D.C., beginning on November 4, and the postmarking of these with others at Cape Canaveral on February 20 brought the total number of First Day of Issue envelopes at that point to almost 3,000,000. How this was done secretly at Cape Canaveral, and simultaneously at 305 other post offices, makes Project Mer-

cury one of the most intriguing tales in philatelic history. James F. Kelleher, Special Assistant to Postmaster General J. Edward Day, wrote:

At the 305 post offices where the stamp was available on February 20, a total of 10,290,850 had been sold by the end of the day. By February 28, orders from the field totaled 187,598,000. The original printing — that secret one — had been 120 million copies. Late in the evening of February 20 a second printing of 100 million was ordered. On February 28, in view of the orders from the field, a third printing of still another 100 million was ordered. Within just ten days of its release there were 320 million Project Mercury stamps — a record for a commemorative issue . . . Nothing in philately ever quite will approach the Post Office Department's Project Mercury, the first time that a stamp went on sale all over the nation at the exact hour of the event it commemorated. When that brisk sunny day, February 20, 1962, began, just a handful of people knew that a feat unheard of in philatelic history was about to be accomplished. By nightfall, the world was talking about John Glenn's three orbits around the earth; and stamp collectors also were marvelling at the most dramatic event in the annals of their hobby.

In Iowa the five postmasters were given the sealed package containing their Project Mercury Stamps immediately after John Glenn was safely landed. Following their instructions carefully, postmasters gave newspapers as well as radio and television stations the story of Project Mercury and with it the announcement that the stamps were on sale in the local post office.

One of the first individuals to be alerted in Cedar Rapids was Norman Erickson, an avid stamp collector and an officer of the Cedar Rapids Stamp Club. Erickson hastened to the post office, bought his stamps, procured 300 envelopes, and affixed his Project Mercury Stamps to them. He then had them run through the cancelling machine, giving him First Day of Issue envelopes at Cedar Rapids on February 20. But this was not enough. Erickson then designed and had printed an appropriate cachet which gave him one of the most attractive First Day of Issue covers personally issued in the country. Erickson then began to trade his cover with those who had possessed both his foresight and initiative around the Nation. As a result, Erickson had acquired 75 First Day of Issue of Project Mercury at the time this issue of *The Palimpsest* was going to press.

The Project Mercury Stamp is definitely one of Iowa's First Day of Issue stamps. The number of stamps actually sold by the five Iowa post offices is not known, nor is the number of First Day of Issue known for Iowa, but the number would not have been great.

Kennedy Memorial Stamp

The John F. Kennedy Memorial Stamp appeared on May 29, 1964, with 2,003,096 First Day of Issue covers passing through the Boston post office alone. The Kennedy stamp, however, was given the most widespread distribution of any

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Commemorative stamp, even surpassing the Project Mercury Stamp. This came about when it was decided that every post office in the United States would be permitted to sell Kennedy stamps on the opening day of sale — May 29, 1964. A total of 400,000,000 Kennedy stamps were printed and their widespread distribution insured their speedy disappearance from postal sales. The policy adopted qualified 1,010 Iowa post offices and 34,064 United States post offices to make First Day of Issue sales. The actual number of post offices, by classes in Iowa and the United States, stood as follows on May 31, 1964:

Presidential

	<i>First Class</i>	<i>Second Class</i>	<i>Third Class</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Fourth Class</i>	<i>Total</i>
Iowa	98	245	514	857	153	1,010
U.S.	4,360	6,867	12,934	24,161	9,923	34,084

In its official *Postal Bulletin* dated May 7, 1964, the Post Office Department warned postmasters not to place the Kennedy Stamp on sale before May 29, 1964, the 47th birthday anniversary of the late President. It also pointed out that the First Day of Issue cancellation could be obtained only from Boston, Massachusetts. Finally, postmasters were directed to cooperate with any and all local groups in arranging for observances planned in connection with the issuance of the Kennedy Memorial Stamp.

The Norse-American, Project Mercury, and Kennedy Memorial stamps represent special situations that did not ordinarily prevail in First Day of Issue covers. The tremendous magnitude of printing, sales, and distribution of the Project Mercury and Kennedy Memorial stamps stand in sharp contrast with the relatively small figures associated with the Norse-American Commemorative Stamp. The difference, in a sense, graphically reveals the growth of interest in First Day of Issue covers throughout Iowa and the Nation.