

Compliments of the Season: Christmas and New Year Greetings from U.S. Rural Carriers

Purpose. This exhibit will explore the Christmas and New Year greeting souvenirs and postcards given by rural carriers to their patrons from the early 20th century to the present day. While the primary focus is on the “Golden Age of Postcards,” 1906-1916, the exhibit does include items before and after that time period.

Treatment. This exhibit examines the subject more-or-less chronologically. It starts with the earliest known type of souvenir, the greetings booklet, and examines all known types. The next section examines postcards. The majority of the exhibit focuses on cards from the years 1906 to 1916, “the Golden Age of Postcards.” This section covers the types, publishers, and dates of cards, how they were used, and how they reflect several aspects of the RFD service. The last section of the exhibit covers the few items known after the 1920s.

Importance. This exhibit is the first to display this subject. These cards are sometimes collected by those that collect RFD cancels, as collateral material, but never as the main focus of an exhibit. These cards illustrate the RFD system which revolutionized communications and commerce in rural America. During the prime age of these cards, written communications were the only option for most rural residents, who had no telephones, indeed the majority did not have electricity. Letters and cards were the primary means of communication, even with neighbors.

Knowledge, Study & Research. The information in this exhibit is original research. Prior to the work shown in this exhibit, there was virtually no research on these items. Richow illustrates several items in his *Encyclopedia of R.F.D. Cancels*, but makes no attempt to date them or perform any further investigation.

The exhibitor went to original sources such as *RFD News*, the newsletter of the Rural Letter Carriers Association, to locate any information or advertisements for these items. This research enabled the exhibitor to determine publishers of the

many of the cards. In particular, he identified, for the first time, the most prolific publisher: the Republican Printing Company of Rushville, Indiana.

In addition to information gathered from his own extensive collection, the exhibitor has surveyed other known card accumulations and determined the year of issue for each of the Republican designs.

One has to believe these cards had limited appeal because their office of origin could not be determined if they were not canceled or docketed with that information. Most cards only have the carrier name and route number. The exhibitor discovered that the origin of most cards could be found by tedious research in the 1910 and 1920 US Censuses, and the 1903 to 1911 editions of the *Official Register of the U.S.* Using those sources, the post office and state of origin of almost every item in this exhibit have been identified. No small feat. This also yielded information on the geographic distribution of the cards.

Rarity. These cards can be found in offerings of some postcard dealers, and a few postal history dealers. The typical Republican cards from 1909 to 1915 are not difficult. Some variations of Republican cards are more difficult. The earlier cards, the sample cards, most of the real photo cards, the adapted commercial cards, and custom-designed cards are rare.

The exhibitor has conducted a survey of the known holdings of these materials. Statements about rarity or numbers reported are from that survey. The real photo cards command respectable prices because of their popularity with real photo card ‘employment or professions’ collectors. Items of most significant rarity are marked in the exhibit.

Condition. Given that many of these items are one-of-a-kind, condition is as best as can be expected. The more common Republican cards shown were chosen for their condition and to display as wide a range of origin states as possible.