

Getting Started in Philatelic Exhibiting

By John M. Hotchner *

Introduction

I “*I can do this!*” was my reaction when I first paid attention to philatelic exhibits at a local club’s yearly show. And it turned out that I could – And so can YOU!

Although the idea of displaying our treasures for other collectors to admire is attractive, it isn’t something we can just do intuitively. Rather, I found that exhibiting is a craft that needs to be learned through trial and error. It is also a public expression of our interests, knowledge, and artistic sense; and that can be a bit daunting. I’d like to have a quarter for every time I’ve heard a collector say, “I don’t have expensive stamps or specialized knowledge. I couldn’t compete with the exhibits I’ve seen.”

I think all successful exhibitors began with some form of that thought. But you CAN compete – just recognize that you won’t get to Gold medals in a month. Learning the craft by doing, and building a prize-winning exhibit takes time, and the secret is having realistic expectations and goals. The purpose of this pamphlet is to help you get beyond the reasons why you may think you can’t or shouldn’t exhibit; and to think positively about your talents and abilities. You will be amazed at what you can do—and you will be amazed at how exhibiting can enrich your philatelic life.

Above: Bill Sammis wins his first gold at NAPEX in 2011.

Published by the
American Association of
Philatelic Exhibitors



“You will be amazed at what you can do—and you will be

Competition...is not the only reason to exhibit. The great majority of exhibitors ultimately enjoy seeing how high a medal their exhibit can earn. But it is equally okay to use your exhibit to try to convince others that they should collect what you do, or to educate other collectors on the breadth of a collecting area by highlighting many different specialty areas that are available.

However, you will find that competition can be fun. America is an accomplishment-based society, and we learn from an early age that winning competitions, be they in sports or speech contest, or to keeping up with the Jones's, drives a good share of our daily thought. We are used to competition, but philatelic exhibiting competition is unusual—except for some limited instances which will be described later—because exhibitors are not competing against each other. Rather our exhibit is competing against the standard of being the best it can be.

Challenge: Exhibiting is a personal challenge since you will develop skills you didn't know you had. And in its most enjoyable form, it is also a philatelic challenge since you will create something unlike what anyone else has done in the past. In addition it will require you to pick a subject to exhibit that gives you room to expand your knowledge and your collecting, and to organize and study your material. Furthermore, by expanding your knowledge of what exists that can be part of your exhibit, and building your exhibit to the status of being the best it can be, you are also building a collection that can be worth more than the sum of its parts.

What Will You Be Trying To Do? The basic idea of philatelic exhibiting is that you are telling a complete philatelic or thematic story using philatelic (and sometimes collateral material in Display exhibits) to illustrate your points. Like a book, your story will have a beginning, a middle and an end. The material will be described on the exhibit pages briefly, but it is the material that tells the story not lengthy text. The only exceptions to this are Topical Exhibits which do not tell a story per se, rather, they show the variety of stamps and philatelic items that represent a single topic, categorized in such a way that they illustrate the challenge of this type of exhibit.

Once you understand the objective, the best thing that you can do is to make a point of going to exhibitions and taking time to look carefully at how others have done exhibits. Part of the secret of success is how you organize the material and the story, so that there is a logical flow. Or, if a Topical exhibit, how you will categorize your items. The other part of the secret is how you use the title page to state your exhibit's purpose, and to outline the story you expect to tell. For some exhibits it is also appropriate to have a plan page which, like a table of contents for a book, provides the outline of the story, and tells the viewer where each part of the story can be found in the exhibit.

In doing your exhibit, it is expected that you will use the best philatelic material, both in terms of quality and condition, that you are able

to get. And that you will label it accurately; providing information about it beyond what can be found in the standard catalogues or what is obvious from the stamp or cover itself. Presentation—the pleasing arrangement of material and text, proper grammar and spelling, general neatness—all count as part of the judging criteria. But it is the philatelic material itself, and how it illustrates a complete story, that counts most.

Getting Started/The Exhibit Subject: The ideal is to pick some part of your collecting areas about which you feel special interest and curiosity. This should be something that is broad enough that you have a good accumulation of stamps and/or covers to pick from to put on your exhibit pages. If you collect it, you have probably already concluded that you can afford to collect most of the material in the area. If not, think about that aspect, because telling a complete story means that expensive material may be needed as you rise in medal levels, and at last attempt to win that Gold medal.

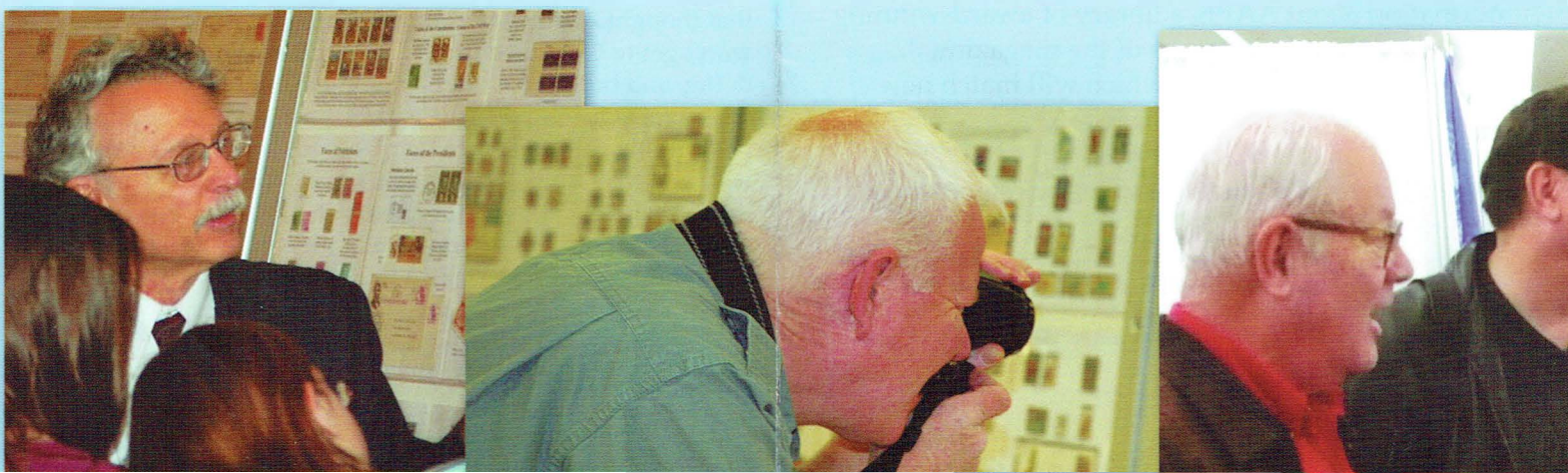
Critically important is the title you pick for your exhibit: “The Air Mail Issues of the United States; The First 50 Years” sounds simple enough, but that would lead the judges to expect that the pricey Zeppelin set will be included, not to mention the 24c 1918 inverted Jenny. So in selecting a subject and title, you need to strike a balance between setting a challenge that you can afford to meet, and a challenge that is worthy of a Gold if you meet it. Happily there are large areas of the hobby in which money is much less a factor than the effort of studying philatelic material and finding the elusive material to illustrate your knowledge about it.

And Then? Next you need to get together all the material from your collection that fits within your proposed exhibit title, and start to organize it so that you know what you have. Then you should begin to get some ideas as to how it can be shown in an effective sequence. Putting your material in stock cards in the order your story seems likely to take is the first step. This will also help you to begin the process to determine what you still need to tell the story.

Length? The maximum length for exhibits at the national (WSP) level described below is ten 16 page frames, but exhibits are often shorter. There is a special category for single frame exhibits. Local and regional shows sometimes have special categories for beginners.

This sounds like work! And indeed it is. Exhibiting is not easy. But what worthy challenge is? Instead it is exciting; even fun, once you get hooked on the challenge. It gives you a goal to work toward—whether it's the exhibit itself, or the medal levels it can earn.

Preparing the Exhibit: Gone are the days when we had to spend hours preparing an exhibit page using a typewriter or by hand lettering. The computer has worked a revolution. It takes only moderate computer knowledge and a printer to do basic pages. And making corrections or revising a page takes five minutes instead of having to start from square one. You will need heavier-than-normal paper



amazed at how exhibiting can enrich your philatelic life.”

because the pages, in page protectors, will have to stand up in exhibit frames. Other than that, you don't need special materials to get started. You may, as you get deeper into the craft, want to experiment with capabilities of your computer to do fancier pages, but leave that for later, when you are more comfortable. To begin, keep it simple.

The final task when your exhibit is complete is to review your draft title page to make certain the exhibit's objective and organization are clear. Then write your Synopsis page, which is a guide for the judges setting forth what you want them to know about the exhibit as they evaluate it.

Exhibit Judging: At the local and regional levels, exhibits are often judged by experienced collectors, and sometimes there are only 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place certificates or medals. More often American Philatelic Society-accredited judges will also form part or all of the jury team, and each exhibit will receive the level of medal it earns.

The APS, the national philatelic organization in the U.S., accredits its national level philatelic exhibitions and those who judge them. Judges, who are themselves successful exhibitors, must successfully complete a training program, which includes developing the skill of providing feedback to exhibitors. This assures that exhibiting criteria will be uniform, and consistently applied at all of the 30+ national "World Series of Philately" (WSP) shows held across the United States each year. The multi-frame Grand Award winner—the best exhibit - at each WSP show ultimately meets all the other Grands head-to-head in the annual Champion of Champions competition, at the annual APS StampShow summer convention. (There is a parallel CofC competition for single frame exhibits at the APS winter convention, AmeriStamp Expo.)

In evaluating exhibits the judges use specific criteria which are laid out in the *APS Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting*, which is available for downloading on the APS website www.stamps.org. You should obtain and read this carefully even if you are not interested in medals. Why? It also explains the different classes and formats in which exhibits can be entered. You will need to know what is expected of, for instance, a one frame postal history exhibit, as compared to a multi-frame traditional exhibit. It also explains Display exhibits (in which you can use non-philatelic material), Illustrated Mail, Cinderella exhibits, Revenue, Post Card, and several other exhibit formats.

Other Resources: Exhibiting is a learning experience, and at its best, it is also an interactive experience with other exhibitors. In fact, one of the best parts of exhibiting is that it is a path to meeting other people who share your interests, and collectors who (having seen your exhibit) will search you out to offer material and information to improve your exhibit. Also, judges will offer specific suggestions for improvements if you make the effort to attend the feedback session that they are required to provide. And, they will review your exhibit

with you at your frames if you ask.

Earlier I suggested that one of the best learning tools is to go to shows and look carefully at what exhibitors have done. Take a notebook, and write down the techniques you think are most effective, and which you might be able to use in your own exhibit. Make the effort to get to know some of the exhibitors, and tell them that you are just getting started. Most will be truly happy to help you over the path they have already taken. The AAPE also offers free seminars on exhibiting techniques, generally offered at APS StampShow and at AmeriStamp Expo.

Written resources can also be helpful. First join the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors, an organization of nearly a thousand exhibitors and aspiring exhibitors, judges and show administrators. AAPE puts out a quarterly magazine *The Philatelic Exhibitor*, which many beginners have found to be an essential resource. The address for AAPE and the APS will be found at the end of this pamphlet. Among AAPE's services is a free critique service through which you can get a judge's review of a developing exhibit before you ever put it up in frames. AAPE also offer to members a review service for title pages and exhibit synopses.

You might also consider purchasing a book, *The Philatelic Exhibitor's Handbook*, Third Edition," originally written by Randy L. Neil and expanded and revised for him by Ada Prill, with assistance from many others in the exhibiting community. Published in 2006, it provides a wealth of information on how to choose a subject, the mechanics of developing the exhibit, what a title page should contain, and much, much more.

A helpful new book published by AAPE in 2016 is *The Path To Gold: 175 Proven Stamp Exhibiting Tips* by Steven Zwilling. Ordering information can be found on the AAPE website.

When Your Exhibit is Ready for Prime Time As it is beginning to take shape, write to several shows to get their exhibit prospectus. Read the prospectuses carefully, for they will tell you a lot about how the host committee will conduct the show, and what is expected of the exhibitors. Pick one or more shows you would like to enter, preferably close enough to home that you can attend. And then enjoy the show experience from a completely new perspective.

How to find a stamp show? Future stamp shows nationwide are listed in every issued of *The American Philatelist* (The APS monthly magazine), on the APS website, in the weekly *Linn's Stamp News*, and in several other philatelic publications.

A Final Word The philatelic exhibiting world is one of challenge, personal achievement, new friends, and sometimes a little frustration. You may not always receive the award you think your exhibit should earn. It may take longer than you hoped to build to that Gold medal. But persistence pays. Disappointments along the road just make the ultimate victory that much sweeter.



21 Suggestions For Getting Started With Your First Philatelic Exhibit...

1. Have reasonable expectations. A Gold is the end of the rainbow. You will get there, but be content to start with any medal at all.

2. Take care in picking your exhibit subject and title.

3. Join AAPE, and read about others' experiences to see how they might apply to you.

4. For ideas about titles/subjects and to see how others have done exhibits, visit nearby shows, study the exhibits. Adopt good ideas and effective techniques.

5. Put all your relevant material together, and begin to organize it into a story.

6. Get and read the **APS Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting**—available free on the APS website.

7. Study your material to make certain that you know as much about it as possible. Note stamps, covers and information that you need to search for.

8. Dummy up your exhibit pages using stock cards to place your stamps and covers in the way they might be arranged on an exhibit page.

9. Describe your material briefly, without stating what is obvious from stamps or covers. Then put your descriptions on small pieces of paper, and add those to your stock cards.

10. As you begin to make pages, keep them simple to start; plain white paper—no borders.

11. Make certain that the story line of your exhibit is clear, or for a Topical exhibit, provide a guide to your categorization.

12. Pay attention to neatness, spelling, and other elements that will make your pages attractive to look at and easy to read.

13. State facts in your exhibit, not opinions or generalities; e.g. "One of six reported examples", not "rare".

14. Do your title page first, and redo it after your exhibit is complete. Make it a clear guide to what the exhibit covers, the objective of the exhibit, and its organization.

15. Have friends or family look at your pages to proof-read them for you and to make sure that the story and text makes sense.

16. If possible, enter your first exhibit at a local or regional show to get your feet wet.

17. Take your exhibit to its first several showings, attend the feedback session, and ask judges for at-the-frames observations.

18. If you don't get the award you expect, get the judges' suggestions, and keep improving the exhibit. Realize that any worthy challenge has moments of frustration.

19. Use the AAPE Critique Services to get a more in-depth feedback for both the exhibit and the Title page/Synopsis.

20. Think of your exhibit as a work in progress. Even after you get to Gold, you should try to improve it.

21. You may not agree with all judges' comments; disagreement isn't license to be disagreeable. Listen carefully, correct misimpressions politely.

Join Us!

An AAPE Membership is one of the Joys of Our Hobby!

The American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors

encourages every philatelist—no matter where you live, no matter your experience as a collector and/or exhibitor—to join our wonderful organization. The exhibiting world of the most exciting segment of the stamp hobby—and the AAPE has been at the heart of this world since 1986.

Joining Is Easy!

Simply fill out, then tear out or photocopy, the application at right and send it today with your check to

Kenneth R. Nilsestuen
1000 Kingswood Drive
Akron, OH 44313

Need More Information?

Visit our website at:

www.aape.org

and find out about the wide range

of events and activities conducted by the AAPE. We'd love to have you involved, though it's never necessary to enjoy our many benefits.

Meet Fellow Members

at every stamp show in America.

Most stamp shows feature special AAPE seminars where you can meet other members and find out more about us.



Mail AAPE MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION TO:

Kenneth R. Nilsestuen
1000 Kingswood Drive
Akron, OH 44313

Enclosed are my dues of \$25.00* (US & Canada) or \$35.00 (all foreign mailing addresses) and application for my membership in the AAPE, which includes \$17.00 annual subscription to The Philatelic Exhibitor. Paypal is available for an additional \$1.00. Either use the electronic application or indicate on this form and I will contact you. Foreign airmail is an additional charge, please inquire if interested. Please make checks payable to AAPE, Inc.

NAME: _____
ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

COUNTRY: _____

eMAIL: _____

PHONE: _____

PAYPAL: Yes: _____ No: _____ PHILATELIC MEMBERSHIPS: APS _____

OTHER: _____

BUSINESS AND OR PERSONAL REFERENCES (NOT REQUIRED IF APS MEMBER):

SIGNATURE: _____ DATE: _____

*Premium membership levels are also available—All amounts over the annual dues are a tax free donation. Members at these premium levels (Contributing, Sustaining, Patron) will be listed on the website and in TPE (if so desired). Thank you for supporting AAPE. Contributing Membership: \$45 per year. Sustaining Membership: \$60 per year. Patron Membership: \$100 per year. (All preceding for U.S. & Canada members.)

LIFE MEMBERSHIP: Those under 65 will pay \$500, under 70 - \$400, under 75 - \$300, and 75+ - \$200. (Foreign life members \$100 more at each step.)

Multiple memberships are available at all levels. Up to 4 additional years may be paid in advance. PayPal Convenience Fee (\$1) applies only once at the basic level of \$25.00 per year (US & Canada) or \$35 per year (all other foreign addresses).

* **Youth Membership** (age 18 and under) \$10 annually; includes TPE.

* **Spouse Membership:** \$12.50 annually—TPE not included.

Help In Getting Started



This pamphlet is brought to you by the **American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors**. Visit our website at www.aape.org, or write to AAPE Secretary Ken Nilsestuen, 1000 Kingswood Dr, Akron, OH 44313 (email: nilsestuen@sbcglobal.net) if you have questions not answered here. AAPE wants to help you get started. We hope you will join with us. A membership application form is provided as part of this pamphlet, and can also be found at www.aape.org.



The American Philatelic Society is the national umbrella organization for the United States, with 32,000 members, 600 local stamp club chapters, and 200 national specialty societies. APS also regulates the national stamp show and exhibition system. The *APS Manual of Philatelic Judging and Exhibiting* is available from the APS website, www.stamps.org. *The Path To Gold: 175 Proven Stamp Exhibiting Tips* can be ordered via the AAPE website. *The Philatelic Exhibitor's Handbook*, Third Edition is available from Subway Stamp Shop, and from many philatelic literature dealers. Google "Subway Stamp Shop" for further information.

Summary of Benefits of AAPE Membership

1. AAPE is a group of like-minded mutually supportive people engaged in exhibiting, who share the challenges, victories, frustrations and enjoyment of exhibiting. It is a source of new life-long friendships.

2. Full color quarterly 48-page magazine, *The Philatelic Exhibitor*, that provides information on how to do exhibits, judging and show administration.

3. Free critique services for both full exhibits and for title/synopsis pages.

4. An extensive website, www.aape.org, that contains full information about AAPE, a library of award-winning exhibits, and content from issues of the magazine.

5. The AAPE Mentor Service, which will match new exhibitors with a Mentor.

6. A full program of exhibit awards.

7. Seminars at all WSP shows and many regionals.

*John Hotchner is the co-founder with Randy L. Neil of the AAPE, and was the editor of its quarterly magazine from 1986 to 2010, and president of AAPE from 2011 to 2015. He is a national grand award-level exhibitor, and is a nationally and internationally accredited stamp show judge. He is also a past president of the American Philatelic Society.