

# ***THE SPRINGBOK***



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# The Springbok

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*The Springbok* is published quarterly for the benefit of Members of the South African Collectors' Society. It is not available to non-members. Contributions in the form of letters, notes, reports of SA related activities, articles, etc., are always welcome and should be sent to the Hon. Editor. All correspondence including a SAE will be acknowledged.

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## S.A. stamps in 100 Years – Quo Vadis?

By Odd Gunnar Skagestad

A few months ago - on 4 November 2010, one hundred years had passed since South Africa's first postage stamp was issued, - the 2 ½ d deep blue, displaying the portrait of King George V (SACC 1 in the S.A. Colour Catalogue).

The *very first* South African stamp? Of course not, - postage stamps had by then been in use for more than half a century in South Africa. It all actually started in 1853 with the Cape of Good Hope so-called "triangulars". During the subsequent decades, postage stamps were issued by the postal authorities in viz. Natal, the Orange Free State, the ZAR/Transvaal, not forgetting the proliferation of more or less temporal regional and local issuing authorities in the course of colonization and consecutive wars.

But in 1910 South Africa for the first time appeared on the world map as a single unified country. Only from then on did the country exist in the capacity of a stamp nation in its own right. So, when discussing the development of South Africa as a stamp issuing entity, it is appropriate to start with the 2 ½ d King George V – a stamp which, equally appropriately, was issued on the occasion of the opening of the Union Parliament.

This is an anniversary which (one would have presumed) would have called for a healthy measure of self-gratulatory retrospective indulgence as well as some level-headed analyses of the developments which have taken place during these 100 years – and also some reflections on current developments and possible future perspectives.

A striking feature of this 100-year-span has been the ever-increasing volume of new issues. Dry statistics will tell a story of almost continuous growth, which has gradually morphed into a picture of not only wildly exponential growth but an overall proliferation of seemingly limitless dimensions. During these 100 years the S.A. Postal authorities (whether Union or Republic) have issued a grand total of **1986** postage stamps (counting the main catalogue items listed in the S.A. Colour Catalogue 2010/11, 30<sup>th</sup> Edition).

Thus, the first 20 years (1910-29) saw a total of **37** issues, i.e. an average of **1,9** per annum.

During the next 20 years (1930-49) an additional number of **82** stamps were issued, bringing the average up to the level of **4,1** new stamps each year.

The following 20-year period (1950-69) brought an increase of **166** new items, which entailed an average to the tune of **8,3** per year.

A further **430** new stamps were issued during the 20-year period 1970-89, skyrocketing the annual average to the hefty figure of **21,5**.

And during the past 20 years (1990-2009) we have seen the well-nigh unbelievable figure of **1272**, giving an average of no less than **63,6** new stamp items each year.

Why this enormous increase in the number of new stamps? Could it be the postal needs or requirements – an ever-increasing demand by the market for new stamps to affix to their letters and parcels? Or is this spectacular growth in volume due to other factors, like changes with regard to the stamps' functions?

The postal functions of stamps have remained basically unchanged since the One Penny Black came into existence in the UK in 1840. The demand of the market for a practical receipt for a uniform, pre-paid postal transaction is still with us. But already from the outset, the stamp has been on the defensive vis-à-vis challenges in the market-place, by the emergence of – and the competition from – other and newer technological solutions and alternative options of communication. The telegraph had already been invented when the stamps entered the

arena, soon to be supplemented by the telephone. The use of stamps would eventually face competition from cancelling machines, later on from the telex, and a number of years thence, from the fax. By the end of the 20th century the Internet, e-mail and sms-texting had universally become everyday means of communication, subsequently to be extended to the so-called "social media" like Facebook and Twitter. So where has this left our traditional and much-beloved stamps?

The electronic means of communications have not made the postage stamp completely superfluous, redundant or obsolete. One would, however, be very hard pressed to discern any increased postal need/requirement/demand which would necessitate or justify the ever more frequent new stamp issues.

This leaves only the second possibility – that postage stamps have assumed or been assigned functions which cause stamps to be issued for completely different reasons than the original postal ones.

One such reason may be temptation (on the part of the S.A. Post Office) to capitalize on an inflated stamp collection market (so-called "cream-skimming"). This is a motive which used to be considered not too respectable, and would place the issuing country in disreputable company, - along with so-called "operetta states" or "Banana Republics" (a common definition of a "banana republic" used to be a place notorious for its "Mickey Mouse currency" and "wallpaper stamps").

The remarkably strong growth (and subsequently huge volume) of new stamps issued by the S.A. Post Office could easily lend credence to the notion that RSA has joined the suspect company of Banana Republics. But the simple greed motive, the covetous lust for fleecing the naïve collectors – those pitiful victims of their own compulsion to acquire all the new stamps that are issued – is certainly not the whole story.

A probably more important driving force is the conscious policy of the S.A. Post Office (as is also the case of postal authorities in other countries, including my own home country of Norway) to use the issuing of new stamps as an opportunity to present their country in such ways that they would like to get across (domestically, but above all to the international audience). These small bits of paper represent, among other things, the jurisdictional authority of the issuing state. They are, in effect, a state's most prominent "visiting card". Thus, what we see is an expression of what is called "public diplomacy", which includes building a favourable reputation/opinion or project a favourable image of one's own country in the minds of the outside world. This is an exercise which most countries indulge in nowadays, and the postage stamp is an object which is uniquely well equipped for performing this particular function.

Nevertheless, what we see (in South Africa as well as elsewhere) is also a galloping inflation with regard to motives with which the issuing authorities deem fit to adorn their stamps. Gone are the days when you would expect a stamp to show an official-looking symbol such as the portrait of the head of state, the national coat-of-arms, or commemorating some particularly important event in the history of that country. The threshold for displaying new motives has been consistently lowered. Today any thinkable kind of motives – from the most spectacularly eccentric to the most insignificant and meaningless ones – are now used as pretext for producing new stamp issues.

One may well wonder what will be the outcome if this development continues. This is, however, a big IF. The postage stamp – such as we hitherto have known it – may eventually be history. Various factors are at play, that may contribute in this respect. One factor is the general (global) trend towards partial privatization of a service that previously, from the outset, was seen as a governmental monopoly (and as such, even a signature mark of the state authorities). This is increasingly not the case any more.

Even more importantly, the very identity or distinctive character of postage stamps – the qualities that make them into attractive collector items as well as credible symbols of the state – are in the process of being obliterated as a result of the inflationary issuing policies. When a new stamp issue is about as interesting as a bit of wallpaper, the enthusiasm and commitment of collectors will dry up. In its turn, such a development may also eventually cause the wantonly expansionist issuing policies to come to a halt.

Dear South African fellow stamp collectors: I am not writing this article in order to predict or prophesy the death – imminent or further ahead – of our wonderful hobby. I do however – on the backdrop of the 100 years anniversary of S.A. stamps - think it is highly pertinent to take a hard look at the developments which we have already observed for what is becoming an increasingly long period of time. Where are these developments leading us? Are we comfortable with letting this wildly inflationary situation continue, letting our hobby be reduced to randomly collecting insignificant pieces of paper – and if not, what can be done about it? These questions should be subjected to a serious debate, and the situation should be addressed by the stamp-collecting community in close dialogue with the issuing authorities (*in casu* the S.A. Post Office).

Having said this much, I'd also like to congratulate South Africa on its proud postal and philatelic history, and extend my best wishes to the future of South African stamp collecting!

***Any comments on this issue to the Editor please!***

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