

Masonic "Postcards"

By: Ralph B. Duncan

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For over one hundred years the collecting of postcards has been a hobby pursued by many in this country. Few members of the Craft however realize the Masonic aspects of such collecting and these cards have long been neglected by general collectors of Masonic memorabilia.

Although government issued postals were used by Masons in the 1870's and 1880's for printed meeting notices, death announcements, and mutual benefit society assessments, the use of view cards, as we know them today, did not begin in this country until the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

The newly erected Masonic Temple on the northeast corner of State and Randolph Streets in Chicago became one of the show places in that city during the Columbian Exposition. The visitors to this first "skyscraper" were able to ride the elevator to the top and view the fair grounds on the far south side of the city on a clear day.

This building became the first known Masonic Temple to appear on postcards. Through the years it has appeared on the largest number of different printings of any Masonic Building.

The period from 1893 to 1896 is referred to today as the Pioneer Era of postcard collecting. Few companies were producing cards and most of the coloration was done by printers in Germany. On the early cards, all messages had to appear on the front (view) side of the card and only the address was shown on the back.

Private printers were granted permission by an act of Congress to print and sell postcards which could be mailed at the same cost as government postals on May 19, 1898. These cards were known as "Private Mailing Cards." The short period from 1898 to 190] produced several cards of a Masonic nature.

In 1901 the imprint on the reverse side of the card changed to the current term "post card" but only the address still could be used on this side.

The divided back appeared in 1907 and our cards still retain this format. The front has seen successive changes in style from white borders to linen to the current photochrome printing. The first fifteen years of this century has sometimes been referred to as the "Golden Era of Post Card Collecting." As a result of the first World War, printing of the cards shifted from Germany to the United States and many local printing companies began to develop.

One might think that the only postcards of Masonic interest are those of Masonic Temples. This is far from true, although Temple cards are those most often found today.

Among the most collectible Masonic postcards are those entitled, "Are You A Mason?" The first set of six cards were copyrighted by Irvin M. Kline in 1907. They were published by the Anglo-American Card Company and the Macoy Publishing Company of New York City.

The titles of these six cards are:

No. 1- The Grand Lodge in Session

2 - The Masons at Work/ The Masonical Harmony

3 - Receiving the Password

4 - The Initiation

S - Riding the Goat

6- The Mason's Wife Giving Away the Secret

The influence for the titles on these cards may well have been a farcical comedy by the same name, "Are You A Mason?" which appeared on Broadway in New York City in 1901. The three act play by Leo Dietrichstein was playing in England as late as 1911. This play was adapted and translated from an original German farce, "Logen Bruder" by Laufs and Kratz.

These American postcards were printed in black and white with some sections colored in yellow. Within a few years, identical pictures appeared in full color printed in Great Britain by the Millar and Lang company in their National Series.

Over one hundred and fifty of these cards are known to exist today in their different forms. They lampoon Freemasonry by giving totally false meanings to such terms as "Passing", "Raising", "Charge", "Mark" and "Grip or Token".

Part of the reason for the scarcity of these British cards may well be the collection of many postcards during the paper scrap drives in England during World War II.

The Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company, while in New York City, produced and sold many Masonic postcards, both of a comic and serious nature. In later years, the Curt Teich Company of Chicago became the largest producer of postcards of Masonic Temples. Today,

thousands of such Masonic cards are in the company archives at the Lake County Museum in Wauconda, Illinois.

A large number of postcards have been created which show scenes of Masonic Homes throughout the country. The Masonic Homes of Elizabethtown, PA and the Masonic Home at Utica, NY are the locations with the greatest number of different views.

During World War II, The Masonic Service Association of the United States operated Army and Navy Service Centers in many states. Postcards were issued of the locations (both external and internal pictures of the buildings and activities) which were distributed to the servicemen to mail to their loved ones.

Through the first three decades of this century cards were sold depicting various aspects of the Grand Encampment sessions of the Knights Templar and the Imperial Sessions of the A.A.O.N.M.S.

Masonic postcards have been printed on a variety of material; some on thin sheets of aluminum and others on leather. In some instances, add-ons have been attached to the postcards; such as pins, miniature hats, pennants, decals and photographs. An example of such a card is one which bears the title, "The Mason Wearing His First Pin" and depicts an infant wearing a diaper with a safety pin attached.

Three view cards of Masonic buildings are referred to as "hold-to-light" cards. In these instances, tissue paper placed over die cut windows allows light from the rear to illuminate the windows, giving the illusion of a night time view. Two of these are of the Chicago Masonic Temple; the other is of Lulu Shrine Temple of Philadelphia.

In recent years, interest has increased in cards which show interior views of Lodgerooms, and those of a real photographic nature. Real photograph cards at one time were among the lowest priority among postcard collectors. Today we realize that these cards not only give the most accurate pictures of buildings, people and their surroundings, but they also may have been a "one of a kind" item which was produced for the individual depicted in the photo.

Lately, few new Masonic postcards are being produced within the United States. A limited number of views have been printed by the Scottish Rite Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, MA of items in their collections. Some of the better foreign cards have been issued by the various Grand Lodges of France. One way to assist in preserving information about your own Lodge is to produce a postcard of your Masonic Temple. As Lodges consolidate and buildings are sold, or new buildings erected, postcards may be the only picture of some of our buildings.

As in most specialized collecting, items are not easily found. Most of the Masonic postcards are bought and sold through specialized antique dealers and at postcard shows where these dealers

are present. Rarely do they appear for sale at flea markets and at antique dealers within local communities unless it is of a local view.

As a renewed interest in collecting of postcards in general has occurred during the past decade, so has the search for Masonic related material flourished.

In the collecting of Masonic postcards not only are you increasing your knowledge about the Craft, but you are assisting in preserving our heritage.

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