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LABEL & NARROW WEB

Food Labeling



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'The Label Man'

Food Labels are certainly an integral part of many a converter's product portfolio. It's also a reliable niche, seemingly impervious to the swinging pendulum of the economic climate, as people will always have the need to purchase food. To some, food labels transcend the converting industry, and are the basis for a hobby, and in one such case, a business, that evokes passion and dedication.

Dwayne Rogers is "The Label Man." Based in Chico, CA, USA, he operates an online business of buying and selling "collectible" labels, primarily those from fruit crates and canned foods. Since 1998, when the business went online at www.thelabelman.com, Rogers has mailed over 35,000 packages of labels to his customers across the globe.

He started collecting labels in the mid 1970s while working as a USDA agricultural inspector. Their historical significance, the colors and designs of the artwork, as well as the sense of adventure he got from hunting down the labels themselves, all have played key roles in drawing him to the collecting hobby, and eventually to starting a business.

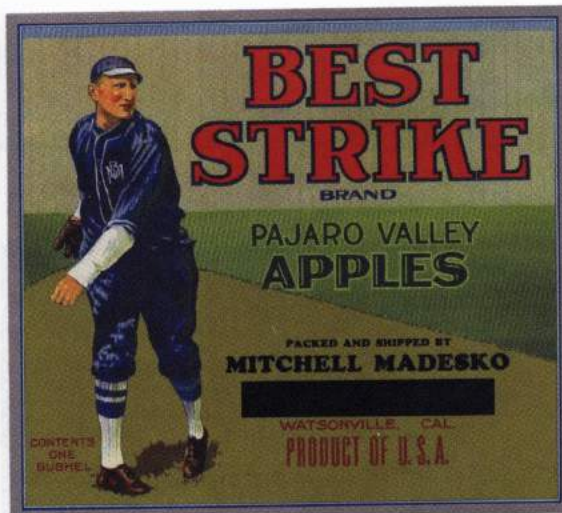
When discussing how it all got started, Rogers touches upon the nostalgia of California's agricultural past. "The majority of labels that are collected were printed between 1910 and 1955. The old fruit crate labels are some of the only remnants left from many early fruit industries. Having been raised on a pear orchard in Placer County, CA, my first desire was to find every label from my area. At the time, Placer County was a thriving part of the California fruit belt. Here, you'd find rolling hills of tree fruit and packing houses that lined the railroad tracks – farming was the way of life. The industry has since moved to the central valley and those rolling hills are now covered with homes. For some companies, the labels are all that remains," he explains.

"In the early days, railroad cars of produce were unloaded at markets and buyers would walk past row after row of crates of fruit, so a brand's having a memorable label was just good business. Great artwork, vibrant colors, catchy titles – it was a natural progression for my collecting interests to expand into other areas outside of collecting labels just from my home region," he says.

When Rogers first started collecting, there was that sense of adventure that appealed to him, something modern technology has come to replace. "A driving force in my collecting was the adventure of finding a new label for my collection. In the early days, there were not many options for buying labels, you couldn't just 'google' them. You had to track down collectors or people in the industry who may have kept a few labels. Being an agricultural inspector, I met up with many people in the industry and always asked if they knew of any labels or collectors. A name would be mentioned and I would track down that person; that would lead to other names being mentioned and the chase would go on. I worked various areas up and down the state and made quite a few contacts and friends."

The Label Man's customer base is diverse, and label buyers are not just like-minded hobbyists. The examples he cites illustrate the wide variety of people who have an interest in collectible labels. According to Rogers, they include: A young woman planning her Tuscan wedding who wanted Italian themed grape labels to use in her placemats; a greyhound dog owner looking for labels with greyhounds, not only for himself, but any extras to place in rescue auctions benefiting greyhounds; veterinarians decorating their offices with labels depicting animals; restaurants looking for a variety of labels for decorating; families looking for labels they once used which no one in the family had saved; graphic artists fascinated with the wide variety of fonts used; museums and libraries expanding their collections; and movie set decorators looking for period background decorations.

Rogers says that while California orange labels have the most dollar value, there's demand for all sorts of collectible food labels. "I've found just about all labels are sought after, everything from banana stickers to soda and beer labels. A defining point in collectible labels is age. For fruit crate labels, as the industry moved from wood crates to preprinted cardboard cartons, the labels became obsolete, thus establishing a time period. It's not quite as simple on all labels, and a good example is canned food. In my collection I have Del Monte brand labels dating back to the 1910s. They all have the famous Del Monte logo as do the current Del Monte can labels, however the early ones are embossed with gold trim and have wonderful artistic renditions of the product. As time progressed, government regulations started adding clutter to the label and improvements in printing technology made it possible to use a photo rather than a drawing. This changed the look of the label. On canned food labels I've found people tend to quit collecting those printed



Best Strike apple, a semi rare label collected mainly by the more serious label collector as well sports or baseball collectors. Rogers says this label sells in the \$50-75 range.

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As with most things, Rogers labels are established by supply. 1960s and 70s most of the lab warehouses. Usually, if the pack there would be an area with lab needed for something else, most clean up or throw them out. Where anywhere from a few hundred guess there's somewhere are brands that were found in quantities basically make up the base for that supplies come from around Printers would save a sample or reference. From these files come scarce material. There are also patent office finds – people who took home small pinches and sample books.

Rogers says that demand is the other factor in establishing prices, and the better the image the higher the demand. When a label depicts something that may have collectible value on its own, thus creating a cross-collectible item, then demand increases. "A strong topical image which is scarce will draw the highest value. Images of Uncle Sam, Santa, sports, autos, famous people all tend to bring higher prices. For example, if you compare two labels with the same population of one with a great image of Santa and the other with just writing, you'll see the course of two or three decades they get dispersed, the value of the better image will increase five to ten times more than the value of the less interesting image," he explains.

Prices for each individual label varies. Those found in large quantities that have not completely been dispersed generally sell in the \$1 to \$10 range and Rogers says that the most affordable labels are the basis of the hobby. He says, "For \$100 you can have an instant collection."

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As with most things, Rogers explains, prices for the labels are established by supply and demand. "During the 1960s and 70s most of the labels were gathered up from warehouses. Usually, if the packing house was still standing there would be an area with labels. Unless this space was needed for something else, most companies tended not to clean up or throw them out. Volumes of these finds can be anywhere from a few hundred to over 100,000. I would guess there's somewhere around 3,000-5,000 different brands that were found in quantities over the years which basically make up the base for the hobby. The second area that supplies come from are lithographers archives. Printers would save a sample of every run for future reference. From these files come the more scarce material. There are also patent office finds – people who took home small pinches and sample books.

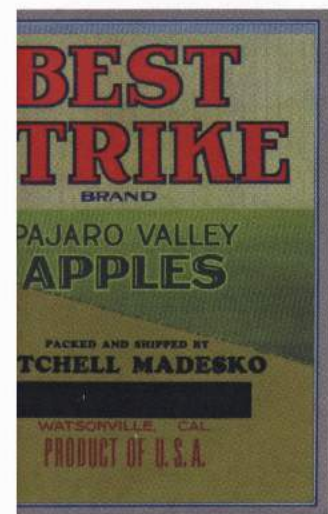
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Prices for each individual label varies. Those found in large quantities that haven't completely been dispersed generally sell in the \$1 to \$10 range, and Rogers says that these affordable labels are the base of the hobby. He says, "For \$100 you can have an instant collection."

Rogers explains just which labels have the most value. "The better imaged labels with smaller populations fall in

the \$10 to \$25 range. Labels that start in the \$100 range are fairly rare or have great images and have all basically been dispersed. At the very top end you'll find the highest pear labels coming in at \$300, apple labels coming in at \$750, and the very best orange labels, with populations less than 10, are in the \$2,000 to \$4,000 range."

Rogers points out that the US label collecting market has been thoroughly searched, but gets excited thinking about the potential collectibles to be found in Europe and Asia. Focusing on the untapped overseas label collecting market brings out the sense of adventure that initially piqued Rogers' interest. He says, "I think the most interesting part is the possibility of finding things – and there's a lot of old printed stuff lying around."



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