

ARTS & CULTURE

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Photo postcards — an early social media revolution

■ Turn-of-the-century postcard images and messages from the Edsel White Collection make up Josephy Center's virtual exhibit

JOSEPH — Before Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, there were photo postcards, America's first great social media crush. Wallowa County, like the rest of the country, eagerly embraced the new technologies that made it easy for ordinary people to take a "snapshot" and have it printed on photographic paper with a pre-printed postcard back. They could then send their own personalized images along with a short note to anyone, anywhere in the world with an address. And a town name and state was all that was needed in the rural U.S.

This social media revolution was driven by the Eastman Kodak Company. In 1888, Kodak developed the first camera pre-loaded with flexible film. After the photographer had taken the pictures, he or she would send the entire camera back to the company for developing, and a few weeks later would receive the photographs in the mail.

In 1900, Kodak introduced the Brownie camera. It was lightweight, portable, inexpensive and easy to use, making photography available to amateurs. In 1902, the company introduced Velox postcard paper, and in 1904, the Kodak Brownie 3A, designed specifically for taking postcard pictures.

The final development that drove this turn-of-the-century social media format was the divided postcard back. Prior to 1907, the back of the photo postcard was strictly reserved for the address of the recipient. The new 1907 regulations allowed for a message and the address on the back. It was the ability to send a photograph with a personal note that really popularized this early social media phenomenon.

The total number of postcards sent in the mail will never be known; the U.S. Postal Service estimated that nearly 1 billion were sent through the mail in 1913 alone.

The ability of amateurs to produce their own photographs cut into the already thin margins of professional photographers, many of whom supplemented their photo business with second jobs. This was true of local professional photographers like Joseph Henry Romig, a Joseph photographer, and Hugh Davis of Enterprise.

Local photographers like Hiram Merry, a farmer who lived in the little community of Grouse near Troy, and Roy Edgmand, a teacher, seemed to identify themselves first as "farmer" and "teacher." And then there were those who were taken photographs as a hobby, offering none of their output for sale, but whose work constitutes an important part of our historical record. Frank Reavis of Enterprise is perhaps the premier local example of this.

In any case, the greatest portion of the historic photographic record we have of Wallowa County comes from photo postcards during this time period. Many of the photographers remain unknown and uncredited.

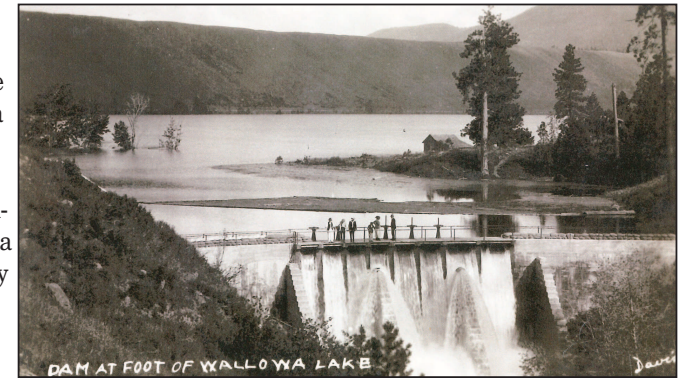
In addition to the historic importance of the photographic images themselves, the notes written on the backs provide an interesting look into the lives of the people of the time. By turns tragic, comic and mundane—the universal human need to stay connected and share lives with distant family members, friends and loved ones was as important then as it is now.

The images and words presented in the Josephy Center's virtual exhibit, which opened May 4, come from the important collection of Edsel White, whose hundreds of photographs and documents add immensely to what we know of our own story. And, thanks to his generosity and willingness to share his passion with others, we're enriched by being able to see something of our own lives through those who have gone before us.

THE EXHIBIT

Go to www.josephy.org/virtual-exhibit/post-cards to see the exhibit, curated by Wallowa historian David Weaver. Seth Kinzie set up the display, with postcards accompanied by readings (by voice specialist Amanda Berry) of brief essays written by Weaver.

On May 29 at 5 p.m., join Weaver and White for an online celebration on Zoom.



Article and photo courtesy of Weaver, White and the Josephy Center



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