

# OPUNTIA

## 66B

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### MAIL ART AND PERSONALIZED STAMPS

by Dale Speirs

Peter Netmail (Minden, Germany) sent me a postcard of his latest personalized postage stamp. On it was the notation "When will you write about artistamps in OPUNTIA?". A good question, and one that reminded me that I haven't written too much about mail art recently, although I am still active in it.

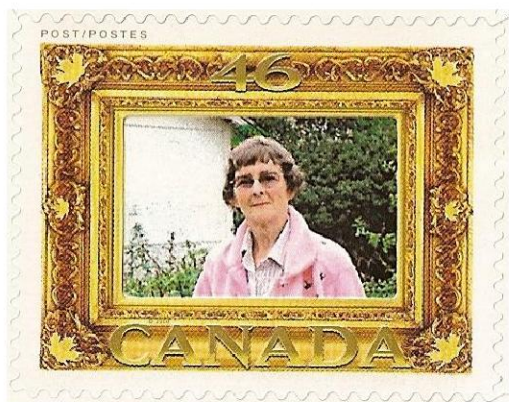
What is mail art? Entire books have been written on this subject, but to give a quick and rough answer, it is art or the process of art exchanged via the Papernet. It can be 3-D objects mailed with nothing more than a label and stamps. It is more commonly small art pieces exchanged by mail, or art on the envelope itself. On the envelope it can be cachets (artwork), artistamps (labels resembling stamps), personalized stamps (government-sanctioned custom postage with the sender's own art or other images), stickers, or rubber stamp art. There are a thousand possibilities.

In this article, I will concentrate on one particular aspect of mail art, that of personalized stamps. These are relatively new, dating from the 1990s. They consist of a frame surrounding the art or image or a 2-D barcode to one side, which is the official part of the stamp indicating payment of postage. The rest is up to the buyer, subject to various restrictions, such as obscenity, copyright, or censorship.

## Introduction.

Personalized stamps are those which have designs supplied by individuals, and which are legal for postage. There are a number of variants. In the earliest forms, still sold today by some postal services, the personalized design is on an undenominated label adjacent to the stamp but part of the stamp sheet, such as produced by the British Royal Mail under the name Smilers. In Canada, the design is on the actual postage stamp; the frame of the stamp has the denomination and is considered the legal part of the stamp. In the USA, personalized stamps are only available as meter labels produced by private companies, with a 2-D barcode and denomination to one side.

*Figure 1:  
My mother,  
Betty Speirs  
(1931-2002),  
on a 1999  
Canadian  
personalized  
stamp. I  
took the  
photo for her  
outside her  
Red Deer,  
Alberta, home.*



Originally personalized stamps of a specific design -2- could only be ordered by the originator. Recently some postal services have begun offering catalogues of designs offered up by artists or organizations, who get a commission on sales. Private firms such as British stamp dealers or the American company Zazzle have also offered limited edition designs or special-occasion designs for sale as if they were commemorative stamps. The vast majority of personalized stamps are used for special mailings such as wedding announcements, mail art, or hobbyist exchange, rather than being a substitute for regular mail or postage meters.

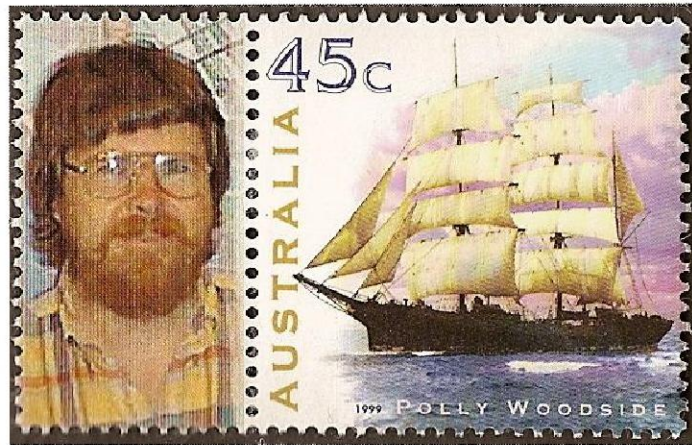
## In The Beginning.

In the early 1900s, some countries sold advertising on labels adjacent to regular postage stamps [1], such as Germany in 1906, Britain in 1911, Italy in 1923, and Belgium in 1927. Technically these can be considered as personalized, but although collectible, are felt to be in a separate category of their own. In 1972, an American dealer tried to use pictorial bulk mail imprints but was shut down by the U.S. Postal Service [2]. Croatia Post introduced in 2008 what it called commercial stamps, which were the standard type of stamp depicting a business logo or product [34].

Personalized stamps in the sense of individuals ordering them are relatively new, and while basically started in the 2000s, did have

some precursors in earlier decades. In 1972, Cyprus issued a World Health Day stamp which had the electrocardiogram of local philatelist Antonakis Georgiades [3], but it was not really a personalized stamp as we understand it today. The American printer and stationery manufacturer Avery Dennison, which prints some USA postage stamps, began offering personalized labels with American stamps stuck on [4], but the stamps themselves were not personalized, and as far as sticking them on a mailing label, anyone could do that.

Australia Post is widely considered to have issued the first personalized stamps to the public in early 2000, at the Melbourne International Philatelic Exhibition. These were labels adjacent to regular stamps. In like manner, they were closely followed by British Royal Mail in May 2000 at the London International, these stamps having since evolved into the Smilers series [5]. Over the next few years, many other postal administrations jumped on the bandwagon and the service is now widespread. Some postal services are resisting the trend. Swiss Post has declined because to them postage stamps are official vouchers of a country, and act as ambassadors of national culture and artistic creativity [6]. Notwithstanding that, a German company WeStampU offered in 2005 to accept on-line orders to print postcards with personalized stamps imprinted on them and mail them from Switzerland to names, addresses, and messages supplied by the customers [7].



*Figure 2: SF fan Alan Stewart (Melbourne, Australia) on a 2000 personalized stamp.*

Personalized stamps are priced at a premium over the face value of postage, to cover the cost of printing and allow a profit margin, sometimes rather excessive. There may be other restrictions, although as competition developed, these tended to come down. Austria, for example, first issued its personalized stamps in 2003, but the minimum order was 500 sheets (10,000 stamps). This later came down to a more realistic 5 sheets (100 stamps) [8].



Singapore, which first issued personalized stamps in 2000, now offers them at a kiosk at Changi Airport where they are printed out on the spot for tourists to mail postcards [9]. Canada Post sells them in sheets of 40 at a price about \$1 for each stamp, cheaper in greater quantities. The stamps are nondenominated and valid for domestic postage indefinitely (52c in 2008).

### **An Obvious Problem.**

When a country issues a stamp through its own postal service, the design has been vetted for the content, although occasionally design errors slip through. With personalized stamps, there was an immediate problem of trying to vet the stamps for both content and design. It requires staff with almost superhuman abilities to recognize images from throughout history and in current events around the world. Since this is an impossibility, postal services require the purchaser to accept conditions prohibiting controversial subjects, obscenity, or copyrighted images.

No country would allow images of Adolf Hitler as an adult, but how many would recognize him as a baby? One person managed to order and receive images of baby Hitler in 2005 from Zazzle.com, which sells American personalized stamps. He then put them up for sale on eBay, but was forced to return them to Zazzle after suit was filed in Superior Court of California for violating terms of use of the stamps [10,11]. The Dalai Lama of

Tibet is a very recognizable man. Austria had planned an official postage stamp in his honour for July 2005, but canceled it in the face of pressure from the Chinese government. Strangely though, the Austrian postal service allowed a retired Austrian named Heinz Stoff to then order personalized stamps depicting the Dalai Lama from them [12]. This seems to be a case of sympathetic postal officials getting back at the cowardly politicians who stopped their own issue.

Other cases show the difficulty of knowing everything about everybody. It seems to depend who was on duty the day the order was received. In Canada, an application in 2000 for personalized stamps of Tamil terrorists was stopped. In 2004, a Toronto newspaper columnist tried to order personalized stamps depicting various criminals, but was stymied and banned from future applications. But in 2007, the son of a Tamil leader successfully managed to order 150 personalized stamps of his father [13 to 15]. Perhaps the regular scrutineer was on vacation that day. Also in 2007, a Netherlands personalized stamp was issued depicting Dutch crime boss Willem Holleeder, ordered by a fellow convict [16]. Other slip-ups are more forgivable. In 2003, the Northern League, an Italian right-wing party, successfully ordered Smilers personalized stamps from British Post showing their leader Umberto Bossi [17]. This was in violation of Royal Mail policy that Smilers are not to be issued for lewd or political purposes, but understandably the Brits didn't recognize him.

Some are rather blatant and easy to pick out. Canada Post rejected an attempt in 2006 by a Calgary photographer for stamps of his topless wife wearing nothing but maple leaf pasties [18]. She was a Ukrainian immigrant and wanted to demonstrate her patriotism for the new land, but posties felt a flag would have done just as well. Copyright is something that stamp issuers must respect, since it is they who get sued. Gerald M. Levitt ordered Zazzle stamps in 2005 depicting the cover of a book he had published in 2000. Zazzle refused on grounds of copyright violation, so Levitt had to demonstrate he owned the copyright. Zazzle allowed that but then refused the design because it constituted advertising. Levitt had to supply a statement that the book was out of print and he had no plans to reprint it. Zazzle then relented and Levitt got his stamps [19].

Politics is a messy subject for personalized stamps. In 2006, an American anti-war group Bring Them Home Now began selling personalized stamps from Endicia.com showing a yellow ribbon and a peace symbol. The USPS objected to Endicia because they were political [20]. Americans love their guns, and Zazzle has had to refuse personalized stamps depicting them [21]. But it works both ways. The U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance objected to personalized stamps issued by Zazzle for the Humane Society of the U.S., and Zazzle thereupon withdrew them [22,23].



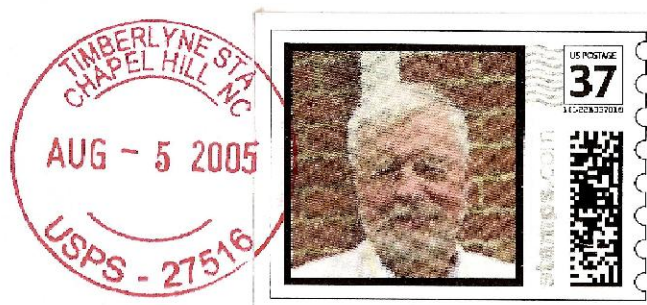
Figure 3: Peter Netmail (Minden, Germany) on an Austrian personalized stamp, showing him dipping in the Danube River.

### The American Experience.

Whereas other countries such as Canada, Australia, and Britain wholeheartedly got into the personalized stamp business, the USPS has been hesitant, and still contracts it out to what are meter marks issued by private companies.



Stamps.com was the first, producing them in 2004 at the selling price of \$22.90 for a sheet of twenty 37c stamps, on a trial basis. After the USPS had a chance to examine the results, they allowed sales to resume in 2005, and the whole thing got going in a big way. Endicia.com leaped into the fray later in 2005, followed shortly by Zazzle. At the beginning of 2007, Fujifilm and Pitney Bowes formed an alliance called Your Stamps [24 to 28].



*Figure 4: Personalized stamp from Stamps.com of Maurice Bursey, canceled in his hometown.*

Originally there was a limited selection of stamp styles and denominations, but the market has now proliferated. When American postal rates went up 2 cents in 2006, some collectors ordered additional personalized stamps in the 2c denomination to

go with their previous order at the old rate [29].

-6-

Because the official USPS attitude is that these are meter marks, some American post offices will not hand cancel them, a thing desired by many mail artists because they are nicer than the spray-on machine postmarks. However, most local branches are not that fussy and it is just a matter of jolly along the postie at the front counter. They don't fuss as much as the head office in Washington, D.C.; as per the Chinese epigram "The mountains are high and the Emperor lives far away". Personalized stamps have become popular with Christmas cards as a way to one-up the neighbours, as well as for wedding and birth announcements. The USPS originally prevented businesses from ordering the stamps with their logo or other advertising, but yielded to demand in 2006. That meant the postal system was back to where it had been a century ago. Personalized stamps continue to increase in popularity, the Internet notwithstanding [30 to 33].

### Canadian Picture Postage.

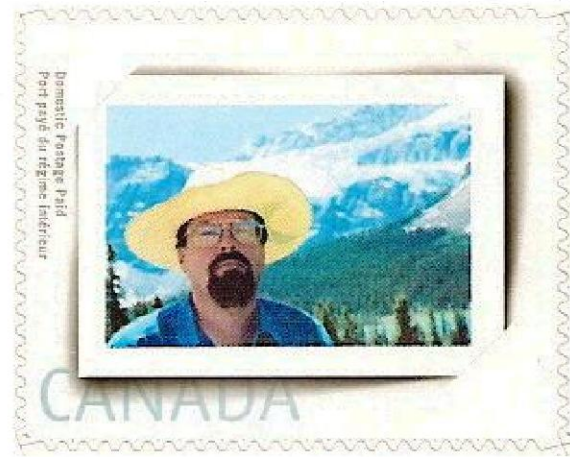
Canada Post contracts out what it calls Picture Postage, but only to one contractor at a time. These are genuine stamps, not meter marks, and are also perpetual postage, since they are non-denominated and good for domestic postage anytime. The design is in the middle of the stamp, and the surrounding frame is the official part of the stamp that pays the postage.



*Figure 5: Railfan Ron Tabbert at the controls of a Canadian Pacific locomotive in his hometown of Golden, British Columbia.*

The majority of personalized stamps are straightforward portraits but many people use them to advertise their hobbies, such as railfan Ron Tabbert, in Figure 5. My own personalized stamp advertises one of my other hobbies, that of hiking in the Rocky Mountains adjacent to Calgary. Figure 6 shows me at Bow Lake, Banff National Park, Alberta, with Crowfoot Glacier on the mountain top behind me.

*Figure 6: Mountain man Dale Speirs in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains, about ten paces from Highway 93.*



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- 3] Fitikides, T.J. (1972-04-27) Collector's heart beats on Cyprus stamp. STAMP COLLECTING 118:409

4] McAllister, Bill (2004-04-12) Avery personalized labels bear attached U.S. stamps. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 77(3937):1, 45

5] Mackay, James (2007 April) Smile and say cheese. STAMP MAGAZINE 73(4):30-31

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10] Bigalke, Jay (2005-08-29) Baby Hitler on Zazzle personalized stamp. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 78(4009):10

11] Bigalke, Jay (2005-09-19) 37c Baby Hitlers returned after Zazzle threatens suit. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 78(4012):1, 10

12] Lees, Deborah (2005 June) Customized stamp policy gives axed Dalai Lama issue new life. STAMP MAGAZINE 71(6):8

13] Robertson, Ian (2000-10-24) No Picture Postage for Tamils. CANADIAN STAMP NEWS 25(12):6

14] Niedermair, Hans (2007-03-06) Tamil stamp catches Canada Post by the tail. CANADIAN STAMP NEWS 31(22):1,7

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Design/Conception/Photos:  
Isabelle Toussaint Design graphique

CANADA POST POSTES CANADA

From anywhere... to anyone

De partout... jusqu'à vous

1 834 311 137 04

Figure 7: Canada Post advertising on the back of a stamp booklet for personalized stamps.



15] Robertson, Ian (2004-10-19) Sharp-eyed scrutineer puts kibosh on Canadian “rogue gallery” stamps. CANADIAN STAMP NEWS 29(12):7

16] Winick, Les (2007-12-10) Crime figure on Dutch personalized stamp; Indian proposal. LINN’S STAMP NEWS 80(4128):24

17] Owen, R., and L. Peek (2003-09-19) Far-right Italians deliver embarrassment to Royal Mail. THE TIMES (London), page 16

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19] Levitt, Gerald M. (2005-12-19) Zazzle stamp saga. LINN’S STAMP NEWS 78(4025):4

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23] Bigalke, Jay (2006-09-25) Three Humane Society stamps taken off sale. LINN’S STAMP NEWS 79(4065):8

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26] Miller, Rick (2005-06-13) Endicia.com second company to offer personalized postage. LINN’S STAMP NEWS 78(3998):1,39

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Figure 8: Peter Netmail and company on a German personalized stamp.

28] Bigalke, Jay (2007-03-12) "Your Stamps": Fujifilm becomes fourth U.S. personalized stamp provider. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 80(4089):10

29] Bergman, O.E. (2006-09-11) Makeup rate stamps. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 79(4063):4

30] Bigalke, Jay (2005-10-03) USPS: Photostamps are meter stamps. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 78(4014):16

31] Bigalke, Jay (2005-11-28) Despite no-cancel policy, personalized stamps get canceled. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 78(4022):41

32] Wilson, Eric (2005-12-22) Vanity postage. NEW YORK TIMES, pages G1,G7

33] McAllister, Bill (2006-04-03) Postal Service gives green light to advertising on personalized stamps. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 79(4040):1

34] McCarty, Denise (2008-08-11) Croatia Post introduces commercial stamps. LINN'S STAMP NEWS 81(4163):14



Figure 9: Tiziana Baracchi (Venezia-Mestre, Italy) created this Finnish personalized stamp.

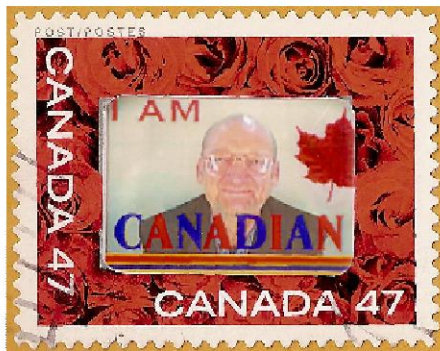


Figure 10: Ed Orr, on a 1999 personalized stamp, when he was postmaster of Courtney, British Columbia,

## THE CRISIS EXPLAINED ... REALLY.

by Robert D. Feinman

[Editor's note: This is the best explanation I have read of the Panic of 2008.]

Analogies are never perfect, but here's one using horse racing. Don't expect a perfect correspondence to the banking situation, but I think it is close enough for government work.

Joe goes to the track and bets \$2 on a horse. Two guys standing nearby get into a discussion and Fred says to Sam, "I'll bet you \$5 that Joe wins his bet."

Next to them are Bill and Bob. Bill says: "I'll bet you \$10 that Fred welshes on his bet if he loses." Next to them is Sally. Sally says: "For \$3 I'll guarantee to Bill that if Bob fails to pay off, I'll make good on the bet." Sally then goes to Mary and borrows the \$7 needed in case she has to ever pay off and promises to pay back \$8. She doesn't expect to ever have to pay since she believes Bob will always make good. So she expects to net \$2 no matter what happens to Joe. A quick calculation indicates that there is now  $2+5+10+3+7 = \$27$  riding on the outcome of the horse race.

Question: how much has been "invested" in the horse race?

Answer: \$50,000 by the owner of the horse, who is expecting to recoup his investment

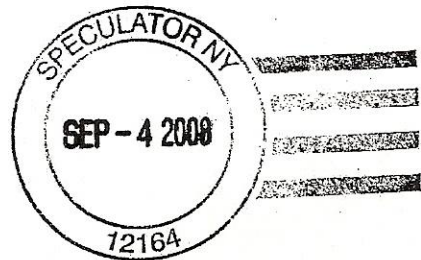


Figure 11: Peter Netmail on a side-label style personalized stamp from Hungary.



from the winnings of the horse and other future deals. Everyone else is gambling, not investing.

The issue with the American housing market is that the only "investor" was the person who bought the house. All those engaged in the meaningless derivatives spun off from this are gambling. You can see how quickly the face value of all these side bets can exceed the underlying investment. Who is holding these side bets? Not the homeowner. It is the people at the failing investment banks, hedge funds, and similar enterprises. Notice



t h a t t h e  
b a i l o u t i s  
b e i n g  
d i r e c t e d a t  
t h e m , n o t t h e  
h o m e o w n e r s .

The real  
world is, of  
course, even  
more complicated.

Over the last thirty years people have been allowed to place bets on everything starting with the value of stock averages. They might as well bet on the temperature in Newark at 8:00 AM. So when you hear everybody saying this is a crisis caused by the housing collapse, be sceptical. We are in the midst of a classic

pyramid or Ponzi scheme and there is no  
way out except for people to lose a lot of money.

All that is different this time is that it is the taxpayers who are being asked for the cash.

## GHAWAR IS DYING.

by Dale Speirs

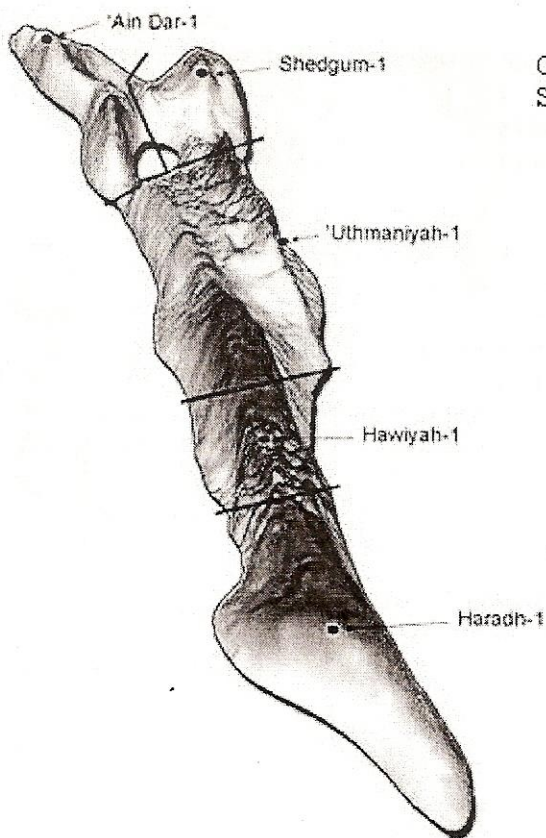
The largest oil field in the world is Ghawar, in Saudi Arabia. During its lifetime it has produced 60 billion barrels of light sweet (low sulphur) oil and still produces about 5% of the total world production today. Nothing is forever, and because the Saudis consider their oil production a state secret, no one knows for sure how much they have. Their published reserves, like those of other OPEC countries, are blatant lies, and petroleum geologists have to make end runs around them. Saudi Aramco geologists aren't allowed to publish the true state of affairs in totality, but many of them publish technical papers on narrow aspects of Saudi geology. Over time, others have been able to piece together the big picture, most famously Matthew Simmons, whose book TWILIGHT IN THE DESERT is the definitive account of what condition the Saudi fields are in. The Saudis claim they still have 400 billion barrels of reserves, good for fifty years until Peak Oil, but their actual production peaked in 2006 and is slowly declining.

Somehow, through error or miscalculation, a 3-D seismic map of Ghawar was recently released by Saudi Aramco, shown at right. Like many (but not all) conventional oil deposits, Ghawar is an anticline, a buried arch of layered rock where the oil is trapped underneath the arch. Oil deposits are not underground caverns filled with the liquid, but rather porous sediments where the oil flows through the pores, much like water seeping through a sponge. The greater the porosity, the more oil can be recovered.

A couple of decades ago, the flow of oil from Ghawar and other Saudi deposits began declining, so the Saudis built gigantic seawater pumping stations that inject millions of litres of seawater per day beneath the oil fields. Oil floats on water, and the seawater pushes it upward. When pumped out, the water is separated from the oil and re-injected. It is known that Ghawar is now down to at least a 30% water cut.

In the map at right, only the underground arch of Ghawar is shown. The arch is deep below the surface, so you have to bear in mind that it is overlain by hundreds of metres of other sediments. The darker the arch, the more oil. Fifty years ago, the entire anticline was filled with oil, but now the north end is almost dry and the rest is narrowing to the caprock of the arch. Ghawar will still produce for decades, but in ever declining amounts that can no longer supply the world. Ghawar is several hundred kilometres long. (The names are individual segments of Ghawar.)

Ghawar - 3-D form  
Saudi Aramco 2008



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead 2008-09-24  
25509 Jonnie Court  
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

About gasoline prices, or, more specifically, the profits from sales. Assuming that sales volume remains static, then shouldn't profits stay the same even as the actual cost per gallon goes up? Maybe I have it wrong and profits are solely a percentage, therefore when prices rise it would dictate that built-in profit would remain that percentage but the absolute value would increase. I just asked because of the rather large profits shown by some of the oil companies.

[The Americans are whining about gasoline prices that have been normal in Canada for decades, and which in both countries are about half of what Europeans pay. Pump prices equal wholesale cost plus taxes plus 1 or 2 cents for the service station owner. The Seven Sisters have annual profit margins of about 5%, not that excessive, but because the absolute amount is so large (\$40 billion last year for ExxonMobil), they become a scapegoat. An excellent place to learn about peak oil, demand destruction, and why southeastern Americans couldn't buy gasoline at any price in late September/early October, is at [www.theoildrum.com](http://www.theoildrum.com).]

FROM: Lloyd Penney -14-  
1706 - 24 Eva Road  
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2 2008-09-26

A graphic in the TORONTO STAR the other day showed a chart with oil suppliers to the USA, and how many million barrels they supply each year. Canada supplies about 1.5 times the amount of petroleum Saudi Arabia does. What did surprise me is that the biggest supplier of gasoline to the USA is Britain.

[When oil is refined, it breaks down in strict proportions and some byproducts are unavoidable. Diesel and heating oil are actually the preferred products, but the chemical process is such that the entire barrel of oil can't be converted to diesel. There is always a proportion of waste product, of which gasoline is the major part. Yes, gasoline is a waste product, which fortunately can be used in automobiles. Europe is more heavily dieselised than the USA, which means its refineries churn out more gasoline than Europe needs, so the surplus is exported to the USA.]


**I Also Heard From:** Peggy Rae Sapienza, Anna Banana, John Held Jr, Heath Row





**MORE PLACES  
I HIKED THIS  
SUMMER**  
by Dale Speirs

*Looking northeast,  
with Lower  
Kananaskis Lake  
in the foreground,  
and the eastern  
Kananaskis  
mountains behind.*



*Rae Glacier, the pitiful little of what remains of it, on the east side of Mount Rae, in the eastern K a n a n a s k i s mountains. This is one of the sources of the Elbow River, which eventually empties into the Bow River in Calgary.*

*I live a few blocks from the Elbow River water treatment plant in Calgary, and this is where my drinking water comes from. The glacier will be gone in a couple of decades, so good luck to the next generation.*