

# Mostly about People

By Wally Traling



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Jeanne Bettencourt has a post-violent hobby.

She collects mail that has been salvaged from wrecks.

Yes, you imagined right, the material is limited, and expensive; but her collection of some 70 covers drips with drama.

Her oldest cover, which cost her \$16.50, is a letter that survived the sea from inside a mail bag, tossed from a balloon used to carry mail from within the walls of Paris during the siege of Paris by the Prussians in 1870.

The mail sack was picked up by a Norwegian ship in the Atlantic, and the letters eventually reached their destination. The story goes that the balloon was losing altitude and the sack was thrown out to lighten the load.

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Her most expensive cover came at \$135. It survived the horrible Hindenberg zeppelin fire at its mooring, Lakehurst, New Jersey, in May of 1937. Forty-nine died.

The most interesting part of specializing in this field is the research. She is constantly writing letters to ship companies, newspapers, and airlines for facts about wrecks.

It's not as easy as it sounds, because these big companies are not wont to dig up old wounds. Most of her covers are purchased at stamp auctions.

Typical of her boat wreck covers is a letter addressed to George F. Kohler of Arcata, California. The letter was delayed because its carrier, the SS Pomona out of New York, ran onto a reef off

Ft. Ross Cove, Oregon, in 1908.

Miss Bettencourt's oldest plane wreck cover dates back to 1920, when Pilot Bryan McMullen crashed his mail plane at Batvia, Illinois. It was addressed to J. W. Adams of Oakland.

Her rarest airmail cover was dug out of the debris of an early attempt to fly the Atlantic in 1926. The pilot was the famed Rene Fonck. He crashed on take-off. There were 17 letters aboard.

\* \* \*

Frank Ruse, flying for Varney air lines carrying mail, lost his way out west and crashed in Jorden Valley, Oregon, in 1926. And as the mail must go through, he hobbled out of his open cockpit, or what was left, borrowed a horse from a farmer and carried the mail to the nearest town.

Her collection has a letter in good shape from the first commercial jet airline crash. It was a BOAC Comet that left the air near Calcutta, India, in May of 1953, with all hands lost.

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Miss Bettencourt has been accused of going to great lengths to get a special cover. It is a partially burned letter addressed to her father, J. E. Bettencourt. It fell in 1959 near Chicago. The letter was enroute to him from Africa.

A member of the San Lorenzo Valley Stamp club, to which Miss Bettencourt belongs, asked her seriously: "How do you know which plane is going to crash?"

Remember reading of the two airliners that collided over Brooklyn in 1960? She's got a cover from that tragedy.

She also has a letter from a rocket burst in Germany.

And talking about going to great lengths in crash collecting.

Another crash collector friend has a letter from his own mailbox.

After the letter was delivered, some kids poured water in the box, greatly damaging it.

He salvaged it and claims it a collector's item.

"Isn't that ridiculous?" asked Miss Bettencourt.

"I want it real bad."

## SOUTH AMERICAN CAT

The South American margay closely resembles the ocelot, or tiger cat, but is more slender and has a long tail. Almost nothing is known about the habits of this feline creature.



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