

## STAMP STORIES

Jack R. Congrove, BU1424

In the last edition, I wrote about a stamp depicting an African animal that I encountered in an unexpected place. For this story, I decided to write about another ruminant that I encountered in my travels. My inspiration derives from a personal experience while stationed in the Middle East. It happened as newlyweds, my wife and I were driving near the Dead Sea. We sighted a lone Bedouin leading his camel beside the highway. Being unaccustomed to such scenes, we stopped to take a photo.

It is customary to ask before taking pictures of strangers and when I indicated to the man what we wanted, he not only agreed, but also offered my wife a chance to get on the animal for a ride. He led the camel around while I took pictures. It was only later that it occurred to me what would have happened if he had just taken off across the desert with my bride? A footrace, I suspect. But, we came away with a nice memento and subsequently, we were able to ride camels at the Pyramids and other places as well.

Even though you often see individuals or flocks of camels roaming, apparently unattended, throughout the Middle East, I was informed by locals that no wild camels exist there. All of them are domesticated and are the property of someone. They not only serve as working animals—hauling cargo and riders, but also supply milk, meat, hair fiber, and leather.

There are two species of camels within the genus *Camelus*. The dromedary or Arabian camel (*Camelus dromedaries*) has a single hump, and the Bactrian (*C. bactrianus*) has two humps. Dromedaries are native to the desert areas of West Asia, and Bactrian camels are native to Central and East Asia. The humps are formed by fatty deposits that can be as much as 30 inches high. Despite common belief, the camel does not store water in its hump. It uses the fat stored there for energy. Camels have many physiological adaptations that enable their legendary ability to go for long periods without water. These include nostrils that trap and recirculate exhaled moisture, specially shaped red blood cells, and the ability to withstand great changes in body temperature and weight loss.

As you would probably suspect, many camel stamps exist from African and Asian countries where these beasts are native and where they are employed as domestic animals. Among the oldest and most recognizable of these designs is from the 1898 stamp issue of Sudan. This design is titled “Camel Postman” and shows a native rider aboard a “ship of the desert” carrying sacks of mail and armed with a rifle and other weapons to ward off thieves and brigands. The design has appeared on Sudanese stamps for more than a century. The circumstances involving its creation make a fascinating story.

In the late 19th century, the self-styled Mahdi controlled much of Sudan. In 1896, a force under the command of General Sir Herbert Kitchener began a campaign to defeat the Mahdi and retake control of the country. Kitchener determined to set up a postal system needed by Sudan after the conflict. He turned to Captain Edward A. Stanton, one of his Engineer officers, to come up with a design because he liked the drawings that Stanton had made on the margins of his survey maps. He gave the captain a five-day deadline.

Searching for inspiration, Stanton a few days later observed the regiment’s mail arrive by camel instead of the usual river steamer. Because he was also a liaison officer to the local tribesmen, Stanton was able to persuade the tribal sheikh to don his full regalia and ride his camel around, using sacks of straw substituting for mailbags, while the captain made a rapid sketch.



Camel Postman

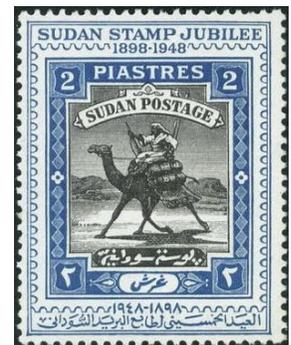
Sir Herbert liked the design and sent it off to the Thomas de la Rue Company in London for engraving and printing by typography. De la Rue produced eight values, from 1-millieme to 10-piastres, each in two colors, on wove paper with a rosette watermark perforated 14. The stamps went on sale in Sudan on 1 March 1898.

Captain Stanton had optimistically inscribed the names of Khartoum and Berber on two of the bags, towns which were at the time still in Mahdist hands. To his amazement, the engraver had managed to incorporate these names in tiny lettering in the finished design. By the time the stamps went on sale, both towns were in British hands.

Despite its hasty design, the Camel Postman became one of the world's most recognizable definitive issues, far outlasting British control of Sudan. The British issued a second set with the same values using paper with a star and crescent watermark in 1902. A set with a smaller format known as the "Small Camels" and including additional values appeared in 1921 and 1927.

The postal authorities redesigned the Camel Postman for its 50th anniversary issue in 1948. It again appeared on the high value for the definitive set in 1951, and even survived the arrival of self-government in 1954, and independence in 1956, to be reused in the 1962 and 1991 series. The postman has also appeared on commemoratives issued in 2003 and 2005, and on Sudanese currency and coins.

This classic design would make a challenging exhibit subject having more than 130 different issues with at least 30 errors or varieties including overprints for government service from 1900–62, Army Service from 1905–24, Air Mail in 1931, and surcharges on various occasions between 1903 and 1941. In fact, R. Gordon Darge won a gold medal with such an exhibit at Wodonga 2007.



Anniversary Issue

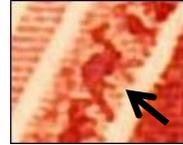
Like the camel itself, these stamps are a great example of service and endurance. The life expectancy of a camel can be as long as 50 years. Camels can run at up to 40 miles per hour in short bursts and sustain speeds of up to 25 miles per hour. Dromedaries can weigh more than 900 pounds. The Bactrian is much larger reaching weights of up to 1,400 pounds. As a beast of burden, the camel can carry up to two-thirds its own body weight. Fossil evidence indicates that the ancestors of modern camels (like also those of the horse) evolved in North America during the Palaeogene period and later spread to Asia.

About 14 million dromedaries live today in Africa and the Middle East where they are an important part of the local culture. An estimated 1.4 million Bactrian camels live in eastern Asia. Most of these are domesticated, but about 1,000 wild Bactrian camels dwell in the Gobi Desert in China and Mongolia.

Up to 1 million feral dromedary camels roam the central parts of Australia, descended from individuals introduced as a method of transport in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. This population is growing at around eight percent per year and the government employs aerial marksmen to cull the animals because they use too much of the limited resources needed by domestic sheep.

Despite being the origination site its ancestor, only two United States stamps contain depictions of the camel. One is a carousel animal on a 25-cent stamp issued in 1988 (Scott #2392), but most people would be hard-pressed to identify the other one. It happens to be on the Fort Bliss Centennial stamp (Scott #976) issued on 5 November 1948.

You will probably need a magnifier to spot it. It is one of the tiny images in the triangle that borders the V2 rocket that is being launched. It is near the apex on the left-hand side. This issue is also one of the first Space topic stamps.



Camel cavalry have been used in wars throughout Africa, the Middle East, and the modern-day Border Security Force of India. Armies have also used camels as freight animals instead of horses and mules. It is not surprising, therefore, that the U.S. Army tried its own experiment with camels in the mid-1800s. The Army imported these animals from Turkey and used them as part of the U.S. Camel Corps to serve as transport and draft animals in the Southwest. One of these “camel trains” passed through Fort Bliss on its way from Camp Verde, Texas, to Fort Tejon, California, hence its depiction on the stamp.

The camels proved to be well-suited for carrying heavy loads and were able to move quickly across terrain which horses found difficult. The outbreak of the Civil War and the fact the camels frightened horses and mules and were difficult to manage caused the Army to end the experiment. Some animals were sold and used in cargo hauling and mining operations. But many escaped, or were turned loose to roam free through the Southwest. The last reported feral camel sighting in the U.S. was in 1941.