

# World's Rarest Airmail Stamp



*The Black Honduras*



*Black Honduras  
10¢ dull blue Ulua Bridge stamp  
Black ink overprint  
AERO CORREO 25*



*Red Honduras  
5¢ bright blue Bonilla Theater stamp  
Red ink overprint  
AERO CORREO*

The 1925 Black Honduras is the world's rarest airmail stamp. This unique stamp is also the rarest of all railroad thematic stamps. A dull blue 10-centavo Ulua Bridge Honduras stamp surcharged AERO CORREO 25 in black, it played an integral role in early 20th century history.

Nearly as rare are the Red Honduras stamps, of which just seven are known.

These Honduras stamps helped inaugurate airmail service between the Honduran capital city Tegucigalpa, which was located in the interior of the country, and Puerto Cortés on its Caribbean coast. At the time, airmail service was of even greater importance to that nation than it was within the United States, and it had the potential to revolutionize communication in the Central American country. Although this fact was not lost on many stamp collectors, no one knew about the existence of the Black Honduras for several years.

The airmail service failed within months and years passed. One day, *Scott Catalogue* editor and prominent philatelist John Luff received an envelope in the mail — and a tale brimming with mystery, intrigue and betrayal began to unfold.

This is the story of these rare Honduras stamps...

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# Major Players in the Black Honduras Story

**Thomas Canfield Pounds, M.D.:** American physician who negotiated the airmail service contract with Honduran government in 1922.

**Sumner B. “Sonny” Morgan:** An American, and the first and only pilot for Pounds’ airmail service in 1925.

**Julio Ustariz:** Owner of the airfield in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, used for airmail flights. Ustariz acquired a single Black Honduras stamp indirectly from Pounds in 1926.

**Karl Snow:** A business associate of Pounds who created the rare Honduran Airmail stamps by overprinting old Honduras stamps.

**John Luff:** 1920s and 1930s *Scott Catalogue* editor and greatest stamp collector of his time. Luff’s reputation was tarnished by his conduct concerning the Black Honduras stamps during the 1930s.

**Raúl Duran Membreño:** Tegucigalpa, Honduras, dentist, stamp collector and dealer, and later Secretary General of Honduras postal administration. Membreño acquired a pair of the Black Honduras stamps directly from Pounds.

**H. A. Robinette:** Washington, D.C., stamp dealer who received a Black Honduras stamp within a small collection of early Honduran Airmail stamps.

**Nicolas Sanabria:** Airmail stamp dealer and publisher of *Sanabria’s Air Post Catalogue*. Sanabria negotiated the Robinette Black Honduras sale.

**Marc Armand Rouso:** Controversial French businessman and stamp dealer nicknamed “the Crocodile.” Purchased the Ustariz single Black Honduras at auction and claimed he left it in a taxi or restaurant by mistake. The stamp has never been found.

**Donald Sundman:** President of Mystic Stamp Company, owner of the surviving Black Honduras, the Robinette single.

## Key Locations

**Tegucigalpa:** Capital of Honduras, located 150 miles south of Puerto Cortés, the closest Atlantic seaport. Distance and the mountainous terrain between the port and capital — along with a lack of rail service — led to the creation of Honduras airmail.

**Puerto Cortés:** Honduras’ main seaport and industrial center. Located in north Honduras on the coast of the Caribbean Sea.

# Background: Honduras, 1920s

By the mid-1920s, many modern nations had built well-developed railroad networks and transoceanic ports. And recent innovations like the automobile and airplane were beginning to show great potential. For many people, correspondence and travel to distant countries was easier than ever before.



*In the 1920s, Atlantic seaports — built by fruit-growing corporations to export bananas — were Honduras' main link to the outside world.*

Honduras, consisting mostly of mountains and highlands, found building this infrastructure difficult. Honduras' capital, Tegucigalpa, was far from the Atlantic seaports in the north. Development of roads and rail in the rough highlands was difficult and expensive, and decades of political instability had weakened the country's economy. U.S.-based banana-growing companies — heavily involved in Honduran politics — were given land grants and tax exemptions to build

railroads along the north coast. The fruit companies built these rail networks to transport bananas from inland plantations to the coast, where they could be exported to America and Europe.

While plans were made for the fruit companies to build a rail line connecting Tegucigalpa to the Atlantic coast, rough terrain and high cost led to the project being abandoned. The fruit companies had little interest in building a railway through Honduras' highlands, where land was unsuitable for banana cultivation. Because corporate influences made the country's primary industry exempt from taxes, only the fruit-growing companies had the money and manpower to complete the project.

Without a link to the Atlantic, Tegucigalpa was isolated from the outside world. It would take around a week to bring mail from the capital to the north coast, where it could finally be sent by boat to its destination.



*Without a railroad to the Atlantic coast, mail from Honduras' capital needed to be carried over mountains by a team of mules or oxen.*

# The Black Honduras

by Ken Lawrence

The stamp known as the Black Honduras, believed to be unique, is the world's rarest airmail stamp. The Red Honduras, with no more than seven available to collectors, is the second rarest.



*The unique Black Honduras*



*The Red Honduras, one of 7 known*

Both were issued in 1925 when Central America's first airline inaugurated service between the Honduran capital city Tegucigalpa, in the interior of the country, and Puerto Cortés on the Caribbean coast.

Considering their legendary names, it may seem odd that the Black Honduras is a dull blue stamp and the Red Honduras is a bright blue stamp. That's because they are defined by the ink colors of the overprints on them, which transformed the underlying common definitive stamps into airmail rarities — the 10¢ Uluá Bridge stamp surcharged AERO CORREO 25 in black ink (converting a 10¢ ordinary stamp into a 25¢ airmail stamp, Honduras Scott C12) and the 5¢ Bonilla Theater stamp overprinted AERO CORREO only in red ink (Scott C3).



*Map of Honduras showing the important port city of Puerto Cortés on the northern coast and the capital city of Tegucigalpa to the south. A mountain range runs between the two cities.*

First-issue airmail stamps of Honduras are important to philately in the same way that United States airmail stamps of 1918 are important, as historical artifacts of the service that created them. But

airmail service was of greater relative significance to Honduras than the original U.S. government airmail service.

Tegucigalpa was isolated from the outside world, with no rail transport and with roads so poor that mule trains took up to a week to carry mail to a port on the north coast for onward transmission to other countries.

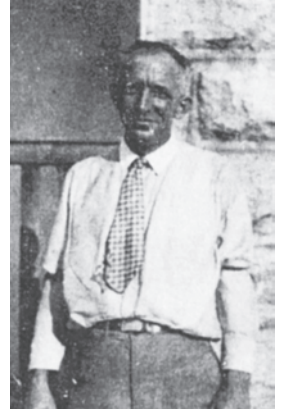
The small aircraft flown by Compañía Aérea Hondureña (also advertised as Central American Airlines [CAA]) traveled the 200-kilometer distance in about an hour and a half.



*Dr. Thomas C. Pounds,  
owner of first Honduras  
airmail stamp service*



*Sumner "Sonny" Morgan,  
first and only Honduras  
airmail pilot*



*Karl Snow, printed  
Honduras airmail stamps*

### **Thomas Canfield Pounds, M.D.**

On October 24, 1922, the postmaster general of Honduras contracted with an American physician named Thomas C. Pounds to establish airmail service between Tegucigalpa and the north coast.

The Honduran president, López Gutiérrez, approved the contract on December 16. A 10-lempira stamp issued by Honduras in 2000 pictures Pounds (Scott C1076).

Pounds was born August 9, 1876, in Montana. Philatelic legend holds that Pounds was related to Kid Canfield (Richard Albert Canfield), a notorious turn-of-the-20th-century gambler and confidence man turned anti-gambling reformer, author, lecturer and subject of a 1920s Western silent motion picture, but I have been unable to verify that.

Pounds graduated from Cornell University in the "Senior Medics"

class of 1902 and earned his M.D. degree from the University of Southern California School of Medicine in 1903.

He established a prosperous eye, ear, nose and throat practice in Redlands and San Diego. On March 28, 1905, he married Marion Ashley of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Almost immediately, the Poundses became respected celebrities of San Diego civic affairs and high society, noted in local news snippets.

In 1910 Pounds taught San Diego schoolteachers how to detect and prevent eye, ear and throat diseases in children. In 1913 the exclusive Sequan Country Club was incorporated with Pounds as its president, its membership limited to 100 families.

In 1915 Marion Pounds was proposed as a candidate for the San Diego school board at a meeting of politically active women, an uncharacteristically progressive suggestion before women had won the right to vote throughout the nation.

Pounds served as an assistant surgeon in the naval reserve, achieving the rank of lieutenant from 1915 to 1918, but was never called to duty during World War I. A January 1, 1917, report in the *San Diego Union* boasted that the town's most prominent citizens, including Pounds, were "citizen sailor" members of the Navy Militia, part of a grand and largely successful campaign to transform San Diego into the Navy's main Pacific coast base.

After the war, Pounds moved his residence to Tegucigalpa and established himself there as an eye doctor.

He is said to have witnessed the pioneer airplane flight in Central America on April 19, 1921, when his friend, Colonel Ivan Lamb, flew his Bristol fighter biplane into Tegucigalpa from San Pedro Sula, which kindled his interest in the aviation business.

### **The Inauguration of Air Transport in Honduras**

Sumner B. "Sonny" Morgan had been an aviator for a decade or more by the time he applied for the job as CAA's pilot. He had worked for Glenn H. Curtiss' Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company in 1916, and had studied motor design at Columbia University.

After completing successful test flights in March and April, and

carrying mail for the first time on an April 20 flight, Morgan flew from Tegucigalpa to Puerto Cortés on April 28, 1925, and back the next day. According to Latin America specialist Brian Moorhouse, he carried letters on both of those flights.

The inaugural CAA flight took off from the Tonconín flood plain in Tegucigalpa on May 1 and flew to Puerto Cortés on the Caribbean coast.

The flight carried 29 letters, of which seven were franked with only ordinary postage, and 22 were franked with both ordinary and special airmail stamps.



Sumner B. “Sonny” Morgan addressed this cover — a first day cover of the airmail stamp and a souvenir of the first flight — to his father in New York. The 6¢ red violet Dionisio de Herrera stamp of 1924 (Scott 213) paid surface postage to the United States. The 1¢ chocolate Ulua Bridge surcharged 25¢ in black (Scott C10) paid for air transport in Honduras.

By the end of June, 100 letters flown from Tegucigalpa and 773 letters flown on return flights from Puerto Cortés had been franked with the special stamps.

Thus, the special airmail stamps of Honduras achieved not only postal and philatelic legitimacy, but cherished status as icons of the airmail age.

Morgan probably carried this illustrated cover, postmarked April 28 at Puerto Cortés, on the first flight.

## Special Airmail Stamps

Early adventures in powered flight and polar exploration were often promoted and funded by special issues of postage stamps and by the sale of souvenir cards and covers that were carried by the aviators and explorers on their trips. So it wasn't surprising or unusual that Pounds' contract allowed him to finance his enterprise in part with a special postal issue.

An April 29, 1925, announcement of the new air service from the Tegucigalpa post office listed the rates and explained the procedures to members of the public, including the use of the special stamps (as translated by John N. Myer in the August 1940 *American Philatelist*):

*The correspondence which will be carried from this city to the North Coast by airplane will bear two stamps: the ordinary postage of the Government, according to the current tariff, and the postage of the special stamp of the enterpriser.*

*The special stamps will be sold by Dr. T.C. Pounds in this city, and by his Agents in the other places where correspondence is to be carried by air.*

Myer quoted from Pounds' contract: "The Government will order printed for its account special postage stamps for franking the correspondence which is carried by airplanes and the entire product of the sale of these special stamps will be paid to the contractor monthly."

As things turned out, the government did not provide the stamps, so Pounds arranged for his business associate Karl J. Snow to add surcharges to

stamps of a regular issue on a Kelsey-Excelsior manually operated press.

Snow had been using his press to print 3-inch-by-5-inch flyers for the Seventh Day Adventist church. That small format limited the number of stamps that could be overprinted at one time. The airmail surcharges



*Full sheet of Honduras Scott C4 stamps printed by Snow. The size of the printing press limited him to producing sheets of just 12 stamps each. This sheet overprinted in red ink was produced after the rare Black and Red Honduras.*

were applied to blocks of 12, and to smaller leftover pieces from the original panes of 100.

Each position of the 12-subject overprint setting differed from the others in consistent traits, so every genuine stamp can be plated.

Some stamps on the original pane were inverted in relation to their neighbors, yielding scarce tête-bêche pairs (or, when separated, single stamps with inverted overprints).

Pounds, Morgan and their associates were aware of philatelic interest in their stamps, which quickly made their way to the hobby market. In the United States, the flamboyant dealer Albert C. Roessler of East Orange, New Jersey, promoted Honduran airmail stamps and covers. Covers that Roessler sold were probably favor-canceled but not flown. Before the end of 1925, the notorious forger Raoul Ch. de Thuin had produced quantities of forgeries (forged overprints on genuine stamps).



**Air Cover**  
 Honduras—Here's a cover that flew years ago. In fact, it is the first one that flew at Tela, Honduras. Has cachet "Landing Field, Tela, Honduras," in an oval, and by the way, this same cachet was used on some of the recent mail. It is stamped with #113. This mail was actually flown in Dr. Pounds mail. Have only a few and our price is \$1.00

*Air cover ad in A.C. Roessler's Stamp News, an eccentric stamp dealer known for his airmail covers.*



*Summer Morgan with a Lincoln Standard plane. The plane Morgan flew for the airmail flights was an Aeromarine 39-L, a Navy trainer biplane. An Aeromarine 39-L model plane was the first to land on an aircraft carrier, the USS Langley.*

**Discovery of the Black Honduras: the Ustariz Single**

When stamp catalogs listed the first airmail stamps of Honduras in



*Ustariz copy of the Black Honduras, lost in 2002.*

1925, the Black Honduras was not among them. The June 1925 issue of *Bulletin Mensuel de la Maison Théodore Champion* reported that the Honduran postal administration had announced stamps issued April 28 to pay a surtax on letters carried by air between Tegucigalpa, the capital, and the north coast of Honduras, and published the list of airmail rates.

Champion listed stamps of the 1915 issue overprinted AERO CORREO as follows, noting the ink color if not black: 5¢ blue, issue of 500, exists with inverted surcharge; 10¢ blue (red), 500, exists with tête-bêche and inverted surcharge; 20¢ on 1¢ brown-violet, 500, exists with inverted surcharge; 50¢ rose, 200; 1 peso green, 100. But no 10¢ blue with a black overprint.

In March 1927, John Luff, a senior dealer at Scott Stamp and Coin Company and editor of the *Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue*, received a large batch of Honduran airmail stamps from Julio Ustariz, owner of the airfield at Puerto Cortés, which included one 10¢ blue overprinted 25¢ in black. Ustariz had obtained the stamps from his friend F.W. Budde, who had received them from Pounds in March 1926.



*John Luff, Senior Dealer at Scott Stamp and Coin Company*

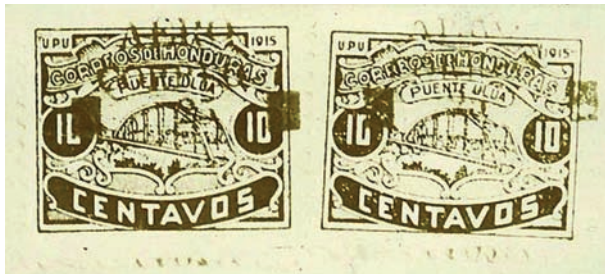
Luff plated the previously unreported stamp to ensure it was not a forgery, and satisfied himself that the overprint was genuine from the first printing. Not having known of its existence earlier, Luff suspected that it may have been a trial print, but his queries drew conflicting reports from his correspondents.

To avoid disclosing its seeming scarcity, Luff hinted to Ustariz that it was probably counterfeit after he had satisfied himself that it was genuine. Luff never returned the stamp to Ustariz, and never paid for it.

Thus, the first example of the Black Honduras is known as the Ustariz single.

## Tragedy of Duran Membreño's Black Honduras Pair

Also in March 1927, Luff received a batch of 16 Honduran airmail stamps from Raúl Duran Membreño, a Tegucigalpa dentist who was later secretary general of the postal administration.



*John Luff photographed the Membreño pair before returning the stamps to their rightful owner. Following their loss, this image from Luff's reference collection is all that remains of them.*

Duran was a stamp collector and dealer who had obtained his stamps from Pounds. (Duran was his surname, and Membreño was his mother's maiden name, in the Spanish rendering. But American stamp writers failed to recognize that distinction, so he is known to philately as Membreño.) He enclosed a pair of 10¢ stamps surcharged in black for Luff to examine and perhaps explain.

The second and third examples of the Black Honduras are known as the Membreño pair.

Luff returned 14 of the 16 stamps, but retained the pair, which he had determined to be genuine, for further study. While playing down its scarcity and potential value, he tried to persuade Duran to sell it, but Duran demanded the pair be returned to him for his own collection. Luff reluctantly complied.

In November 1927, Duran wrote to Luff that his collection had endured "an accident" and that "My two 25¢/10¢ blue airmails were lost." The Membreño pair has not been seen since, but the Philatelic Foundation has the photograph that Luff kept with his reference collection.

### **The Robinette Single, Last of the Original Four**

Finally, in June 1930, Washington, D.C., stamp dealer H.A. Robinette sent Luff "a Honduras airmail surcharged '25 on 10' blue. This came to [Robinette] with a small collection of these stamps, which are undoubtedly genuine, and the original owner claims to have bought them all, right at the post office in Honduras."

The fourth example of the Black Honduras is known as the Robinette single.

Overprints on the four recorded examples of the Black Honduras have consecutive top-row positions of the original overprint setting, but the underlying stamps came from different, widely separated positions of their original pane, which is part of the reason specialists doubt that more than those four ever existed.

The four stamps had been grouped together for overprinting. Plating established that in the 12-subject setting, the Robinette single overprint was from position 1; the Ustariz single, position 2; the Membreño pair, positions 3 and 4. When images of all four were examined together, even the overprints on the partially separated Membreño pair aligned.

But they had not been an attached strip of four. The Robinette single was position 40 on the original pane of 100 stamps, and the Ustariz single was position 60, the last stamps in two different horizontal rows.

Had the overprint positions not been consecutive or had the original stamps been taken from a single block of 12, there would be reason to suspect that more had been printed. But this unusual combination and the fact that no others have been found since 1930 are good reasons to doubt that any more were made with the black surcharge on the 10¢ stamps.

The poor quality of the overprint and the original use of black ink later replaced by red suggest that this Black Honduras patched-together strip was a trial print of the setting, perhaps to check the placement of the black squares that obliterated the original denomination. Nevertheless, even if it had been a trial print, at least one of the stamps had been sold at a post office as a normal issue, according to Robinette's source.

### **Grand Award at the 1936 Third International Philatelic Exhibition**

In the absence of contrary evidence, Robinette's report should have satisfied Luff's dithering about whether the Black Honduras had been an



*On May 9, 1936, the Post Office Department issued Scott 778 to salute the Third International Philatelic Exhibition. The souvenir sheet included four different postage stamps, all of which had been issued individually during the past year.*



*Amelia Earhart awards Philip G. Cole the TIPEX airmail class grand award for his exhibit that included the Black and Red Honduras stamps.*

issued stamp — not simply a trial print — but Luff still did not list the stamp in the *Scott Catalogue* while he hoped to buy it cheaply from Robinette “as a trial stamp or an essay.”

Robinette was no fool. He instead sold it to airmail dealer Nicolas Sanabria. Sanabria sold it to New York airmail dealer Fred W. Kessler, who then sold it to Philip G. Cole, a famous collector of Western art who had the finest airmail collection then in existence.

The stamp was finally placed on public view in 1936 as part of Cole’s exhibit at the Third International Philatelic Exhibition (TIPEX) in New York City. By then, with only two known examples still likely to exist, it should have been recognized as the world’s rarest airmail stamp, but that was not to be.

Instead, the Red Honduras, of which only seven were collectible, was highlighted. Amelia Earhart presented the TIPEX grand award in the airmail class to Cole as airmail collectors celebrated his achievement, but no report paid special attention to his Black Honduras.

### **Origin of the Red Honduras**

In 1926 John W. Nicklin, the Scott Stamp and Coin Company buyer, purchased a large batch of Honduran airmail stamps from Morgan, the pilot. Morgan had taken the stamps in lieu of money Pounds allegedly owed him. Among the hoard was a single irregular block of nine Red Honduras stamps.

Honduran correspondents had advised Luff that only a single block of 12 had been printed, so he recognized the rarity of the stamps. Two were so badly scuffed that they were deemed unfit to sell; those went into his reference collection. Nicklin sold the other seven to these wealthy collectors: U.S. Senator Joseph S. Frelinghuysen, Charles C. Lieb,

Oscar R. Lichtenstein, Fuller Heathcote, Donald R. Davis, Carlton W. Smith and G.B. Towne.

By the time Cole had won the TIPEX grand award, the Red Honduras was famous. In the September 24, 1932, issue of *Stamps* magazine, airmail dealer Emil Bruechig's article "The Rarest Air Mail Stamp — Honduras 5¢ Surcharged in Red" had summarized the production of the 1925 set, and then declared, "But the specimen of this issue that outshines them all is the five-cent light blue, surcharged in red!"



*The Red Honduras originally received more attention than the rarer Black Honduras.*

But by 1936, someone should have reported that the Black Honduras was rarer. The reason for the omission was a mistake by Sanabria. He had listed the Black Honduras in the 1936 first edition of Sanabria's *Air Post Catalogue*, but had reported the quantity issued as 12 stamps, and had assigned it a value of \$4,000, compared to seven stamps valued at \$7,000 each for the Red Honduras.

Sanabria repeated his mistake in the 1937, 1938, and 1939 editions (each published in the year preceding the cover date). He must have believed that one block of 12 had been surcharged, and that all of the stamps from that block might have survived.

As this confusion spread, the forger de Thuin was making matters worse. In the British magazine *Stamp Collecting* for December 7, 1935, and January 4, 1936, de Thuin's article "The First Air Stamps of Honduras (1925)" reported the history reasonably accurately from the perspective of a writer who had been an associate of Pounds, thus adding an aura of credibility to the author's widely marketed forgeries.

### **Recognition for the Black Honduras**

John Luff died August 23, 1938, and very quickly things began to change.

A September 24 NBC radio report announced the discovery of a second example of the Black Honduras in addition to the one that Cole had exhibited at TIPEX. The October 8, 1938, issue of *Stamps* magazine published an article titled "The World's Rarest Air Mail Stamp" by Prescott Holden Thorp that provided more information, though no

details of when or by whom the discovery had been made.

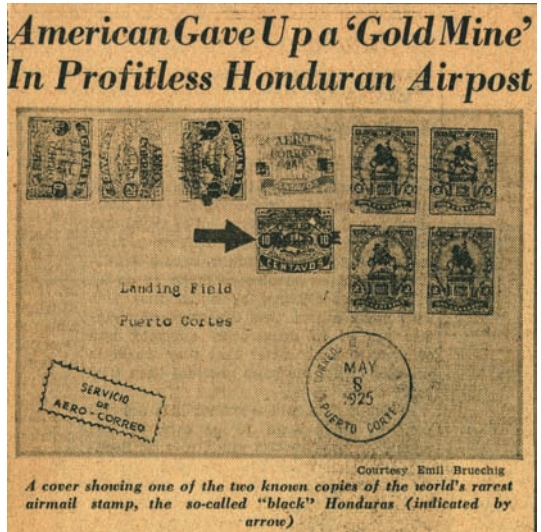
Thorp's article pictured a May 1925 cover franked with both ordinary and airmail stamps of Honduras. One of the airmail stamps was the 10¢ blue surcharged 25 in black, a Black Honduras. Thorp submitted the cover as evidence to refute Luff's catalog note that the stamp "is not known to have been put in use."

The cover was actually in the possession of stamp dealer Bruechig – the man who had previously promoted the Red Honduras as the world's rarest airmail stamp. Bruechig showed the cover not only to Thorp but also to Hugh Clark, who had succeeded Luff as the *Scott Catalogue* editor. On that evidence, Clark listed the Black Honduras as a legitimate issued stamp. Several months later, after the stamp had been accorded official recognition, Bruechig's cover illustrated an article in the *New York Herald-Tribune*.

It later transpired that the stamp had not originated on the cover, but was the unused Ustariz single that Luff had failed to return in 1927. It may have been added fraudulently to the cover as a way of disguising its origin. Ustariz was not fooled, and was angry that Luff had led him to believe it was a forgery, but his complaint that Luff had "stolen" the stamp from him had no influence on events.

In 1953, Nicklin told writer Irving R. Green, "The story is this: The stamp on the cover, was sold; it was later cleaned [fake cancel removed] and regummed." Green believed that "Bruechig had sold it to his best customer, Dr. Lieb of New York City."

But when John A. Fox sold the Dr. Charles C. Lieb Collection of Airpost Stamps of the World in his February 25-27, 1957, estate sale, the Black Honduras was not included. Green pursued a rumor that "a wealthy



*Herald-Tribune* article picturing the Ustariz single on the cover that Luff had altered by adding that stamp and a fake cancel.

Mid-Westerner had obtained it,” but was unable to confirm it. At that point, the Ustariz single disappeared from view and dropped out of hobby lore.

### **Record Sale Prices for the Robinette Single**

On October 27, 1939, Kessler sold at auction the Famous “Dr. Philip G. Cole” Collection of Rare Airmail Stamps & Covers. The Black Honduras realized \$5,300, purchased by Sidney F. Barrett of Economist Stamp Company for Oscar R. Lichtenstein. Sanabria corrected his listing in the 1940 edition of his catalog, showing that only two examples of the Black Honduras were known (the Robinette and Ustariz singles), with an assigned value of \$15,000.



*In 1961, the only stamp more valuable than the Black Honduras was the 1856 1¢ Magenta British Guiana.*

Lichtenstein died in 1955. Harmer, Rooke sold his collection at auction in 1957. The next owner of the Robinette single was Thomas A. Matthews of Ohio, who built the finest airmail collection of all time. Matthews paid \$11,500 for the Black Honduras at the Lichtenstein sale.

When Kessler sold the Matthews collection on February 27, 1961, Raymond H. Weill of New Orleans bought the Black Honduras for \$24,500, which set a record for any stamp sold at auction in America. Only one stamp had previously sold for a higher price — the 1856 1¢ Magenta of British Guiana.

The underbidder who dropped out at \$24,000, retired weekly newspaper publisher Max L. Simon, was missing only two stamps in his worldwide airmail collection. He had reckoned on just three competitors: “One of them is in London, one in Rome and another in Cairo.” But after the sale, Weill told Simon the buyer was “a wealthy Texan” who had authorized him to bid as high as \$30,000. To my knowledge, the identity of Weill’s client has not become public.

### **From Josiah K. Lilly Jr. to Joseph Levy Jr.**

The Robinette single made its next appearance in Robert A. Siegel’s 1968 sale of the Josiah K. Lilly Jr. philatelic estate, where a consortium of New York stamp dealers purchased the Black Honduras for \$29,000. The buyers displayed it anonymously at Anphilex 1971, the Collectors

Club's 75th anniversary exhibition.

On February 6, 1976, Jared Johnson, proprietor of Chandler's Inc. school and office supply chain in Evanston, Illinois, purchased that Black Honduras from Andrew Levitt for a price in excess of \$80,000 on behalf of Joseph Levy Jr., owner of the world's largest Buick and Chrysler dealerships, also located in Evanston.

Besides being a showpiece at Chandler's store, Levy's Black Honduras was anonymously displayed as a special exhibit at the Interphil '76 international stamp exhibition at Philadelphia.

### **Resurrection of the Ustariz Single**

In the March 15, 1986, *Stamp Collector*, the headline over The World of Unique Stamps monthly column by Norman Williams read, "Four were printed; but one 'Black Honduras' only is known today."

Two months later he published a retraction. The May 17 headline was "Unique no longer: A second Black Honduras stamp has appeared."

After reading the first column, Raymond Weill wrote to inform Williams that his subject — the Robinette single — was not unique. In 1985 the Weill brothers had purchased a collection that included the Ustariz single, which had been certified as genuine by the Philatelic Foundation.

The Ustariz single sold for \$116,670 at a May 26, 1989, Italphil auction in Rome. The stamp next appeared at the Harmer's of London February 23, 1994, sale of The Jack C. Boonshaft Collection of Airmails of the World (Part 2), where it realized £104,500, equivalent to \$155,705.

The next owner exhibited the Ustariz single anonymously at Claridge's in London, July 6-8, 1995, and at the Collectors Club centennial exhibition Anphilex '96 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, November 28 to December 2, 1996.

That was its last public appearance before the January 23-24, 2002, Cherrystone sale where it was purchased by the rogue French stamp dealer Marc Rouso (also known as Armand Rouso). Less than a week later, *The New York Times* reported that a former Federal Bureau of Investigation operations manager and two former Paine Webber Inc. executives had pleaded guilty in federal court to having illegally helped Rouso and another Frenchman "who carried out huge stock frauds in the United States

and Europe... both of whom were fugitives from French justice.”

Rouso later told members of the stamp trade he had lost the stamp after the sale, having left it in a taxi or at a restaurant by mistake. Perhaps his mind was not on stamps that day. If Rouso told the truth about his loss, the Robinette single had finally truly become unique.

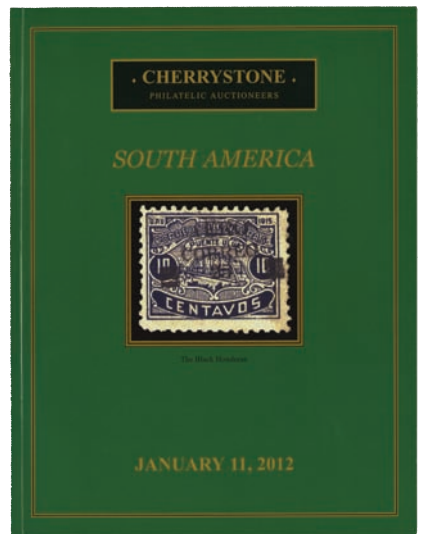
### **2012 Cherrystone Sale of Rare Honduras Airmails**

At Cherrystone’s January 11, 2012, “Santa Fe” sale, Mystic Stamp Company bought the rare stamps and covers illustrated in color with this article, including the Black Honduras, which realized \$120,000, and the Red Honduras, which realized \$7,000.

I’m told that “Santa Fe” was a coy reference to Edward M. Gilbert, the one-time “Boy Wonder of Wall Street” who later served two terms in prison for financial crimes. According to the *Encyclopedia of Santa Fe and Northern New Mexico*, Gilbert moved to Santa Fe in 1991 and founded a firm that became the largest holder of commercial real estate in New Mexico.

Despite his checkered business career, Gilbert spared no expense when he assembled outstanding stamp collections. Former auctioneer Greg Manning claimed to have sold \$25 million worth of Gilbert’s collections in a series of name sales during the previous decade, so it does not surprise me to see his name on the Black Honduras provenance roster.

Mystic’s president Donald J. Sundman proudly exhibited the Black Honduras at the Aerophilately 2014 international exhibition at Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, in September. He next exhibited the rare first-issue airmail stamps of Honduras at the New York 2016 world stamp show.



*Auction program cover for Cherrystone’s January 11, 2012, “Santa Fe” sale.*

## Timeline of World's Airmail Stamps

Although Honduras was largely undeveloped in 1925, the establishment of airmail service placed it among larger and more progressive countries. Consider the dates this sampling of nations issued their first official airmail stamps:

- 1917 – Italy
- 1918 – United States, Hungary, Austria
- 1920 – Spain, Switzerland
- 1924 – Bolivia
- 1925 – **Honduras**, Albania, Denmark
- 1926 – Costa Rica, Egypt
- 1927 – Cuba, France, French Morocco, Peru
- 1928 – Canada, Ireland, Malta, Romania
- 1929 – Australia
- 1930 – Belgium, Finland



*Ken Lawrence*

### About the Author

Ken Lawrence has been a philatelic writer and researcher for more than 30 years, a United States antebellum and Civil War era historian for more than 40, and a stamp and cover collector for more than 60. He has published articles in all the major American stamp hobby publications, some in other countries, and in many specialty journals. He is a former vice president of the American Philatelic Society and a former trustee of the American Philatelic Research Library. He was elected to the APS Writers Hall of Fame in 1998. In 2004, the United States Philatelic Classics Society honored him with its Distinguished Philatelist award. He is co-author with Scott R. Trepel of *Rarity Revealed: The Benjamin K. Miller Collection*, published by the Smithsonian National Postal Museum in 2006; editor and co-author of *The Liberty Series*, published by the APS in 2007.

# Other Rare and Valuable Stamps



## America's Rarest Stamp – The 1¢ Z Grill #85A

The scarce 1868 One-Cent Z Grill (Scott 85A) pictured to the left is the rarest U.S. stamp. Only two are known. For seven years, Mystic Stamp Company owned the finest example, which is the only 1¢ Z Grill available to collectors.

Grills were a security device used on U.S. postage stamps from 1867-75. They were made by embossing the stamp – that is, breaking the paper's fibers. This allowed cancellation ink to thoroughly penetrate the stamp's paper, making it more difficult to bleach out or remove a cancel and reuse the stamp a second time.

The “Z” grill is just one of eleven grill patterns that were used on U.S. stamps. Experts currently value this stamp rarity at around \$3 million.

## The Legendary British Guiana 1¢ Magenta

The British Guiana 1¢ magenta is the rarest postage stamp in the world. It was created in 1856, when a newspaper printed an emergency supply of 4¢ stamps. In 1875, school boy Vernon Vaughan found a stamp inscribed “ONE CENT” instead of “FOUR CENTS.” Unaware of the stamp's potential value, the boy sold the stamp for just six shillings. It was soon sold again for a great deal more.

The stamp has had many famous owners. In 1980, John Du Pont acquired the British Guiana 1¢ Magenta for \$935,000. In June 2014, entrepreneur Stuart Weitzman purchased the stamp for \$9,480,000 – the highest price ever paid for a postage stamp.



*The British Guiana 1¢ Magenta had its corners clipped by an owner unaware of its rarity and value.*

## The Unique Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block



*Jenny Invert  
Plate-Number Block*

The legendary Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block is the *only* plate-number block from the *only* surviving sheet of inverted 1918 24¢ airmail stamps, making it truly unique.

The Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block has been the crown jewel in a number of famous stamp collections. The plate-number block sold for record prices each time it changed hands, reflecting its status as America's greatest stamp rarity.

# About Mystic Stamp Company

Mystic Stamp Company was founded in 1923 by Camden, New York, stamp collector Lawrence Shaver. In 1974, he sold the company to fellow stamp dealer Maynard Sundman of Littleton, New Hampshire. Maynard sent his 19-year-old son Donald to run Mystic as general manager. Today, Mystic is America's largest mail order stamp dealer.

Also the country's largest buyer of collections and dealer stocks, Mystic spends millions of dollars on stamps each year – over \$70 million in the last five years.

Located in a small upstate New York town, Don and 150 stamp colleagues are dedicated to helping Mystic's family of collectors enjoy the world's greatest hobby. Treating people the way they like to be treated – with honesty, fairness and courtesy – is how Mystic interacts with its loyal customers and colleagues.

Mystic has introduced tens of thousands of collectors to stamp collecting. Through *Mystic's U.S. Stamp Catalog* and other publications, the company offers a full line of U.S. and foreign stamps, supplies, albums, and supplements.

Mystic has been part of the hobby's most exciting stamp stories. In 1986 Mystic purchased a quantity of newly discovered \$1 Candleholder error stamps, now known as the "CIA Invert." Don filed a Freedom of Information Act request to learn how the error happened. The report revealed CIA employees purchased the error at a Virginia post office. The story made international headlines after Don broke it in *Linn's Stamp News*.

In 1998, Don's 11-year-old son Zachary bid a record \$935,000 for the rarest U.S. stamp – the 1868 1¢ Z Grill. In 2005, Mystic traded its 1¢ Z Grill for the unique Jenny Invert Plate-Number Block – worth \$3 million – with collector Bill Gross, then sold the stamps for around \$5 million in 2015 to famed shoe designer Stuart Weitzman.

Mystic supports the preservation of America's stamp heritage through donations to the Smithsonian National Postal Museum. It fosters philatelic scholarship by funding the Maynard Sundman Lecture at the museum.

Don Sundman has sponsored over 5,800 American Philatelic Society members, a record for the APS. He is Chairman of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum's Council of Philatelists, Vice Chairman of the Philatelic Foundation, and Fellow of the Royal Philatelic Society. In 2010, he was awarded the prestigious Luff Award for Outstanding Service to the American Philatelic Society.

Upon request, Mystic furnishes stamps and collecting materials to schools and stamp clubs around the country. This service introduces a new generation to the fun and challenge of collecting, ensuring the hobby's future survival.

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