

The “Pen-Friends” Clearing House (IYS) in Finland Correspondence.

By Tom Droege

On October 2nd, 2010, a huge cover lot was offered in Finland by Hellman auctions. It was the 28 year accumulation of incoming requests for a “pen-friend”. By sending a form to the International Youth Service, you would get a list of names of people to write to (see Figure 1). They kept the incoming mail! Not only did they keep it, but they sorted it by country into boxes. Even better, they kept the covers in the boxes in incoming date order. And then they marked the boxes with the country name and dates of the covers within. Even with all that, the lot did not sell. Though random boxes of covers from the lot had sold in three previous auctions, no one dared buy the lot – probably due to the sheer size and cost of shipment.

Knowing none of this, I was trying to track down the location of a missing box of the Mexico portion of this hoard when I was able to locate the buyer and he gladly told me the rest of the story. When the lot did not sell, he being a collector of African postal history living in Finland tried to buy just the Africa portion. The auction house declined, and so he took the plunge and bought the entire lot. He shared with me that the selling price was a matter of public record and that he paid 49.000 euros or about \$65,000 dollars, roughly by his estimation 2 cents per sound cover.

I have to say, that I can't imagine the reality of the size of something like this. 5 million covers in 7200 boxes weighing 25,000 kilos sounds like a lot, but he told me it took him and 6-10

friends several weeks just to sort the smaller boxes of 700-900 covers each. He kept the Africa, and sold by country parts of the lot to his friends and others. If you check ebay, you should find at least a half dozen sellers selling lots from this correspondence. Search for “Cover to Finland”. Some incoming countries like Hong Kong are selling individual covers for \$20 - 50.

A dealer in the US had bought much of the lot from him, including the US, Canada and Mexico and that is where I came into the picture. I had bought some covers from Jim Forte and in conversation he told me of an enormous accumulation of Exportas and introduced me to the owner. Contacting the owner of the Mexico portion, I learned he had maybe 30,000 covers from Mexico to Finland covering the years 1972 to 2000. This was the entire Exporta period, a bonanza of Exporta! He wanted me to review the lot in person as it would have been difficult to ship even a portion of it to me to examine. Sadly, in discussions, I discovered that he was missing a box. When I asked where in the time sequence it was, I discovered that it was the T32 period.

Last time I wrote for Mexicana, it was an article on T32. An earlier article in Mexicana had listed a start date for this period as Jan 82, but many cover collectors were having problems rating T32 covers. In checking the original postal bulletins and looking at other mail for that time period, it was clear that the start date for T32 was November 1982, not Jan 1, 1982.

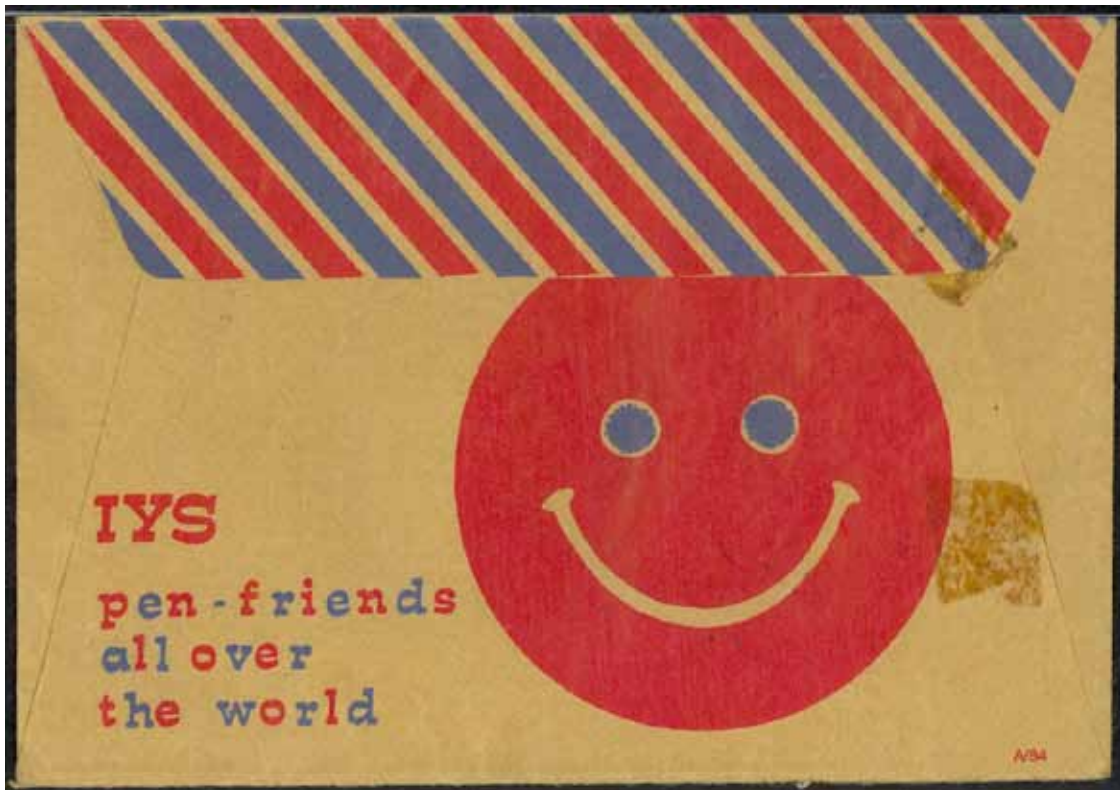


Figure 1. *pen-friends all over the world*. Reverse of single rate T37 90p Abr 85 return envelope to the International Youth Service (IYS)

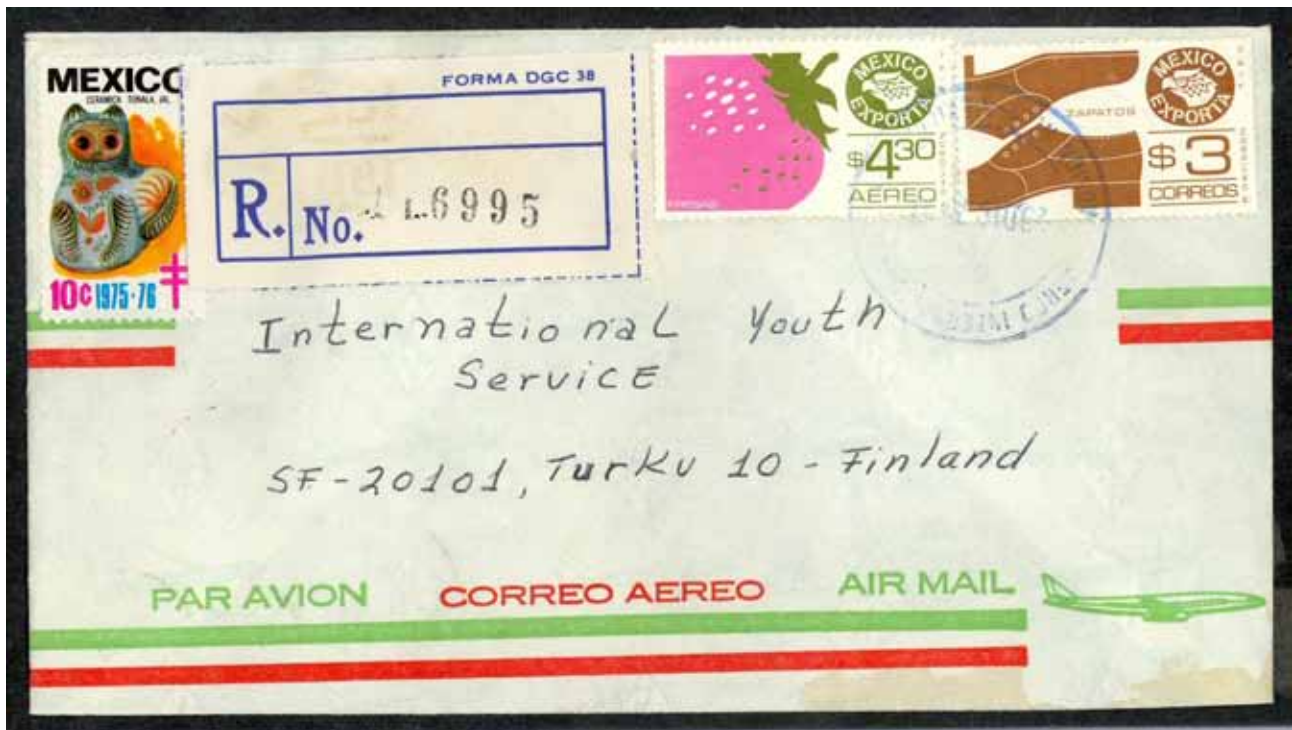


Figure 2. Example of incoming letter to the International Youth Service. 7.3p pays the T29 registered rate to Europe on this early usage of the 3p Zapato and 4.3p Fresa canceled Dic 29, 1975.

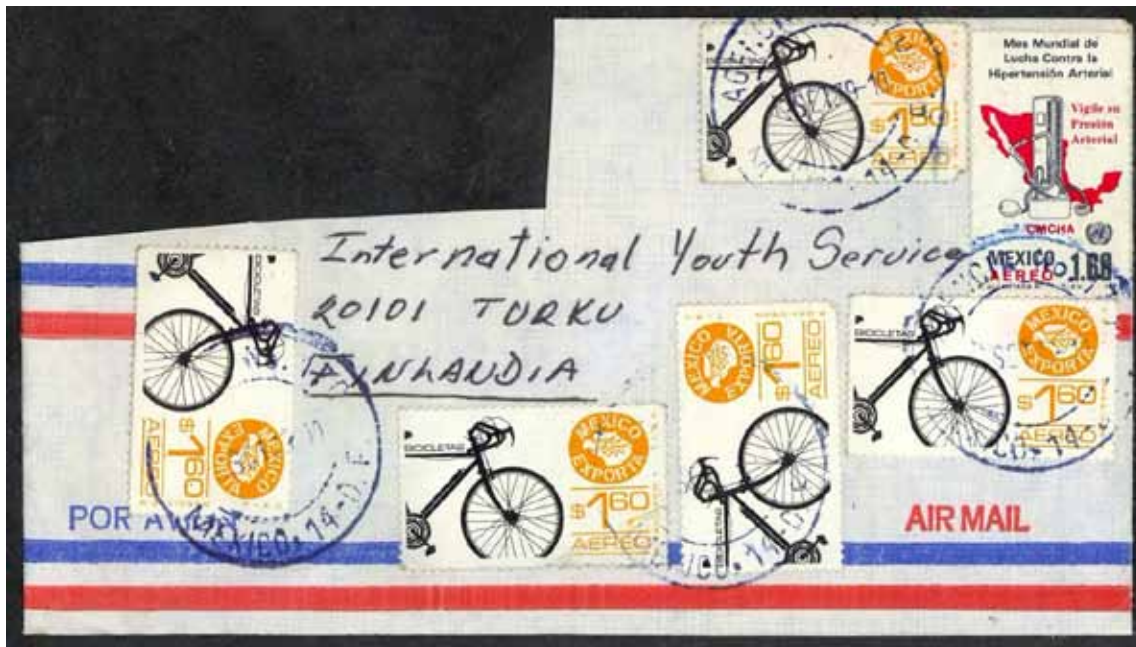


Figure 3. When the inside form was illegible, they would cut out the return address.

That made T32 the shortest of the postal periods in the Exporta era. Worse, the missing box completely spanned the T32 period, meaning there would be no end of period T31 covers, no start of T32, end of T32 or start of T33.

Even without T32 I was still interested, and if not for the missing box, I would not have learned the rest of the story or even found more covers still. Because of the missing box, I searched for everything I could on the lot, which led to the info above, the owner of the current lot and its story. Though I have not found the box of T32, when I located the owner I found he

had two more boxes of Mexico. Though the time periods of those boxes did not overlap any Tariff changes, they will still be very helpful and yield lots of covers. I still have not located the T32 box, but it is either in Finland among his stock, or mixed in the US lot held by Jim Forte, or least likely, it was one of the random lots offered before the single lot sale. Since I have not seen any covers from Mexico to Finland, I believe it is not there, though I am trying to get auction catalogs from the three previous auctions to make sure it was not one of the random boxes sold individually.

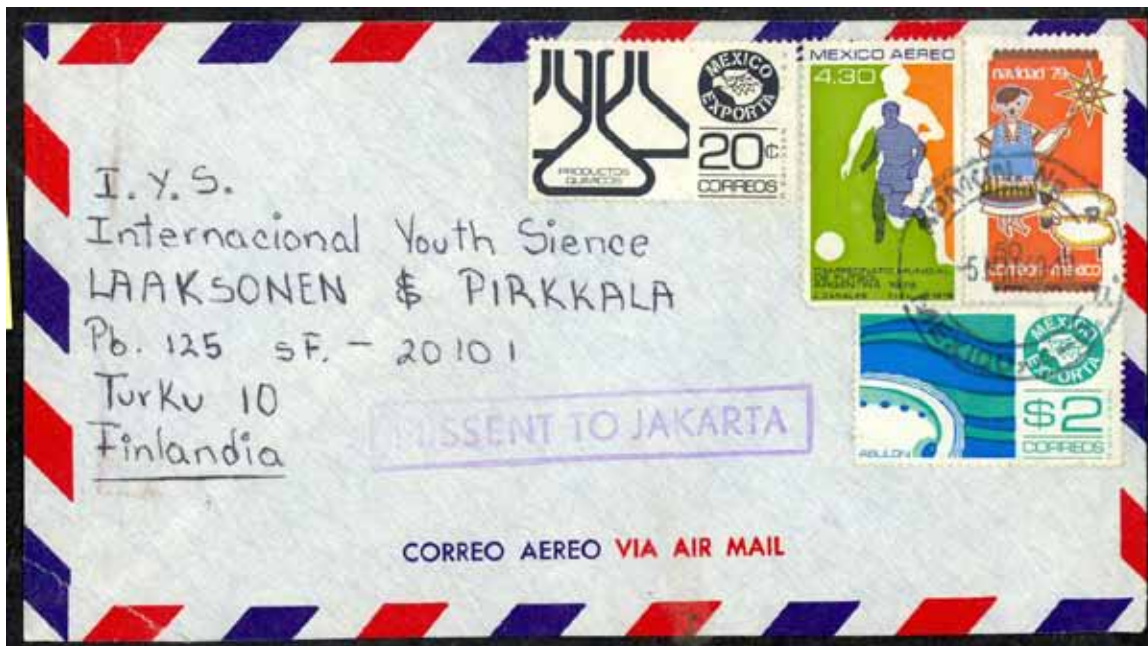


Figure 4. Missent to Jakarta. 7p overpays the T30 single rate on a 5 Mar 80 cover to Finland. Which is very odd, because 7p pays the exact T30 rate to Asia. Were they sorting the International mail based on the postage applied and it went into the Asia sort?

In October 2014, I went and examined, then purchased the lot. In most ways, it was what I hoped, lots of Exporta covers to Europe. Here is what I did not expect.

Early usages. With incoming mail arriving each day, I expected to find lots of early usages of Exportas. I find that though the Exportas were first issued at the end of 1975, I don't have many covers any earlier than March 1976. The first I found was a cover with the 3p and 4.3p (see figure 2), but I found only a few cases where the Finland hoard had an earlier use than I had in my own collection. I assume that people just used up their A&A's.

You would think that most of the covers would be small #6 envelopes from kids. I expected it to resemble other pen pal accumulations that I had purchased, sloppy handwriting and ratty covers. What I found was about half and half small and business covers with better than average handwriting, carefully opened and sound. Some covers had cutouts where the return address was. If the form was unreadable, they would cut the return address out of the incoming cover (see Figure 3). Many were wrinkled from storage. What was surprising was the number of small packets and <250 gr mailings. I assume lots of teachers would collect forms from their students and submit them together. Several covers support this theory.

In preparing to leave, I had spent some time looking at the covers from other countries on ebay. I noticed many sellers were selling auxiliary markings, and I noticed many "MISSSENT TO xyz" covers on ebay. I planned to watch for those. In the fifth box of Exportas I found my first MISSSENT cover. There were 3 missent to Manila, two were on Exporta covers. That was

the most common of the misspent, as I found maybe a dozen more. In T30, I found one to Jakarta. I recognized the city, but I did not know where it was. My host turned the cover over and looked for a backstamp and of course, Indonesia. After collecting Exportas for so long, I had really pretty much forgotten to look for a back stamp.

I was glad to find that the issues that I considered tough to find, were also just as tough to find even when you had 30,000 covers to look through. In the first pass, I found only two covers with the 5c steel tubes, one properly rated. 50p cotton and 50p joyeria were just as hard to find as my experience as I found less than 10 50p cotton and maybe a couple dozen joyeria. Though I did not get through every single cover in the later periods, I found very few of the high, hard to find values, 1900p (9), 3600p (4), 3900p (7), 4800p (4), 4800p invert (4), 6000p (50), 7200p (8). These are very hard to find, and not valued properly in the market. Just recently, I was able to buy a cover with all six of the highest values on cover for just \$15 on ebay. It had the 3600p, 3900p, 4000p, 4800p, 6000p and 7200p. These denominations on cover should be worth more than that.

In the following couple of weeks, I was able to go through the covers again, counting just the scarce issues. This is an updated table showing the number of covers found for each of the tough issues. I include only those issues where I had less than 100 examples. I include the 200p and 300p inverts, as my experience (I have slightly fewer 200p inverts than 300p inverts) shows that the 200p invert is scarcer than the 300p and this count supports that. Surprisingly, the 10p Cattle is much harder to find than you would think (but that also matches my experience).

Denomination	Qty
5c Steel Pipes	3
40c Coffee	15
80c Denim	13
5.60p Cotton	3
10p Cattle	4
20p Bicycle	22
20p Forged Iron 37.5mm (p 5,6)	7
40p Flask	14
50p Cotton	7
50p Jewelry	17
200p Citrus invert	109
300p Motor Vehicles invert	175
450p Electronics	64
750p Film	73
950p Automotive Parts	42
1900p Abalone	11

Denomination	Qty
2000p Forged Iron no burelage	70
2100p Bicycles with burelage	60
2100p Bicycles no burelage	10
2200p Cattle	23
2500p Denim no burelage	53
2800p Flask	34
3600p Automotive Parts	8
3900p Petroleum Valves	6
4800p Tomato	5
4800p Tomato Invert	5
6000p Citrus	35
7200p Film	10
Any Seguros (1p-100p)	35
14p Cattle Sobre	5
300p Cattle Sobre	1

Table 1. Count of covers found with each of the hard to find issues. Only counts less than 100 are included (except for the 200p and 300p inverts)



Figure 5. 5c used correctly. 24p pays the T31 2x registered rate on a Feb 9, 81 cover to Finland.

One of my concerns was the size of the correspondence and its impact on the market. If you could estimate the total number of Exportas to the US (the most common destination) in the hands of those that accumulate them, I would give an educated guess that that number is around 18,000. From one point of view, you could then say that covers to Finland are now more common than to the US. Finland was not a tough destination before this find. I had as many covers to Finland as I do to France. What does that do to the market? Time will tell. Studying this correspondence may make Exportas more attractive than ever. Even with the huge number of covers, there were still very few of the scarce issues.

I am not a fan of doing a lot of work identifying stamps. I don't really like looking for tagging or measuring the width of the design, hoping to find tough varieties. I like the idea of rating covers. Check the date, add up the postage, figure out if the rate is correct, if it is correct, then great, if not darn. But my friend Mike Rhodes suggested that in the short time available I look for a couple things, the \$1.60 bicicleta bionica of which there are a few covers known, the 80c bionic bull (which has yet to be seen on cover) and 37.5 mm forged iron, paper 5 or 6. So before I left, I practiced looking at my collection under the black light and measuring 20p forged iron.

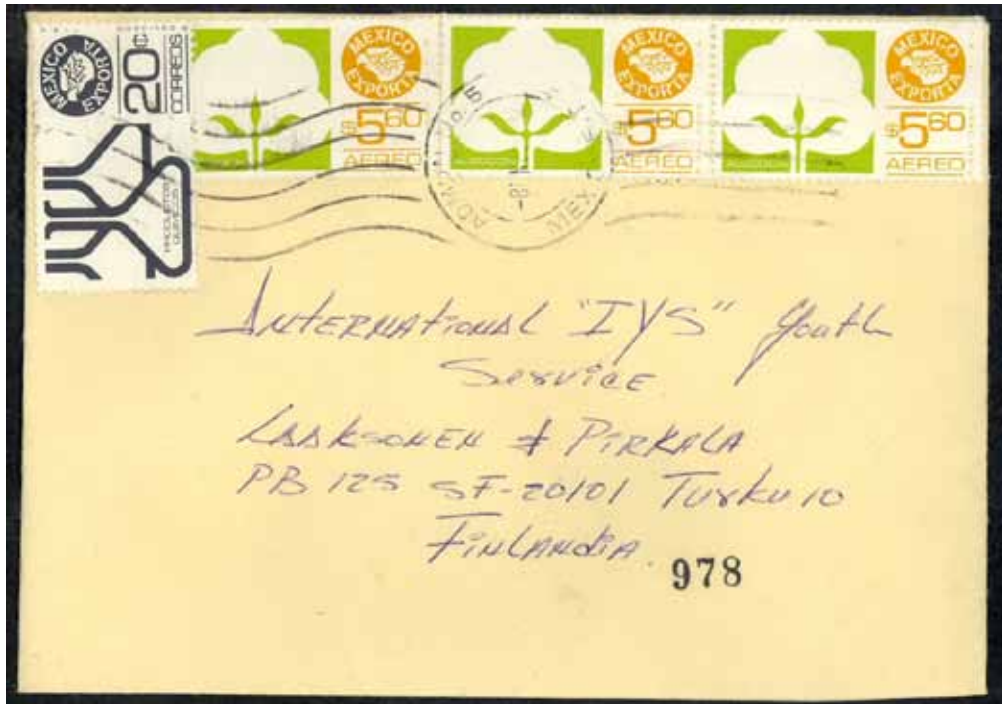


Figure 6. Another hard to find issue. 17p pays the T31 1x registered rate on a Ene 8, 82 cover to Finland.

First, I had to figure out a faster way than taking a ruler to every stamp. So I went to my collection of loose 20p forged iron and started measuring them. But instead of measuring, I started by just comparing one to another till I found shorter and longer versions. Not very long into it I found 2 longer ones and measured them. Then I found several more, which at that point figuring they were not that hard to find, practiced cutting them as I thought if I cut the stamp, it would be easier to use to compare to other stamps. Fortunately, I did not cut any of the 37.5 paper 1s that I found, though I did mark them in fat black ink so I could use them as references. I finally found that if I just used the 37.5 that I found as a comparison sample, I could line it up against the stamp on the cover and quickly determine if the stamp on the cover was a 37.5mm. As I practiced in my collection, I started to notice that the 37.5 are printed in a slightly narrower font than the 36.5 design. The words FIERRO FORJADO are subtly thinner, but I would not trust myself at first.

In my own collection I was able to find several 20p paper 1,2 or 4, which catalog mint from \$30-60. But I did not find in my collection any that reacted white to the UV. Those would be paper 5 or 6 and would be worth if mint \$400 or \$700. Back to the hoard. There I was, working through T30, every time I would find a 20p, I would grab my comparison and measure it. I found maybe a couple dozen of the more common 37.5

When I got to T33, I started to see 20p paper 5 or 6. Each time I would stop and measure them. Finally I figured there has to be a better way, so I put all the 20p in a pile and sorted through the rest. Soon I had a pile of a couple hundred, and with a foreboding sense of futility I grabbed my reference copy. I must have looked for a half an hour before I found my first

one. In the end, from the first box, I found 7 copies. Though they catalog either \$400 or \$700 mint, I have no idea what they are worth as covers. I have never looked for them before. It was lot of work so I made a note to continue in the next box when I had time.

Registered Covers: I expected some registered covers, but not what I found. In certain periods like T29, there were twice as many registered covers than clean single rate covers. Maybe you had to enclose money to get names of “pen-friends”.

Bicycles: I expected to see lots of 4.3p fresas, but I was unprepared to see so few biciletas. After 5 boxes of T29, I had seen just a couple dozen 1.60p issues. I figured I had a better chance of finding the mythic 3p zapato – as there were buckets of those. On the morning of the 2nd day, I placed a damaged cover with 5 biciletas under the light, figuring, “might as well, there are so few of them anyway”, and they were dark. I thought “it can’t be”, but they were not doing anything in the light, no yellow or white, just dark. So I carefully bent the cover, near the edge of the stamp and pried up some of the stamp to see the back. Tiny flecks of yellow could be seen on a number of corners. Later I was able to get up much more of the stamp, and I have sent it to be expertized, but I am sure I found a bionica. Though it is damaged, as for a small number of covers, they cut the return address out if the form did not have the address on it, but it is a multiple of 5 on a single cover. You saw a picture of it at the beginning of this article in figure 3. 9.6p overpays the 5.5p T30 rate to Europe with 5 1.60p Biciletas (bionica). With so few 80c and 1.60p stamps, I felt pretty sure that I was very lucky to find just the one, and thought it very unlikely to find the bionic bull.



Figure 7. 24p pays the T34 single rate on a 10 Oct 83 cover to Finland using the 20p Forged Iron 37.5mm variety

In planning to evaluate the covers, I figured I had less than one hour per 1000 covers to work through them. Monday, I was only able to start by about 4 and made it though only 5 boxes. The next day, it was heads down, but by midnight, I had gone through every box. During that time, I had no way to appreciate what I was doing, surveying the entire Exporta period. It was almost always exciting, looking for issues, papers, varieties, occasional first uses and start and end dates of periods. I had no time to rate too many covers, but when I came to a tough issue, I would make the time. There were only a few boxes that

seemed to be just the same and more of it. But if I knew what to look for there, it could be more interesting. The next day, at the airport I realized that it was quite an experience to work through the entire time period start to finish in one sitting, so started thinking of ways to give others the same opportunity.

So if I can collapse 20 hours into a paragraph... A&A cover lots are not that exciting, but when they are to Europe and have half registered covers it is a different matter, lots of high



Figure 8. 4800p invert used on an underpaid registered T47 Oct 16 92 cover to Finland.

values and colorful combinations. In the Exportas, when you buy a large lot, it is usually the same thing. I bought a group to Argentina and got tired after a hundred 1.9p that I had never seen before, but in this lot, there was everything – Zapatos, Fresas, 1.9p used with 1.60 and 80c to make up 4.3p, two 1.9's plus a 50c to make 4.3. So lots of 1.9p, 1.6p, 5.2p, 4.3p etc... enough postal stationary to find varieties, but not too much to get bored. Hopeful uses of special delivery. In the later tariffs I the occasional uses of 10 or more stamps to pay the rate. When have you ever looked though a bunch of covers and missed seeing bicycles? Of course lots of registered, inverts, missent, seguros (both used as postage and used to pay insurance), meters (both applied at the post office to correct, and applied at their offices), correctly rated covers with 5.6p, postage due covers, last and first dates of rate changes. There will be stuff that just isn't there, like printed matter rates, but I expect to find surface rate covers. I already found <250 gr rates with AR and Registered paying some obscure correct total like 21,800 pesos! Bottom line, when will you ever be able to look at every issue, from the 3p Zapato to the 7200p, plus the major rarities, the bionica, the 37.5 mm Forged Iron. I need to find that box of T32...

I am going to keep the entire correspondence intact long enough for those that want to study it to be able to. To that end, I would like to invite you to a study group. If you are interested in browsing, studying or examining the correspondence, please contact me and I will figure out the next steps. I could

see a group coming together to study it in depth. After enough people have had a chance to study it and we can document the relevant aspects, I plan to sell much of it. For my part, I am going to document as much of this find as possible and combine with other resources to produce a reference that Exporta cover collectors can use to rate covers. The reference will give collectors a quick way to determine if a cover pays an exact rate for the services shown. It will also give real census numbers that will show which are the difficult issues to find.

“Fraudulently Re-Used”

In working through the covers a second time, I came across a cover with a reused 80c Ganado y Carne. Someone had taken either a skipped stamp that had not been canceled, or had put the stamp on an envelope that was not used. Either way, with close inspection, you could see that they did not even soak the stamp off the original cover, but just tore it off the envelope and glued it on the new and used it to mail to Finland. On the left side of the stamp, they tore the paper away so you could see part of the gum. I was looking at everything under UV light, so again this stamp was dark. I was able to pull up the left side of the stamp, and though it was stuck on two layers of envelope, you could see yellow on the gum side. I had found a bionic bull on cover. As I understand, there is known only one other bionic bull used copy, one other copy on cover, and a rumored damaged copy on cover.

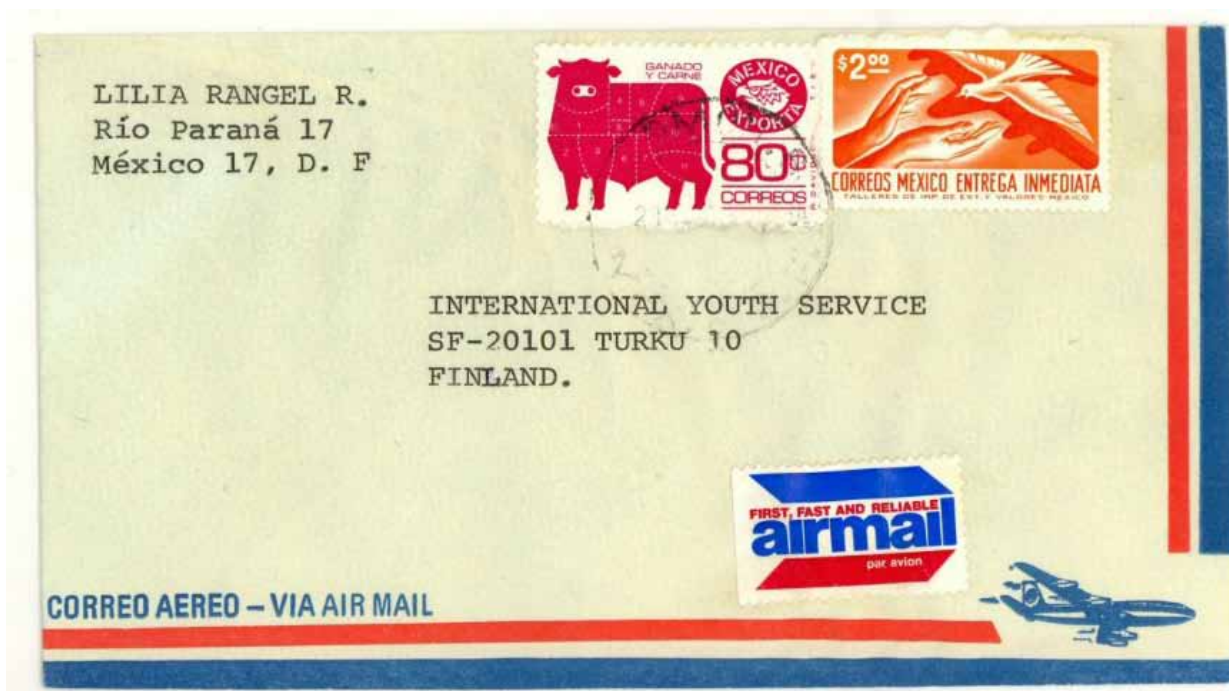


Figure 9. Fraudulently re-used Bionic Bull underpays 4.3p T29 rate to Finland sometime between Oct 76 and Sep 77.

It took about a month to sort through the 20,000 covers a first time, sorting them by Tariffs, and usages and then putting them in their own boxes. I could tell that there is much more to learn here. In my experience, it is tough to find a sound cover, with a clear cancel, paying the correct rate. With this hoard, I hope to get better statistics on just how hard that is. For some reason,

the use of registered mail went up and down over the course of the correspondence. I have not found if money was enclosed, or if people just did not trust the mails. There were a number of AR covers, which is already helping me understand exactly how AR was used. For one thing I have already discovered that the AR stamp was mostly not applied to the cover even when



Figure 10. Closeup of Bionic Bull showing reattachment of stamp on paper to cover.

paying for AR services. I assume the attached card was considered enough proof. I know this by the number of registered covers paying the correct registered and AR rates, with nothing more than staple holes to show AR services. In later periods I started to see notations for “a remettre en main propre”. I have not even begun to look for usages during the Tariff transition periods. Nor, have I had the time to examine for plate flaws.

As I said, there is much to learn from this correspondence, and I would like to invite others that are interested to join me. I have not figured out the particulars, but if any MEPSI members have a particular interest and would like to explore it using this correspondence, I would welcome them. I have set up an Exporta yahoo group for this purpose and for general correspondence via e-mail on other modern Mexico. You can join this group by sending an e-mail to exportas-subscribe@

yahoogroups.com with the subject “Subscribe”

I will be posting a number of covers from the hoard at my website. You can review other covers from the hoard right here (join [stampauctionnetwork](http://stampauctionnetwork.com) to see the complete census). There is other information about the Exportas there, as well as links to other exporta resources, so if you have a link you would like added, you can send that to me also.

<http://StampAuctionNetwork.com/ExportaTop.cfm>

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