

PEOPLE

It's a queer world after all

New greeting card company records same-sex history

BY MEG DALY

At first glance, Kevin Thomas seems an unusual suspect for an entrepreneur of a gay and lesbian greeting card company.

The 46-year-old history buff is the creator of Our World Press, publisher of glossy black and white and sepia-toned cards depicting same-sex couples from the early to mid-20th century. But Thomas, who has lived in Southeast Portland for four years with his partner and their son, is straight.

"It's something that needed to be done," says Thomas, who for decades has collected images and objects from U.S. history that he feared would be "forgotten." His 14 years as an antique dealer has given him special access to a world of memorabilia.

As a child of an interracial marriage, Thomas took a particular interest in saving pictures of nontraditional couples and has created an informal photo history of anonymous same-sex and interracial pairs. The images, he says, "tell a story of our history."

The idea occurred to him a few years ago that many of the photos would make great greeting cards. March 3 of this year catapulted him into action. Watching so many queer friends and fellow Oregonians line up for marriage licenses at the Multnomah Building, Thomas knew he had the perfect wedding cards just waiting to be made.

Less than two months later, Our World Press rolled out its first nine cards targeted at newlyweds. Each one has a salutation inside congratulating the lucky couple.

Thomas says it was "very difficult" deciding which images to use for his first print run. Many he ultimately chose are posed family portraits. Others are candid. One card that looks to be set in the 1950s features a woman on bended knees, head upturned, taking a bite of an apple being fed to her by a female companion. Inside it reads, "Yes!"

Another shows the backs of two men with polka-dotted aprons doing dishes. This one, his best seller, reads, "Congratulations on your domestic bliss!"

Thomas tries to stay away from explicitly sexual or nude photos for the cards. "I wanted something that your grandmother could get you," he smiles.

But, by the same token, there is no way of proving whether the "couples" featured are actually lovers or just friends or relatives. "One never knows," Thomas muses. "Still, same-sex couples did pose for these types of photos, they were just not allowed to talk about what was really going on."

After spending years poring over thousands of old photos, Thomas feels convinced his cards contain images of actual couples. Either way, they "read" gay and lesbian, especially to a queer audience.

According to Rob Douglass of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, historical photos are important to modern-day queers. "The photographs are valuable because they validate that homosexuals did indeed exist across all strata of society," he says. "Oftentimes the only proof we have is some round-about yarn in the family about old Auntie being 'a little peculiar.'"

Douglass also notes that the photos' very



Kevin Thomas (right) and his best-selling wedding card

existence shows they were taken "by peers who also accepted this lifestyle."

Thomas has found a wide audience through distribution to card and other specialty shops. In the Portland area, you can find them at In Other Words, Powell's City of Books, Powell's Books on Hawthorne, Greg's, Wham! and New Seasons, to name a few.

"People love them," says Sue Burns, manager of In Other Words. "I've even had people come in and buy them for straight couples who are getting married."

Thomas has also marketed the cards nationally, including to stores in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. He says shop owners have been responsive, often thanking him for providing these kinds of images.

Next up on the Our World production line will be a series of cards for same-sex parents. Thomas says it was particularly difficult finding a photo of gay dads from the mid-1900s, but find one he did.

After that, he plans to make cards that aren't necessarily wedding or family related but that reflect happy queer couplehood in general. One particularly striking image features a 1950s interracial lesbian couple on a motorcycle.

"I want to see the expression on a black 'dyke on a bike' to the fact that she existed back then, too," he says.

Thomas acknowledges that Our World Press is not a get-rich-quick scheme. "I could probably make more money doing other things," he notes. But he loves old photos, and he feels good about filling an important niche in the greeting card business.

Like other same-sex marriage proponents, Thomas shows no sign of losing momentum in the celebration and legitimization of queer love and family. **J**

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