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ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE

by ROBIN CLARKE

King Tut—the tombs of the Chinese Emperors—sunken treasure—tremendous discoveries—fabulous finds. We've all read about those fortunate enough to be involved, and probably wondered just what it must feel like. I'm sure too, that a lot of us have read of some pretty fabulous philatelic finds, and wondered how we would feel opening some long-forgotten desk and finding, tucked away in some far cranny, a pane of Penny Blacks ! Or digging through a dumpster-full of old attic contents and coming up with bundles of spectacular old covers—(we heard about this one at the last meeting, didn't we?). Well, I know how I'd feel, and some years ago I did stumble onto a “find” of sorts—not fabulous or spectacular—but interesting none the less, and one that provided many hours of very pleasant reading, research and discovery. Let me tell you about it.

The phone rang one afternoon as I was working on my stamps. I had been, for some time, recuperating from major surgery, and, forced to spend quite a bit of time resting, had started to re-build a long-neglected stamp collection. This led to a long series of visits to the office of stamp dealer Reg Nairne, and as our friendship grew, this patient gentleman saw to it that I was thoroughly exposed to the Postal History bug! I was hooked on the pre-stamp postal history of Great Britain—just as Reg knew I would be! I acquired as many covers as my budget would allow, and of course a collection of any sort is far more fun if you show it to all your long-suffering pals (who probably hadn't a clue what I was talking about, but happily, were too polite to say so!)

Anyhow, everyone knew I was Interested in postal markings—the older the better—and stamps, and had been requested to look out for anything that might be of Interest, so when the phone rang that afternoon and a school pal announced that he had something to show me, I guessed it might have something to do with stamps. And it sure did!

Dan and a friend from where he worked at the Phone Co. were, he told me, downtown at a demolition sale— rummaging through the remains of a little old turn-of-the-century cottage on what must have been the upper end of Discovery St.—down below the Memorial Arena, behind the Imperial Inn (neither of which

were there then, by the way). An old gentleman named “Arundle” was selling off all the lumber, plumbing, door frames, etc., and Dan and his friend were looking for bits and pieces to use in re-modelling of a friend’s house. While poking through the little house, peering into back rooms and cupboards, they came across an old trunk in the closet of a rear bedroom, and one glance at the old envelopes it contained was enough to send them hustling off to find a phone.

It didn't take me long to get down to where they were, and being careful not to appear too eager or excited, we made our way to the tiny back bedroom and the clothes closet in the far corner. We opened the door, and there, up on end, its mohair-padded lid ajar, spilling its contents all over the floor, stood a big old steamer trunk. Sadly, it all looked like rubbish at first glance, but closer inspection produced a pleasant surprise—a dozen or so old covers with 1863–65 dates, from Victoria to Liverpool via San Francisco and New York. All had letters enclosed, and all bore the big horizontal oval cancel POST OFFICE - PAID - VICTORIA VANCOUVER ISLAND—in blue—along with various other transit strikes. There were some loose letters without envelopes, a lot of school scribbles and miscellaneous papers, and, yes, rubbish. The covers were, of course, the most eye-catching thing there, but something else was catching my eye too, and I wished it wasn't—there were no stamps on any of those covers, and my stamp catalogue told me there should have been! The covers were all addressed to someone called “Rowland Fawcett”, and the way the stamps had been so carefully removed led me to suspect he had probably been a stamp collector too. You can just bet I spent the next few frantic minutes searching through the litter for a stamp album of some sort—any sort! No luck! We did, however, find a couple of old mouse-chewed stamp weeklies, confirming our suspicions. Gathering up the little bundle of “treasure”, I approached old Mr. Arundle.

“What ya got there, stamps?”, he asked. “That’ll be three bucks”, “No, no stamps, just some old letters”, I assured him.

"No stamps, eh? In that case, you can have 'em!" “They're not worth anything”.

Not to him, maybe, but the postal markings alone, not to mention the extremely interesting bits of gossip and comment on life in the 1860’s Victoria that I was to read, over the course of many evenings spent with those letters, was certainly worth a lot to me. Of course, at the time, I had absolutely no idea who the Fawcetts were, and only after quite a time spent asking and digging around, did I discover that they were pretty well-known around early Victoria. As it turns out, Mr.

Fawcett Sr., who wrote a lot of these letters to his son Rowland, who was visiting in England with relatives (to improve his mind and manners and thus to become a “gentleman” no doubt), was a carpet manufacturer by trade in England, and emigrated to Australia in 1838. Son Edgar, (who also wrote some of these same letters to his brother), was born there, and went with the family in 1849 to California, following the gold rush. While there, Fawcett Sr. invested in a ship, which was to come to B.C., load lumber, and sail for England via San Francisco, taking the Fawcetts with her. The ship never returned, having been wrecked somewhere off the coast of Vancouver Island, taking with her all Fawcett’s savings. The family moved to Victoria soon afterward, and established a furniture and interior decorating business on Government St. He operated this business for 30 years, following which he served as Government Agent in Nanaimo for three years, returning to England in 1889. Mrs. Fawcett died in 1863, four years after their arrival in Victoria, leaving three sons, Edgar (who, as I mentioned, wrote some of the letters we found), Rowland (to whom the letters were written), and Arthur, who, as far as I can determine from reading the letters, had gone to England ahead of Rowland on the same sort of self-improvement mission.

Edgar, it turns out, would have been about seventeen years old when he wrote these letters to his brother. They sound like a teen-ager’s letters too, with plenty of humour and good-natured digs. Father’s letters are a bit dry! Research reveals that Edgar was to grow up to be quite an authority on early days in Victoria, wrote several books on related subjects, including one, “Some Reminiscences of Old Victoria”, a very scarce book, just loaded with information and photographs of Victoria in the 1860’s. He also wrote a book about Bishop Cridge’s life, and some works of poetry. He eventually joined his brother Rowland in an upholstery business in Victoria, then in 1882, joined the Customs Service as an appraiser in charge of the Postal Package and Express Dept., where he stayed for 29 years, until he retired. A year later, he wrote his book about Victoria in the early days. Brother Arthur remained in England, it seems. One rather nice family connection to emerge—Fawcett Sr.’s cousin was Rowland Hill of Penny Post fame. Hence the name “Rowland” Fawcett and, I don’t doubt, the fact that he was a stamp collector! I wonder how many Penny Blacks second cousin Rowland gave him for his collection while he was visiting in England?!

A few quotes from the letters - some amusing, some not so:

“Don’t you get too infatuated with all the girls, leave me a chance for some

future day. I and the girls are better friends—I am not so afraid of them as I was”.

“Mr. Cridge has lost all his children (4 out of 6) with scarlet fever. Poor man, he bears it well though”. – from Edgar.

From Fawcett Sr. “The steamer has been 3 days overdue, having been detained in the Columbia by a terrible gale”. “Another steamer leaves S.F. today or tomorrow and comes direct so will be here in about 4 days”.

And from another letter: “It is a mystery to me where these letters were detained, unless they were started overland and returned to New York in consequence of the Indian disturbances which have been so serious as to cause the telegraph to be destroyed for many miles”.

As you can see, the chief topic of conversation was, for the most part, when the steamer would arrive or why it hadn’t, and where the mail might have gotten to.

Fawcett Sr. writes, in another letter, “The House of Assembly has passed a bill for a new Govt. House to cost \$50,000 and I shall make application to supply the furniture”. That was March, 1865.

Edgar’s letters are far more breezy: “Mighty big fellows those cousins of ours (the boys) but the gals—pitch in old boy and enjoy yourself while you have the chance, no want of cousins to help you”.

Later In 1865, Rowland’s father writes him: “Things are very bad with us: the colony never has looked so gloomy since the first year, everybody leaving, houses to let in every street and property down to about one half its former value.” It seems they had their share of recession blues too. From another letter in the batch, this one from a school chum of Rowland and Edgar, named John Pidwell: “This town as far as business is concerned is flat. Stores and even Whiskey Shops are closing out and the proprietors go over to the other side.” “The people here are very much shocked at the manner of Lincoln’s death; ever since the news came nearly everyone has sympathized with the North.”

Young Pidwell’s letter is most interesting. It seems he is a member of the Fire Dept., (the Deluge Co.), as he mentions three fires he fought—“ ... Mrs. Milby the Tedian trader at the foot of Johnson Street”; “... the Square Dance House near the foundry”; and “the little old house at the corner of Gordon and Government Streets opposite the Victoria Hotel.”

In a lighter vein, he describes the May 1st festivities: “The Grand Parade came off on May 1st, the Tigers turned out 60 men, we only about 35. After being reviewed by H.E. Gov. Kennedy we had a department drill on the St. Nicholas, which was the best fun of all, The Hook & Ladder Co. were first sent to the ground and got their ladders to the top of the house. Then the Engine Co. got the word to

come down slowly, but when we got nearly down to the cor. of Govt. St. we saw the Tigers running so we went in and we got on the first water.”

In another letter, he tells of the May 24th celebrations: “I took two girls out to the Review in the forenoon, and then out to Harris’ Pond at the head of Pandora Street to a picnic in the afternoon.” Young Master Pidwell was quite a “mover” (or so he would like Rowland to think!)

In one final letter from Edgar to his brother: “I and Johnny McCredy are going to fight a duel soon over a girl (Carry Watkins). He is dreadful jealous of her... I’ll play Master John out soon, you’ll see.” And as a postscript: “Don’t let Aunt see this letter.” Typical boy!

And to further emphasize the all-consuming dependence on the mails and the comings and goings of the steamers they obviously had, Edgar tells Rowland, “How glad I am always when the steamers come in, how I bolt to the Post Office with expectation big.”

Finally, a bit of philatelic research, (with some kind assistance from your Editor), revealed an excerpt from a letter to the Colonial Secretary: “Letters from British Columbia to Great Britain—Correspondence is sent to San Francisco in a vessel subsidized by the colony, and is there treated as American mail matter, not being received unless the full U.S. postage be prepaid, which causes the Post Office here to keep on hand a large supply of U.S. postage stamps.”

From “Deaville” comes this bit of information regarding the blue oval Victoria handstamp found on all these letters: “Most probably used to indicate the pre-payment of Vancouver Island Colonial postage from Oct. 26th, 1864, to Sept. 19th, 1865, when the use of postage stamps on Vancouver Island was temporarily abandoned. Impressions are usually found at the upper left-hand corner of plain envelopes, bearing U.S. stamps, which were leaving the colony.”

So it would appear that young Master Rowland Fawcett must have had a pretty nice collection of U.S. stamps, at least, judging from the empty spaces on the corners of these letters!

No, not a fabulous treasure in the monetary sense, but a treasure none the less. These letters, to my way of thinking, are a treasure of insight, social comment and a glimpse of the past and how it must have been to live and grow up in the Victoria of the 1860’s. Things change, progress is made; but some things do remain the same: don’t we still each day, look forward to the coming of the mailman? I know I do !



One of the covers mailed from Victoria to Rowland Fawcett in England.

The [24¢] U.S. stamp has been added to give it some of its original appearance. The letter was written May 25, 1865. It arrived at San Francisco May 30, and probably went overland by stage to St. Louis, Mo., thence to New York by train, From N.Y. to England by steamer and probably by coach to its final destination, Birmingham, where it was backstamped on July 16, 1865—about 52 days in all. Charges were 16¢ to cross the Atlantic, 3¢ to travel by land in England, and probably 5¢ to go from Victoria to New York. The oval Colonial frank cost an extra 5¢. [The US postage for a ½oz letter from San Francisco to England was 24¢ and the Colonial postage was 5¢, as indicated by the PAID oval. gs]

The material in the article was reported in two other places:

R. Clarke, "Treasures Are Where You Find Them", *American Philatelist* (May 1986) pp. 480–482.

V. Chadwick, *Victoria Daily Colonist* (April 12, 1964) pp. 3 & 14.