

Legends of the West Recalled Stamp - Story Behind the Issue

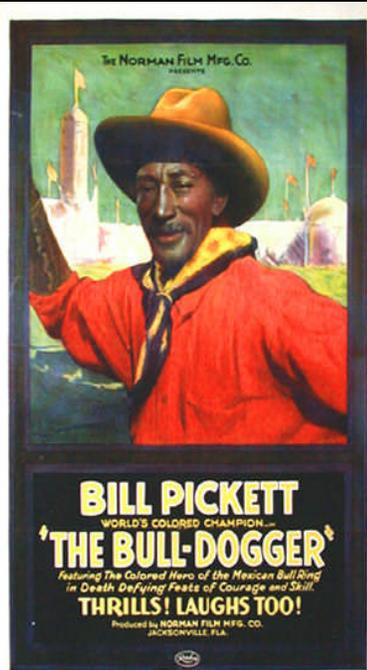
by John Walter

The idea and suggestions for the article came from Vern Watts with input from Dave Parsons

When planning the 1994 "Legends of the West" commemorative sheet, the USPS decided to include the famous African-American cowboy Bill Pickett, inducted into the National Rodeo Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1971, among the sheet's 20 subjects. Pickett is credited with the invention of steer wrestling, also known as bulldogging. Little did the USPS know this would lead to one of the most embarrassing and infamous mistakes in their history.



Photograph of Ben Pickett incorrectly identified as Bill Pickett.



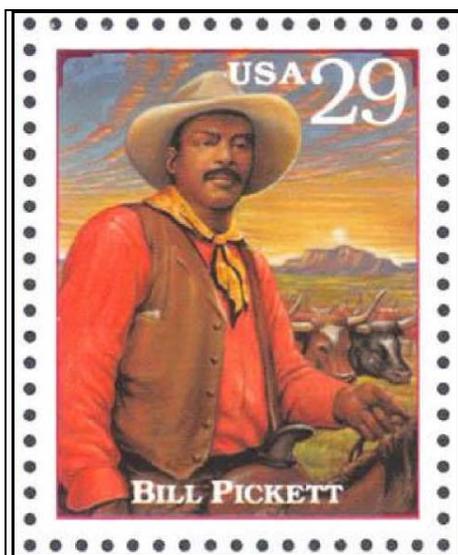
Movie poster of Bill Pickett used for the redesigned stamp.

Stamp artist Mark Hess designed the stamp using a famous photograph (on the far left) that had been identified as Bill Pickett. In January 1994, two months before the scheduled release date, the Pickett family informed the USPS that the stamp actually pictured younger brother and fellow cowboy star Ben Pickett. Within weeks the USPS announced a recall and destruction of the sheets. The problem was that over 5 million sheets had been shipped to post offices across the country, and 183 sheets had been sold to the public before the scheduled release date (some as early as Dec. 1993).

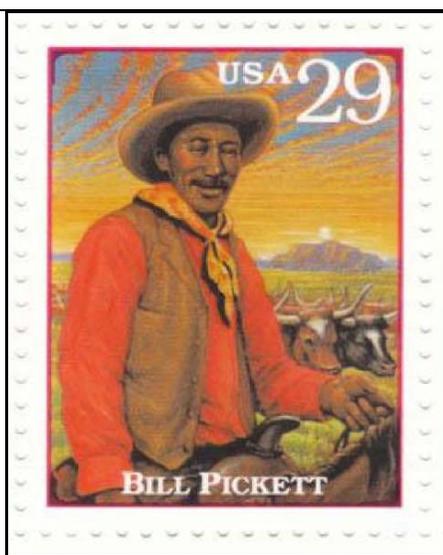
Since the few sheets in the hands of the public were being sold at astronomical prices, the USPS decided to do something it had never done before: sell a limited number of the recalled and unissued stamps to the public. In an attempt to satisfy collectors' demands and offset the

\$1.2 million printing costs, the USPS reached a compromise with the Pickett family who were promised that none of the error sheets would be sold, and announced a controversial decision to sell 150,000 recalled sheets by lottery.

Meanwhile, the USPS redesigned the stamp using a corrected photograph of Bill Pickett, and the sheet was issued nationwide in October 1994. For the first time in its history, the Post Office sold an unissued and recalled stamp to the public, and sold stamps to collectors for the first time using a lottery system. And for the first time, a stamp was recalled due to a design error rather than a production or printing error.



Recalled stamp actually pictures Ben Pickett. Scott # 2870



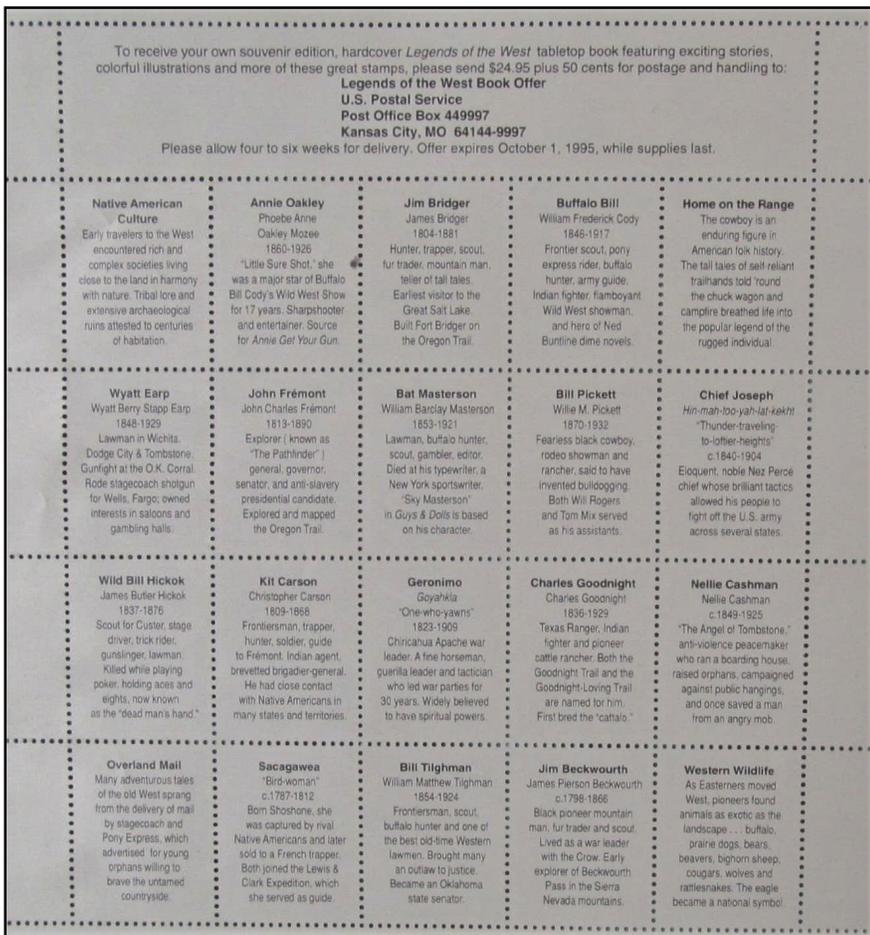
Redesigned stamp pictures Bill Pickett (1870-1932). Scott #2869

Collectors that were able to obtain both the recalled and issued sheets immediately noticed a difference in the Pickett stamps. The recalled stamp depicts a younger man with a wide, light-colored hat. The issued stamp depicts an older, thinner man with a smaller darker hat. In addition, the red border of all stamps in the sheet is thicker on the issued versions.

A collector or someone who's heard rumors that there's a rare version of the sheet will want to know if the sheet they have is the recalled version.

Compare your sheet to the two pictures on the previous page. The picture on the left is the recalled, and rarer of the two. Notice that Ben's right sleeve touches the red frame that borders the stamp. Also compare the hats and faces, in the recalled stamp Ben looks much younger and his hat is in better condition. For the pedantic, notice that the red frame that borders each stamp is dark blood red on the recalled sheets, and is bright red on common sheet.

The pane of 20 stamps was finally issued on Oct. 9, 1994 for the face value of \$5.80 (Scott value of \$15 MNH and \$10 used).. The reverse of the full sheet is illustrated below. A press sheet was also issued which consisted of 6 panes for a face value of \$34.80 (Scott value is \$90).



And if that was not enough to gouge stamp collectors, a set of 20 postal cards (UX178-197) was issued for \$7.95 (Scott value \$22). On top of that, the USPS had three first-day-of-issue cities - Tucson, AZ; Lawton, OK; and Laramie, WY.

Another interesting fact is Scott catalogue has a USPS estimate of only 10,000 First Day Cancels for the postal cards, with a value of \$1.50 for any card with a FDC.

On the other hand, FDC for the stamps from any of the above cities were from 191,393 cancels in Lawton to 429,680 in Laramie, with a value of \$2.25 from any city. That value is about double for other 29¢ FDC of that time period.

So it looks like this is an interesting collecting area with stamps, FDCs with cachets, postal cards and the recalled sheet of 20 which has a value of \$240.00 - more with the blue USPS envelope. The recalled sheet was sold through the lottery system for \$5.80 plus \$2.90 surcharge. The official announcement from the Post Service read that to "balance the interests

of the philatelic community with respect for the interests of the Pickett family" it would sell 150,000 original panes. All the rest were destroyed by the USPS.

In the U.S. Postal Service booklet available with the issued sheet, Roy Rogers offers introductory remarks of the "Legends of the West" as "The color, romance, and character of the old West come together appealingly in this issue of stamps, as they do in the fascinating photographs and narratives of Legions of the West."

The US Postal Service had never before collectively honored, in this fashion, prominent characters and features of the American frontier until the issue of this commemorative sheet. Several aspects of this issue are notable and distinctive: 1. Never before had stamps been published with such vivid color and clarity of production. 2. Also unusual is a brief biographical summary of each character or feature on the back side of the stamp (illustrated above). 3. This issue covers a representative assortment of individuals both Native and American, along with other factors influencing the development of the Western frontier.

Just another reason collecting stamps is as much a history lesson as it is a "pride of ownership" experience.