

What's in a postcard? Picture on one side, words on the other. Today, you can print your own from the vacation photos snapped on your phone, though you're more likely to post your pictures on Instagram and send your message via text. However, there was a time in American history, somewhere between the advent of the railroad and a telephone in every home, when postcards were the way to stay connected.

I stumbled upon the golden age of postcards, roughly 1900 to 1920, as an intern at the Birmingham Museum in suburban Detroit. As a graduate student in Wayne State University's master of library and information science program specializing in archival administration, I was eager to apply what I was learning in class. When the opportunity to work with the museum's substantial postcard collection arose, I leapt without looking. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice pursuing the White Rabbit down his hole, I learned a few lessons before I resurfaced.

A Glimpse of the Rabbit

The Oakland County Historical Resources (OCHR) awarded a grant to the museum for a postcard digitization project in December 2015. The grant funded the purchase of a high-resolution digital scanner and an external hard drive as well as staff time to develop digitization procedures. As a grant recipient, the museum committed to adding a collection of digitized historical documents focused on the history of Oakland County, Michigan, to the consortium's growing database.

"We get frequent requests for images that represent historic places in Birmingham and the surrounding communities," said Leslie Pielack, the museum's director, about her choice to digitize postcards. "We have quite a few postcards in our collection and needed a better way to search them quickly."

The museum staff assessed about 300 postcards unearthed from various collections. We used an object ranking grid to group the postcards into five levels based on the following criteria: alignment with mission, object duplication, special types, uniqueness, copyright issues, use, and reproduction. Postcards placed in Level 1 would be locally significant and likely irreplaceable, while postcards in Level 5 would be regional in content and widely available. Once the collection had been sorted, museum assistant Robert Lutey digitized the postcards using the newly developed procedures and equipment.

Diving Down the Hole

From the original 300 postcards, Pielack chose 46 to make accessible to the public through OCHR. The images selected needed to have wide public appeal, illustrate locally or regionally significant places, and be created before 1923 or otherwise free of copyright concerns. Pielack created a spreadsheet that replicated the data required by OCHR and then entrusted me with the task of completing metadata for the final upload to the database.

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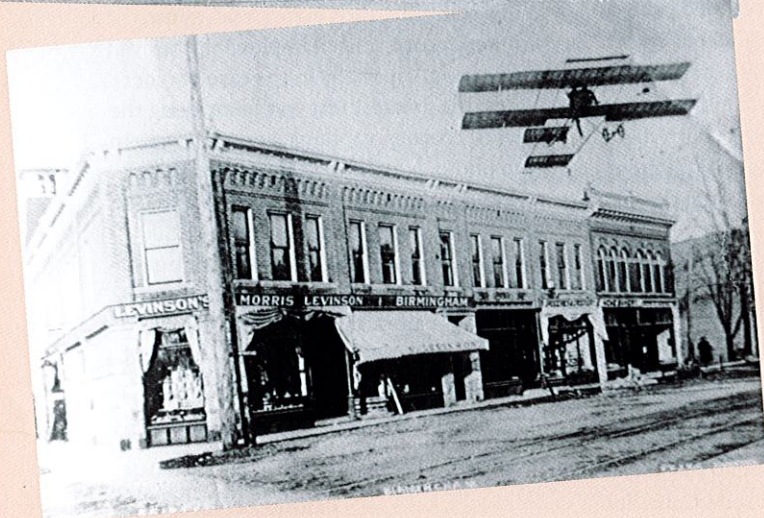
Photos, top to bottom: "Feeding the Swans, Palmer Park, Detroit, Mich.," circa 1920; "Maple Ave., Looking West, Birmingham, Mich.," circa 1921; and "Biplane over Levinson's Department Store," a real photo postcard by Louis James Pesho with one of his whimsical embellishments, circa 1921. *Courtesy of Birmingham Museum.*

POST CARD



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Adventures
in Postcard
Land



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The date and the description were the two most challenging fields to document. Of the 300 postcards the staff originally evaluated, about 15 percent had been mailed; of the 46 I was working with, only two bore a legible postmark date. To aid me in estimating dates for the rest, I first turned to collector sites like *www.metropostcard.com* and *www.postcardzone.com* and then to reference books. Bogdan and Weseloh's *Real Photo Postcard Guide: The People's Photography* and Jack H. Smith's *Postcard Companion: The Collector's Reference* kept me company throughout my adventure.

If you find yourself having to evaluate vintage US postcards, here are some timeframes to keep in mind:

- "Private Mailing Card" era (1898–1901): A special postage rate for postcards was established that required the words "Private Mailing Card" to appear on the address side. Only the mailing address could appear on the back, so room for the message was sometimes left on the front.
- Undivided back era (1901–1907): Beginning on December 1, 1901, the term "Post Card" began to replace "Private Mailing Card."
- Divided back era (1907–1915): Publishers could print cards that were divided on the back, half for the message and half for the mailing address.

- White border era (1915–1935): US printers began including a white border around the image.
- Linen era (1935–1945): Printers began using linen card stock with a high rag content.
- Modern chrome era (1945–present): Printers began using bright chrome colors and high gloss finishes.

To fine tune the date beyond these broad signposts, I looked for other hints in the font style used, the position of symbols around the stamp box, and the colophon or publisher's trademark.

One Tunnel Leads to Another

With the date of the postcard established or at least approximated, I turned to the task of completing the description field. In some cases, the work was nearly done for me. For example, the color-tinted postcard entitled "Feeding the Swans, Palmer Park, Detroit, Mich." had a printed caption on the back that was three sentences long. Printed view postcards like this one were produced in high-quantity print runs by large manufacturers. Though at the time they were considered to have high production value, they are often considered of lower value to today's postcard collectors because they are more plentiful.

Real photo postcards, dubbed RPPCs by collectors, were made from true photographs and printed on photographic paper by individual photographers

working in smaller cities and towns across the country. One of these, Louis James Pesha (1868–1912), was a Canadian-born photographer who settled in Marine City, Michigan. Pesha was known for the photographs he took of freighters and ships passing by on the St. Clair River, and his postcards are sought after by collectors. According to Gene and Scott Buel, authors of *Marine City*, Pesha was also known to create "fantastical scenes, such as a man with a giant corn cob on his back or a biplane towing a passenger steamer." One such scene in the Birmingham Museum collection features a superimposed biplane flying over a row of shops.

Each postcard I touched had the potential to lead me down its own rabbit hole of research, whether it was identifying the make and model of the cars in "Municipal Building, Birmingham" or the year Chautauqua came to Birmingham in "Maple Ave. Looking West, Birmingham, Mich."

Returning to the Surface

It was something of a relief once the postcards had been described and the metadata and digital files uploaded to OCHR. A few months have passed since then. Looking back, there are details I would change—an awkward word here, a thin description there. I doubt I will ever look at postcards the same way again. But as with every task I've undertaken at the Birmingham Museum, I've moved one step closer to an understanding of what it means to be a working archivist. ■

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not only inspire your volunteers to be more diligent workers, but creates loyalty in you toward your volunteers, driving you to fight for your team, if needed. This continuous circle of loyalty, support, friendship, and hard work only serves to create positive working experiences that strengthen with time.

While each of these steps may take a little more time in your day, they will benefit you and your job. I have a team who I trust to do their job and do it well. They have a sense of ownership of their work that increases efficiency and thoroughness. My volunteers have developed bonds of love and friendship with each other that extend past work



The many volunteers helping to make the Church History Library a success. Courtesy of Jennifer Barkdull.

hours. Because I have taken the time to get to know my volunteers and work closely with them, they've become my friends. Work can be busy and stressful, but having a strong team behind you makes it worth it. ■

ARCHIVAL

OUTLOOK

July/August 2017

Published by the Society of American Archivists



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