

# The history of the Christmas seal

Each year millions of Americans lick millions of Christmas seals in the finest spirit of the holiday season. But chances are most card senders are not aware of how this tradition became part of the Yuletide mountain of mail.

As you adorn your envelopes with 1983 seals—a jolly Santa decked out in granny glasses—consider that the first holly-wreath-decorated “stamps” were sold in 1907 for one penny each in a Delaware post office lobby. They came with envelopes bearing this persuasive legend:

“Put this Stamp, with Message Bright  
On every Christmas Letter  
Help the Tuberculosis Fight  
And Make the New Year Better”

The initial sale, organized by a Delaware social worker named Emily P. Bissell, raised \$3,000 to pay for an open-air shelter for TB patients near Brandywine, Del. By 1917, Christmas seal sales had topped the \$1 million mark.

But the reasons for the campaign's success lie beyond the copywriter's skills and the low cost of the stamps. “TB was so widespread in this country before the 1930s that everyone knew someone who had the disease,” says Ray Kondratas, curator of medical sciences in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. “Unfortunately, everyone could relate to the problem.”

The disease was so prevalent, in fact, that the pale, frail consumptive women who were “going into a decline” were considered romantic by the poets and novelists of the 18th and early 19th centuries. In truth, the facts about TB were anything but romantic. In 1907, when the Christmas seal campaign began, one in seven deaths was caused by TB, making it the chief cause of death in the United States.

It struck people of all economic and social backgrounds. But Americans aged 15 to 45 were hit the hardest, especially those in the immigrant-crowded cities of the East coast where large families lived in close quarters and where factory conditions and nutritional and public health standards were poor. The stricken often were out of work for long periods; treatment called for bed rest (either isolated at home or in a sanatorium), fresh air, a nutritious diet and sometimes lung surgery.

The impact of TB on the country's young people, especially during wartime, undoubtedly gave the annual fund-raising campaigns an added impetus and

emotional appeal, Marilyn Hanson, associate executive director of the American Thoracic Society, says.

The news media gave the annual fund drive even more attention by wholeheartedly supporting Christmas seal sales. But not at first. When Bissell went to The North American, Philadelphia's leading newspaper, to see if something might be published about her “stamp out tuberculosis” effort, one editor was shocked at the thought of combining “Merry Christmas” greetings with the country's most dreaded disease—and refused.

Bissell, however, did manage to convince one influential columnist there, Leigh Mitchell Hodges, to help. Years later, in his book, *The People Against Tuberculosis*, Hodges recalled the words of the paper's Sunday editor one December day in 1907, “Tell Miss Bissell the North American is hers for the holidays. Drop what you're doing and give this your whole time. Take all the space you need. Ask her to send us 50,000 (stamps) by tomorrow.”

The effort grew until the sale of Christmas seals involved thousands of state and local organizations affiliated with the National Tuberculosis Association. The money raised was earmarked for medical research and public health education as well as for the care and prevention of TB, support of sanatoriums and identification of new cases.

For years, the Christmas seal campaign followed the same successful formula: Sheets of 100 seals (the word stamp was dropped to avoid confusion with U.S. postage stamps) along with educational materials were stuffed into millions of envelopes by volunteers at local TB associations and other organizations. In 1962, the California Lung Association switched to computers for its mailing and by 1970 all lung associations' direct mail operations had been modernized. Magazines stuffed the envelopes and computers processed the mailing labels at five national mailing centers.

In October 1983, Christmas seals were sent to 50 million households. The American Lung Association expects about 6.5 million responses, each containing an average donation of \$5.

The history of the Christmas seal campaigns can be traced in the Smithsonian's numismatics department in the Museum of American History, where a new seal is added each year to the “Cin-

derella” collection (a name used by stamp collectors to denote non-postage stamps). The museum also has grim reminders of the era—surgical tools used in tuberculosis lung operations, containers used for antibiotics, sputum cups, “don't-spit-on-me” sidewalk bricks and collections of old photographs gathered by curator Kon-

dretas and museum specialist Michael Harris last year in Pittsburgh on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Christmas seals.

The appearance of the seals themselves has changed over the years, but they have always featured a holiday-related scene.



## Christmas Joy

Peace, love, happiness...  
may they be yours today!



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## Happy Holiday

It's a fun time of year... one that we hope you'll all enjoy to the fullest. And to all our patrons who've been so kind, a special 'thanks'.

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