

STAMPS

From page 1

won't keep serious collectors from buying.

"Most of the people involved in stamps are a little better heeled and have discretionary income," Gary Hausin said.

Even though the Hausins say they make a good living at what they do, they don't recommend you do it for the money.

"I never tell people to invest in stamps," Gary Hausin said. "It's a hobby. Stamps, to me, are not an investment."

To him though, they are.

Robert Hausin just smiled.

"You've got to know what you're doing," he said.

One of the common misconceptions is that stamps are worth more simply because they're old. They're not. The post office produces more stamps now, which may actually make them less valuable to collectors. Ultimately, the price is set by supply and demand.

"Most of the time the value is nothing, dollar-wise," Gary Hausin said. "I've got boxes over there with stamps from the 1800s that are (still) worth 5 cents each."

An exception: the most expensive stamp New England sold recently was a 10 cent honoring George Washington, the second stamp issued in the United States.

"I just sold it for \$10,200," Gary Hausin said.

The first U.S. stamp issued, in 1847, was a 5 cent honoring Benjamin Franklin, who was also the first postmaster general.

The stamps need to be in near-perfect condition to be desirable to serious collectors.

"We're not getting rich but we love what we do," Gary Hausin said.

Just a hobby

For hobbyists, the dollar value isn't worth as much as the miniature picture of something that strikes a personal note.

Post offices order enormous quantities of stamps from printing presses each year, for the primary goal of providing postage. But it's also to satisfy everyone from Ayn Rand readers to Star Wars fans. It makes stamps more interesting to those consumers, and make them collectible.

Most Post Offices offer a stamp year-book that contains each stamp made in the U.S. during a given year, along with explanations of the history of each.

"One year it was Batman on the cover when they were pushing Marvel Comics," said Mr. Falco, the customer service supervisor at the downtown Fort Myers Post Office.

The most popular stamp at that post office is one with sunflowers.

One cashier had an idea why: "We have more female customers than we do men and they like something pretty," she said.

When the new Christmas stamps come out this year, featuring a painting by Botticelli, Mr. Falco expects to see a few collectors show up early in the weeks before it arrives.

"As soon as you open up at 9 a.m., you'll get them wanting to know when it comes out," he said.

But according to local collectors, interest in the hobby waned about a generation ago.

"The hobby is dying and the way the market is, people in the U.S. aren't really paying anything for stamps," said Bob Bennett, 46, a Fort Myers-based cabinet maker who also sells stamps on the side. "A lot of the (collectors) are dying. They are older people and there's really no new blood coming in."

Mr. Bennett has been collecting stamps for 30 years and said he has a lot of rare finds, including one from a 1923 postcard that turned out to be worth \$6,000.

Nicholas Cifelli, president of the Cape Coral Stamp Club, said the important thing to remember is that there aren't any



EVAN WILLIAMS/FLORIDA WEEKLY
Gary Hausin and his father, Robert Hausin, owners of New England Stamps in Naples. The business was started in 1893.

rules in stamp collecting.

"It's totally up for grabs," he said. "That's the important thing — you do what you want to do..."

"One member in the club was a magician, so he collected hands on stamps," he said. "Someone else collected (stamps with) barbed wire."

Mr. Cifelli, who is a retired physician, said he started collecting as a child, but stopped in college. Once he began earning more money, he got serious about collecting again.

"I used to go out and buy sets of stamps," he said. "If I saw a set from Germany or Israel or Portugal that I liked, I bought it."

Some of his stamps he sells, mostly on eBay. His last batch, he said, went out to collectors in Russia, Singapore, Africa, France, Brazil and Australia.

Although Mr. Cifelli respects coin collectors, he put it this way: if he were on his death bed, he'd rather speak to a stamp collector.

"You could learn a lot from a stamp collector," he said. "They do know their geography. They know their history..."

"The world is totally open — there's nothing you can't find out about with stamps."

Mr. Cifelli will be speaking more about stamps at the Cape Coral Public Library on Oct. 18, in observance of National Stamp Collecting Month. ■

If you go ↗

>>What: National Stamp Collecting Month event
>>Who: Postmaster Anne Murray hosts the event for all ages. It includes an introduction to stamp collecting with a Disney costume contest for children. There will also be a presentation by Nick Cifelli, president of the Cape Coral Stamp Club.
>>When: Saturday, Oct. 18, 10 a.m. to noon.
>>Where: The Cape Coral Public Library, 921 SW 39th Terrace.
>>Cost: Free

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