

Compliments of the Season:

Christmas and New Year Greetings from U.S. Rural Carriers



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Real photo card printed on Cyko photo paper (reported use 1904-1920s).

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.

At the start of the 20th century, city dwellers had enjoyed free mail delivery for several decades, but most rural patrons had to call at a post office to pick up their mail.

The modern US Rural Free Delivery (RFD) service began with a tiny number of experimental routes in 1896 and initially grew very slowly. RFD was not widespread until 1902-1903 when Congress began to fund thousands of new routes because of public demand. The number of routes grew exponentially each year thereafter into the 1920s. The development of the rural delivery system coincided with

the rise in the popularity of postcard greetings, and more specifically Christmas greetings.

Several companies marketed souvenirs and postcards to rural carriers for them to distribute to the patrons on their routes. The practice could be, and sometimes was, a subtle request for a holiday gift or tip. Because of that aspect, the Post Office Department took a dim view of the practice and had regulations to prohibit it. It is apparent from the existing number of cards that the rules were ignored as often as respected.

At the end of the postcard craze about 1916, these carrier specific greetings virtually disappeared. A few items are known in the decades that follow. Undoubtedly carriers that wished to send patrons a holiday greeting, switched to standard commercial Christmas cards in envelopes. Since about 1975, a mail-order company (now on the web) has marketed holiday cards for rural carriers.

Plan of the Exhibit

1. Souvenir Booklets, Starting 1902

- A. Carriers Greeting Company
- B. Ohio Printing Company

2. Golden Age of Cards, 1906-1916

- A. Early Designs
- B. Ohio Printing Company
- C. Republican Printing Company
- D. Adapted Commercial Cards
- E. Custom Designed Cards
- F. Real Photo Cards

3. Postal use and mis-use

- A. No postage
- B. Properly Used with Postage

4. Reflections of the RFD System

- A. Christmas Day Operations
- B. County Systems of RFD Routes
- C. Female Carriers
- D. A Family Business
- E. All in the Office
- F. States with few routes

5. After 1916

- A. 1930s and 1940s
- B. 1950s and 1960s
- c. 1970s to present, Grace Sales Company

Original Research: Virtually everything in this exhibit is original research by the exhibitor. This includes

- Identification of the publishers of some cards, in particular, identification of the most prolific publisher: the Republican Printing Company of Rushville, Indiana
- Determination of the year of use for each of Republican's designs
- History of the publishers and the RFD carriers themselves
- Identification of the origin office for almost all the cards and items in this exhibit. This is no small feat, as most only have a carrier name and route number – no post office or state. This was done by consulting several government records, mainly the 1910 *U.S. Federal Census* and the 1903 to 1911 editions of the *Official Register of the U.S.*

Item Selection: All the items in this exhibit were specifically used for Christmas and New Years greetings. All the real photo cards either have a holiday message in the image or on the message area of the card. Real photos of rural carriers without these greetings are beyond the scope of this exhibit.

Rarity: Items of significant rarity and interest are marked with ★ and accompanying text in **Bold**.



Unknown carrier and location.
Reverse is blank.
Two color lithograph.