A subcategory of postal history is specialized studies of postmarks – whether town postmarks, office cancels, or auxiliary markings applied by the post office in its normal course of business. This area is called ‘marcophily’ and is a quite legitimate area within which to form a specialized exhibit.

Postmarks are the nuts and bolts of operations within a postal system. A well-crafted postmark exhibit necessarily tells the story of how, when, or why postmarks were utilized in the moving of the mails. The exhibitor has at least the same degree of freedom as with any other philatelic exhibit and the only constraints are both the exhibitor’s imagination and the guidelines as to how all philatelic exhibits should be shown and developed. Thus, the same criteria apply: the marcophily exhibit is evaluated against its title page; its treatment and development; the knowledge, study and research the exhibitor shows in the exhibit; the rarity and condition of the material; and its overall neatness in presentation.

Marcophily exhibits allow for deep specialization in a collection of postal markings. This is, however, a double-edged sword. Specialized knowledge must be demonstrated, but this knowledge must be accessible to the judges and the casual viewer. Not only is the exhibitor using a taxonomy involving the organization of the collection of postal markings, this taxonomy must be logical so that it can be appreciated...
and understood by the viewer. And, because of the close similarity of material, page after page, the exhibit needs to be visually attractive in order to draw the viewer into wanting to keep reading.

There is also a tendency to over-write a marcophily exhibit, as a fair amount of explanation may seem necessary about the variety and various uses being exhibited. It may be easier to turn the material into a handbook than into an exhibit; but this should not dissuade the determined marcophily exhibitor as this is an area of philately in which original research can still be pursued and presented to interested stamp show attendees.

Our exemplar here is the ‘Canadian Dead Letter Office Handstamps’, a 10-frame exhibit by Gary Steele of Nova Scotia. The Dead Letter Office (DLO) was the place where letters were sent if they were deemed undeliverable (for various reasons), and then had to be opened by the postal authorities in an attempt to return them to the sender. Over the last few years, Steele’s exhibit has won virtually every major award that it could earn at our Canadian national and BNAPS shows.

His exhibit tells a story by developing when and where DLO postal markings were used across Canada between 1872 and 1954. It takes them from their earliest use only at Ottawa and then through all the cities where DLO handstamps were eventually used. He shows the variety of handstamps used within each office, and ties them into known proof strikes of each type. His research includes previously unknown types, previously unreported strikes, and a variety of the earliest and latest recorded examples.

His title page tells us what he intends to show. The left-hand column includes his plan, and a main text section outlines his purpose, his treatment, and his exhibit structure. I also find it visually appealing as he uses his artistic license to superimpose some DLO postmark graphics around his title. He has even managed to include an 1868 cover as a precursor to the DLO markings he will be showing. Note, too, that he includes a key as to how he will highlight his rare items. He will outline significant graphics with a red double frame to draw attention to them.

The first page of his Halifax DLO chapter comes four frames into the exhibit after he has thoroughly covered the Ottawa DLO. He introduces the chapter with a text box that includes background information on the types of handstamps used at Halifax and the known proofs, and then concludes with what he will show in the chapter regarding previously unreported strikes or early and late dates.

He then illustrates a cover with the earliest known Halifax DLO hammer, highlighted by the red double frame, and with enough descriptors to allow identification and classification of the type of steel circle hammer used. Most importantly, he illustrates the hammer with a full-sized photocopy of the DLO strike as found on the back of his cover, authenticating its use for the audience.

Marcophily exhibits are challenging to put together. The exhibitor may constantly add new material, and may decide to revise many pages of the exhibit. Gary Steele’s exhibit has certainly evolved over the years, as he continues to make modifications. Like all exhibitors, he may never be finished, never fully satisfied. Forming such exhibits provides new learning experiences that drive many exhibitors to improve. Such is the motivation behind the craft.

Previous columns in this series now also appear on the RPSC website, at http://www.rpsc.org/exhibiting.htm. Readers are encouraged to use them to facilitate further discussion at club meetings, and for promoting novice exhibiting at local and regional levels.