

Postcards

Every historical society has a collection of old post cards, and every one of them wish their collection was larger than it is. Recently I was visiting at the Barkhamsted Historical Society, located in their recently renovated Squires Tavern on East River Road. Doug Roberts was there, and he happened to have an album of post cards featuring Colebrook River and Sandisfield. I had seen most, but not all of the examples held within the covers of that album; that is the fascination of these collections: no matter how experienced one might be, there is always some gem awaiting discovery in the next volume.

The history of the post card is barely more than a century old, and has become a sort of official documentation of society.

The debut of the post card in the United States occurred at the Columbian Exposition of 1893. With its advent began a hobby and a collecting spree that whirled unabated until shortly after World War I. Then suddenly the post-card album, a book second in importance only to the family Bible, vanished from atop the player piano.

At first, postal regulations permitted only the name and address of the recipient on the face of the card, so that of necessity messages defaced the illustrated side. In 1907, however, a key date to collectors, the Post Office Department relented: The faces of cards could be split down the middle to provide for address *and* message. This epochal decision saved the picture, unless, of course, you chose to mark “X” over some hotel window and label it “our room,” or, “the body was found here.” After 1907, therefore, the industry was off and running, and so was the hobby. While there were both artistic and trashy cards, sheer bulk was the general criterion of the collector – even when he was a specialist, devoted, say, only to cats, Santa Claus, or trains and trolley cars. Ordinarily, though, not a traveler stirred from his hometown without being charged with the stern responsibility of mailing post cards of his travels to his album-keeping friends. This each person did gladly, for he knew the bread he cast upon the mailbox waters would return to him sevenfold. In turn the post-card publishers endeavored not only to sell cards embracing a variety of subjects but also to provide for the public a printed post card of charm and originality, often superbly colored and occasionally embossed.

Indeed, post cards were much more than a means of communication; for more than twenty-five years they trace history, a kind of homely view of life in the United States and in much of the civilized world. Often when no one else did, they recorded the landscape; it was a rare village green or country trolley crossing that did not have its card. They celebrated Home, Mother and the Flag; they helped out in courtship (“To the Candy Kid,” or “Greetings to my Sweet Fluffy Ruffles”); they would Save Your Boy from the Saloon. They covered births, anniversaries, holidays, presidential candidates, burning issues like Prohibition and woman suffrage, heroes, beautiful girls, fashions, sports, freaks, advertising, war (at the turn of the century, war was what you might call in its minor-league status), tragedies like the Talcottville train wreck and the San Francisco earthquake, visiting royalty and celebrities of all kinds. A strange phenomenon reveals itself to some collectors of the older cards. People didn’t get around as much as we do these days, and the publishers of some cards, to save expenses, would use the same photo, but would supply a different legend, so that it is possible to have three or more exact duplicates, but with each one identified as being from a different state or region.

The chances of this being discovered while the cards were on sale were not very high; it only became apparent after the cards began to be collector items. Another “short cut” became apparent when comparisons were made between cards showing a local high school, often containing insert photos of beautiful coeds, the idea being that the girls in this particular part of the country exceeded in pulchritude anything anyone else had to offer. It must have been a bit disconcerting when comparisons were made between the local seat of higher learning and the school on Phoenix, where you just visited, only to discover that the faces were identical! Then there were cowboys, Indians, actors, actresses, expositions, fairs, parades, tender sentiments, anti-Semite, erotica, humor, and on and on. This is to say nothing of endless view cards depicting Old Faithful, Main Street everywhere, the Flat Iron Building, the local steamship, Lookout Mountain, the Hoosic Tunnel, and Highland Lake by moonlight.

To supply the insatiable demand, publishers sprang up like wildflowers. Frequently they had their pictures printed in Germany and Austria, where lithographic techniques were superior and painstaking workmanship very cheap. The most prominent of the local producers of post cards was Frank DeMars, who had a studio in Winsted. Many of the local scenes appearing on our old post cards were identified as “The Art Store. Printed in Germany.” One of the most famous names in the post card trade was the Detroit Publishing Company, with almost 16,000 different views taken for it by photographers who traveled all over the country. Many of the company’s cards were models of color, composition and meticulous detail. Dedicated collectors will recognize the following leading publishers: Edward H. Mitchell, the largest company in western U. S.; L. J. Koehler (publisher of “Hold to the Light” cards); Winsch, Art Publishing and Rotograph. England’s leading publishers were Bamforth and Company and Raphael Tuck and Sons, who exported many delightful cards made expressly for the American trade; the German publisher Stengel and the Italian firm of Sborgi set the picture post-card standard for reproductions of fine art.

Like so many other simpler things, the early post card fell victim, after the First World War, to the new era of sophistication and mass production. That album seemed, suddenly, so old-fashioned. And now, a century later, you can get a card, if you want to save writing a letter that looks like, and perhaps may be – a perfect color photograph. Yet something, somehow, is lacking; craftsmanship, perhaps, or a sense of the past, the warm moment of charm or surprise that one might, only a few decades ago, bestow on another for the price of a five cent card and a one cent stamp.

Historic Bytes

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