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Postal patron Wilmar Tognazzini

## Bicentennial project ends in brouhaha

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A retired school teacher from Morro Bay, Calif., and Lansing Postmaster Berniece Salerno have stubbornly locked horns in a Bicentennial battle over stamp cancellations that has grown to involve the U.S. Postmaster, the President and President-elect, a half dozen U.S. senators and even Johnny Carson.

The trouble began when Wilmar Tognazzini decided to do his part for the Bicentennial and leave each of his eight children a lasting memento of the nation's 200th birthday.

**IN FEBRUARY**, the Postal Service issued a sheet of 50 stamps, each bearing a state flag. Tognazzini's idea was to send eight envelopes, addressed to himself and bearing the commemorative stamp, to each of the 50 capital cities for cancellation July 4.

The envelopes 400 of them, were sent to the various state capitals June 15 with the request that the postmaster kindly hold them until July 4, cancel them on that date, and return them to Morro Bay.

It wasn't long before Tognazzini began receiving the postmarked envelopes, and Tognazzini had 392 cancelled envelopes had returned from 49 states by Aug. 9.

**THE EIGHT** sent to Lansing had come back, too — on July 3, without postmarks.

Accompanying the virgin Michigan stamps was a form note from Postmaster Salerno which read: "Dear Postal Customer: We regret that we cannot hold your mail for a July 4th cancellation as we are not one of the post offices authorized to do so. Signed, Berniece Salerno."

Ms. Salerno further explained her action in a recent interview:

**"WE WERE** getting hundreds of requests from philatelists (stamp collectors) then for cancellations by hand July 4th," she said. "I had no way of knowing whether Mr. Tognazzini was a philatelist or not, but his letter said he was working on a project so I assumed he would not want a machine postmark."

(Ms. Salerno explained that collectors prefer stamps cancelled by hand in a philatelic store rather than the routine machine cancellation because a postmarking machine can obliterate a stamp and destroy its value where care is taken to preserve the stamp with a hand cancellation).

Steadfastly insisting he is not a collector, Tognazzini said the method made no difference to him, it was the postmark itself that mattered.

**"I COULD** have been happy with the refusal if she had returned the envelopes immediately," Tognazzini said. "But she didn't return them until it

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**Postmaster Berniece Salerno**

# Stamp goal thwarted

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was too late to have them handled for cancellation in a different way than through her office.

"I have friends in Lansing who could easily have dropped the envelopes in a mail box July 4 and the stamps would have been cancelled," he added.

In fact, Ms. Salerno could have done that herself — and she says now she would have done it, had she not assumed that Tognazzini was interested only in postmarks applied by hand.

**EVEN AT** that, it seemed a simple misunderstanding that could have been settled easily — Tognazzini would send the stamped envelopes back to Lansing and Ms. Salerno would reset her cancelling machine at July 4, 1976, and run them through.

But there's one catch: Postal regulations strictly forbid back-cancelling mail for any purpose. It's a rule etched in stone to Ms. Salerno and superiors.

A most determined man, Tognazzini was not about to accept that post office version of "Catch-22" without a fight. What had begun a meaningful Bicentennial project had become an obsession of high principle to Tognazzini.

**"WITH ALL** the commercialism which bombarded the Bicentennial Year, this very personal project seemed very worthwhile," said Tognazzini. "It would have been easier to leave my children some cheap trinket memento of the Bicentennial."

Though Tognazzini pointed out that a number of the cancellations provided by postmasters in other states were obviously cancelled after July 4, Ms. Salerno would not budge in her pledge to follow the rule.

"I think you should talk to those postmasters," Ms. Salerno responded when asked why others had cooperated with Tognazzini. "They broke the rules and he's trying to tell me that isn't so."

**"I'M JUST** following orders," she added, "it's the only way to run a business this size."

However, in an attempt to satisfy Tognazzini, Ms. Salerno asked her boss, Ralph Haffenden, a postal supervisor from Detroit, for permission to backcancel the commemorative stamps. Haffenden refused.

"As far as I'm concerned, that was the end of it," Ms. Salerno said. "If your boss says no, do you keep asking?"

**BUT, ACCORDING** to Ms. Salerno, she was reluctant to ask in the first place.

"Do you realize what it would mean if I cancelled those stamps for him?" Ms. Salerno asked. "He would have the only collection of its kind."

"I've got no ill feelings toward this man," she continued. "But I just don't feel he can be singled out and given this."

The fact that Tognazzini is not a stamp collector, and plans only to present the collections to his children, holds no water with Ms. Salerno.

**"I'M NOT** saying this started as a money-making scheme," she said, "but it is now."

"The only way I would agree to let this man have these cancellations would be to flood the market with them," she continued. "It would mean publicizing that anyone who wants a July 4, 1976 cancellation from Lansing, Michigan can have it."

Meanwhile, Tognazzini began contacting every high-level official he could think of in an effort to coerce Ms. Salerno into changing her mind.

**SINCE AUGUST**, Tognazzini has written more than 100 letters to state, federal and media officials including: Benjamin Bailer, postmaster general; Stephen Gordon, office of the Consumer Advocate, Washington; editor of the National Enquirer; producers of "60 Minutes," CBS-TV; California Cong. Burt Talcott; California Sen. Alan Cranston; Thomas Chadwick, Consumer Advocate for the U.S. Postal Service; producers of "To Tell the Truth," NBC-TV; editor of Time magazine; Johnny Carson, "The Tonight Show," NBC-TV; John Warner, administrator of the American Revolutionary Bicentennial Administration; President Gerald Ford; President-elect Jimmy Carter; U.S. Sen. Robert Griffin and Sen. Philip Hart of Michigan; U.S. Rep. Robert Carr, (Michigan) State Sen. Anthony Derezinski and several others.

In most cases, Tognazzini received a curt, and usually unsympathetic, apology for not being able, or interested enough, to help.

In the case of government inquiries, especially those of Postal Service officials, response ran to rule citing and reminders that Lansing was not a Post Office authorized to be open July 4 for philatelic cancellations.

**BILL FLEMING**, district director for customer service, explained the reluctance of the Postal Service to rectify the situation.

"Stamps derive value from history," he said. "If a special deal was made to cancel these stamps, it would just serve to enhance their philatelic value."

"In addition, we usually stand firm on the policy against back-cancelling mail — it's a security thing," he continued. "A cancellation can be very important, for example, in a legal matter involving fraud or attempted fraud."

**FLEMING SAID**, however, that Tognazzini's letter-writing has made him known among federal postal officials and that many in Washington are on the lookout for July 4 machine cancellations to complete the set.

"I don't know if Tognazzini will have to pay for those stamps if we do find them, though," said Fleming.

Jim Adams, owner of Okemos Stamps and Coins, says even if Tognazzini's collection was complete, its philatelic value is questionable.

**"IT WOULD** certainly be more valuable to him than it would be on the market," Adams said. "Stamp projects are only worth what someone is willing to give, and I really can't see where there is a demand for something like that."

"There were many Bicentennial-related projects," he added, "and I just don't think the one described here was that unusual."

Tognazzini, meanwhile, says he will continue the fight.

**"(I FIND** this) to be an exceptional commentary on the bureaucratic mess in which we find ourselves," he said. "Any project as worthwhile and as educational as this is incomprehensible to the government bureaucrats."

"In this project, the buck has no place to stop."