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Oasis



Purse Numbers Pose Problem

What's in a number? A great deal if it's a social security account number. But what if it just looks like an account number?

Take, for instance, the digits 078-05-1120. Way back in 1938 this was a legitimate account number, issued to an employee in the northeastern section of the United States. Yet, in the single year 1943, over 5,000 workers attempted to credit their earnings to this account. Between the years 1939 and 1948, there were 29,526 reportings.

In case you haven't guessed, 078-05-1120 is just one of at least a dozen pocketbook or specimen numbers. In the late thirties and most of the forties, there was a surge of false account numbers, brought into existence by wallet manufacturers, card-holder firms, and even private insurance companies. When the majority of these were traced to facsimile account number cards, they were tagged pocketbook or specimen numbers.

Actually, 078-05-1120 was the only one of these numbers ever issued to a wage earner. Meanwhile, a billfold manufacturer included a specimen card bearing this number in the card holder of his product, and wide circulation resulted. Former account number 078-05-1120 assumed full pocketbook character in 1941 when the Bureau reprocessed it and assigned him another.

Two insurance companies published pamphlets which included specimen account numbers in the midforties. Both were contacted by the Bureau and agreed to discontinue use of the specimens. Later in the decade, an ad appearing in a Midwest newspaper pictured a Minnesota girl's notarized personal identification card, showing her social security account number, photograph, and thumbprint. Many other cases are on record.

During the pocketbook number heyday, BOAS1 circulated lists of these numbers, instituted procedure to cover situations that developed, and, in general, carried out an information program designed to offset their rise. And, although reportings of pocketbookers greatly decreased, they still are turning up today. Sporadic increases have accompanied each new coverage, especially self-employment and agriculture.

The Division of Accounting Operations treats specimen numbers as they do any other items which will not post to a wage record on the master tape. Of initial electronic data processing rejects (normally about 5 percent), a portion can be electronically matched to prior reinstated items, and posted on subsequent passes. The clerical-staffed Numerical Register Section takes over next, and reinstates about half the remaining rejects. Additional rejects are identified and corrected by further integral electronic operations.



Accounts still failing to post are referred to the Division's Suspended Accounts Section. Here a series of form correspondence with the employer and, if necessary, employee takes place. In some instances, district office action is also triggered. Usually, errors in account number or name recording are discovered, and the corrected items can be reintegrated during a future updating cycle. In a tangible sense, less than 1 percent of all the earnings items DAO receives remain in suspense after the last of the investigative smoke has cleared. And many of these can be posted at a later date as a result of future wage records or claim actions.

Pocketbook numbers, as such, cannot be reinstated. Earnings reported under these digits remain in suspense until they can be credited to an assigned account, under an actual number.

In terms of cost, the Bureau's total reinstating job is an expensive undertaking. During 1960, this amounted to \$41/4 million-about 34 cents per item, a hike of 30 cents over normal processing cost. However, pocketbookers accounted for only a small portion of this debit.

Unfortunately, a 1940 publication of the old Social Security Board gave birth to specimen number 219-09-9999. We were recently reminded of this fact through an incident reported by Provo (Utah) DO Contact Rep Delma Meddles.

Delma encountered a woman disturbed over the refusal of her last employer to accept her "account number." Sure enough, the employee had been using number 219-09-9999, illustrated on the first page of the 1940 pamphlet. And she had the original Board pamphlet to prove it.

When asked by Rep Meddles why she used 219-09-9999, the woman replied that she had needed a number, and that was as good as any.