

# CANAL ZONE OFFICIAL PERFINS



Editor's Note: All of the facts in this article have been taken from the book "Canal Zone Postage Stamps", which was published in 1961 by the Canal Zone Postal Service, Balboa Heights, Canal Zone. The book was written for the Canal Zone Government by Edward I.P. Tatelman, of Bradenton, Florida. The illustrations at the top of this page are tracings of actual stamps in the collection of D.C. Stump. The "RPR" is Scotts #425 (U.S.), and the "P" is Scotts #105 (Canal Zone). While every effort was made to accurately depict these Perfins, it must be remembered that precision work cannot be done on a mimeograph machine.

The first reference to the use of official stamps in the Canal Zone is contained in a letter written to the Executive Secretary on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1905, by Captain George R. Shanton Chief of Police and one of President Theodore Roosevelt's old "Rough Riders". It states:

Sir: I have the honor to enclose herewith requisition for 100 two-cent postage stamps required by this office for use on official correspondence with persons in foreign countries

There is also on file an acknowledgment of receipt for "100 Panama postage Stamps surcharged Canal Zone, two cent." It is thus safe to assume that ordinary postage stamps were used for official correspondence during the first years of the Canal Zone Government.

The first reference to the perforated "P" stamps in the files is a letter dated June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1916 from the Director of Posts to the Superintendent of the Palo Seco Leper Colony. The letter inquires how an inmate sent a letter with "...a two-cent Canal Zone Postage Stamp, perforated with the letter 'P'". As this stamp was apparently secured from Panama Canal stock, I would be glad to have you inform me how it came into possession of the writer..." Unfortunately, the reply to this most interesting question has not been preserved, so we can only guess how a segregated leper was able to procure a stamp from stock supposedly kept for exclusive use on official mail.

The perforated "P" was made by a Panama Railroad die which was originally "RPR". The small "R's" were burnished off at the Mechanical Division Shops at Balboa. When used on stamps, the letter "P" was punched through the stamps by folding the sheets along the perforated edges of the stamps and punching several thicknesses at a time. Thus it is possible for the "P" to show up

in all sorts of positions, "loop" to left or right, stem of "P" horizontal with loop facing up or down, or "Tete beche" if found in pairs or blocks.

The earliest copies of the perforated "P" are those of the 1909-1921 Canal Zone overprints of the Second Portrait Series of Panama. (Scotts #31, etc.) From that series until Canal Zone stamps were overprinted "OFFICIAL PANAMA CANAL" at Mount Hope Press in 1941, the Perfin "P" is apt to be found on any of the Canal's stamps. Although a strict accounting of their use was attempted, there is no actual recording of the totals and types punched and used.

In 1928, the General Storekeeper, Panama Canal, did the actual perforating, but in 1929 all official stamps were transferred to the Administration Building and there released upon requisition. On May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1931, an order was issued directing that "...in the future, Departments and Divisions will draw such postage direct from the Postmaster, Balboa Heights, on requisition..." This system continued for about ten years, the perforating being done as needed, by clerks in the Balboa Heights office.

The first requisition for official Air Mail Stamps was made on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1929, for twenty, 25-cent airmail stamps with the Perfin "P". Records show that \$136.00 worth of these official airmail stamps were used by the Panama Canal during 1930.

On February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the Executive Secretary wrote to the Director of Posts as follows: "I think that our Official Stamps should be plainly surcharged "official" rather than be perforated 'PC' as at present. (The Executive Secretary apparently did not use official stamps very often, as he incorrectly added the initial 'C' to the Perfin 'P'.) A distinct surcharge printed on the stamps would enable postal employees to keep much more careful check on any misuse of these stamps. Please have specimen surcharges prepared at the Panama Canal Press."

As a result of this memo the Mount Hope Press prepared two forms to cover full sheets of 100 regular sized stamps, and sheets of 50 of the 5-cent "Steam Shovel" stamp or Air Mail size. The plates were composed of monotype cast and set lettering with the printing performed on a hand-fed job press. Before any printing was done, the sheet margins were removed to facilitate registration in overprinting, which eliminates any collector's concern regarding plate numbers - there just aren't any. A circular describing the new issues went out to all postmasters on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941, and is quoted, in part, below:

#### ISSUE OF SURCHARGED STAMPS FOR OFFICIAL USE

1. The practice of issuing perforated Canal Zone postage stamps with the letter "P" for official use has been discontinued. Hereafter all postage issued for official use will bear a surcharge reading "OFFICIAL PANAMA CANAL"

2. (Describes and lists values which were surcharged.)

3. The use of official postage is restricted to Departments and divisions of the Panama Canal and Panama Railroad. Postmasters having reason to suspect that such stamps have been diverted or traded in for personal use shall report the circumstances to this office. The stamps are NOT for sale and will be issued by the Postmaster, Balboa Heights, against official requisitions, as heretofore,

The perforated "P" stamps on hand were ordered continued in use before the overprinted officials were to be used, thus, the new officials could have been used April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941, or any day thereafter, as the new denominations were replaced. While no more can be told about the Canal Zone Perfin "P", it might not be considered amiss to finish this tale by relating the story of the life of the surcharge.

Despite close supervision of the handling the officials stamps by Zone authorities, some did surreptitiously reach the philatelic marts. On April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1942, it was recommended to the Executive Secretary that cancelled official stamps be sold over the counter. As with any other controversial matter, the decision to sell in this manner was met with both brickbats and bouquets. Among those heard from were the A.P.S., the A.S.D.A., the A.A.M.S., and many collectors. The Director of Posts, in justifying his position said: "The speculation in these stamps reached a point where they were forged as to the overprint, and it was apparently a situation that approximated a monopoly." Time, and the resolution of the situation, proved that his decision was a wise one.

On December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1951, Postmaster Charles Hinz of Balboa Heights succeeded W.L. Howard as head of the Philatelic Agency. He announced that overprinted official stamps in mint condition were to be sold to the public for three months, commencing January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1952. The use of the surcharged stamps was to be discontinued on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1952, and their use for official postage would become invalid at the close of business on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1951.

The Canal Zone Philatelic Agency maintain a list of its patrons - newspapers, clubs, associations, individuals, etc. - numbering in the thousands, and to each was sent a postal card notice of the sale of the mint officials. Despite ample notice, the Agency was still filling orders late in April 1952. Requests for sets far exceeded the expectation of the Director of Posts, and three extra printings were resorted to in order to fill collectors' wants. One was for 20,000 of the 1¢ Gorgas Stamp on January 8<sup>th</sup>, when it was learned that one person was attempting to "corner the market" on that value. We thus come to an end of a philatelic series which we believe will not be seen again in the Canal Zone Postal System. It is a fact that there is no necessity for the existence of overprinted official stamps.

To complete the story, it is well to say that all values of the ordinary mail stamp were overprinted and sold in mint condition in numbers ranging from 27,690 for the 1¢, to 3,933 of the 50¢. Of the airmails, 8 different varieties were likewise surcharged and sold mint to the public. The criteria for the number of complete mint sets is the 3,933 - number of the 50¢ ordinary.

There are no records available giving the number of stamps perforated with the "P". This work was done by various clerks in the Postmaster's office at Balboa Heights, and no one apparently kept records, however, all Perfin Collectors know that there are not many around today, for this is one of the scarcest Perfin

Any member desiring further information on official stamps or any other phase of the philatelic history of the Canal Zone, is invited to refer to the 439-page book "Canal Zone Postage Stamps" on sale for \$2.50 by the Canal Zone Philatelic Agency, Balboa Heights, C.Z.