

Poster Stamp Artist John T. Coulthard (1903-1966)

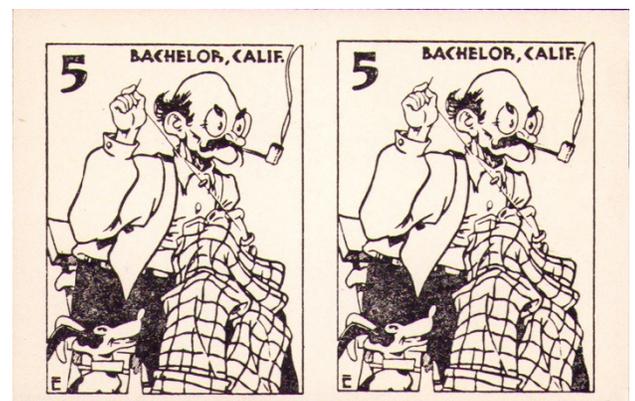
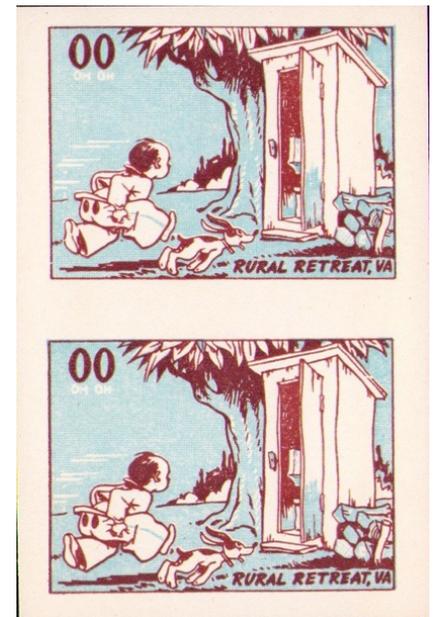
John Thomas Coulthard was a commercial artist who had a special affinity for both drawing cartoons and philately. He was born and died in Modesto California and spent most of his life in the San Francisco/Modesto region. He was a collector himself and had an active twenty-five-year+ career (from the early 1930's to the 1950's) producing artwork related to his love of stamp collecting: cachets, advertising art, and what we care about, some poster stamps.

During high school he became interested in art and ordered a correspondence course in cartooning. After graduating high school in 1922, Coulthard started producing cartoons and commercial art for the local newspaper, national magazines, and clipart sold to retailers by Cram Studios in Michigan. Before 1930 he began collecting California cancels and precancels, making art for philatelic events, and even writing articles for philatelic periodicals.

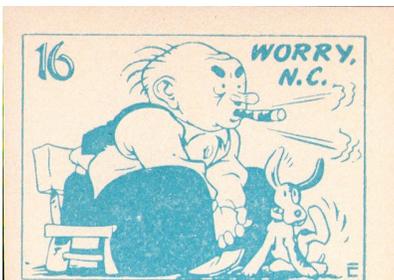
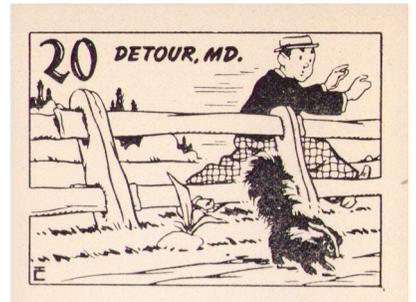
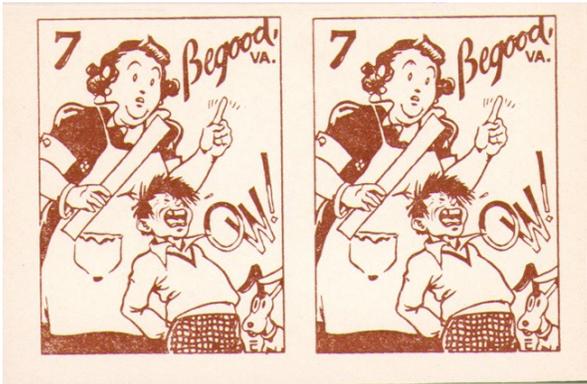
After the Great depression hit he also began producing cacheted covers, many first days, printing his own using linoleum block cuts and selling inexpensively to others.

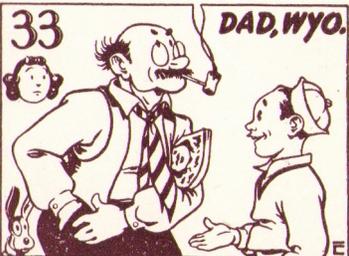
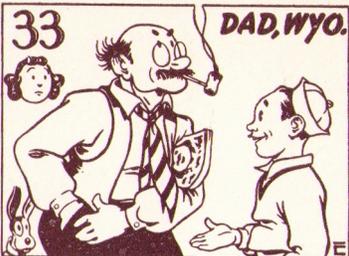
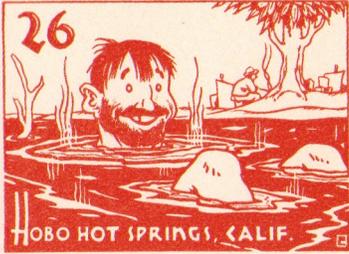
During the 1930s, collecting covers postmarked at towns with unusual place names was popular. John Coulthard drew and produced on his own several cachets matching unusual place names of towns in California. They appealed to collectors and in late 1938 or early 1939, Western Stamp Collector commissioned him to do a series of 20 poster stamps for towns with odd names. Soon after, this was followed by an additional 20. These labels were numbered from 1 to 40 with two extras, numbers "00" and "7 1/2" added for a known total of 42 designs.

Here is a sampling of the stamps of the series; all of them were imperforate, and apparently often sold as pairs, as my set is. Note that it was the depression, and the printing and cutting was done with no great care, and paper quality also varied.



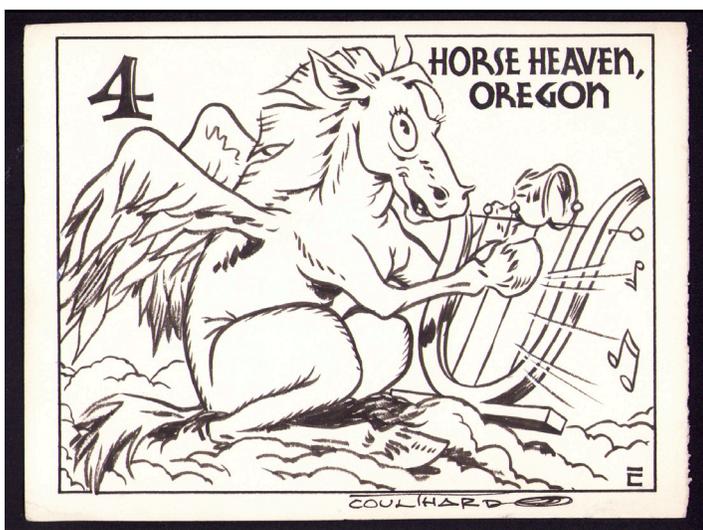
Stamps above shown at 100%, printed area is typically approx. 46 x 33 mm.



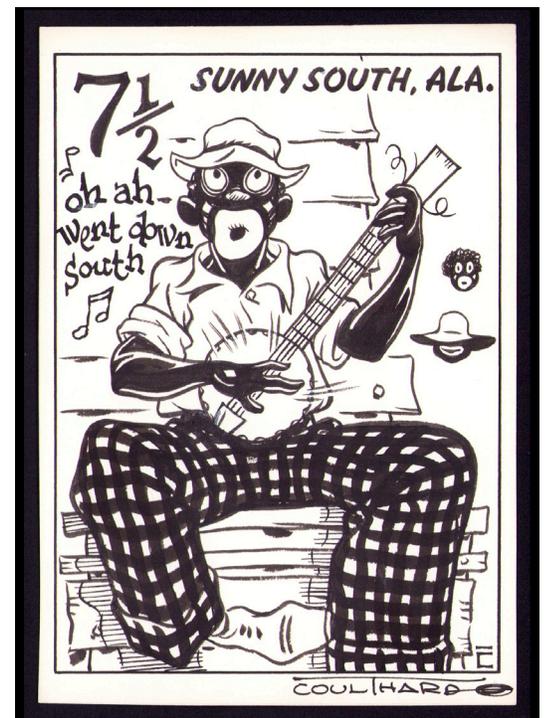


Following are 15 of the 42 camera-ready art cards, a step for printing; it's the set Coulthard saved for himself.

These Photostats are 6+” wide, made from his initial drawings, used to get rid of extra marks and lines and improve the contrast. Coulthard marked each of these with a typical monogram he used on cachets, a box shaped C with a line mark above it. On these he added a bit more shading, clothing patterns, error touch up, etc. These were then copied--the negative was reduced, multiplied and used to make an offset printing plate.

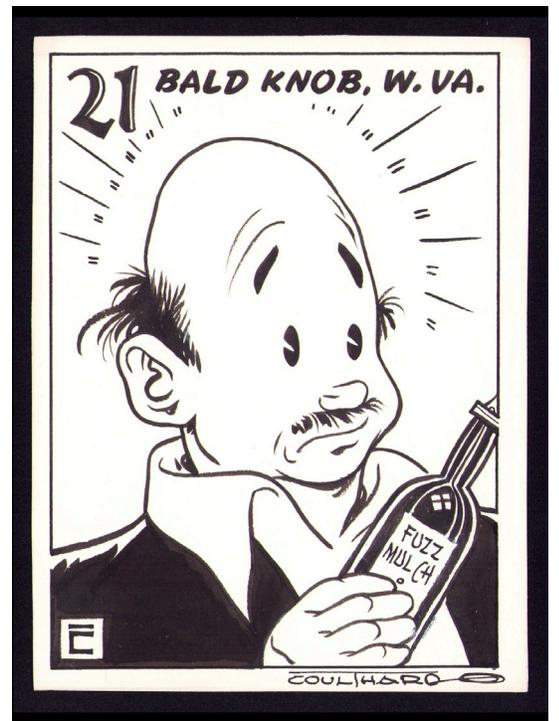
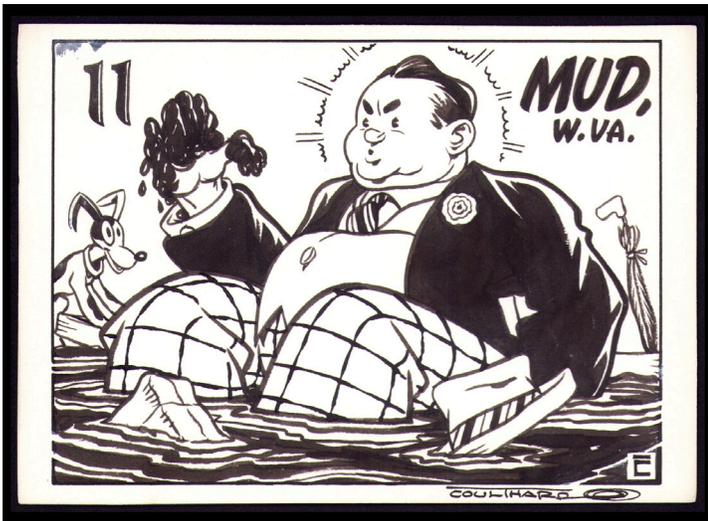


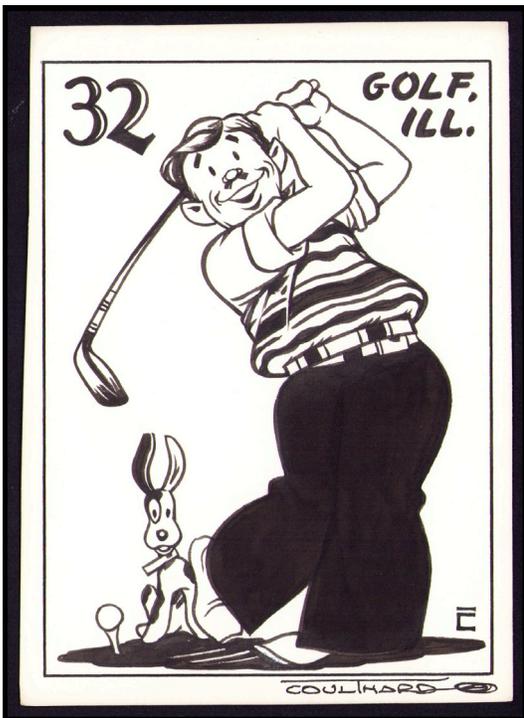
At some time Coulthard added the "signature" in the bottom margin--which doesn't show in the final poster stamps.



John made all of the cartoons humorous takes on the town names.

Two of the stamps, numbers 7 1/2 and 25, are embarrassing racist humor, but Coulthard's drawings were of his era. We show them as part of the overall record, not because we approve in any way.





These photostats average 6.25" by 4.5", (they are shown at about 55% size) but they are not carefully drawn to an exact size or squareness. These were done to be inexpensive, no one was highly paid.

The original idea of the stamps was no doubt so that collectors could use the stamps on cover as a cachet and have it postmarked at the corresponding post office. One can find a number of cover fronts posted online and some occasionally for sale, usually postmarked during 1939.



The list of these towns was not picked carefully. The post office of #36, Boggy Depot, closed in 1934. For some towns there is no record a post office ever existed.

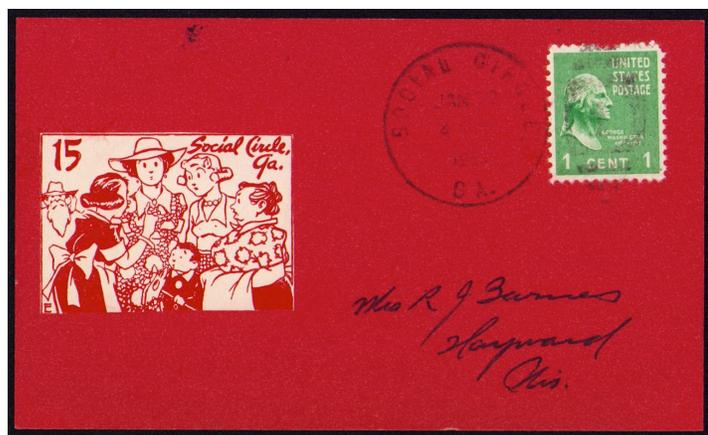
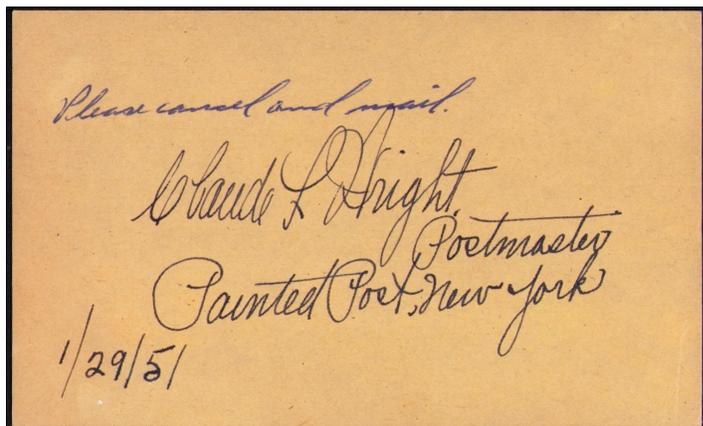
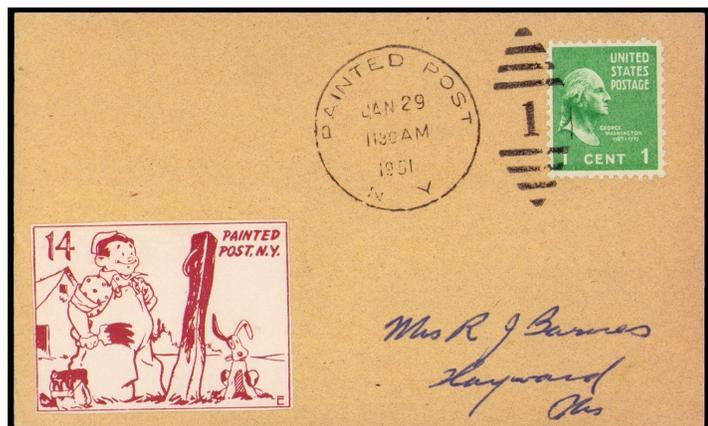


Dean C. Bartley (1882-1971) produced covers using both pre-printed (above) and typed envelope addresses, all canceled in 1939.

Bartley was at one time president of the Seattle Collectors Club and also a maker of first day covers and ship covers (USCS #44), some using Coulthard artwork, so no doubt they knew each other in the 1930's-40's. See Henkle's website and the USCS site below:

https://www.navalcovermuseum.org/wiki/Cachet_Maker_Deane_C_Bartley

Mrs. R.J. Barnes of Hayward, Wisconsin cut her own tinted post cards and got cancels in 1951, the latest date I have seen. The card backs are usually blank, but the postmaster of #14 Painted Post New York autographed and dated the card for her.

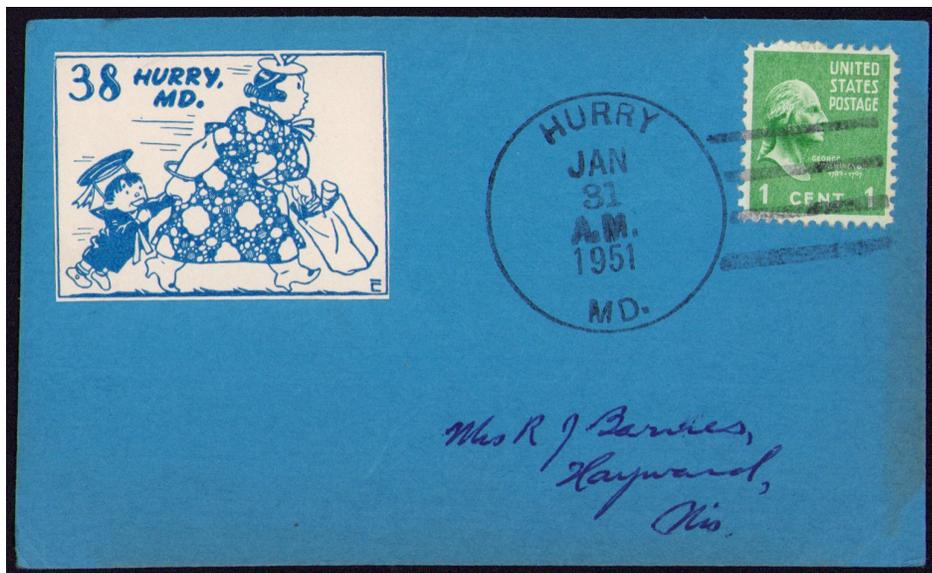


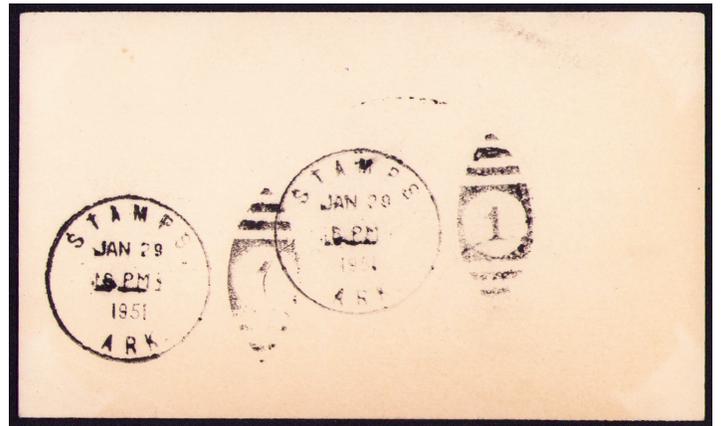
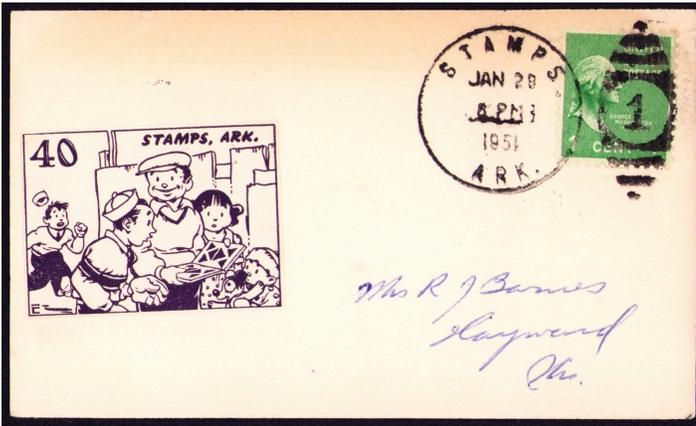
All of the Barnes examples are roughly 3.5 x 5 postcard size, some in colors to match the stamp color. all canceled in January 1951



All over the midwest, farm towns began disappearing after 1900, as farm equipment was replacing human labor and personal cars meant people could live farther from farmland and drive to stores.

It would not be possible to get these covers made in 2025. Many of these very small towns have disappeared, or lost their post office, or they may no longer have cancelers as the mail is handled in regional facilities for automated sorting. Competition Missouri for example, is unincorporated, lost its post office in 1967 and reports no population figure.





The postmaster in Stamps, Arkansas tested the canceler on the back. Stamps still survives as town with post office; although it's named for a person, not postage, it's still popular with philatelists.



Cover picture taken from the website Stamp Collecting Forum

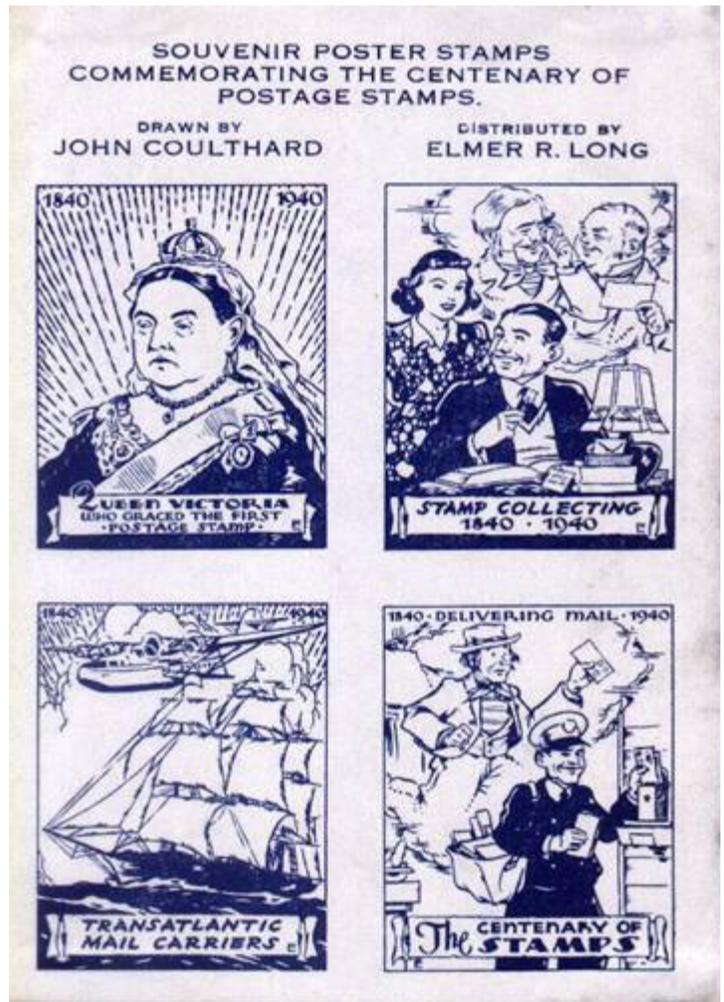
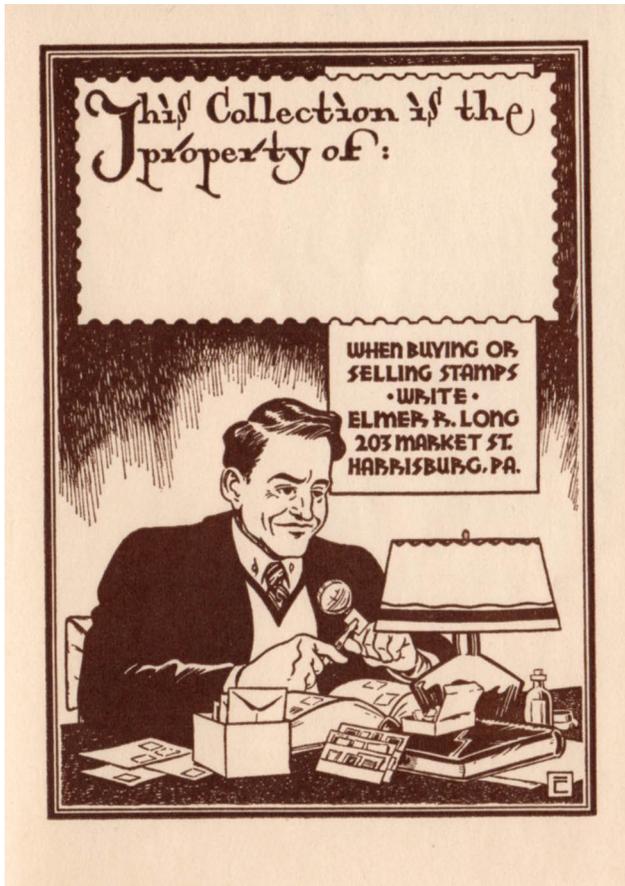
Coulthard also did cachets for First Day Cover makers Washington Stamp Exchange and Cachet Craft, plus numerous generic drawings for U.S. Navy ship covers. He was a member for a time of the Universal Ship Cancel Society, and the Meter Slogan Associates, and wrote articles for those groups.

But Elmer Long was Coulthard's biggest philatelic-related client.

Work for Elmer R. Long

Beginning in early 1937 Elmer Long, a stamp dealer, began using John for advertising art, a relationship that continued into the late 1950s. Long had Coulthard produce cover art for a series of mail order price lists he mailed to customers from 1939 to the late 1950's, along with a stream of ads used within the catalog and in philatelic gazettes of the time. Long died in 1965.

Sometime circa 1938 Long had him design a book-plate given free with orders, which included an Elmer Long mention. These are gummed single color on white.



Similarly, a pane of four was made in 1940 for the centennial of stamps—again to serve as advertising.

Over the years, writings about Coulthard have appeared in the philatelic press, mainly in reference to his cachets. Doug Henkle, on website pages which discuss Elmer Long, gives information about Coulthard, the catalog fronts and illustrations, cachets on covers for Long's use, and cartoons, that he produced for Long.

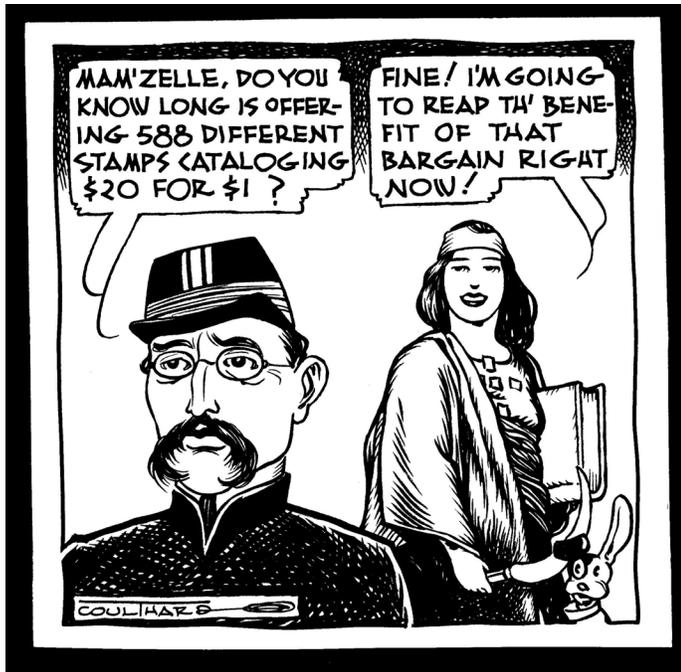
<https://www.folklib.net/fdc/bibliog/elmer-long.shtml>

Coulthard continued philatelic activity during World War 2, but the war was a disruption; he spent over a year working in shipyards in San Francisco before opening a studio there. His philatelic output after the war never regained the earlier level; his interest waned, and he had plenty of business from companies wanting art production, which no doubt paid more.

Coulthard had health problems from childhood, including bouts of pneumonia, severe spinal and neck pains; by the late 50's he suffered from diabetes and heart angina. He died in September 1966, felled by a heart attack while walking on Market Street in San Francisco. With all that, we can understand that he chose to live a fairly quiet life, mostly in Modesto, prolifically turning out commercial art as a living.

Advertising Art for Elmer Long

The images following are from a series of 14 scans of camera-ready art prepared as ads for Elmer Long, many of which pertain to Long's advertisements for the sale of seals (primarily Xmas seals of the US and Canada).



Like the earlier town name cartoons, his rough originals were Photostatted at a 6+” size and then touched up by hand. This is difficult to see except by looking at an extreme angle in bright light. Patterns for clothing and shading were added—some with pre-printed films (a brand-new item that dates these as post WW2.) The dress of the disappointed blonde on the ride has a self-adhesive printed dot pattern, for example.





These are signed in 2 ways. His monogram on these later works was his full name Coulthard with the T stretched above the name, but part of his "signature" was a mascot-- a spotted dog which he began adding often as time went on, the dog appears already in 1939 in many of the town name stamps, riding in the car for #19 Auto, West Virginia, for example.



Coulthard's sense of gentle humor shows through in the ads, he mocks popular culture of the time, which seems to mark the drawings as 1940's.

None of these cartoons were made into poster stamps, which is too bad, they would have worked decently as stamps with color tints added. The image at article end is just that, a "colorized" version of one of the designs, altered for this article.

Once a Collector, Always...

The British Museum contains a surprising listing of Coulthard online:

An American cartoonist and collector who amassed a library of more than 50,000 volumes on art history and many thousands of examples of early cartoon art as well as other material. He died on 24 September 1966 and following his wishes his collection was dispersed by sale to prevent a museum from “burying the material in dusty vaults, there to be dead and never enjoyed again”.

So why do they list Mr. Coulthard if he was uncooperative? A Kwakiutl mask [northwest American tribe] owned by Coulthard was purchased from his estate by Robert Inverarity, who sold his collection to the British Museum in 1976, so Coulthard is listed because of a later collector.

John was survived by his youngest sister Lois (1906-1990), who apparently inherited, and gradually sold or gave away many stamps and related materials before she died, still in Modesto. This biography comes primarily from interviews with her, used in articles about John after his death. Walter Schmidt, who visited her when he lived in California before 1984 commented that she was a philatelic collector herself— and a bit of a pack rat.

The two sets of camera-ready art were acquired by Walter Schmidt, and from him eventually to Joe Ward and to me.

--Tom Minor

Sources:

- American Philatelist article A Study of John Coulthard, 1903-1966: by Clyde Carriker; issue September 1984 pgs. 915-20.

- Doug Henkle's website: <https://www.folklib.net/fdc/bibliog/elmer-long.shtml> about Elmer Long, note that not every FDC shown is by Coulthard. This section shows Long catalogs “Collectors Handbook” with Coulthard cover art.

- Henkle page showing first day covers by Coulthard. <https://www.folklib.net/fdc/makers/coulthard.shtml>

Coulthard was featured several times in First Days magazine of the First Day Cover Society, Henkle gives some notes on those issues.

- An article on CinderellaStampsForum.com that shows many examples of the town name stamps on cover

https://www.cinderellastampsforum.com/the-poster-stamps-of-john-coulthard_topic1488_page1&SID=61cc8e50-8adb-4271-94da-43ff9679a910.html

- There are websites where one can find genealogical and census data covering the Coulthard family, siblings, birth and death dates.



Town names series

1. Shaver Lake, CA
2. Looking Glass, OR
3. Hellgate, WA
4. Horse Heaven, OR
5. Bachelor, CA
6. Left Hand, WV
7. Begood, VA
8. Sunny South, AL
9. Romeo, CO
10. Young America, IN
11. O.K. KY
12. Mud, WV
13. Competition, MO
14. Painted Post NY
15. Social Café, GA
16. Worry, NC
17. Horseshoe, FL
18. Gasoline, TX
19. Auto, WV
20. Detour, MD
21. Bald Knob, WV
22. Flying H, NM
23. Wink, TX
24. Ball Ground, GA
25. Talking Rock, GA
26. Hobo Hot Springs, CA
27. Harmony, RI
28. Sleepy Eye, MN
29. Roads End, CA
30. Sailor Springs, IL
31. Barefoot, TX
32. Golf, IL
33. Dad, WY
34. Twin Sisters, TX
35. Twinfish, WA
36. Boggy Depot, OK
37. Possession, WA
38. Hurry, MD
39. Magazine, AL
40. Stamps, AR
41. 7.5 Sunny South, AL
42. 00 Rural Retreat, VA

23 different States used

CA, OR, WA, WV, VA, AL, CO, IN, KY, MO, NY, GA,
NC, FL, TX, MD, NM, RI, MN, IL, WY, OK, AR.

1. Shaver Lake, population 580, located beside Shaver Lake, which is named after Mr. C.B.Shaver.

3. Hellgate Washington, not found online or maps. There is a ghost town in Montana, there is a hell's gate canyon section of the Columbia River system.

36. Boggy Depot, Oklahoma was a once important town which was bypassed by the Katy railroad in 1872 and became a ghost town. The post office closed in 1934, so it would have been impossible to get a town cancel in 1939. (Wikipedia).

11. O.K. Kentucky was an unincorporated town in Lincoln County, now gone, not on maps now. Post Office lasted 1882-1942 listed

12. Mud, West Virginia, 25565 is an unincorporated town in the mountainous SW. It is now probably an empty mining or quarry area by the Mud River.

18. Gasoline Texas seems to have totally disappeared, was possibly an oil boom town.

30. Sailor Springs, Illinois farm town in SE Illinois, pop. in 1940 was 300, now 89.

32. Golf, Illinois is in metropolitan Chicago west of Evanston. It amounts to the large Glen View Golf course and a residential area pop. 500. Incorporated in 1928, post office still operating.

4. Horse Heaven, now a ghost town, but had a post office 1938-1945; a mercury mining town. Wild horses congregated in the area.-

35. Twinfish Washington, not found online. More than one site uses names involving twin or twin lakes. . .

34. Twin Sisters, Texas unincorporated. Pop. 78 in 2000. Has a zip code, post office ended 1951. Named for two hills.

38. Hurry, Maryland, an unincorporated village in the south of Maryland, had a post office from 1897 until 1959. The site has disappeared from Google maps.

39. Magazine, Alabama is probably an old village/ neighborhood absorbed into Mobile, just north of the major rail yards and industrial zone, north of downtown.

40. Stamps, Arkansas survives 20+ miles east of Texarkana. The population has dropped below 2000, but it still has a post office. Stamps was the name of one of its founding families, not postally related.

19. Auto, in southeast WV, unincorporated, had a post office until recently, no population noted.