

# Marion County Mystery Solved

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When the Kansas State Historical Society made their search of the Marion County Courthouse in 1982 and no stamps were found, a mystery that went unsolved for years was born (see Figure 1). What had become of the collection that Charles Bellinghausen mounted for the county archives? Hugh Smiley returned to Marion in the late 1980s to inquire about any remaining stamps. Marquette Eilerts, the current County Clerk, informed Smiley that not only were no additional reminders to be found, but that the archives collection was missing as well.



**FIGURE 1. MARION COUNTY COURTHOUSE CIRCA 1980S.**

Bellinghausen had since passed away, and Smiley turned to county employees in hopes of finding out what had happened to the stamps. It turned out that the disappearance of the collection coincided with the retirement of the previous County Clerk in 1980, the same clerk who had saved the remainders in a box for so many years, and no one had seen or heard of her since. Such rumors and stories about the missing stamps spread from local collectors to others across the country. Somewhere along the line Smiley and Eilerts began to recall that the collection consisted of full books of all the stamps issued between 1954 and 1970.

Prompted by such exaggerations, collectors from far and wide made pilgrimages to Marion County in search of clues that they hoped would lead them to the lost treasure. After one such trip in March 1992, I stopped to visit with neighboring revenue collector Ken Pruess. Late in the evening a letter was found folded in the front of an album which at one time had contained a group of Marion County fishing and duck stamps in full panes. Pruess had purchased the panes from Bellinghausen shortly before his death and subsequently sold them to me, forgetting to make mention of the letter. It was dated April 21, 1980, and was addressed to Charles Bellinghausen. It read, "Dear Sir, The Marion County Commissioners met this A.M. and approved your having the stamp collection that you had assembled for our county. Please contact us or come in as the book is here waiting for you...." The letter was signed by the County Clerk.

Yet another trip to Marion and a check of the county records proved that Bellinghausen had indeed picked up the collection from the clerk a few days before she retired. It also confirmed that I made several trips from California to Marion County, Kansas, in search of the “missing collection” which in fact had been part of my collection all along!



FIGURE 2. THE ONLY RECORDED COMPLETE PANE OF 1969 DUCK STAMPS FROM THE MARION COUNTY COURTHOUSE COLLECTION. THE “DUSK” STAMP CAN BE SEEN IN POSITION EIGHT.

In total, I made 21 pilgrimages from California to Marion County. The last eight times I came home empty handed. However, I would not trade the experience for anything!