

The history U.S. Postal Service Cloud Stamps and beyond...

On October 4, 2004, the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) released a sheet (also known as a “pane”) of 15 cloud stamps. This event culminated a 15-year effort or nearly 25 percent of my lifetime at the time. To say that I was thrilled (cumulonimbus or cloud 9 on a scale of 1 to 9) would be a gross understatement.

Like many of my professional colleagues, elementary teachers, and weather buffs, I am into clouds. They fascinate me through their sheer beauty, their constant transformations, and how they help foretell the weather. And while not as exciting as chasing tornadoes, I get to cloud watch (or at least sky watch) 365 days a year from wherever I happen to be.

Like many cloud lovers, I began cloud watching in my elementary school days. From my vantage point on the 14th story of a New York City (NYC) apartment building, I recall watching snow showers marched down the Hudson River. Cirrus fanning out from a focal point on the horizon and fair-weather cumulus always got my attention. But it was a series of hurricanes that struck NYC in the 1954-1955 timeframe that became the defining moment in my youthful quest for a career. Wind-torn clouds, torrential downpours and flying roof-top TV antennas clinched the deal.

In college (Florida State University), my affair with clouds took on added dimensions. Thanks to a Kodak brownie camera, I was able to photograph “holes in altocumulus” and the diurnal movement of thunderstorms linked to the land-sea circulation. With pictures in addition to just my mental images, I was really starting to understand cloud processes.

I officially joined the National Weather Service (NWS) in 1973. Frequent trips allowed me to experience clouds from a new observation platform (35,000 feet). I imagined myself as a cloud astronaut in my own shuttle, watching clouds from the top down. Maybe there was some truth to the Joni Mitchell song “Both Sides Now.” My experience was similar to that portrayed in a 1959 novel – “Henderson, The Rain King” - by Saul Bellow (*Penguin Books*. p. 280. [ISBN 0-14-007269-1](#))..

In the 1970’s and 1980’s, my NWS career took me to Missouri, California, and Texas. Each locale offered its special blend of sky imagery.

In 1988, cooperatively with the National Weather Association, I drew from my voluminous collection of sky images to publish a three-part cloud poster set. I sold some 16,000 of these.

More cloud-publishing opportunities came my way in the 1990’s. How The Weatherworks, my consulting company, created a set of cloud flash cards for a National Science Resource Center second grade science kit. Shortly thereafter, we produced a cloud post card set and a highly visual, limited text cloud chart for elementary cloud watchers. Then I wrote a nearly 40-page cloud section and provided numerous cloud images for the Discovery Channel’s Weather book.

In 1991, my wife (an elementary teacher) and I followed the lead of Jack Borden, another consummate sky-watcher. Jack, through his For Spacious Skies organization, had obtained a sky awareness day proclamation for Massachusetts.

Believing that a whole week was better than a single day and preferring a positive and associative acronym [Sky Awareness Week (SAW) not Sky Awareness Day (SAD)], we obtained a Maryland SAW proclamation. Over the next 6 years, thanks to the support of meteorologists and teachers across the Nation, 42 states issued proclamations. The issuance of cloud stamps set the stage for more extensive SAW activities in the years to follow.

Prior to our SAW efforts, we learned that Dave Harbster, an educator from Arizona, had written to the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) requesting that they issue cloud stamps. I learned later that other individuals had done so, as well.

Again, if one letter was a good start, why not a petition with thousands of signatures? Many people, including TV meteorologists, NWS employees, teachers and others either signed or distributed the petitions. I am pretty sure that we submitted some 2,000 to 3,000 signatures. After submitting these, we heard nothing from the USPS.

In the mid 1990's, the graphics design company that handled the creation of USPS stamp art contacted me. Surprised, but ecstatic, I was then asked to be part of the advisory team designing a set of cloud stamps. In saying "YES," I was required to keep the project secret. Obviously, this was not an easy thing for me to do!

Over the next 5 years, our team obtained cloud images, reviewed them for clarity and simplicity and verified that the images were actually taken in the U.S. The latter was key because actual images were going to be used instead of artist renditions. We also set up the cloud stamps vertically (each row was at a different atmospheric layer) and we ensured that any colors in the images did not conflict with neighboring photographs.

One of my photographs (an altocumulus undulatus) was eventually chosen for the set of stamps (it is in the center position). There are about a dozen contributors to the stamp set – some meteorologists, all weather watchers. One photograph showing a tornado was supposedly taken by the wife of a storm chaser. The chaser wasn't home that day; he was elsewhere chasing storms. Go figure!

I was also asked to write the content material for the back of each cloud image and the masthead for the "Cloudscapes" sheet itself.

While the project was progressing, we learned, unfortunately, that the individual stamps were not going to be in desired landscape format, but rather more like squares. This was a printing cost issue. Thus, to save money, the stamps lost some of their panoramic perspective.

Once the designs were completed, they went to the USPS and seemed to disappear into a meteorological black hole. I heard nothing about the stamps for several years.

I had hoped that the stamps would have been issued in 2003 to commemorate the pioneering work of master cloud maven, Luke Howard. That didn't happen. Instead, the USPS opted for a 2004 issuance linked to National Stamp Collecting Month. Their intent was to excite kids and adults about the joys and benefits of collecting stamps.

That "benefits" piece is very significant. When I was growing up, I was a philatelist. It was easy...almost fun... to learn so much about world geography, national leaders and global events and celebrations. I am pretty sure that this helped me in my schoolwork; I know it gave me incentive to travel the world.

Nearly a year after the Postal Service announced the stamp issuance, reality set in. People I spoke with uniformly loved the stamps. Meteorologists were shown the stamps at both the AMS' Annual and Weather Broadcaster's Conferences and they couldn't wait for them to hit the streets. Before their release, The Weather Channel had already run a feature and Weatherwise magazine had published a cloud stamp story. Many TV meteorologists planned to publicize the stamps in October 2004. I can only say "THANKS" to Stephanie Kenitzer, AMS' media coordinator, for her efforts at making these showcase events happen.

From a large pool of candidates, the USPS chose Blue Hill Observatory, outside of Boston, as the first day ceremony site. This is because of its long-term observational record keeping and its view of the skies. But other places (including Rockville, Maryland) planned ceremonies and the Denver Philatelic Club offered a cloud slide show program early in October that year.

Meanwhile, my camera continued to document the many faces of the sky. In spring 2002, from my newly named front "weather porch", I captured a large funnel cloud just southwest of my Rockville community. Nearly two years later, it was a double rainbow. Both images appeared in the local press. Several dozen people actually ordered prints of the rainbow photograph; many of these people had experienced a defining personal moment during the day of the double bow. One involved a 4-year old granddaughter who saw her first rainbow and two people who had attended funerals earlier in the day.

Thanks to digital photography, I routinely add at least 500 to 1000 images a month to my sky photo collection. Recent fun images include clouds the shape of cartoon character Underdog, a cloud in the shape of a Klingon bird of prey (Star Trek fans take note), numerous fair-weather funnel clouds, and even some pronounced Kelvin-Helmholtz waves in Maryland and south Florida (far away from mountainous regions). My favorite is still the flying elephant cloud (the one that attorneys for the Disney Company told me I could not call by a certain name...)

The past 15 years have also allowed me to share numerous cloud images with teachers, students, and the general public. I can't even begin to count the number of people who

have enjoyed looking at my images and then gazing skyward. Yet, when my neighbors and friends return from a trip with cloud photographs to show me, I realize they have become hooked on clouds, too. One friend, here in Florida, was embarking upon a cruise from the Miami area when she captured a complete rainbow over the city..

Knowing that other meteorologists are telling similar tales makes us all part of a special crusade – showing how easy it is to use the sky as a one-of-a-kind teaching tool. And with the issuance of cloud stamps, I suspect that all of us cloud crusaders will redouble our outreach efforts.

My message to my readers back in 2004 was “Be sure to walk, don’t run, to your nearest Post Office on October 4th and be among the first to capture a sheet of these cloud stamps.” Now, you can still obtain a sheet of the “CLOUDSCAPE” stamps from Amazon (<https://www.amazon.com/Cloudscapes-37-Cent-Postage-Stamps-Scott/dp/B0012M5G0Y>).

Whether you have a pane of these stamps or not, you can still lay back and enjoy the cloud show that constantly unfolds above. Keep your cell phone camera handy, as well. You can also visit Mike’s website at <https://www.weatherworks.com>. Look for a series of Sky Awareness Week articles leading up to and during SAW 2026 and a link to a social media site for sharing some of your favorite images. And, please, if your local on-air meteorologist showcases SAW, please let us know. Photographs of the TV weathercast would be appreciated.

H. Michael Mogil is an active member of the AMS. He has his TV Seal of Approval (CBM) and is a practicing Certified Consulting Meteorologist (CCM). He and his wife, Barbara, are constantly working to expand Sky Awareness Week activities. If you are interested in playing a role in this annual celebration, please contact Mike at hmmogil@weatherworks.com

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