

The Fabulous One Cent Magenta Stamp

by Joseph Cowles

ONE OF THE PLEASURES of being first generation “hot off the press” readers of Barks stories is that the subject matter often inspired wonderful schoolyard discussions for us kids.

“Have you seen the latest Donald Duck comic?”

“About the guy in gold tights and the \$50,000 stamp?”

“Yeah—and those man-eating fish!”

“Do you suppose there really are *piranhas*?”

“You bet! My dad showed me an article about them in his encyclopedia. And my uncle even has a real piranha, dried and mounted as a display on his bookshelf.”

“No way!”

“It’s true! And he has a real shrunken head that he keeps in a glass box.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I’ve seen it. It’s really weird. About as big as a tennis ball, and the eyes and lips are sewn closed.”

“You’re making that up!”

“No I’m not! My uncle says the headhunters shrunk them with hot sand and sewed up the eyelids and mouth to keep the sand from falling out.”

“Gosh. D’you think your uncle would let us see the dried piranha and shrunken head?”

“Sure! Maybe I can bring ‘em to school for Show-and-Tell next week.”

And so went our conversations, inspired by the wonderful Duck tales of Carl Barks.

RECENTLY I WAS SURPRISED TO HEAR a rather renowned Barks authority state that *Donald Duck and the Gilded Man* (one of my personal favorite stories) is a weak story—contending that the premise of a postage stamp worth fifty grand to collectors is preposterous.

“That’s a *real* stamp,” I countered. All the kids knew about the 1856 British Guiana one-cent magenta stamp.”

“Hmph. Never heard of it!” came the reply.

When the story was originally published in late 1952, I and many of my friends in sixth grade were avid stamp collectors—inspired in no small measure by philatelic reports about the world’s most valuable scrap of paper.

Millions of kids in the early 1950’s knew about the “\$50,000 stamp,” which originally sold for a single penny to mail a letter and was resold many times over to attain a princely sum.

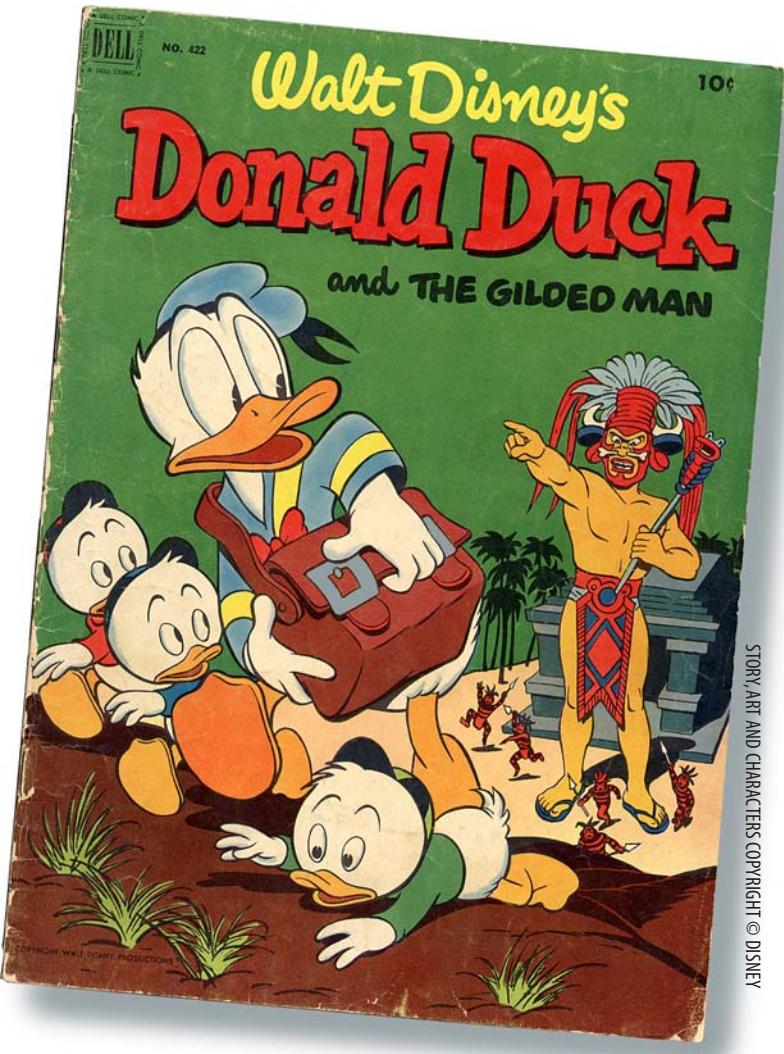
Surely, if Donald Duck and his clever nephews could locate such a treasure, that left the door wide open for us kids to dream of someday, somehow, doing something equally exciting.

In my research for this article, I turned to two prized Internet sites for historical information: www.Wikipedia.org and www.NewspaperArchive.com. The Wiki article links to www.Guyana.org, which proudly reports on what may be the little South American country’s happiest claim to fame. Here is an edited version of the article. You can click on the link above to read the original in its entirety.

The 1856 one-cent “Black on Magenta” of British Guiana is regarded as the rarest stamp in the world. It is a rectangular stamp printed in black ink on magenta paper. The corners have been clipped off, giving the stamp an octagonal shape.

In early 1856, British Guiana’s stock of postage stamps was sold out before a fresh shipment arrived from England. The postmaster needed stamps in a hurry and had a local publisher print an emergency issue. The printing quality was poor. To prevent forgery, the postmaster had his clerks initial each stamp before selling it.

In 1873, Vernon Vaughan, a stamp collecting 12-year-old Scottish schoolboy living in Georgetown, discovered the stamp



among some family papers. It was in poor condition, ink smudged and damaged.

Vernon soaked the stamp from the envelope and traded it to a local collector, N.R. McKinnon, for six shillings—which at that time was less than one U.S. dollar. Five years later, McKinnon sold his entire stamp collection to his friend Wylie Hill, who lived in Glasgow, Scotland. A London stamp dealer later identified the Magenta as rare. Hill sold it to a dealer in Liverpool, England, for 120 British pounds.

In the early 1900's, the Count Philip La Renotiere Von Ferrari—the most well-known stamp collector of the period—bought the stamp from the dealer for 150 pounds (about \$450).

Ferrari died in 1917. His collection was sold at several auctions and New York millionaire Arthur Hind purchased the stamp for 7,343 British pounds. Hind died in 1933. Seven years later his wife sold the stamp to Frederick Small, an Australian living in Florida, for a price said to be between \$40,000 and \$75,000.

In 1970 the stamp was purchased by a group of Pennsylvania investors for \$240,000. Ten years later, John E. DuPont bought the Magenta at auction for \$935,000.

THE NEWSPAPER ARCHIVE INCLUDES

hundreds of articles mentioning this stamp—from single paragraph “filler” items to feature stories. I haven't read all of them, but did print out representative clippings from various newspapers.

In 1890, a Chillicothe, Missouri, newspaper reports: “At the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the invention of the postage stamp, held recently in England, a stamp was shown worth 100 guineas. It was from the British Guiana collection and showed a rude postmark on pink paper.”

In 1922, the *Detroit News* reported: “The rarest stamp in the world . . . is the one-cent British Guiana of 1856, recently put up for sale in Paris by the French government for liquidation of seque-

tered property. Wealthy stamp lovers of many nationalities vied with each other for possession of the unique specimen. Not until 17 years [after it was originally issued] was this present solitary specimen brought to light by a London collector and he failed to appreciate its importance so much that he sold it for a few shillings. Eventually it reached the famous collection of Baron van Ferrary, [sic] its last owner.”

In 1930, the *Jefferson City Post-Tribune* made this mention: “Valued at \$40,000, a British Guiana stamp recently exhibited in London is regarded as the costliest square inch of paper in the world. It was printed in 1856.”

As part of a Sunday feature by Harry E. Gray, the *Oakland Tribune* of October 6, 1938, devoted nearly a full column to the Magenta, along with a photographic reproduction. In part, Gray wrote: “When Count Ferrary [sic] died in 1917 his huge and wonderful collection was sold, in a series of 14 historic auction sales, at a price which totalled \$2,275,975. It was at one of these auctions that the agent of Arthur Hind of Utica, N.Y., outbid the agent of King George V for the possession of the British Guiana rarity. The price,

including the French Government tax, was \$38,025—a colossal sum for one postage stamp.”

A 1940 newspaper clipping says, “The world's highest priced stamp—the British Guiana penny magenta of 1856—is on exhibit at the British Pavilion of the New York World's Fair. The stamp is owned by Mrs. Anna Hind Scala and is valued at \$50,000.

In December 1970, a Missouri paper noted that the costliest of all postage stamps is “The British Guiana one-cent Magenta. It is the only one known for its kind. The stamp was recently bought by a collector for \$280,000.”

WELL, YOU GET THE PICTURE. In sending Donald and the kids off on a quest for a One-Cent Magenta stamp, Carl Barks was playing to the fantasies and emotions of millions of readers worldwide. In my book, that's hardly a “weak” and “preposterous” story theme. “Hmph,” indeed.

For those who may not yet have read this story, and for those who remember it with pleasure, the following pages offer a brief synopsis of Walt Disney's *Donald Duck and The Gilded Man* by Carl Barks.



“The world's most valuable scrap of paper” measures only one by one-and-one-quarter inches.

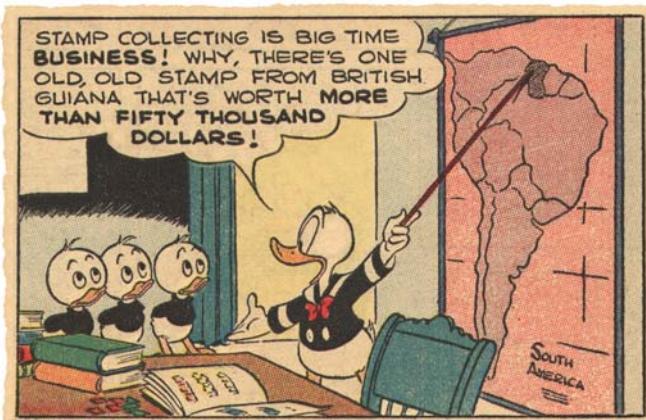
HUEY, DEWEY AND LOUIE want their Uncle Donald to take them to a movie, but he's busy, working on his stamp collection. When the kids complain that Donald is wasting his time, he tells them about an old stamp that's worth lots of money, giving the ducklings, and us readers, a geography lesson about the South American country with mighty rivers, man-eating fish, steaming jungles and savage voodoo cults. Donald explains that he's hoping to make enough cash from collecting and selling stamps to pay for a ticket to British Guiana, where he just might be able to find one of the valuable stamps.

At the train station, Donald is scrounging through trash baskets looking for stamps when he encounters his cousin and rival, Gladstone Gander. Donald brags that he has found ninety cents worth of stamps in ten minutes (equal to about an hour's wages in 1952), so Gladstone uses *his* luck to find a fortune in stamps in ten seconds.

Sure enough—the gander finds a valuable stamp album accidentally left at the station by an absent-minded millionaire collector. Hoping there will be a reward, Gladstone decides to return the album to its owner, and Donald accompanies him. Philo T. Ellic, the rich stamp collector, laughs at his own forgetfulness and gives Gladstone a thousand dollar bill for his prompt honesty.



Gladstone hurries off to spend his windfall, but the experience has left



Donald too weak to walk. He remains seated until the forgetful millionaire notices him and, thinking it was Donald who returned the album and that he hasn't yet received a reward, forces the duck to accept a thousand dollars. Donald struggles with the thought of taking the money, but decides that if Philo T. Ellic is happy, he should be, too. Don hurries home and tells his nephews to pack up for a trip to British Guiana.



On their long ocean voyage to South America, the ducks read about Sir Walter Raleigh and others searching for a legendary man who covered himself entirely with gold—*El Dorado!* But the explorers never found him.



In Guiana, the Ducks pay householders to let them look through old attics and trunks, and eventually realize they are following a well worn trail. Donald decides to go to the post office to take a look at the mail records of 1856, only to find a long line of stamp collectors ahead of him. Meanwhile, quick action by the ducklings saves the life of a riverman being attacked

by *man eating fish!* In gratitude, the old



man tells the ducks he will gladly do anything to repay them. One of the nephews asks if he can tell them where to find a once-cent magenta stamp of 1856. He replies that the question is a joke in Guiana, but since they saved his life he tells them that he knows who has one—*El Dorado, The Gilded Man!*

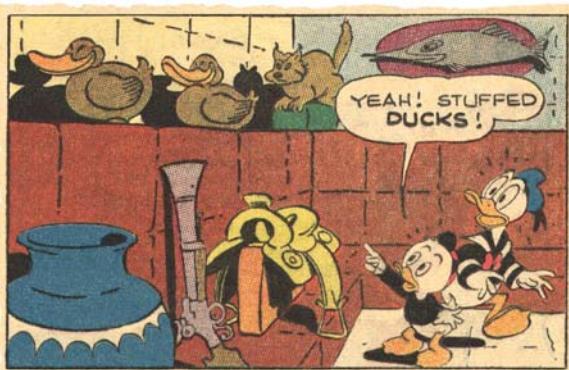
The old timer says that his father was a mail carrier in 1856, carrying a sack of mail that included a letter bearing a one-cent magenta stamp. He was seized by a band of strange Indians; their huge leader—covered entirely with gold—took the mail sack because he was fascinated by its big silver buckles.

The next day, Donald and his nephews hire a helicopter to fly them to the edge of the jungle, then set out on foot to pick up the trail of the man in gold. For days they walk, wade, climb and crawl among ants, snakes, lizards, vampire bats, jaguars, sloths, armadillos, manatees, monkeys and mosquitoes. They are about to give up and go home when they find a tame



monkey that they follow through the jungle to what appears to be a deserted Mayan-like temple. Inside, they discover a sort of museum, filled with old rusty armor, cannons, anchors, cutlasses, muskets, saddles, pirate belts, boots and gauntlets. "That guy," Donald says of *El Dorado*, "was quite a collector!"

One of the ducklings becomes alarmed. "Did you see something?" asks his uncle. "Yeah," he replies, pointing up to a shelf. "Stuffed ducks."



This inspires Donald and his nephews to get on with their search, and they look for a room where the man of gold keeps his special treasures—including the mail sack with its shiny silver buckles.



Donald rummages through the contents of the mail sack and finds the letter—still with its stamp. "Look!" he

says to the ducklings. "The original One-Cent Magenta!" Unfortunately, the ducks are being watched by the gilded man himself. *El Dorado* doesn't take kindly to their touching the silver buckles, and decides that the ducks shall get "the royal works."

Thrown into a cell, the ducks wrack their brains to figure out a means of escape. The old riverman had told them the man of gold was "nutty about silver," so the ducklings brought along a small container of silver paint.

When Donald is hauled from the cell to face his punishment, the ducklings find a way to collapse the floor beneath the two-ton giant and cover him with the silver paint. An amazed *El Dorado* awakens to discover he's no longer gold, and during the commotion the ducks grab the mail sack and escape.

Alas, back in civilization, the ducks learn that the

sack and its contents belong to the government; "His majesty's mail is *delivered* even if it is 96 years late!"

Fortunately, a kind-hearted clerk gives Donald the address on the envelope: Miss Susiebelle Swan in the U.S.A. Now the ducks follow a trail of addresses leading them back home to Duckburg. There they discover that Gladstone Gander is sole heir of the late Miss Swan, and he becomes recipient of the letter. The ducks follow Gladstone to the home of Philo T. Ellic, where the gander sells his envelope to the collector for \$50,000.

The absent-minded collector rushes to the train station, anxious to exhibit his prize and have the collectors of the world grovel at his feet.

In yet another grand turnabout of fortunes, Ellic leaves his stamp album on a bridge as he rushes to hail a taxi. The collector is aboard the train before he realizes he's misplaced his prize. But Donald finds the album and manages to buy a ticket as far as the Duckburg city limits.

Aboard the train, Donald meets up with the distraught Ellic, and happily accepts a reward of \$50,000 for returning the album with the One-Cent Magenta stamp.

What a delightful story! —JC

