

## Comment by the Editor

### *THE EVOLUTION OF STAMPS*

To many Americans the announcement that 1947 is the centennial anniversary of the use of postage stamps in the United States will come as a surprise. How could anyone send a letter without a stamp? But, like many an everyday convenience, stamps which the user can "lick and stick" were late in making their appearance.

The idea of stamps, no doubt, goes back to the signet ring of the ancient monarch and the imprint of the ring on clay or wax came to be the symbol of authority. From this came the great seal and the lesser seals affixed to legal documents.

Few things in life are free and there came to be a charge for the affixing of a seal. The idea spread to the tax-gatherers, and so it happened that the first acquaintance of the early American colonists with stamps was a revenue measure, the Stamp Act of 1765. History books frequently give the impression that the British government sent over sheets of stamps which were to be affixed to all the papers and articles listed in the act.

The Stamp Act itself was rather vague as to the system to be used, but it appears that the govern-

ment was to provide, at a price including the tax, sheets of vellum or paper already stamped with some design and all legal documents must be written on these sheets. In some cases the authorized official might affix a seal or stamp the paper with some design. Each pack of playing cards had to be wrapped in a sheet of stamped paper. There were no separate stamps which could be purchased and used whenever needed. The use of stamped paper for wrapping an article was not a new idea. Covers, stamped to indicate that the charge for delivering the enclosed letters had been paid, were used in Paris as early as 1653. These were the original stamped envelopes.

Postage stamps were authorized in England by a law of Parliament in 1839. The following year the first adhesive postage stamps made their appearance, bearing the picture of Queen Victoria printed in black. The idea was brought to New York in 1842 when Henry T. Windsor started a private postal system and issued a three-cent stamp. In 1845 the postmasters in New York and St. Louis issued adhesive stamps as a convenience for marking prepaid letters. Other postmasters followed their example, and in 1847 the United States Post Office Department issued its first postage stamps and postmasters' "provisionals" were banned.