

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# Real Photo Postcards

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Picture a Wilmette street corner in 1916. The old Brethold Building on the southwest corner of Wilmette Ave. and Green Bay Road, still has its cone-shaped tower, with an ironwork weather-vane at the top. Wilming's Pharmacy displays photos and magazines and glass bottles in its windows, and the long east-facing wall is painted with a big ad for Coca-Cola, next to which a woman sits on a bench, holding something in her lap. On the second floor, a window announces in gilded letters the office of John Smith, Dentist, and a man wearing glasses – Dr. Smith himself, perhaps? – sits in the next window over, gazing out at the



street. A bicycle leans next to the pharmacy door, below the sign for Dr. B. M. Conley, whose office is also upstairs. Next door, in the Oddfellows Building, a man enters a door whose window advertises Cigars and Tobacco, next to the awning of an ice-cream parlor. A soda, says the sign on the sidewalk, is only 5 cents. A woman in a long white dress, holding her toddler by the hand, peers into the crowded shop window of Tucker's Shoes.

A precious glimpse of a vanished world is captured forever in this little scene. We owe its survival to a short-lived fad that swept America 100 years ago. Real photo postcards – collectors call them RPPCs – came into existence in 1907, when the US Post Office first declared that, with a penny stamp, a card could be sent through the mail with a photo or picture on one side and a “divided back” on the other, leaving room for a short message next to the recipient’s address.

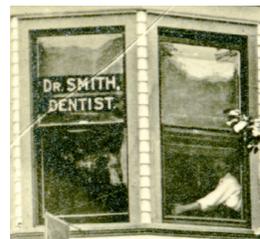
Before long, racks of postcards sprang up on drugstore counters across the country, and companies competed to fill the demand. In Chicago, the photo studios of C. R. Childs, P. L. Huckins, and H. B. Brooks sent photographers out to suburbs like Wilmette to take pictures of streets and buildings, developing them as postcards that were then marketed to local drugstores like Wilming's. Prominent Wilmette photographers, like H. G. Borgfeldt and T.

S. Gillette, made the most of the new fad by selling copies of their photographs that they had developed onto the pre-printed postcard paper.

The craze for sending and collecting photo postcards had started to fade by the 1920s, but their heyday (roughly 1907-1918) proved to be a golden age for local American photography.

It has also proved to be a boon to local history museums. Our museum has lots of these cards in its collection, most of them given to us over the years, but a few of them discovered on

eBay. Recently, we were able to acquire several dozen RPPCs of exceptional historical interest, including the one seen here, at an auction of the estate of local collector Mike Saper.



*Because they were developed directly onto the paper (hence the term “real photo”) the quality of these is so high that enlarging the images (as at left) often reveals astounding levels of detail.*

One of the keenest delights of working with these cards is reading the messages. These sometimes comment on the picture on the other side. “Here is our beach,” runs one note, “only 7 blocks from our house!” A photo of horse and wagon at the old train station is joined by the welcoming message, “Here is the carriage waiting for you.” Helen Gage sends a photo (previously unknown to us) of her house at 1134 Elmwood with a note wishing her friends a happy new year in 1908. A beautifully detailed 1914 photo of the southeast corner of Wilmette and Central Avenues comes with a note from “Tillie” that doubtless spoke for many postcard senders: “Don’t know anything new to write a letter. Was downtown today and got this card.” We’re glad she did, and especially glad that it at last made its way to us for safe-keeping.

*Patrick Leary*