



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

November 2013

HSGL Upcoming Events

Lansing Postcards Panel

Thursday, November 21, 2013 - 7:00 pm

Turner Dodge Home, 100 E. North Street, Lansing

Most of us own at least a few historic postcards, yet few of us really understand the historical significance these seemingly common items have. Once the cheapest form of easy long distance communication, the penny postcard was and is a glimpse into Lansing's history. Join a panel of local experts for a look at the secrets postcards reveal. Topics to be discussed include identifying the era of postcards, deciphering the messages on them, popular categories of postcards, postcards as tourism memorabilia, and more. A large variety of Lansing area and MSC/MSU postcards will be shown during the presentation. Then, after the talk we'll decorate an HSGL tree with postcards for the Friends of Turner Dodge Festival of Trees event.

HSGL Fall Auction Raises \$15,000 for Museum Fund!

The HSGL Board is thrilled to announce that our fall auction raised \$15,000 for our museum fund! About 200 people attended the event, making this by far our most successful fundraising event yet. Thank you to everyone who donated items, attended the auction, placed bids, and purchased items. We couldn't be more thankful for your ongoing support!

Please note that HSGL will be taking the month of December off for the holidays. Our programming and *The History Explorer* will resume in January, 2014.

Lansing Votes! Exhibit

Some of you have been asking about our next exhibit, Lansing Votes! The HSGL Collections Committee made the decision to push the opening of the exhibit back until after the holidays. At issue – and it's a great issue to have! – is the fact that we have received several donations to our permanent collection that require processing before we can focus our attention on our next exhibit. More information about Lansing Votes! will be coming soon.

If you have an item that you would like to donate to HSGL, please let us know! A list of object categories that are of interest to us can be found on our website, www.lansinghistory.org.



Annie's Ghosts – Michigan Humanities Council Great Michigan Read

HSGL is partnering with the Michigan Humanities Council for this year's Great Michigan Read. The book, *Annie's Ghosts*, by Steve Luxenberg, tells the story of a Michigan native who attempts to unlock the secrets of his mother's past upon learning that his late mother, a self-professed only child, had a sister named Annie who spent a great deal of her life in Eloise Mental Hospital in Detroit. As a partner organization we have a few copies of the book available for borrowing. To reserve a copy, call (517) 282-0671 or e-mail info@lansinghistory.org.

Messages From A Different Time

by Bill Castanier

Dear cousin

“I’m having a nice time. There was a big fire here this forenoon and we went and saw it but I was afraid.”

Percy

From a postcard sent from Ionia to Webberville – July 4, 1910

One hundred years ago the nation was all atwitter with a new fangled form of communication-the penny postcard-sending millions of cards each year via the U.S. Postal Service.

“It was the Twitter of that generation,” Valerie Marvin, president of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing said. “Not only were they small, limiting the writer to a brief message, but they were also the most public form of mail, as everyone who saw the postcard could read it.

When postcards were first proposed in Germany as early as 1865 the whole idea of people writing private messages that everyone could read seemed radical and was quickly dropped. Today, those Germans would be apoplectic to see what is sent everyday on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. However the concept of sending of postcards with personal, periodic updates often with one-of-a-kind photographs certainly was the precursor to modern communication.

“Postcards were also the poor man’s letter. They were cheap, easy to send, and disposable,” Marvin said. She pointed out that even though they were cheap and disposable people of the time treated them as pleasant memories and saved them. “Some of our most treasured memories are remembered in an iconic postcard,” she said.

The Germans may have said “nein” to postcards, but their Austrian neighbors embraced the idea four years later and in short order sent three million postcards over a three month period. Arguments against postcards continued, including a potential loss of literacy. (Sounds familiar?)

Postcards first were issued in this country in 1873 by the U.S. government, but it wasn’t until the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 that postcards in glorious color with one side being reserved for the address only were issued. In 1898, it took an act of Congress to allow private printers to

publish their own postcards which were typically souvenir cards showing popular destination in the U.S. These cards, commonly called “Private Mailing Cards”, had a shelf life lasting until 1901, and any messages had to be written on the front of the card around a small white border. The space restricted messages to the length of what you might find in a tweet today.

The next phase of cards (1901-1907) saw cards issued with undivided backs but U.S. Postal regulations still did not allow anything but an address to be written on the back. It wasn’t until 1907 that postcards were issued with divided backs that allowed both the address and a message to be written on the same side.

Messages of the time were mostly breezy telling about the weather, the sender’s health, or descriptions of short trips, often indicating arrival times back home. In many cases postcards were delivered the same day they were sent, allowing a traveler in Kalamazoo could alert a family member in Lansing to pick them up at the train station. Postcards of this era were mostly printed in Germany and the full-frame lithography was exquisite, driving the postcard collecting mania. Side tables in homes all across America held postcard albums. Complete albums like this are rare and pricey items for modern-day collectors.

Another category of postcard history stretches from the introduction of the Kodak 3-A Autograph Camera in 1903 to about 1930 and is called ‘real photo’ for the obvious reason that these postcards were actual photographs – the historical version of the modern ‘selfie.’

Postcards of this type were often one offs or one-of-a-kind. Beginning in 1907 it became popular to have photo stores print multiple copies with postcard backs to send to friends. Postcards of this type are very rare because of the limited number produced. They often provide unique views into contemporary society, sometimes portraying disasters or pleasant occasions such as a circus parade.

The advent of World War I ended German dominance in postcard production and the newer U.S. cards often were printed in black and white with a white border around the image. The next significant era of collecting runs from 1930-1945 and is characterized by a textured and very bright card. These cards, sometimes called photochromes, helped to popularize postcard mania even more. Probably the most notable of cards from that era were from the 1939 New York World’s Fair showing modernist, brightly colored futuristic buildings.

It wasn’t much of a leap that the issuance of postcards soon moved to more commercial advertising for restaurants and motels and often for funky roadside attractions like alligator zoos and places named with the foggy promotional names common in Michigan such as Deer Acres, Mystery Spot, Castle Rock or the Toonerville Trolley.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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www.LansingHistory.org

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A typical card showing a single deer in a field sent from Sidnaw in the Upper Peninsula on November 17, 1947 reads: "Second day of hunting & no bucks...got four inches of snow."

Postcard collecting today is the number three hobby in the U.S. trailing only the collecting of stamps and money and the reasons for collecting postcards are as varied as the postcards that are collected. Name a category of postcards and someone collects it: amusement cards, hometown main streets, railroads, holiday cards; especially Halloween and Christmas, Great Lakes boats-the list is as endless as a person's interests.

Take for example Peggy Metzger of East Lansing who collects cards to keep what she calls "a piece of my childhood together through postcards." She said, "I wanted to capture my youth and my favorite memories of going on the bus with my mother to shop in downtown Lansing." She said postcards to her are like a "fly in amber."

Metzger's collection includes many downtown Lansing street scenes and postcards of the downtown department stores Arbaugh's, Knapp's and Penney's. "For me they caught Lansing in a certain place."

Ray Walsh proprietor of Archives Book Shop and Curious Book Shop in East Lansing concurs with Metzger's reasons for collecting. "Postcards are nostalgic and allow us to recapture our youth along with capturing a past that is no longer there". Walsh also said some collectors (although rare) collect postcards for the messages; especially quirky ones or ones that comment on a historical event like the Kennedy assassination.

He also said that since postcards are still affordable collecting postcards is easy to get in to unless of course you are looking for rarer cards such as the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) Parade in downtown Lansing, which recently sold for \$250 on eBay. HSGL Board Trustee Jesse Lasorda, who closely follows Lansing memorabilia, said auto-related cards, cards depicting African Americans, electric railroads, and early aviation are going for close to \$100 online. Walsh said he has observed that postcard collecting is on the upswing with the added advantage that postcards don't take up much space.

Local collector Fred Schworer, who can trace his family roots back to the mid 1800s in Lansing, has been collecting postcards for more than 30 years and his personal collection focuses mostly on what are called holiday cards which he attributes to sitting on his grandma's lap as a child.

"When I was a little boy sitting on my grandma's lap listening to Santa Claus on the radio show she would show me these wonderful Santa cards," he said. Today, he estimates that he has 4,000-5,000 holiday postcards, mostly depicting Christmas themes.

Schworer said the most popular and expensive holiday cards are those representing Halloween scenes showing

pumpkins, witches and black cats. As of Halloween Archives Book Shop in East Lansing was sold out of these cards.

Harry Emmons, trustee of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing and avid postcard collector, said collecting postcards is a simple way to get pictures of the city or in his case thousands of pictures of the city. Emmons especially likes collecting postcards that represent early automotive history in Lansing showing scenes from Oldsmobile, REO and Auto Body.

He also collects MSU scenes and downtown Lansing postcards. For Emmons his "holy grail" card is one showing the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad Station in Lansing. For others like Stephen Terry of Williamston it is a real photo card of Teddy Roosevelt, R.E. Olds and MAC President Snyder driving in a REO to Lansing during the president's visit in 1907.

Craig Whitford, avid collector of Lansing memorabilia, said real photo occupational cards are difficult finds for collectors. He said fire and police department images are highly sought by collectors; especially a postcard showing the "Black Maria," Lansing's paddy wagon.

For Terry who began collecting MAC, MSC and MSU memorabilia, collecting postcards (mostly real photo) relating to MSU was a natural outgrowth. Terry who now has more than 900 postcards in his MSU collection especially focuses on the architectural scenes represented by buildings that were once on campus. One of his most prized cards is that of a fire that destroyed the Engineering building in 1916. He said he traces some of his collecting spirit to his great grandfather who graduated from MAC in 1877. Terry and two other MSU postcard collectors have collaborated on a book showcasing historic postcards which will be published in 2014.

Although historians, architects and preservationists use postcards to research "what was" many postcard collectors are attracted to the cards for the varying and unusual artwork and their ability to capture memories in a very small space.

A 1932 Lansing State Journal reported that two runaway boys from Flint were discovered in Detroit and sent home when they were "found sitting on a curb stone, writing postal cards to their Flint friends." It was never said if the postcards were mailed.

The Historical Society is sponsoring a special program on the history of postcards and collecting Lansing postcards at 7 p.m., Thursday, November 21 at the Turner-Dodge Mansion, North East Street, Lansing.

Discussing their postcard collections will be Harry Emmons, Ray Walsh, Peggy Metzger and Stephen Terry. The discussion will be moderated by David Votta, the community engagement librarian for the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing
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