

Midwest Postcards/Landscape Images

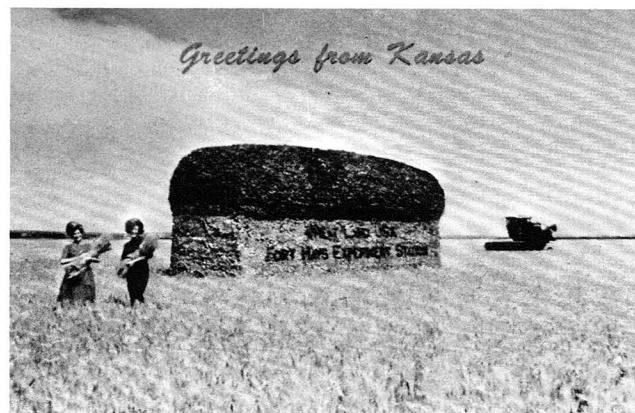
Robert Z. Melnick

Introduction

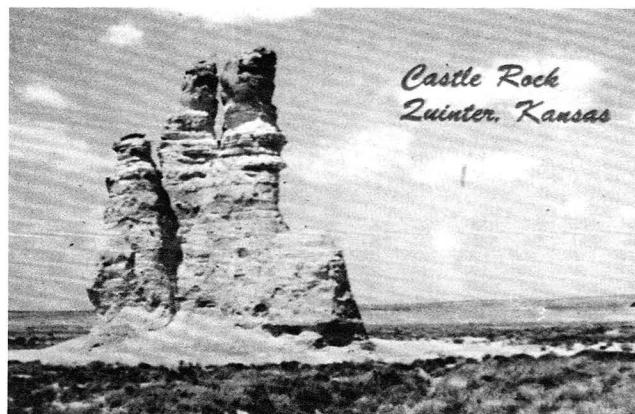
I first became interested in postcards many years ago when a friend sent me a picture postcard of a painting by Franz Kline. On the back, in the "message" section, was an exclamation point (!) and the initial of his name. That was all. It struck me that my friend had communicated a great deal about our relationship with the fewest words possible. It was the first postcard of a soon-to-be growing collection.

When I first moved to Kansas, in 1974, I was, like many other outsiders and foreigners, put off and taken aback by the harshness of that environment—the seeming blandness of the towns and the oppressive solitude of the landscape before my eyes. I searched for a way to understand this place, to appreciate it if not love it, and finally to feel at home in it. I soon came to know it, love it, and call it home.

From earlier experiences in my life (in far different locales) I was attracted to soda fountains and pharmacies, filling stations and cafes in the towns I visited. Before long, I began to take notice of the ubiquitous revolving postcard rack in the corner of the store or cafe. Sometimes it was near the cash register. At times, in those towns where national chains had moved in, the postcard rack had disappeared, replaced by greeting cards or twenty-eight varieties of imitation designer sunglasses.

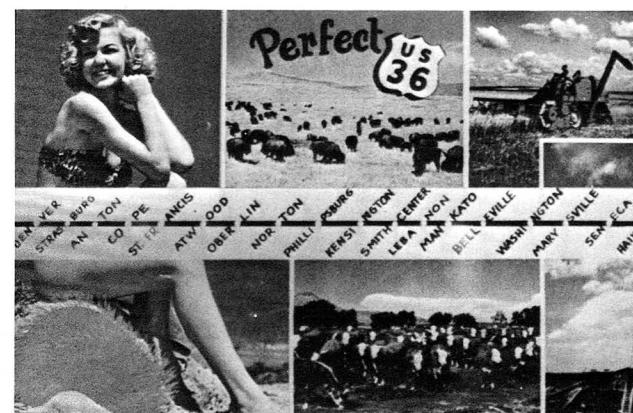


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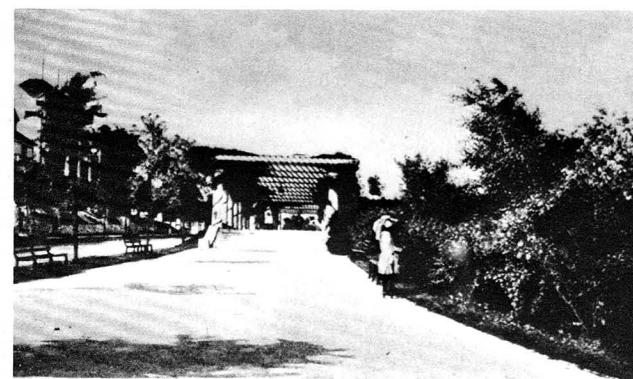


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I began to search, vigorously and actively, for that postcard rack. I evaluated cafes and drug stores on their postcard selection. Those without any were not even worth a visit. Those with regional or state cards were interesting, but the prize, the treat, the place worth sending a postcard home about was the dusty pharmacy, with yellowing books in the window, a long-ago shut-down soda fountain, and an unlimited supply of locally conceived and manufactured cards.



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They still sold for 10¢ each. Sometimes they were curled with age, sometimes they were almost faded. Most importantly, however, they were special, unique: they were from this place, this town, this village, this landscape, and this place only.

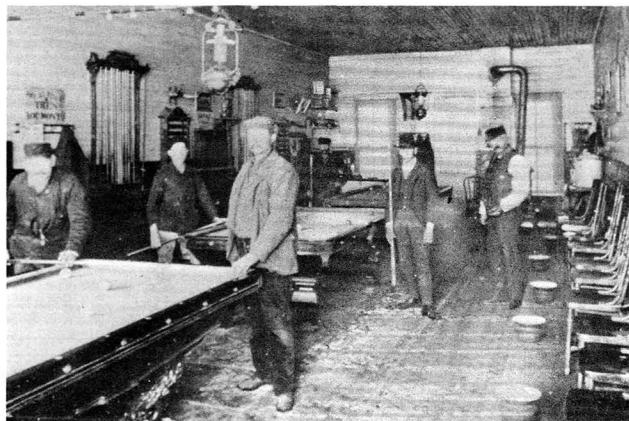
I began at that point to believe and understand that people in the Midwest do, in fact, feel a special way about their homes, their landscape. It is no accident, I now understand, that

this region of the country has the highest percentage of family vegetable and flower gardens. The connections to the earth are powerful.

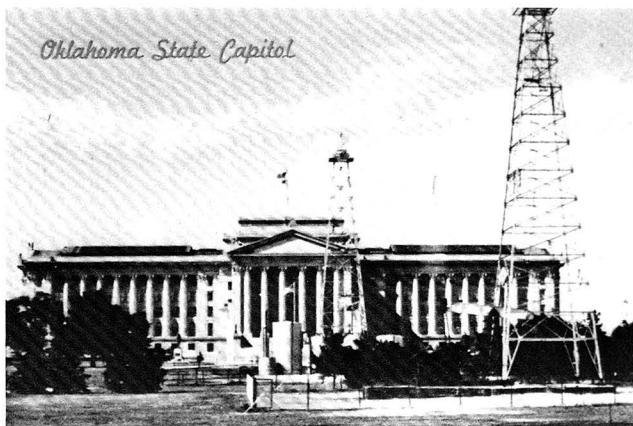
As with other aspects of individuality, I began to see, over the years, that these special postcards and their purveyors, were slipping away. It was at this point that I started seriously collecting postcards; not because they are all beautiful; not because they are all accurate; not because they are all



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special (in the usual sense): but because they represent a piece of that place, a connection to the people, and a way to remember, understand, and appreciate those ordinary and extraordinary landscapes.

Connections

While the postcard is clearly not a form of "high" art, it represents an important set of connections between

people and place, between lifestyle and landscape. Nowhere are these connections more evident than in the Midwest. While Kansas may be seen as an example of these connections, the postcards of Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, and Oklahoma, all exhibit the significant ties which people have to the land.

There are a number of ways to "read" postcards, in the generic sense. Postcards most often contain *information*,

they are a way of connecting one person to another through direct communication. Often, postcards are an *art* unto themselves. A postcard may be a painting or a photograph. We have all heard the phrase: "As pretty as a postcard." Postcards may also indicate *local values*; a way of saying and showing what is important about *this place*.

As with oblique aerial views of would-be towns in the 19th century, post-

cards may simply be *hype*. They may make a place appear to be more than it is. Postcards may be *ugly* or *beautiful*. They are sometimes *true*, oftentimes patently *false*, either through cropping, color, or added imagery. Postcards are *place markers*, ways to remember a special town, building, event, natural wonder, or person. Most often, though, postcards are ways to *communicate quickly*: "If nothing else, at least send me a postcard."

Social History

The private postcard was first invented in this country in 1861 by John Carlton of Philadelphia. Partially as a response to this, in 1873 the United States Post Office Department required the use of official postcards only. These were plain cards, with a cost of 1¢ to mail domestically. It was not until twenty years later that these regulations were relaxed.

In 1893, as a response to the popularity of the world's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the Post Office Department allowed the use, on a limited and experimental basis, of a commemorative postcard. In 1898, new regulations allowed for privately printed picture postcards. The address was to be on one side, and the message was scrawled across the view side. In 1906, the regulations were further relaxed to allow the message to appear on one-half of the

address side. In that year, 770 million postcards were mailed in the country. In 1909, there were 968 million postcards mailed.

The revolving postcard rack, invented in 1908, became a standard feature in stores and shops. The era of self-service merchandising of postcards as inexpensive versions of popular photographs had arrived. With the advent of the popular Kodak camera in the 1920's and 1930's, the postcard passed from popularity as the prime way to send these images to friends.

"Today's postcards are primarily used to tell others about the tourist's travels, because most people have already 'seen' the place in other media. In the past, postcards were used to provide a new image of the place, as well as to tell about the traveler. Current cards, however, draw on existing images of the place, mostly based on television and movies, to give information on the traveller... The conventional (non-artistic) picture postcard today is a well-known view, stereotypical if not iconic."

—Dotterer and Craz

While the postcard may not serve the same function it once did, there can be little doubt that it has a renewed presence on the American scene. Cur-



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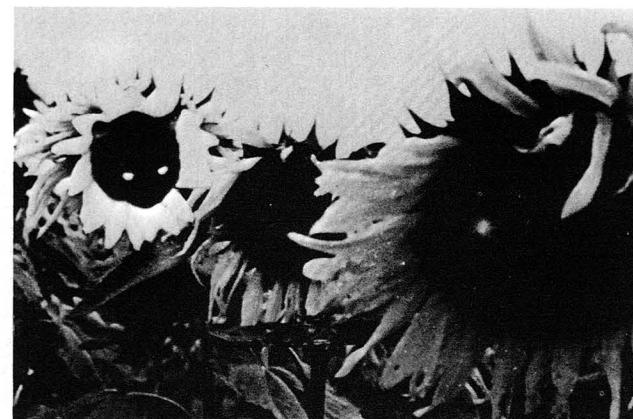


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rent regulations require a minimum size of 3½" x 5" and a maximum size of 4¼" x 6". Dexter Press, of West Nyack, New York, the single largest manufacturer of picture postcards in the country, has a constant demand for their product.

Stories Postcards Tell

While the postcard, as we have seen, is a product of American culture, pic-



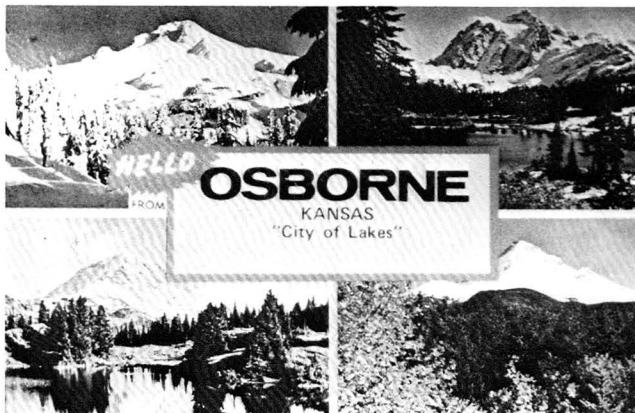
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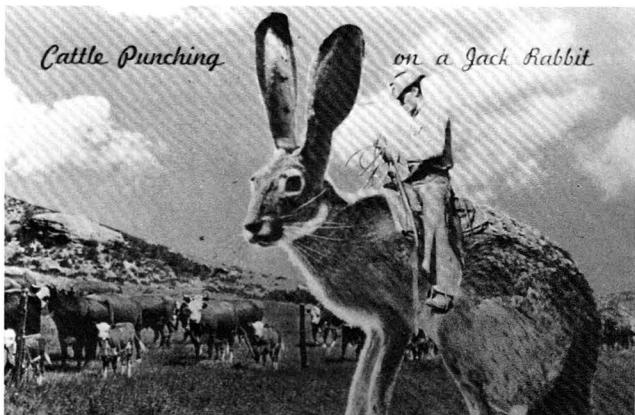
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ture postcards from the Midwest present us with a clear set of images, messages and tales about that region of the country. Perhaps because it has been so relatively stable, the Midwest provides a solid social and physical backdrop against which to view, and perhaps evaluate, these images. What, then, are the varieties of landscape images on Midwest postcards? What are the messages on these multi-varied 3½" x 5" flimsy pieces of cardboard?

1. "I have been there..." or "Here I am..."
2. Landscapes of natural beauty.
3. Landscapes of people.
4. Landscape maps: roads and regions.
5. "My home town..."
6. Democracy in stone: public buildings.
7. Social/economic structures: grain elevators and hotels.
8. History in place: buildings, bridges, interiors.



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14

9. Marking places: statues, monuments.
10. Just plain folks: people in the landscape.
11. Animals and livestock: ties to the land, to agriculture.
12. Flowers: real and ideal.
13. Slogans and sayings.
14. Tall-tale images: "Never give yourself away and never crack a smile..."
15. New American landscapes.
16. Places that were never real.

Some Further Thoughts

The landscape represented in the postcards pictured here are marked for their meaning. They are substantial elements in the lives of the people of the Midwest, but also in the images which others have of that region of the country. While they represent important aspects of this area, they also indicate some puzzling (yet curious) contradictions. As a set of images they represent two opposing urges:



16



15

the desire to be unique and the desire to be part of the group.

As a region, the Plains and Midwest has always suffered, in popular culture, from an inferiority complex, albeit undeserved. The landscape images of these postcards both reinforce and negate that impression. Clearly, these are places of which people are at once proud and yet not quite secure in. They are places of great beauty and wonder; landscapes

we can marvel at, either because of natural presence or cultural brilliance. They are also places, however, which bring laughter, condescension, and a certain attitude which come from *knowing* that these images (of balls of string or heaps of cow chips) represent something *less* than the rest of our "correct" culture values.

It is perhaps most important to recognize, however, that these contradictions and inconsistencies represent and reflect the contradictions and inconsistencies of the region itself. It is a difficult place to know, either because one is too close to it, or not quite close enough. The landscape images of these postcards merely reflect and reinforce that learning disability from which we all suffer, reminding us of our need for a bit more education.

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