

## Yesterday in U.S. Stamp News:

# Gutter Snipes and Beyond

by Louis E. Repeta (From USSN, January-February 2000)



Figure 1. Strip with a full horizontal gutter and a trace of the adjoining stamps.

### Introduction

During production any sheet stamp printed on intaglio presses may yield a **gutter snipe**. What does this stamp jargon mean?

First, the gutter is the narrow unprinted space running vertically and/or horizontally through the center of the sheet dividing it into two or four panes. The gutter is much wider than the margin space between adjacent stamps on the pane.

A gutter snipe is an intact single stamp, block or strip attached to the unsevered vertical or horizontal gutter, or both gutters. The unsevered gutter is one completely bounded by the set of perforations that outline the gutter. The italicized portion of this description is the defin-

ing key phrase. The gutter snipe need not show a trace of the adjoining stamp, but the two rows of perforations bordering the gutter must be complete (Figure 1). Since the perforations are properly positioned, gutter snipes are not perforation varieties, but production vagaries, and as such, are not *Scott Catalogue* listed.

Postage stamp pane size and pane dividing gutter patterns are established during plate layout. Two interpane gutters, one vertical (longitudinal), the other horizontal (transverse), quartering the **rotary plate** printed full sheet into panes are approximately dimensionally equal. When two companion plates are mounted on the rotary press to form a complete printing cylinder two horizontal interplate gutters are formed where the plates meet. The two hori-

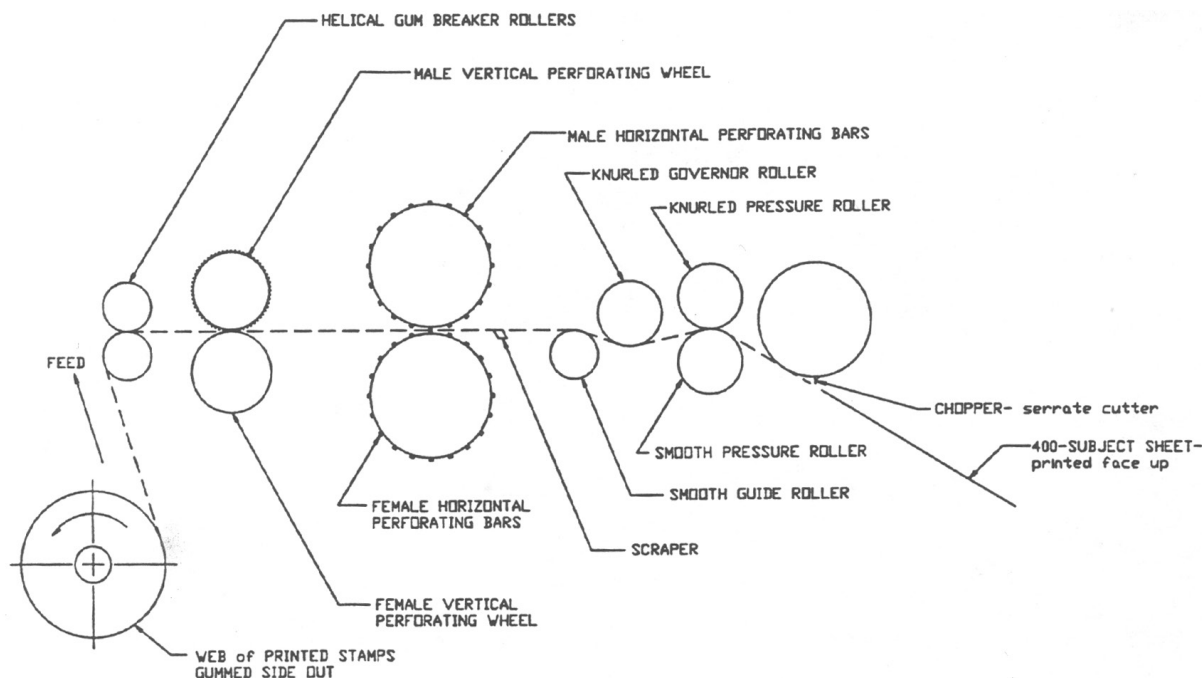


Figure 2. Schematic diagram of the 400-subject rotary perforator

zontal interpane gutters and these two interplate gutters are about equal in height. During processing two types of gutter snipes may be produced:

(1) *interpane* and (2) *interplate*.

## Interpane Gutter Snipes

Prior to perforating, usually an off-line process, the rotary printed and gummed stamps are set aside to "season." The seasoning process allows the paper to finish drying, i.e., the ink and gum cured further. After seasoning, the rolls are subjected to gum breakers, perforated in both directions, and finally the web is cut into sheets of four panes by a serrate cutter (saw-toothed blade) called a "chopper." A schematic diagram of the machine that performs these operations is shown in Figure 2 (page 30).

Next, the sheets are inspected, counted and assembled into pads of 100 sheets. Cardboard covers are placed at the top and bottom of the pad and the whole assembly is secured with staples at the sides. These pads are quartered into post office "books" of 100 panes each by a "guillotine" knife, and issued for sale. The product we purchase at the local post office as a sheet of stamps is actually a pane of stamps.

The guillotine knife normally cuts the sheets near the center of the horizontal and vertical gutters. Guillotine knife paper cuts have smooth straight edges, like the ones produced by scissors. A gutter snipe is created when the knife falls outside the gutter, leaving it intact.

Interpane gutter snipes can be caused by the inaccurate positioning of the guillotine knife cut, the sheets

stacked out of alignment in the pad, creep of the sheets during the cutting stroke, very poor centering of the perforations, when the pad is inclined at an angle, sheet fold-overs produced during pad assembly, or sheets that contain accordion folds or pleats. When gutter snipes are created the full vertical gutter may be to the right or left of the stamp, or the full horizontal gutter may be above or below the stamp, or best of all, a stamp with a combination vertical and horizontal gutter may occur.

Various examples of gutter snipes are shown in Figure 3, as follows:

- A horizontal block of 20 stamps, the lower two rows of the upper left pane, with a full width horizontal gutter combined with a trace of the stamps from the top of the lower left pane is featured. The guillotine cut is displaced parallel to its normal position and a gutter snipe is created across the full width of the pane. The top row of stamps from the companion lower left pane will show a straight edged knife cut.
- A single copy of a horizontal gutter snipe is shown on cover, with a portion of a stamp near the top edge of the cover (arrow).
- The single copy at the lower right corner is from

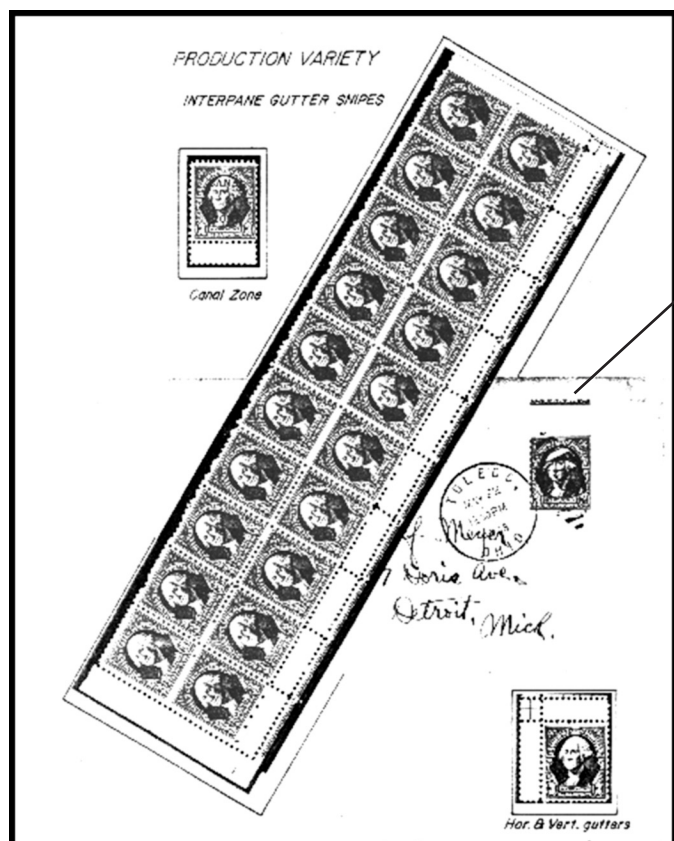


Figure 3. Interpane gutter snipes

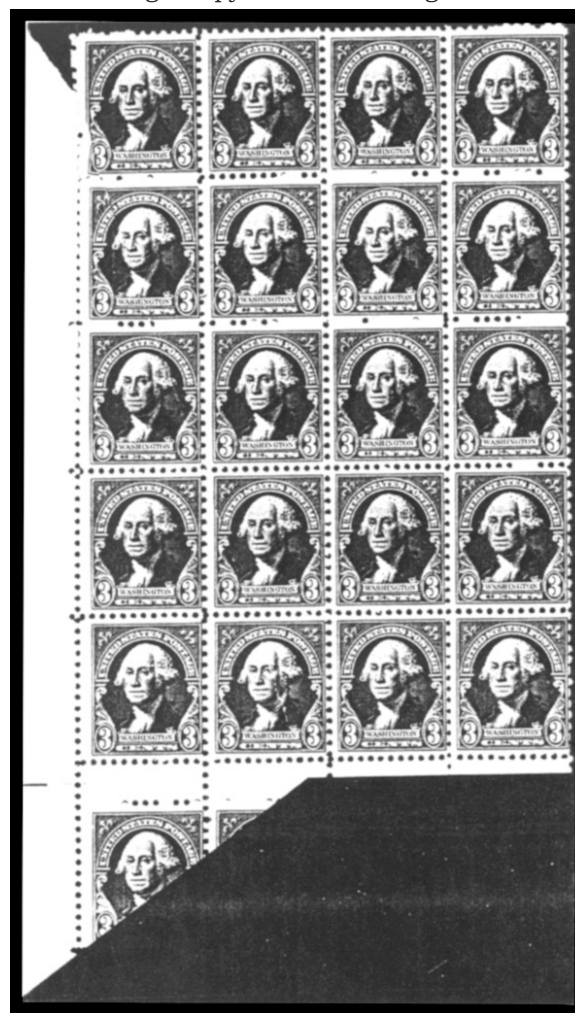


Figure 4. Fold-over gutter snipe

Continued on page 32



the upper left corner of the lower right pane, and exhibits two gutter snipe margins meeting perpendicular to each other. Examples of these “double” gutter snipes are more difficult to obtain.

- At the upper left is an unusual and desirable gutter snipe. A rotary printed stamp, flat plate overprinted for use in the Canal Zone. This stamp may be found with the gutter at the bottom as illustrated, or at the top.

In addition, a fold-over produced during pad assembly can result in odd shaped gutter snipe freaks (Figure 4, page 31).

The plate layout employed on rotary press coil issues prohibits the production of gutter snipes. There are no interpane gutters and the interplate gutter, complete with joint line, is equal to the margin space between stamps.

Although rotary press booklet stamp plates have large top and bottom interplate gutters they are not bounded by perforations. Therefore, according to the definition, booklet pane gutter snipes are not possible.

From 1894, the flat plate stamp layout has been refined to accommodate advances in printing press technology, and off-line stamp production techniques. Individual sheets are fed into the flat-bed printing press and each sheet is printed as a single complete unit. For many years pane cutting of these sheets was accomplished simultaneously with sheet perforation. When pane separation (guillotining) is performed after perforating then flat plate gutter snipes are possible, but are limited to the interpane variety.

Gutter snipes have been found on the intaglio printed flat plate product. The one dollar Wilson (Scott No. 832c) of the Presidential Series can be found with a full gutter in the right margin. Copies of the 8-cent bi-colored Liberty stamp of the 1954 series (Scott No. 1041) exist with a full gutter at the top. The flat plate printed Canal Zone 15-cent air mail (Scott No. C29) exists with a full bottom gutter.

Used copies of gutter snipes on commercial mail are scarce. Mail room personnel seem to have an aversion to extra stamp paper. This is particularly true when panes of stamps are to be perfined. These panes generally have their surplus paper, salvage and margins, removed or trimmed to facilitate centering and ease of movement through the perfin device.

Some perfin gutter snipe examples do exist (Figure 5). In addition, gutter snipes can be found locally or Bureau precanceled (Figure 6).

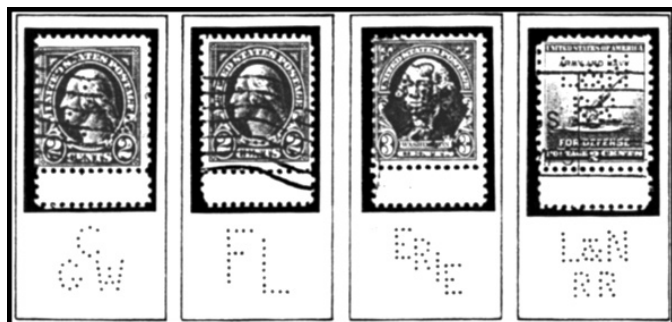


Figure 5. Perfinned gutter snipes



Figure 6. Local (Cleveland/Ohio) and Bureau (Miami/Fla.) precancels

## Interplate Gutter Snipes

Interplate gutter snipes are produced when the rotary press printed and gummed stamps are being perforated. These gutter snipes are dramatic looking and more elusive to acquire than the interpane gutter snipes. They are not created by the guillotine knife quartering operation.

The horizontal gutter separating companion 400-subject sheets is about equal in width to the horizontal gutter between the 100-subject vertical format sheet stamp panes. The parallel lines of perforations bordering these gutters are the same distance apart. These sets of perforations are produced by a pair of punches mounted on two horizontal perforating bars (Figure 7). A total of twenty horizontal perforating bars, eighteen single bars and the two double bars (spaced 180 degrees apart) are employed to horizontally perforate each 400-subject sheet.

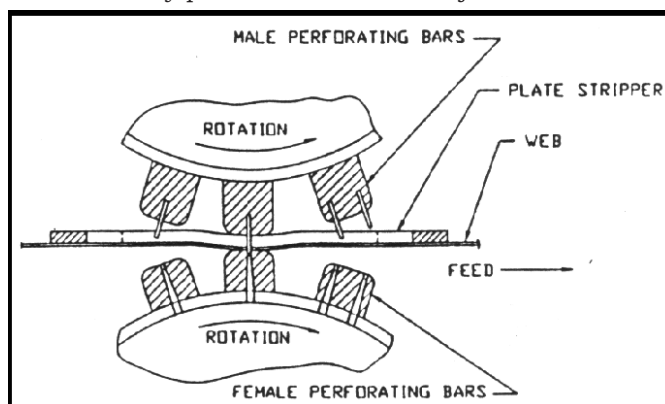


Figure 7. Local (Cleveland/Ohio) and Bureau (Miami/Fla.) precancels

The serrate cut, used to separate the 400-subject sheets from the web, is usually made in the horizontal gutter along the joint line between the companion plates. The serrate knife produces a characteristic cut edge of uniformly spaced peaks and valleys. This cut is similar to the one made by pinking shears. The cutter has a finite life, and when it wears, the peaks and valleys flatten out and are less pronounced.

When the horizontal perforations are being properly applied, but if the serrate cutting-bar mechanism is out of

register, the cut is made through a row of stamps leaving the interplate gutter intact. When rolls of stamps are being set up for processing on the perforator, before all adjustments are properly made, an interplate gutter snipe is most apt to occur. When this happens, plate number interplate gutter snipe blocks, or stamps complete with the gutter and plate joint line are produced (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Interplate gutter snipe

Confusion is apt to raise its ugly head when the serrate cut and the horizontal perforations are coincident (Figure 9). Be aware the horizontal row of perforations ends just outside the continuous column of vertical perforations, but the serrate cut severs the whole web width.



Figure 9. Coincident serrate cut and perforations

### Gutter-Spanning Pairs and Blocks

Fold-overs after perforating can occur in a wide variety of forms and combinations. Large and unusual fold-over combinations are the causes of interpane gutter-spanning pairs or blocks. During the sheet quartering operation, the guillotine knife passes well beyond the gutter, past the margin between the first and second rows of stamps, and a straight edged cut is made through the stamps in the



Figure 10. Horizontal gutter pair

second row, or beyond. These gutter-spanning production varieties are known as horizontal gutter pairs (Figure 10), or vertical gutter pairs or gutter blocks (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Vertical gutter block

To qualify as gutter pairs or blocks, the stamps on either side of the gutter must be complete with their perforations intact.

Although these major errors normally have a paper crease or some defect running through them, they are the elite brethren of gutter snipes and are accorded Scott Catalogue recognition.

### Conclusion

Interpane and interplate gutter snipes were introduced and defined. The philatelic aspects of these production anomalies were treated in a study of the mechanics employed during sheet and pane separation. Examples of gutter-spanning pairs and blocks, major errors, were presented.