

The British American Bank Note Die Proofs for Sweden's 1920 Definitive Issues

By Ross Olson

A bit of background information is helpful in setting the stage for the story of these die proofs. The events up through 1919 have been documented previously and are summarized here.^{1,2,3,4}

The demand for postage stamps in Sweden had doubled between 1910 and 1917. Jacob Bagge's Banknote Printing Works held the stamp printing contract with the Swedish post office during this period. The increased demand, plus the fact they were unable to replace their aging presses due to World War I, resulted in Bagge's being unable to handle the printing effectively. As a result, they canceled their contract with the Swedish post office effective at the end of 1917.

The post office decided they would take over the printing task themselves, and was able to secure an extension of the contract with Bagge's until the end of 1919. This would give them time to purchase a printing press and make the other necessary arrangements.

Julius Juhlin, head of the Swedish Postal Administration, had heard of a new type of press being used by the United States Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) to print some U.S. stamps. Early in 1919 he traveled to the U.S. to investigate this press which had been designed by Benjamin R. Stickney, an employee of the BEP. Known as the Stickney press, this rotary press printed from plates in the form of a rotating cylinder onto paper fed from rolls, an innovation in stamp printing. Impressed by the speed of this press, Juhlin signed a contract on March 13, 1919, for the purchase of one machine at a cost of \$56,809.

Since the Swedish post office did not have experience with the type of printing plates required by the Stickney press, Mr. Stickney recommended that they contract with the British American Bank Note Company (BABN) in Ottawa, Canada, which had a half-century experience in this field, to engrave the necessary dies and produce the initial set of plates.



1- and 3-öre Small Coat of Arms design, se-tenant in copper red on wove paper.



King Gustaf V, Full Face design, master die proof in black on linen backing. Red contract number 9239 and black die number 469 are written on the proof. This die was rejected because of an unsatisfactory image of the king. (From cover of Olof Linder's Auction 230, January 12, 1998.)

The need for all new plates presented the opportunity to redesign and replace the King Gustaf V in Medallion series of definitive (regular issue) stamps, which had been in use since 1910. Four designs, consisting of 10 denominations, were chosen: Small Coat of Arms, 1 and 3 öre; Standing Lion, 5, 25 and 30 öre; King Gustaf V, Full Face, 10, 15 and 20 öre; and Crown and Posthorn, 35 and 45 öre.

Dies for these stamps were engraved in steel by G. N. Burland of BABN. The transfer rolls and printing plates were also produced by BABN and shipped, along with the dies, to Sweden in the autumn of 1919.

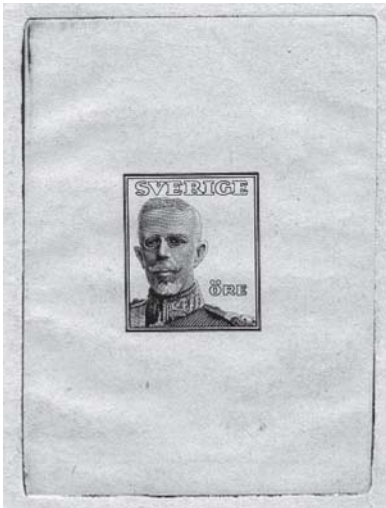
In the meantime, the parts for the press had been manufactured by the BEP and arrived in Sweden in



5-öre Standing Lion design, orange brown, stamp size, on India paper on card.



10, 15, and 20 öre King Gustaf V, Full Face design, se-tenant in dark blue on wove paper. This proof was created by clamping the three dies together. The joint lines between the dies are visible between the images, and the outside edges of the group of dies are visible at the ends.



King Gustaf V, Full Face design, large die sunk master proof in black on wove paper, showing the complete outline of the die as a black frame around the stamp image.



35 and 45 öre Crown and Posthorn design, se-tenant in dark green on wove paper.

early September, 1919. The problems encountered in assembling these parts and launching into the printing operation on the new press is a story in itself.⁴

Proofs Auctioned 78 Years Later

We now fast-forward 78 years to 1997. BABN decided to dispose of its stamp archives through public auction. The material, primarily consisting of proofs, essays, and models, is consigned to Spink America, the collectibles division of Christie's New York. This comprised 55 lots in its auction of October 10, 1997. Thirty-one lots of Canadian items, plus two lots of Newfoundland, made up the bulk of the material. The remainder consisted of Sweden, 11 lots; United Nations, 5 lots; Honduras, New Zealand and Zaire, 4 lots; plus 2 lots of sheets and samples. Most of the lots contained multiple items.^{5,6}

The auction received a certain amount of notoriety because on October 8, two days before the sale, the Canadian government reclaimed 31 of the 33 Canada and Newfoundland lots on behalf of the Canadian Postal Archives. This move was based on the claim that all items produced under the original contracts with the Canadian post office remained the property of the post office. Reportedly, no money changed hands in this action.⁷

The 11 lots of Swedish material contained 29 items, all die proofs from the 1919 contract between BABN and the Swedish post office. Five of the lots were purchased by a collector, four by a Swedish dealer, and two by a U.S. dealer. The estimated sell prices by Spink America proved to be extremely conservative. The total of the estimated high sells for the 11 lots was \$2,450. The total hammer price for the 11 lots was \$14,491, not including the buyer's premium of 15 percent, or nearly six times the estimated highs.

The existence of these die proofs apparently was unknown prior to the Spink auction. None appear to have been included in the shipment of dies, transfer rolls, and plates sent to Sweden in 1919. None have



been found in the Swedish Postal Museum. Apparently it was the policy of BABN to simply put the proofs into their files at the completion of contract work.

Surprises from the Archives

The Swedish die proofs contained an additional surprise – the 1-öre Small Coat of Arms. It is not known if the printing plates were made for this stamp, as no documentation can be found concerning this denomination. There evidently was little further need for a 1-öre stamp, because most postal rates became multiples of five on July 1, 1919.

These proof impressions, coming directly from the die in a manual printing operation, are startling in their clarity. The printed stamp images are the same height, but .6 mm wider than these die proof images. This was, no doubt, caused by the stamp images being rocked into a flat printing plate. The plate was then bent to conform to the drum onto which it was mounted in the Stickney press. This bending stretched the image in its horizontal dimension.

One of the 11 lots consisted of five small master die proofs printed in black, one for each of the four designs, plus a rejected view of the king in the Gustaf V design. These have no denomination or background shading, but contain the contract and die numbers in script above the images. Several of the lots contained items with the different values of the design se-tenant. Five items with se-tenant pairs have since been bisected, so we now have 34 total pieces. All have certificates by Karl Norsten attesting to their genuine status of originating from the BABN archives. Some of the items have appeared in subsequent auctions and even on eBay.^{8,9}

The final chapter in this sequence of events occurred in early 1998, in a Nutmeg auction containing 814 lots of Swedish material from the estate of a well-known collector.¹⁰ Included in this wealth of highly specialized material were two items that appeared to be BABN die proofs. Both are of the King Gustaf V, Full Face design, one of which is of special note. This is a large die-sunk master proof, 72x88 mm, in black, lacking a denomination and the background shading. The other piece contains the 10-öre and 15-öre values in dark green, se-tenant.

How this collector acquired these items is a mystery. The most probable scenario is that an employee of BABN, perhaps a friend of the collector, slipped them out of the company files. Since these two pieces were not part of the original find of die proofs included in the Spink auction, the certificates subsequently issued by Karl Norsten state “most likely originating from BABN in Ottawa.” An inspection of these pieces does show that the physical characteristics, such as paper, color, image size, die size and print clarity, all match the items from the Spink auction.

(Ross Olson collects all of Scandinavia, but specializes in the stamps and postal history of Sweden. He has exhibits of the 1910-1919 and the 1920-1938 periods.)

References:

¹ *Postage Stamps of Sweden 1920-1945* by Georg Menzinsky, Stockholm Postverkets Tryckeri, pages 5-15.

² *Postage Stamps of Sweden 1920-1942* by Arthur Rydquist, Handbook of American Philatelic Society, pages 4-6.

³ “Postens Frimärkstryckeri under 75 år” by Sven-Rune Johansson, *Posttryttaren*, Postmusei Årsbok 1995, pages 31-44.

⁴ *50th Jubilee of the Swedish Postal Administration's Post Office Stamp Printing Works*, by Nils Hörjel, Stockholm, May, 1970, pages 1-14.

⁵ Spink America auction catalog, lots 396-450, October 10, 1997.

⁶ “British American Bank Note to Sell Archives” by Charles J.G. Verge, *Linn's Stamp News*, September 22, 1997, page 28.

⁷ “Authorities Assert Ownership; Withdraw Proofs from Auction” by Rob Haeseler, *Linn's Stamp News*, October 27, 1997, page 1.

⁸ Olof Linder ab catalog, Auction 230, lots 2015-2035, January 12, 1998.

⁹ Northland Auctions catalog, lots 664, 665, 676, November 21, 1998.

¹⁰ Nutmeg Stamp Sales catalog, Sale No. 4, lots 4460 and 4466, February 24, 1998.



Inventory of all known die proofs

Small Coat of Arms

- Master proof in black on linen backing, no value or background shading, die number 466 in script.
- 1 and 3 öre se-tenant in copper red on wove paper (2)
- 1 öre in copper red on wove paper_a
- 1 öre in yellow brown on wove paper, large margins on top and left_b
- 1 öre in yellow brown on wove paper, large margins on 4 sides
- 1 öre in brown, stamp size, on India paper on card (may not have a certificate)
- 3 öre in copper red on wove paper_a
- 3 öre in yellow brown on wove paper_b

Standing Lion

- Master proof in black on linen backing, no value or background shading, die number 468 in script
- 25 and 30 öre se-tenant, in black on wove paper, no background shading
- 5 öre in orange brown, stamp size, on India paper on card (2)
- 25 öre in orange brown, stamp size, on India paper on card
- 30 öre in orange brown, stamp size, on India paper on card

King Gustaf V, Full Face

- Master proof in black on linen backing, no value or background shading, die number 465 in script
- Same as above but with unissued portrait, die number 469 in script
- Large die sunk master proof in black on wove paper, no value or background shading (from Nutmeg auction)
- 10 and 15 öre se-tenant in dark green on wove paper (from Nutmeg auction)
- 10, 15 and 20 öre se-tenant in dark blue on wove paper
- 10, 15 and 20 öre se-tenant in copper red on wove paper
- 10 öre in copper red on wove paper_c
- 10 öre in dark blue on wove paper_d
- 10 öre in orange red on wove paper_c
- 10 öre in orange red on wove paper
- 10 öre in dark brown, stamp size, on India paper on card
- 15 öre in dark brown, stamp size, on India paper on card
- 20 öre in copper red on wove paper_c
- 20 öre in dark blue on wove paper_d
- 20 öre in orange red on wove paper_c
- 20 öre in dark brown on wove paper
- 20 öre in dark brown, stamp size, on India paper on card

Crown and Posthorn

- Master proof in black on linen backing, no value or background shading, die number 467 in script
- 35 and 45 öre se-tenant in dark green on wove paper
- 35 öre in orange brown, stamp size, on India paper on card
- 45 öre in orange brown, stamp size, on India paper on card

Note: Sub letter items _a, originally se-tenant on one piece, sub-letter items _b, originally se-tenant on a second piece, etc. ■