



Introduction to Guatemala Philately

by David Reitsema

Guatemala is a beautiful country located in Central America. From the Pacific coast the topography rises sharply to the Sierra Madre range of active volcanic mountains where the present capital of Guatemala City is located. The eastern portion of the country descends to a tropical jungle on the coast of the Caribbean Sea.

Guatemala remained relatively unknown to the rest of the world until the late nineteenth century for a variety of reasons. Spain prohibited its colonies from trading with any country other than Spain itself and its colonies, which hindered the early development of international commerce. The lack of natural seaports on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts made shipping problematic for both commerce and tourism. The industrial 'revolution' sweeping Europe and other areas of the world did not reach Guatemala and its economy has remained primarily an agricultural one to the present day.

The earliest known transoceanic letter existing in private hands is dated 1509. Spain maintained an extensive communication network with its far-flung colonies. An early Guatemalan cover dated May 5, 1809 is shown in *Figure 1*. It is interesting that the cover has a slogan handstamp proclaiming "Viva F VII – Guatemala" which is "Long Live Ferdinand VII". Interestingly, one year earlier, in 1808, Napoleon had prevented Ferdinand from succeeding to the throne of Spain.

This article will describe some areas of Guatemalan philately with the hope that it will stimulate the reader's collecting interest. It will touch on selected philatelic topics as well as sources of information and market conditions. Unlike many other collecting areas, one can complete a collection of every Guatemalan stamp for a very reasonable expenditure.



Figure 1

Stamp Issues

In 1871 Guatemala issued its first postage stamps which were printed in Paris (*Figure 2*). Only a few independent countries issued stamps later than Guatemala, including China and Japan. Stamp collecting as a hobby already existed at that time, and because Guatemala had not issued any stamps until such a late date, bogus Guatemalan stamps, printed in Boston, appeared on the world market in 1867 purporting to be genuine stamps of Guatemala (*Figure 3*). These bogus issues were printed in many different colors and shades of paper.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The following years of the nineteenth century were characterized by a limited number of new issues as well as by numerous provisional issues. There were 47 provisional surcharged issues compared to 32 stamp issues in the years from 1886 to 1900.

In Guatemala postage stamps were authorized by the national legislature which approved each stamp issue. Unless the printing is paid for by an outside group, such as was common with many countries' issues in the 1960's when various United Nations agencies paid for an issue in return for a portion of the total stamps which the agency then sold to the philatelic trade as a means to raising money, each stamp issue of Guatemala required both legislative approval of the issue and specific legislative funding to print the issue. The difficulty in obtaining this approval in many cases led to significant delays in the issuance of necessary postage. As late as 1998, Guatemala was unable to supply the contractor operating its postal system with sufficient postage stamps and as a result the contractor issued 'labels' indicating payment of postage. An example is shown in *Figure 4*.

In recent years Guatemala has issued consistently attractive and culturally relevant stamps. *Figure 5* is an example from a series of stamps issued to observe the "dawn of a new Mayan age," an event anticipated around the world at that time.

Collectors of stamps have a wide variety of opportunities to specialize. Guatemala's 1902 definitive issue was printed by Waterlow and Sons (London) and all stamps in the issue exist with at least five perforation varieties as well as major color variations. *Figure 6* shows the 1c Waterlow value (Scott 114) which value has four distinct color varieties and collectively 17 perforation varieties. Incidentally, Waterlow also printed stamps of China and Costa Rica at that time which also have the numerous perforation varieties.

Nineteenth century numeral cancels are an area of specialization which received much attention from early philatelists. The different numbers have been identified as originating in specific towns, and come in a variety of sizes and colors. *Figure 7* is the 1900 6c issue (Scott 102) with large numeral '6' which was assigned to the city of San Marcos in western Guatemala.

Many of Guatemala's early issues including surcharges have been plated, meaning that each individual stamp may be identified by its position on the printed sheet of stamps. *Figure 8* is the 1886 25c surcharge issue (Scott 26) from position 11 in the sheet, which was the first stamp in the second row of the sheet. This is an interesting and specialized area of philatelic study and most issues are cheap enough that it is possible to undertake this study for a very reasonable investment.

Guatemalan errors exist from the first issue on and make an interesting area to concentrate on. *Figure 9* is the 1881 2c issue which has an inverted quetzal bird in the center. Most errors are available and are not expensive.

Some of Guatemala's most striking stamps are the numerous airmail issues of the 1930's, an example of which is shown in *Figure 10*. The late twentieth century experimentation by postal administrations with different types of gum and paper led to many varieties of Guatemalan stamps. These stamps catalogue for minimum values but are challenging to locate.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Postal History

Covers franked with stamps prior to 1890 are rare. Most of the postal history used internally consists of postal cards and even those are rare.

Beginning with the 1880's a somewhat larger amount of correspondence exists, some of which is referred to as the Matthews correspondence due to the addressee's name on many of the extant covers (see Figure 11). In 1873, Justin Rufino Barrios was elected President, and his goal was to implement the liberal reforms expected from the independence movement in the 1820's. To that end he sought to bring technological improvements such as railroads and modern agricultural techniques to Guatemala. He invited foreigners with those skills to settle in Guatemala. This led to large influx of western Europeans, particularly from Germany, who were able to acquire land for livestock and to cultivate bananas and coffee, and who also established banking and industrial enterprises. They were largely responsible for the significant increase in foreign correspondence beginning in the early 1890's.

Figure 12 is a cover mailed in 1895 which evidences the influx of foreigners. It was sent by a German immigrant who owned a coffee plantation to a large commercial firm in Germany. Other nationalities also took advantage of the changed conditions in Guatemala. Figure 13 is a 1908 cover from a Chinese merchant in Guatemala sent to San Francisco where there was a large Chinese population and which city was a source of merchandise for all of Central America.

The first airmail flight covers were flown in 1924. A cover carried on the first flight from Guatemala City to the ancient Mayan city of Quiche, is shown in Figure 14; the plane crashed while landing in Quiche and there was no return flight. Numerous other experimental flights which carried mail were made in the 1920's, and most of these are available at reasonable prices. Beginning in the late 1920's, efforts were made to link Guatemala by air first with Mexico and then other countries. In 1929 Pan American Airways began development of airmail routes in Central America, and in 1931 Guatemala developed an internal airmail route to various cities.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

There are many other postal history areas of interest. Guatemala never issued postage due stamps, but many postage due covers exist. *Figure 15* is a 1925 cover with a "T" (postage due) marking and a "10" indicating the underpayment of 1 peso which was equal to 5 German pfennigs; the added 5 pfennigs were the penalty imposed for underpayment in Guatemala. First day covers for most issues beginning in 1930 exist and are relatively inexpensive to obtain. Censored covers from both World Wars I and II are favorite collecting specialties. Prison censor covers also exist from numerous prisons and make an interesting study.

Postal Stationery and Postal Cards

Guatemala issued its first postal stationery and postal cards in 1875. These were issued in quite large quantities and although mint examples are fairly common, postally used examples are rare. *Figure 16* is an used example of the 1875 postal reply card used in Guatemala City with the reply portion still attached; 5,000 of these were printed and few have survived. Guatemala did not issue any postal stationery from the 1920's until 1976 when it began issuing commemorative postal stationery covers for some of the new issues. *Figure 17* is the 1978 Fauna issue 10c postal stationery cover which is typical of these issues which continued for many years.



Figure 16



Figure 17

Fakes and Forgeries

The provisional issues provided fertile opportunity for forgers and fakers. In the case of stamps surcharged with higher rates, forgers attempted to profit by taking low value stamps and applying the higher surcharge rates on them. In the case of high value stamps surcharged with lower rates, fakers took advantage of the low quantities produced to make fakes available to the stamp collecting community. *Figure 18* shows an example of the 1886 engraved issue, surcharged in 1901, and a forged surcharge (the surcharge is crooked and has the wrong measurements).



Figure 18



Figure 19

Back of the Book Issues

Guatemala issued a variety of so-called 'back of the book' material including revenues, official stamps and telegraph stamps. The first official stamps were issued in 1902 (*Figure 19*) and exist both watermarked and unwatermarked. The next issue of official stamps were the triangle stamps released in 1929 which remained in use into the 1960's (*Figure 20*). Between 1902 and 1929 Guatemala ran out of official stamps and resorted to perforating the 1902 Waterlow issue with the word "OFICIAL" (*Figure 21*). All of these official stamp issues and their use on covers are interesting collecting specialties. *Figure 22* is one in a series of telegraph stamps issued in 1897 and surcharged on the regular issue of that year.



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

Resources for Guatemalan Philately

Fortunately there is a large body of information available to Guatemalan philatelists. By far the most useful and accessible source of information is the International Society of Guatemala Collectors ("ISGC"). That society was formed in 1949. It publishes a quarterly journal, *El Quetzal*, and all past issues are available on a CD, and it also publishes many reference publications. Its website is www.guatemalastamps.com

The availability of this information helps to make collecting Guatemalan stamp interesting. For those who use printed albums to display their stamps, the only one currently in print is published by Palo Albums (www.paloalbums.com). A new album will also be available this spring through the ISGC.

Conclusion

Guatemala has an interesting philatelic heritage. You may have deduced from this article that I particularly enjoy postal history for the unique stories each cover tells. Guatemala's stamps provide ample opportunity to specialize and its stamps are very modestly priced in comparison with those of most other countries. Collectors are spread around the globe and its stamps are available including on the internet. If you are looking for a new collecting area I hope that you will consider Guatemala. You will be in good company.



About the Author

David Reitsema is a lifelong stamp collector, exhibitor and philatelic author. He currently serves as the Editor of *El Quetzal*, the journal of the International Society of Guatemala Collectors. He resides in Centennial, Colorado USA.



