

COFFEE PROMOTIONAL MARKINGS

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Introduction: Promotional Markings in Guatemalan Philately

The philatelic literature of most countries, including the United States, does not include promotional markings among the country's auxiliary markings. In most countries, marks applied to the mail to promote events or causes of either national or local significance were not regularly applied by postal personnel, in the usual course of their duties. In most of philately, such markings are classed as cachets, or "pictorial souvenirs" privately affixed to covers, as a part of private individuals' efforts "to tell a story" through mail pieces. Thus, to most philatelists, such "private labels" are dismissed as being "of no philatelic interest or significance whatsoever."

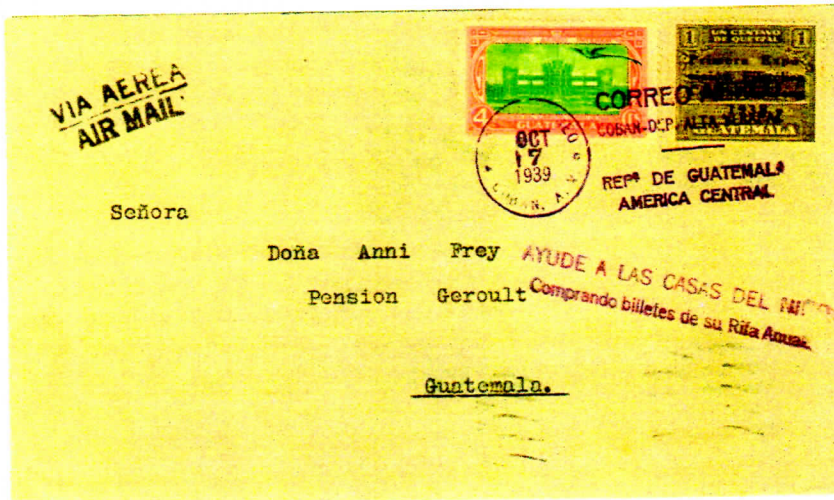


Figure 1 1939 Marking promoting a local raffle

Promotional markings played quite a different role in twentieth century Guatemalan postal operations and practices. They served a unique social function, fulfilling a significant public purpose. They were a vehicle used to convey officially approved semiotic messages, sometimes political in nature, usually linked to the country's identity, and sometimes calculated to affect the image which Guatemala projected to the world. For this reason Guatemalan promotional markings traditionally are ranked as auxiliary postal markings. Promotional markings thus rank alongside other Guatemalan auxiliary markings, including instructional markings, directional markings, and class of service markings.

In the early 1980s, one of this Society's British members happened upon a cover bearing a promotional mark. In all likelihood, it was among the first Guatemalan promotional markings he had encountered. The mark was on a cover which might have dated from 1940 (the black and white image of the cover in that early issue of *El Quetzal* does not reproduce the entire postmark very clearly). It promoted a raffle. He found assistance in understanding the mark from a fellow ISGC member. The same mark is seen on the 1939 cover reproduced in Figure 1. In English translation the promotional marking reads, "Help the Children's Homes: Buy tickets for their annual raffle." The explanation he received was as follows:

"[Guatemala City philatelist Romeo Routhier] tells me that the slogan hand stamped across the second illustrated cover was added at the postoffice [sic] at the request of the Casa[s] del Niño which is an orphanage. The slogan gave free publicity and helped the sale of lottery tickets. The interested party furnishes the rubber stamp, and even today this custom goes on."

Recently, I came across an interesting cover which still contained its contents, being a piece of card stock cut to the size of the envelope. It seems that in January of 1978, James Andrews, a New York philatelist, mailed a cover home to himself from the small town of Santa Cruz El Chól, which is located just outside of Salamá, the departmental capital of Baja Verapaz. Very kindly, the postal clerk allowed Mr. Andrews to place an impression of the El Chól po:



Figure 2

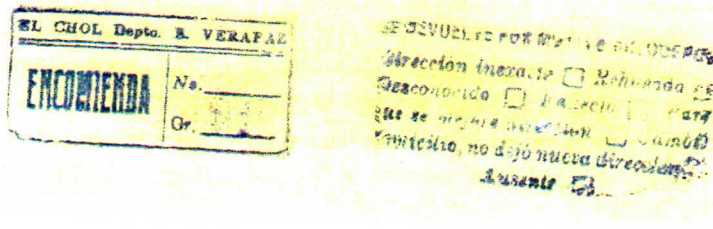


Figure 3

office’s postal markings on the cardboard stiffener (see Figures 2 and 3). The marking in the upper right of illustration 2 promotes the town’s annual *fiesta*: “Attend the fiesta and fair of The Conception, which is celebrated annually from the 4th through the 9th of December [at] Santa Cruz El Chól, Baja Verapaz.”

Thus, when Cécile Gruson came to write her encyclopedic work on Guatemala’s postal markings, she quite naturally came to include the promotional markings. Her introduction to Chapter 37, the chapter on “Promotional Hand-stamps” reads in part as follows:

A great number of these markings have been noted throughout the country. They were a cheap way for the government offices and local communities to publicize important issues such as population and housing censuses, sanitary and economic matters, jubilees and the local fairs held yearly in each town or village. They were applied free of charge by the postal personnel provided the markings were paid for by the respective government entities, municipal corporations or other institutions.⁶

Coffee Markings: A sub-set of governmental promotional markings

Context matters in the study of postal history, as in history in general. One needs to appreciate the overall historical context of the coffee industry in 1920s Guatemala, in order to begin to appreciate the significance of the 1920s coffee promotional markings.

Gruson organized her chapter 37 by grouping together promotional markings of different types. She chose to group coffee promotional marks under governmental marks, and explained that choice as follows: “We are listing under this heading the items with an official connotation.... We are also listing in this section the publicity for coffee, because of its impact on the country’s economic situation and influence on the state of public finances.”⁷ She concluded by remarking that, “While most of the promotional markings were destined to and applied to interior mail, the publicity for coffee was intended and stamped on foreign mail.”⁸

To understand the significance of the 1920s coffee promotional markings, one needs to have some understanding of the history of Central American coffee production, and of the place of coffee in Guatemala’s economy and society.

The coffee plant is not indigenous to Guatemala, perhaps first being cultivated, as a food rather than as a beverage, by the Oromo of modern day Ethiopia around 800 AD. The fruit of the coffee plant came to be boiled and consumed as a stimulating beverage by the sixteenth century, first in Persia and then in Arabia. By the seventeenth century coffee had come to be prized as a beverage throughout Europe.⁹ Coffee was being consumed in Guatemala by 1743, and coffee bushes were recorded as growing in the various gardens of the former colonial capital of Antigua at the time of the devastating earthquake of 1773.¹⁰

At first, coffee production was economically insignificant. As of 1825, coffee amounted to only 0.04% of the total value of agricultural exports from the short lived United Provinces of Central America.¹¹ Large scale coffee production in Guatemala dates from the early 1850’s, and by the middle of that decade it had become the country’s single most valuable export.¹² Although most of the export crop initially was shipped to the United States, by the 1900’s Europe, and especially, Germany, had become the major market for Guatemalan coffee.¹³

Continental European markets for Guatemalan evaporated in an instant at the outbreak of World War I. By the early 1920s, however, Germany had begun to reemerge as a major export market. For instance, in 1923, 77% of

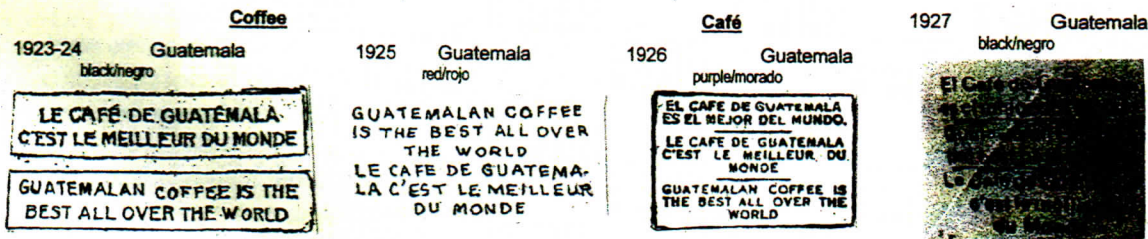


Figure 4

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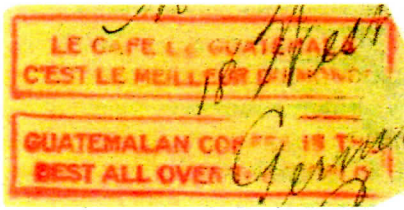


Figure 5

Guatemalan coffee was shipped to the United States, 14% to Germany, and 2% to England. However, just two years later, in 1925, 41% of the crop was exported to Germany and 43% to the United States. By 1925, new European export markets also had emerged, notably Holland and Sweden.¹⁸

The Guatemalan government played a large role in stimulating and subsidizing this production. Most notably, it created a legal regime which bound indigenous laborers to work on the coffee *fincas* (or plantations).¹⁹ The Guatemalan government also began in the early 1920's to play an institutional role in the systematic promotion of the industry abroad.²⁰ The 1920's coffee

promotional markings need to be understood and appreciated in this context.

Details of the 1920s coffee promotional markings

Postal Markings of Guatemala catalogs four coffee promotional markings in use in the middle years of the 1920's (see figure 4).²¹ Study suggests that this listing can be refined and expanded.

The first of Gruson's markings is identified in *Postal Markings of Guatemala* as existing in black only. While most of the examples of this bilingual (French and English) marking which I have come across are indeed in black ink, I have found one example in red (see Figure 5). It is noteworthy that this example dates from late May of 1923, which represents quite an early use of the marking.

Even more interesting is the cover depicted in Figure 6. This February 1923 cover bears a striking of a postal marking which is identical to what was

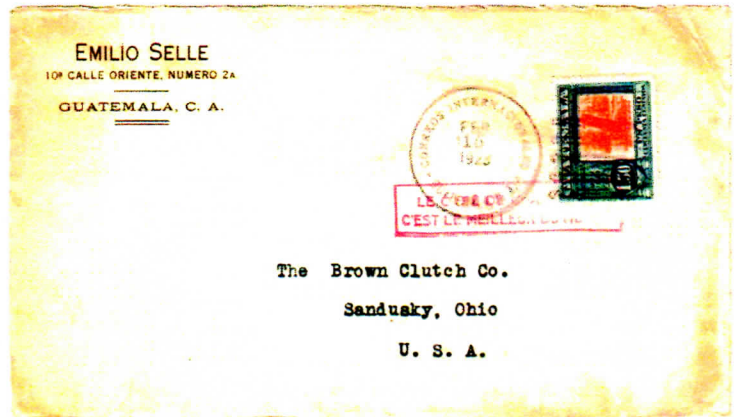


Figure 6

to become the upper, French language portion of the first of the markings depicted in *Postal Markings of Guatemala*. The type face appears identical. Also, the size of the boxed marking on the February cover is dimensionally identical to the size of the upper half of the Gruson Type 1 coffee promotional marking: 51½ x 11 mm.

I like to think of this early mark from February 1923 as a precursor marking. I have only found the one example of it. It is possible, of course, that a postal clerk went to the great effort to shield the lower, English language portion of the Gruson type 1 marking stamp when he applied the mark to the February 1923 cover. However, that is extremely unlikely, especially in view of the fact that this is clearly a commercial and not a philatelic cover. It seems far more likely that this February cover bears a impression of a distinct, precursor marking. Note that the cover bears a printed return address; it is typewritten, not hand addressed; and it was mailed to a manufacturer of clutches.²² It is not likely to have received painstaking treatment in the course of the postal system. Thus, the mark it bears should be catalogued as a separate coffee promotional marking, preceding the first of those catalogued by Gruson.

The second of the coffee promotional marks is listed by Gruson as dating from 1925. While most of the examples which I have collected, and which are on covers bearing a legible postmark, date from the early part of 1925, this marking first was used at least as early as the last months of 1924. The example of the marking in Figure 7 appears on the back side of a cover mailed to Paris from Guatemala City on November 14, 1924. I am yet to encounter any examples of this marking in colors other than red.

Perhaps the most frequently encountered of the four 1920's coffee promotional markings listed in *Postal Markings of Guatemala* is the third of the series shown therein. Gruson states that it was applied in purple. While most examples I have encountered are indeed in purple ink as in Figure 8, I have also seen examples in both red and in black ink.

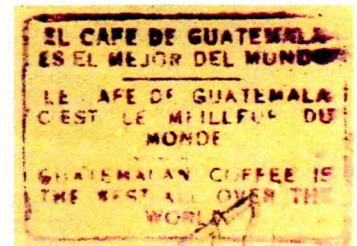


Figure 8

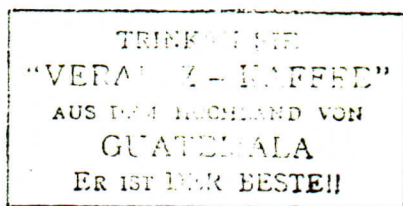


Figure 9

The fourth of the coffee promotional markings which Gruson depicted is not that hard to find; however, I have yet to find an example of it which depicts the entire mark clearly. The reproduction of this mark on the far right in Figure 4 is as clear as any in my collection.

A late sequel

Coffee exports to Europe, and especially to Germany, continued to grow in economic significance in the decade following these 1920's promotional markings. Whereas the Great Depression brought about an almost

instantaneous decrease in Guatemalan coffee exports over-all, coffee exports to Germany actually grew in the early 1930's. German consumers increased their consumption of the highest quality Guatemalan coffee varieties in this era – notwithstanding the crushing reparations imposed upon Germany in the Treaty of Versailles. [2]

The unilingual German language marking reproduced in Figure 9 may be understood in this context. The marking is : ““Drink ‘Verapaz Coffee’ from the highlands of Guatemala. It’s the best!!” I have only seen this one example of this promotional marking.

This mark too has a story behind it. In this era German interests controlled the coffee estates in the Alta Verapaz department, as well as the associated business houses in Cobán, the departmental capital, from which city this cover was mailed to Germany. Tension existed between these interests and the national Government in Guatemala City, especially regarding rail shipments of the Verapaz coffee to coastal ports for transshipment overseas. The national government favored the interests of the United Fruit Company, and its railroad subsidiary – which, in turn, controlled the major Atlantic port at Puerto Barrios and rail lines from the interior to that port. UFCo inflated freight rates through its monopoly power. This in turn led the German business houses to fund the construction of the “Ferropazco” rail line from the old, shallow water port at Livingston to a point on the inland river system nearest to the Verapaz region, specifically for the shipment of coffee. German steamships called at Livingston in this era, specifically to take on coffee bound for Germany, notwithstanding the costly requirement for lighterage at this obsolescent port. [2]



Figure 10 Two different machine applied markings

Given all this, it is quite understandable for the coffee producing interests in Cobán, in 1933, to have arranged for this unique German language promotional marking to have been applied to outgoing overseas mail at the local post office.

A machine-applied coffee promotional marking

There was at least one more successor to the 1920's series of coffee promotional markings during the decade which followed. While the vast majority of Guatemala's promotional markings were applied in stand alone form with hand stamps, a tiny number comprised elements in duplex cancellations. The earliest dates from 1925, when as part of the government's program of accelerated construction of rural roads, a marking was used beside the date slug in a duplex cancellation which urged people to help with road construction and upkeep. It is the first of the markings illustrated on page 10.17 of *Postal Markings of Guatemala*.

Similarly, at the end of the 1920's and into the early 1930's, the mail receiving a machine cancellation at the main post office in Guatemala City received either of two legends, alongside the circular date element of the machine duplex cancelling device. Domestic mail normally received a unilingual Spanish language cancellation urging people to save

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for a pleasant retirement, thus contributing as well to national progress. Mail destined overseas normally received a different, quadrilingual slogan, touting the singular excellence of Guatemalan coffee. The cover depicted in Figure 10, which was mailed on June 9, 1930, and destined for the first air mail flight from the national capital to the departmental capital of Zacapa (the origin of the famous rum of the same name), received both promotional markings as it passed through the cancelling machine.

For all of the efforts of Cécile Gruson, of the many members of our Society who assisted her, and of earlier generations of Guatemalan philatelists, the study of Guatemalan postal markings always will remain a work in progress. Given the unique role of promotional markings in Guatemalan philately, I find their study to be of a singular significance. I hope to learn from fellow Guatemalan philatelists, including colleagues within Guatemala as well as ISGC members outside of the country, and to expand my own appreciation of Guatemalan promotional markings. Please contribute what you know to these pages, and please share both your knowledge of and your enthusiasm for Guatemalan philately when the ISGC convenes each year. ☞

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1. L. N Williams, *Fundamentals of Philately*, rev'd edn. (Bellefonte, Pa.: American Philatelic Society, 1990), pp. 15-17.
 2. Winthrop S. Boggs, *The Foundations of Philately* (New York: Philatelic Foundation, 1955), p. 186.
 3. Cf. Jack Child, *Miniature Messages: The Semiotics and Politics of Latin American Postage Stamps* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008). Dr. Child's work concentrates exclusively on stamps, to the exclusion of postal markings, and it does not discuss address Guatemalan practices.
 4. Keith Dixon, "Examples of Philatelic Cooperation," *El Quetzal*, vol. 32, № 232, pp. 3, 30 (1981).
 5. The American Philatelic Society's staff were kind enough to confirm that Mr. Andrews was an APS member at this time, and that his address in the APS records for the year 1978 matched that on the cover.
 6. Cécile Gruson, *The Postal Markings of Guatemala: Sus Marcas Postales* (Detroit: International Society of Guatemala Collectors: 2004), ch. 37, p. 37.1.
 7. She did claim her cataloging of promotional markings to not be "anywhere near comprehensive, but rather to give an idea about the great variety of uses and forms these markings had, between the early 1920s and the 1990s." *Ibid.*
 8. *Ibid.* My own study and collection suggest, perhaps to the contrary, that coffee promotional markings were applied indiscriminately, to whatever mail came across the sorting table of the postal clerk charged to wield the marking stamp, whether international or domestic.
 9. Regina Wagner, *The History of Coffee in Guatemala* (Bogotá, Colombia: Benjamin Villegas & Asociados, 2001), pp. 19-23.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
 11. And most of that well may have come from Costa Rica, not from Guatemala. *Ibid.* p. 37. Spain granted independence to present day Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador in 1821 (in the pre-philatelic era). The State of Los Altos, centered upon Quetzaltenango in the Guatemalan highlands, was a fifth, distinct province from 1838 until about 1840. The United Provinces after 20 years, each of its provinces then becoming an independent country.
 12. Wagner, *Coffee in Guatemala*, pp. 49-50 and table at p. 50.
 13. *Ibid.* p. 109. See also Regina Wagner, *Los alemanes en Guatemala, 1828-1911*, 3rd ed. (Guatemala: Afanes, S.A., 2007), tables at p. 122.
 14. Wagner, *Coffee in Guatemala*, pp. 155-56.
 15. These laborers' regulations first were implemented in the 1870, and continued throughout this era. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92. Perhaps the most accessible discussion in the English language of the system of *Mandamientos*, or forced labor, specifically as it applied to the coffee industry, is that of David McCreery in his *Rural Guatemala, 1760-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), at pp. 186-94 and 220-223.
 16. See generally ch. 11, "Guatemalan Coffee Cultivation in the 1920s," in Wagner, *Coffee in Guatemala*, pp. 151-62.
 17. Gruson, *Postal Markings of Guatemala*, p. 37.1
 18. In 1911, U.S. Patent number 991817A was issued for a "friction-clutch" to one Harry Darvin Baldrige of Sandusky, Ohio, "assignor of the Brown Clutch Company" of the same City. A 1925 advertisement of The Brown Clutch Company in my ephemera collection offers for sale their Model 10A "'Giant-Line' hoist or clutch," intended to enable the farmer to "get your crop under cover in a hurry during the short spell of good weather."
 19. Wagner, *Coffee in Guatemala*, p. 169.
 20. Hillary E. Kahn, *Seeing and Being Seen: The Q'eqchi Maya of Livingston, Guatemala, and Beyond* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 18.