

1856 ➤ Finland's Jubilee Year ◀ 2006

By Lauri Poropudas

1856: Finland's first stamps

One hundred and fifty years ago a powerful trend was stirring in Finland, which was then an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. "Finnish-ness" was consciously being built through the Finnish language, history, and culture but also with national symbols, such as a currency and postage stamps.

Finland got its first stamps – the blue 5-kopek and the red 10-kopek oval stamps – in the beginning of March, 1856. At that point, a rapid change was overtaking Finland as it began to develop into a modern society. The issue of the stamps did not cause any great stir: a brief, 13-line piece was published about it in the newspaper *Suometar*, a couple weeks after the stamps were issued.

Finland was then an agrarian society. Slightly more than 24,000 people earned their living from industry and crafts, whereas in Sweden there were 164,000 industrial jobs. Only about 6 percent of the Finns lived in towns, whereas in Britain, for example, more than one-half of the population lived in urban areas. As an illustration of the situation in Finland, during the decade after stamps were introduced, there was a famine that killed 15 percent of the population.

Naturally, a literate population is a prerequisite for a demand and the need for stamps. Fewer than 10 percent of Finnish men could write and far fewer women. Reading ability was more widespread, but there were only about 25,000 people who could read fluently.

For a population of fewer than 1.7 million Finns there were 40 post offices, some of which were far from the centers of growth and development. Of about 900,000 letters mailed annually, 36 percent were official mail, which did not require stamps. The number of stamps sold was only 82,000 in 1857, plus almost 128,000 postal stationery covers. An average of 0.33 paid letters were sent in Finland per person per year.

Illiteracy combined with the high price of postage prevented the use of postal services. A worker's daily pay in Finland was 0.80-1.50 marks, which was only enough for 4-6 cheaper and 2-4 more expensive stamps.



Block of 5-kop stamps (from Corinthila sale 135 on April 6, 2003).



Finland's biggest post office was in Helsinki, from which about 43,000 letters were sent to foreign countries in 1857. More than 17,000 were sent from Turku and Viipuri, and the Viapori fortress (now called Suomenlinna) off Helsinki sent more than 13,000 items of mail. Most of the mail from the Russian garrison on Viapori went to Russia. In all, roughly 147,000 items of mail were sent abroad, 16.3 percent of the total.

In the 1850s and 1860s, numerous decisions were made which got the wheels of trade and industry rolling and shifted the country from a subsistence economy into a monetary economy. Much of industry was freed of almost all mercantilist regulation; roads, canals, and railways were built, and schools, dairies, newspapers, and printing





Block of 10-kop canceled in Helsingfors in 1858 (from Corinphila sale 135 on April 6, 2003).

Finland was the 57th country to introduce postage stamps. Denmark issued its own in 1851, Norway and Sweden in 1855, and Finland's imperial mother country, Russia, followed after Finland in the beginning of 1858.

The picture for the oval stamps came from the denomination imprint on postal stationery covers issued in 1850. They were "printed" with the same blocks. The only difference was the addition of tiny secret markings, "pearls," in the mouths of the mail trumpets and between the coat-of-arms and the crown. The markings were intended to prevent forgeries and the use of clippings from postal stationery covers as stamps.

Today the secret markings can be used to date printing batches of stamps and postal stationery covers, as the markings on the 5-kopek stamps were enlarged in 1858. The same blocks were used again to print the denomination imprints of postal stationery covers. Finland had issued its first postal stationery covers, Porto Stempels, in 1845, the third country in the world to do so.

The oval postage stamps were stamped out on a sheet of paper freehand, ten to a line, after which the paper was reversed. A ten-stamp strip of end-to-end stamps was then in the middle of the sheet, with the stamps upside down relative to each other. These have become hugely popular with collectors.

After printing, the stamps were separated manually by cutting with a knife or scissors, probably both. The ink was mixed by hand, which is why the stamps are found in different nuances of color: there are five shades of blue and eight of red.

houses were set up. A national currency was introduced to accompany stamps and gradually the language of the majority of the people – Finnish – became accepted as an official language.

Ovals "printed" by hand

The first Finnish stamps, the oval stamps issued in the beginning of March, 1856, were produced by a primitive printing method: they were stamped out by hand on a manual press. The blue, 5-kopek, or oval stamp, was for ordinary letters going less than 125 versts (a little over 130 kilometers) while the red, 10-kopek version was for longer distances. The theme chosen for the illustration was the lion coat-of-arms, an old symbol of Finland dating from the Swedish period. The coat-of-arms was the standard image on stamps until diversification began in the 1930s to recognize major events and individuals.



Postal stationery preceded the use of stamps in Finland by more than a decade. Beginning in 1845, Finland became the third country to use postal stationery. Here is a 10-kop laid paper stationery envelope (type II without watermark) without a postmark to Sulkawa (from Corinphila sale 135 on April 6, 2003).





This 1856 letter, from Hamina to Christiania (now Oslo, Norway) features a strip of three, 10-kop stamps. The letter is unusual in that it was not until 1857 that permission was given to use postage stamps for foreign mail. (Used by permission of Finland Post and Finland Post Museum.)

at auction per year, and for 10-kopek stamps the figure is roughly 150. Some of these are the same items making the rounds. These figures are for auctions held between 2000 and 2004, including two international Finnish classic philately auctions in which there was an exceptional amount of oval stamp material, the kind that otherwise goes on sale only at intervals of decades.

Except for major auctions, it is rare for pairs of oval stamps to come under the hammer, to say nothing of larger groups. During the period mentioned, pairs were only on sale at the biggest of the auctions. Oval stamps on envelopes are also more an exception than the rule at auctions, particularly in the case of 5-kopek stamps.

Value of the Ovals

Oval stamp collectors look first at the borders of the stamp: the wider the border, the better. Stamps cut close to the picture are not highly rated. If an oval stamp is cut so that part of its oval outline is missing, it's the same as if a perforation is missing from a perforated stamp, says stamp dealer Kaj Hellman.

First Stamps in Short Supply

Oval stamps were in use just under five years — from the beginning of March, 1856, to the end of January, 1860. Some 235,000 of 5-kopek and 602,000 of 10-kopek stamps were printed. But only 135,500 of the 5-kopek stamps and 442,439 of the 10-kopek stamps were sold. It is estimated that 1,000-2,000 specimens of Finland's 5-kopek oval stamps still exist. The number of surviving 10-kopek stamps is thought to be 2,500-6,000 (some estimate as high as 10,000). This means there would be roughly 1 percent of the original quantity sold extant.

In contrast, the world's first postage stamp, the British penny black, was in use from May, 1840, to February, 1841. Sixty-eight million of these were printed and an estimated 1.5 million are still in existence. Sweden produced 6.6 million of its first stamp, the 4 skilling banco, for use from 1855-1858.

Today, fewer than 100 5-kopek stamps are sold at auction per year, and for 10-kopek stamps the figure is roughly 150. Specialties, like large blocks of stamps — blocks of 3-7 stamps or strips of four — go on sale only at intervals of decades. In ordinary auctions, pairs of oval stamps are a rarity, not to speak of larger blocks. Oval stamps on envelopes are also rare.

Fewer than 100 5-kopek stamps are sold

Finland 1856 Oval Stamps				
Stamp	Printed	Sold	Surviving (est.)	Sold per Year
5 kopek	235,000	135,500	1,000-2,000	Fewer than 100
10 kopek	602,000	442,439	2,500-6,000	Fewer than 150



Another distinct group consists of stamps that have been cut in an oval shape. Some of these were cut by postal clerks, so one of these should at least be in an exhibition collection.

Another point to look for is the freshness and good looks of the stamp. The fresher the color, the better. Some colors are hard to find, such as the 10-kopek lilac-carmine.

In general, a postmark on an oval stamp is a rarity. Cancellers on stamps were in use only for the first 18 months. On September 18, 1857, it was ordered that the stamps had to be canceled with a pen – they were scribbled out for the rest of the time that oval stamps were in use. In some post offices, stamps were canceled with a pen alone, in others with both a pen and a franking. In some cases, the ink cancel has eaten through the stamp, which usually reduces its collector value.

It's good to find oval stamps with some other postmark than HELSINGFORS, WIBORG or ÅBO — these are common, others rare. An ideal specimen would be a beautiful, wide-margin stamp with an early cancel from a smaller town.

Oval stamps were printed on different kinds of paper. The 10-kopek stamp can be found on regular and two different types of laid paper, but for 5-kopek stamps laid papers are a great rarity.

The most sought-after are strip pairs: the ones in which the stamps are upside-down relative to each other. These belong in an exceptional collection. The ordinary collector can only dream about these as they are rare and expensive.

You can get a good 5-kopek oval stamp for \$1,000. Ten kopek stamps are less expensive, with a good specimen costing about \$400. The upper limit is high, as the most expensive oval stamp sold in recent years went for \$200,000.

A separate category is subsequent printings, which were mainly made for collectors. In Finland they are little appreciated, but they tell a story of their own about oval stamps and early Finnish philately.

If stamps with postal matter are included, collecting becomes complicated, as the factors to be considered include the condition of the postal matter, the postage rate, cancels and other markings, as well as the country of destination.

At a major auction in 2003, strips of four of the 5- and 10-kopek stamps brought \$75,000 each. In another auction, a strip pair of 5-kopek stamps on an envelope went for \$150,000, and an envelope with four, 5-kopek stamps was sold for \$200,000.

Some 837,000 copies of those first stamps were printed in not quite five years. Since then, Finland has printed 1,700 different kinds of stamps. In 2004, there were 170.5 million stamps printed. In this 150th jubilee year of 2006 there will be 54 different stamps released in 29 separate issues. ■

(Editor's Note: The author is Editor of Filatelisti in Finland. Marja Pihlman, communications manager of Finland's Philatelic Center, contributed to this article.)

Some Finnish Milestones

- 1845 – First Finnish letter sheets appear
- 1856 – First stamps issued
- 1866 – First stamps denominated in marks and pennies
- 1875 – Stamps bear country name, SUOMI/FINLAND, for first time
- 1917 – First stamps of independent Finland
- 1929 – First stamps without coat-of-arms image
- 1930 – Only Finnish aviation stamp issued: Zeppelin
- 1938 – Stamp booklets come into use
- 1984 – Finnish province of Åland gets its own stamps
- 1991 – First self-adhesive stamps issued
- 2002 – First euro-denominated stamp
- 2003 – Personalized stamps introduced