

# The Origins of Abbott's Dear Doctor Card Program

by Tom Fortunato, January 18, 2004

Little has been known or written about the origins of the Abbott Lab mailings. Shortly after an announcement about the formation of the Dear Doctor Collectors Club appeared in Linn's Stamp News, an email arrived which helps answer some of the questions about the ad campaign.

The message was sent by Harriet Hahn, widow of Charles Hahn, who was the long-time stamp editor of the Chicago Sun Times. They both owned "All Americas Publishers Service" which Charles started in the 1950s and operated through the early 1980's. It was located in a small office at 9 South Clinton in Chicago.

This was the marketing company which contracted with Abbott to handle the Dear Doctor mailings.

As Harriet wrote, "I was not working actively in the office, but I was in touch with almost everything that happened."

Sometime between 1953 and 1955 Charles Hahn was approached by Abbott advertising executive Tom Bird and began publishing a Spanish language magazine called "Abbotribuna" for doctors in Latin America touting Abbott products. This was a pet project of Tom's who had always wanted to be a magazine publisher himself.

Over the course of working on this magazine, Charles made many contacts with freelance article writers throughout Central and South America. His approach was a simple one: He would send off a letter soliciting stringers to major newspapers in the region. A "stringer" is a freelance writer who would be paid by the job on a casual basis. The newspaper offices would pin the letter to their bulletin boards and responses flowed in!

What's not clear is who's idea it was for the Dear Doctor card mailings- Hahn or Bird. Abbott Labs was certainly not the first company to use a "junk mail from foreign lands" marketing approach. Shell Oil in Canada sent gas station patrons cards from Egypt, Iraq, and other places around 1937. Laboratories La Biomarine started mailing "Dear Doctor" type cards as early as 1948 to French doctors advertising a variety of their products. Perhaps Charles or Tom had seen or heard about them, and the idea was adopted by Abbott.

All Americas Publishers Service decided the posting schedule and locations from which the cards would be mailed, recruited and paid stringers worldwide to find appropriate picture postcards (in quantities of up to 100,000+), buy the stamps, frank each postcard properly at the least expensive surface rate and then mail them.

Charles would often suggest the appropriate stamps to use on each mailing, favoring commemoratives when possible, as he was kept up to date about new issue reports through his Sun Times job.

The Hahns never dealt with the cards themselves. It is unclear whether the postcards were sent to Abbott which printed the message and addressed each, or if this was done in each locale of mailing. Evidence of a newly discovered card Arabic language card posted from St. Pierre but actually depicting a scene from New Caledonia suggests that Abbott may have prepared the cards in bulk.

The earliest cards mailed in 1956 were addressed with a machine applied script looking like a mimeograph, after which other mailings used labels instead, except for later postings between 1966 and 1968.

The relationship between Abbott and All Americas ended in 1960. It is assumed that internal marketers within Abbott took responsibility for the project around that time. This is supported by details in an article by Martin Walker of Australia who reported that the Abbott office in Camperdown, New South Wales purchased £7,700 worth of 5d and 8d AAT stamps from the Sydney Philatelic Sales Section mid-1960 for the January 1961 mailing from the Wilkes Base in the Australian Antarctic.

It should be noted that an article entitled, "The Story Behind Pentathol (sic) Sodium Cards by Abbott" by Daniel Friedman appearing in Barr's Post Card News, July 19, 1993 claims that the idea behind the Abbott mailing came from a man named Dean Carson. He was a product manager for Abbott who is quoted as saying, "I just came up with this idea and they said it was fine." Friedman reports that cards were indeed printed in each foreign locale and labels were sent by Abbott, with about 75,000 of each mailed in languages other than English. Locations were selected mostly because Abbott had offices there. Carson retired in 1960.

The only remaining records of the Dear Doctor project must be with Abbott Labs, if they exist at all, as all documents held by "All Americas" were thrown out when the company closed up shop in the early 1980's. Tom Bird died many years ago, and Charles died in 1999.

Only time will determine if more of this story comes to light.

A postscript is in order regarding Charles Hahn and his contribution to philately. Details were provided by his wife and a life-long best friend and fellow philatelist, Hal Stral. Charles was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he lived for several years, accounting for his Spanish language skills. The family later moved stateside. His myopic eyesight prevented him from serving in

**World War II, when he soon started his publishing career.**

**Hahn edited and produced the *American Philatelist*, monthly publication of the American Philatelic Society, for several years in the early 1950's. He also served as president of the Collectors Club of Chicago. Charles was recognized as the preeminent authority and collector of Great Britain postal history in the US. His exhibit and scholarly work on the Mulready Envelopes of Great Britain won several international gold medals.**

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