Photomontage Postcards and the American Tall-tale Culture

The American tall-tale photomontage postcard was born from a marriage between the folk practice of myth-creation and the medium photography. American tall-tales were visualized in the early 20th century as composite images for mass distribution, largely in the Midwest but certainly across the entire nation as postal cards. In this paper, through a basic history of these postcards I will introduce a few key artists and survey their ties to our folk cultural heritage while never engaging the probative attention and analysis of the Art world even after the acceptance of collage and Surrealism.

The history of the postcard in the United States and its regulations are very much part of the perfect storm which aided in the massive proliferation of the photo postal card. The first of these cards that were not sealed in an envelope was technically called Lipman’s Postal Card, with the earliest postmark known to be 1870 (in the United States), however “-it soon became obsolete when the Government released its own postal card.”¹ These early cards were attractive as an alternative to consumers because at one penny each they were half the cost of sealed cards to send. Besides being limited to government printers, these cards had specific rules regarding their use which were continuously misunderstood by the public. In 1898 an act of Congress allowed private publishers to print their own versions of the “private mail card” (PMC). This change allowed for a larger variety of cards to be created, consumed and mailed. This same year, the Rural Free Delivery expanded their mail delivery service from towns with a minimum of at least ten thousand to significantly smaller populations, as well as many single person stops.² This delivery service now being daily meant that just for a penny news was faster than ever and affordable for most.

By 1901 the main streaming of photography gave people the opportunity to send through the mail their images printed on paper that had the legal postcard backs which are typically referred to as real photo postcards. Because there was still a regulation at this time that no writing was allowed on the postcard side except the address, it was very common for the image side to creatively be enhanced with text in some way. (Figure 1) Finally in 1907 the divided back postcard was permitted in the United States. An estimation of how many of these divided postcards were sent this first year varies from source to source but in at least one it is estimated to be over 650million; staggering when you figure the total U.S. population at the time was under 90 million.³ Now that the postcard found its most user-friendly format for writing, a buyer was presented with hundreds of options to choose from for purchase.⁴ (By the

² Michas, Introduction to Early Postcard Prints, 46.
⁴ “When Postcards Were the Social Network,” Collectors Weekly, interview of Ann Waidelich by Maribeth Keane,
height of the tall-tale postcard golden age, there were postcard stores, the demand was so high. Figure 2) Along with this format and six full years of real photography cards being sent, there came an appetite for a different type of image.

“In the early 1900s, American wit and ingenuity challenged the old maxim “Photographers don’t lie” with a new format for the time-honored tall tale. This phenomenon originated in the Midwest, where farmers were expert in straight-faced boasting about the enormity of prize specimens, whether they be produce grown, fish caught, or animals hunted.” The exaggerated photomontage postcard, sometimes called a “freak”, “trick” or “fantasy” card and later “tall-tale” postcards, were, in essence, a visualization of the straight-faced yarn spinning considered part of the fabric of American culture. The first composite images of this genre created were actually sent in sealed envelopes, but by 1905 they were being created specifically as postcards, unsealed and mailed. No individual artist is credited with being the ‘first’ to make or mail these. As described earlier, the storm that was the invention of photo negatives, the divided back postcard and Rural Free Delivery sparked simultaneous experimentation across the country.

According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, in the context of the photographic image, a postcard, “- depicting a geographic location engendered a certain myth about that town or region, usually equating the land with an Arcadian utopia.” They go on to suggest that the prevalence in rural communities for tall-tale postcards stemmed from a hope “-to forge a national identity for themselves as a place of agrarian abundance.” The earliest of these images as postcards are dated 1905 with their golden age defined as being from approximately 1908 to 1915. Folklorist Robert Welsch defines the tall tale as usually short, having one theme, only hinting at further narrative. Another way to define them is to say they “are told by insiders to outsiders for the amusement of the insider. Tellers of tall tales do not believe their narrative but want the audience to believe it.” For example:

I grew a crop of corn so big I had to go for the neighbors to help me get it onto the wagon. We took it home but there was no scale large enough to weigh it so we got a block and tackle and hung it on the windmill tower while I took a picture of it. That picture weighed twelve pounds.

Comparing these tales visualized in postcards to television, Welsch says that just as it (TV) “-has made possible theatrical effects that were only dreams to Shakespeare, photography brought into being, visual effects that, tall-tale tellers through the centuries had seen only in their fertile imaginations.”

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Michas, Introduction to Early Postcard Prints, 33.
http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/feature/talltales/
“About Tall-Tale Postcards,” Wisconsin Historical Society;
“What is a Tall Tale?” Michigan State University Museum: Tall Tale Postcards, Storytelling through the mail, (online exhibit) http://museum.msu.edu/museum/tes/talltale/index.html
Why the Midwest seemed to especially favor these cards and generate so many artists at the same time, as suggested by writer Alain Weill, is because their, “exaggerated versions of reality or pure invention-” were welcome since they “encapsulated the rural dream of abundance and prosperity.”

Even though advertisements that had been luring people to move West made promises, speaking in tall-tales like, “-land said to be so fertile at harvest time that a man could get lost in his own luxuriant fields.” There was a desire to believe that possibility, as historian Karal Ann Marling postulates a romanticized correlation where if nature, “-spawned the Grand Canyon, the Great Lakes, the Rockies and the trackless sprawl of the Great Plains worked according to different measurements in America provided the climate in which avid exploration, earnest naturalism, and outrageous hoax could flourish apace.” The still sparsely populated area’s inhabitants however often found themselves subject to violent climatic changes, droughts, floods and even swarms of bugs. Historians Cynthia Rubin and Morgan Williams suggest that despite the hardships they found themselves in, these pioneers were, “Not about to admit to anyone their growing disappointment with their new homes-.” Instead, they were more likely to exaggerate a bit. Marling quotes Tom Wolfe as saying American culture is a sort of, “-Hog-stomping Baroque exuberance -,” with a, “-certain native propensity for fiddling with scale-.” For as often as there were hardships there were also times of bounty in the fertile Midwest. At least a decade after the first known real picture postcards were being produced for example, the epic corn harvest year of 1887 in Sioux City Iowa inspired the locals to build a palace made entirely out of corn. Whether this inspired other communities to follow suit or it was in the spirit of competition, more towns started similar traditions such as vegetable inspired festivals, county fairs which have prizes for the largest agricultural items and colorful parades. This juxtaposition of overwhelming highs and lows in an agriculturally based livelihood, for a culture well versed in the tall-tale, created a conducive environment for the exaggerated postcard.

Before and during the golden age of the tall-tale postcard, trusted sources for facts like newspapers were also a means of spreading both hoaxes and real ‘larger than life’ stories. There were rampant articles on things such as finding giant petrified men and crops so big as to topple homes; with the public being, more often than not, duped; confirmation by way of an ‘I’ve seen it with my own eyes’ via mail correspondence to those not close enough to have been able to see it for themselves. Historians Cynthia Elyce Rubin and Morgan Williams note that an underlying recognition of the possible, of hopefulness in the vastness of the Midwest added to the desire for the pictorial versioning of things. Marling adds her own analysis, “American culture has endlessly contended with the riddle of heroic scale: of how the finite individual can find his bearings in the infinite immensity of space; of how to symbolize and so come to grips with a wholly new world, sized for Titans or for gods.”

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12 Weill, Photomontages Improbables, 3.
15 Marling. Colossus of Roads, xi.
16 Ibid, 6.
17 Rubin and Morgan. Larger Than Life, 60-63.
18 Ibid, 6.
19 Ibid, 10-13.
20 Ibid, 54.
dream could be reflected in images of fishing holes so replete with trout that it was all a man could do to fight them off, even if the image (or ideal) was total fiction.22

The artists of these postcards are still very much undiscovered. While many cards are identified by studio stamps or signed by the photographer, their creators’ biographic information remains basic. Trying to follow sources of inspiration is problematic; no evidence exists currently to suggest that even the most prolific artists, William Martin and Alfred Johnson Jr., knew of one another’s work.23 Yet, by their very popularity it is easy to suppose that at least the better selling images would have found their way into the hands of one another through mutual friends or printing distributors. The sheer number of photographers making tall-tales of giant fruit on wagon beds or train cars alone supports only two possible conclusions: one, that there was a coincidental, simultaneous occurrence of that same idea from artists spanning the entire country or two, that we simply have not yet traced the source image to its origin and out to each of the photographers who made their own versions. Their work is still almost entirely lacking in formal acknowledgement or analysis by the art history world so as yet, either possibility exists.

Alfred Stanley Johnson Jr. (1863-1932) of Wisconsin, was one of the more prolific artists of tall-tale postcards.24 Apparently Johnson was well versed in the art of photography before he started making these photomontages having trained under his father.25 In an ad for his gallery, he offered a variety of image making techniques including sun pictures, carbon pictures, and photo jewelry.26 There are a couple of process images from Johnson’s work extant which clearly show how he and presumably most of the artists, created their composite images. He would prepare two or three photos, one being the background with the people in their positions, often holding a prop. (Figure 3) Then, one or more photos were taken, these being close ups of the main subjects. He paired them by physically cutting out the close up images, then pasting it neatly onto the background. When the collage was fully built, a photograph of the composite would be made. After this final print ready negative was made, according to writer Ania Michas, it is likely that these postcards were printed using Rotogravure, though the ones after 1915 were probably printed using monochromes with photolithographic and photogravure techniques or offset lithography.27 Johnson’s photomontages are typically very highly finished, with the seams between layers barely discernible.

Trends in subject may have been a partial reason for Johnson’s popularity since he, “-frequently pressed his numerous children into service as models-.”28 During the golden age Welsch says photographs of children were almost as popular as those of motor cars, with the automobile being especially prized because of its new-factor.29

The Wisconsin Historical Society has a strong collection of Johnson’s tall-tale postcards and after a sample examination of his decade long exploration of the medium, finds “-a clear progression in

24 Welsch, Tall-Tale Postcards, 110. Welsch claims he was second only to Martin.
26 Rubin and Morgan. Larger Than Life, 106.
27 Michas, Introduction to Early Postcard Prints, 88.
28 Weill, Photomontages Improbables, 3.
29 Welsch, Tall-Tale Postcards, 107 and 117.
sophistication emerging, with regards to both content and composition.”30 Specifically they cite the change from his early composition *Onions* (1909, Figure 4) where the vegetable is “-motionless on the farmer’s wheelbarrow with an almost statuesque, albeit elegant, rigidity.” This image seems very static indeed when compared with the later *Homeward Bound* (1915, Figure 5) image.31 Possibly because of his facility with photography, Johnson was, according to Welsch, one of the very few artists working within this genre to attempt and be successful at depicting action like that seen in *Homeward Bound*, “-that sometimes approached uncontrolled violence.”32 The compositions he created where the joke started with exaggeration of size was often sold by his careful depiction of, “-the difficulties such bounty brings along with it” such as trying to shovel giant onions through a barn door or can peaches taller than a human.33 Welsch credits Johnson as being the originator of the postcard texts which read things like, “How We Do Things At Berwick, PA.”34 He is also one of the few artists who added puns to his postcards, often these were not used as a means to sell the exaggeration but to add a second joke the reader might have missed for musing on the image itself.35 (Figures 6 and 7)

William H Martin, known as Dad Martin (1865-1940) of Kansas, was trained in photography by a man named E.H. Corwin whose studio he bought out sometime around 1894.36 By 1908 Martin was making these trick photo postcards. Like Johnson, Martin was another artist versed in multiple process methods. According to Welsch, Martin was the most prolific of the tall-tale postcard artists. This is possibly partly due to the fact that he had distribution deals with at least two other printing firms besides his own.37 As early as 1909 he was advertising that he was printing ten thousand postcards daily out of his own studio.38 Writer Alain Weil suggests that he was producing seven million postcards per year, but it is not clear whether this number was out of his own studio or if it was a combination between his and those printing firms with whom he had the distribution and printing deals.39 Martin was savvy enough to consider uses besides postcards for his photomontages. There are several images he transformed a step further from the original photomontage to become advertisements such as his “A load of extra good apples” which used the same image to sell washing machines (by adding a billboard for washing machines in the background).40 (Figures 8) Martin also made at least two souvenir postcards commemorating a trip Presidential candidate, William Howard Taft made through Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska in 1908. Welsch asserts that these particular images associated Taft with “-rich, inflated abundance.”41

Martin’s precision coupled with his subjects, made for postcards so popular several printings are found of his more common works. Welsch’s review of *Saltd* (Figure 9) suggests that it may have been, “-plagiarized by other card distributors-”since a version exists which not only lacks the correct copyright information but also stops short of the skill level typified by Martin’s hand, this being one of many

32 Welsch, *Tall-Tale Postcards*, 111.
37 Welsch, *Tall-Tale Postcards*, 100.
showing the same problems. The Wisconsin Historical Society says that Martin’s reason for having gotten into making these composite images was “-mostly economically driven-” which may account for why he sold his business only four years after starting the photomontage work and could be part of the reason some images appear to have been plagiarized.

Late to the tall-tale postcard scene and long after the end of its golden age was Kansas artist, Frank D. Conard, nicknamed Pop Conard (dates unknown). He was an established postcard photographer of scenery and social events as well as a radio station owner. In 1935 the town he lived in was invaded by a swarm of grasshoppers. Conard discussed what followed that event with a local newspaper saying that the evening the bugs came down he, “-went home to sleep, but awoke at 3 a.m. and all I could think about was grasshoppers. By morning I had the idea of having fun with the grasshoppers, and took my pictures and superimposed the grasshoppers with humans.” Conard would call this series of cards the ‘whopper hoppers’. (Figure 10) Unlike his predecessors, Conard continued making these cards for the rest of his life. Between 1935 and 1963 when he retired, it is estimated he had printed three million whopper hoppers.

Though technique as a means to judge the beauty of a print is understood, in terms of these tall-tale postcards the attention to the final composite image could make or break whether it believable. A simple application of a cut out animal pasted on top of a background in the wrong artist’s hands (Figure 11) fails to sell truth let alone exaggeration. Some potentially great compositions are undermined by the simple fact that the last step of photographing the collage was done under uneven lighting condition. The shadows cast and/or obvious white paper edges of the cut pieces remove the myth, a version of the tale being told with a wink so the audience is never in any doubt that it is all in fun. (Figures 12 and 13)

The drop in popularity for these tall-tale postcards seems to have been a convergence of factors much like its beginning. The first World War sparked a ban on imported German postcards, Germany having been a long time source for printing. Ania Michas offers the calculation that 75% of “-pre-WWI American postcards were printed in Germany.” The realities of the war also seemed to have taken their toll on even the rural communities, possibly fracturing the “-utopian myth upon which these postcards were based. What’s more, the advances in technology and production catalyzed by wartime industry, in the form of and affordable personal automobiles and telephones, ushered in new systems of information exchange, making postcards all but obsolete.

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42 Welsch, *Tall-Tale Postcards*, 103.
45 Welsch, *Tall-Tale Postcards*, 89.
50 Ibid, 155- 156.
51 Michas, Introduction to Early Postcard Prints, 16.
52 Ibid, 16.
In her foreword of the exhibition catalog *Dreams, Lies, and Exaggerations: Photomontage in America*, Director Gwendolyn Owens says that “Photomontage has long been recognized as an important European avant-garde art movement. Less understood, and certainly less well-known, is the advent of photomontage in America, which has resulted in a common misconception of the American movement as simply an outgrowth of the European movement.”\(^5\) These first sentences of the catalog suggest that the show and therefore the catalog will discuss the part tall-tale postcards play in this ancestry of American photomontage. Unfortunately the very next sentence quashes that when Owens writes their show is the “first comprehensive study of photomontage in America from the 1930s to the mid-1960s.” Though it is left unstated the “movement” she aligns their “comprehensive [ness]” of photomontage to the movement, Surrealism. Despite this, it is difficult to understand why they would chose to start at such a late year when Owens clearly notes that curator Cynthia Wayne “-looked beyond traditional art photography sources to examine how photomontage was practiced by a wide range of American artists.” The sheer number of tall-tale photomontages in existence could not possibly have escaped her attention since she, “-researched and examined photomontage material in both public and private collections.” If the purpose of the exhibit and catalog was to limit their show around a specific time frame it makes sense to eschew the millions of photomontaged postcards made twenty years prior. The problem is that Owens boasts Wayne’s “-catalogue essay provides a concise analysis of the origin and development of photomontage in America, examines various applications of and approaches to photomontage, and classifies the artists according to their most significant influences on the development of the medium.” If she simply acknowledged their decision to align the show and the origin of American photomontage with Surrealism as defined by the European movement, the claims in this foreword text would make it clear why they had chosen these research limits. At least Wayne does hint at their existence, albeit via other historians’ writing. “In separate texts on the topic [photomontage], both Dawn Ades and Robert Sobieszek address the use of composite imagery in the nineteenth century. Both authors argue that photomontage, or composite imagery, existed in the nineteenth century sharing similar structure, and often a similar spirit with the modernist. These images were found in the context of experimental photography, vernacular postcards, private portrait assemblages, and family albums of the nineteenth century.”\(^5\) Ades’s reference to this experimentation in distorted reality through composite imagery capitalized on “-disruption of scale-“or “-wistfully juxtapose an idea and a real scene.-”\(^5\) Her description and image evidence however are about European experimentation, so it is unclear if she would align the American tall-tale photomontages with these examples.\(^5\) In the history of photomontage it is understood that though this term was not coined until much later with the Dadaists, as a form of expression it was employed almost from the beginning of photography’s invention. Historian Sally A. Stein too, questions the lack of alignment saying, “It remains a matter of some interest why none of the Dadaists acknowledged as a conceptual source commercial combination images which abounded in that period along with vernacular postcards and private portrait assemblages.”\(^5\)

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\(^7\) Ades, *Photomontage*, Figure 130 and 131 on page 108.

“Tall-tale postcards affirmed the fundamental American myth of agricultural abundance — a myth that often diametrically opposed reality. Ultimately, these deceptions remain benign by way of their sheer absurdity, injecting a light-hearted, often humorous note into a landscape seldom willing to offer its own. If the ideal promised by the American Frontier did not yet exist in the real landscape, at least it might in an imagined one.”^59 Perhaps their deliberate absurdity explains an inherent absolution for its dismissal as only play instead of Art by historians. Perhaps it is because they were created for the purpose of selling in quantity, as pre-Greenbergian kitsch, that authoritative sources like Dawn Ades’ *Photomontage* mention their existence but that they “belonged on the whole, to the realm of popular diversion.”^60 Unless tall-tale postcards are found in the personal collections of established artists, or reflected upon by them, it is likely that art historians will find no justifiable tie between the two in terms of inspiration. Without that tie their place as part of the ancestry of photomontage will persist as speculation. These works are recognized for their value as the evolutionary step past traditional storytelling and part of the fabric of folk culture; however, for the art world they will remain as a link from the oral tale, to country fairs, to roadside sculptures of Paul Bunyan, or the World’s Largest Ball of Twine.

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Figures table - Photomontage Postcards and the American Tall-tale Culture

Figure 1.
Photographer unknown
*An Indian Woman of Pine-Creek Manitoba*
ca. 1901-1907
www.vintagepostcards.org

Figure 2.
Photographer unknown
*Patton’s Post Card Hall in Salem, Oregon*
ca. 1908
pdxhistory.com
Figure 3.
Johnson Jr., Alfred Stanley
_Melon Party_
ca. 1911

Figure 4.
Johnson Jr., Alfred Stanley
_Onions_
October 30, 1909
Image ID: 44418
http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=44418
Figure 5.
Johnson Jr., Alfred Stanley
*Homeward Bound*
1915
Image ID: 44668
http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=44668

Figure 6.
Johnson Jr., Alfred Stanley
*Father Works*
Date unknown
A.S.Barnes & Co., 1976. 120.
Figure 7.
Johnson Jr., Alfred Stanley
*Some Ducks*
1913


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Figure 8.
Martin, William H.
*A Load of Extra Good Apples*
1909

Figure 9.
Martin, William H. *Salted* 1909
Image ID: 44617
http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=44617

Figure 10.
Conard, Frank D. *May the Best Man Win* Date unknown
Figure 11.
C.C. Slack & Co.
*We Are Feeling Pretty Foxy*
Date unknown

Figure 12.
Photographer unknown
*The Parcel Post is so convenient in South Berwick, Me.*
Date unknown

Figure 13.
Photographer unknown
*They Come Up In High Water They Caught Several of ‘Em*
Date unknown

http://www.kshs.org/p/cool-things-exaggerated-postcards/10137


Michigan State University Museum: Tall Tale Postcards, Storytelling through the mail. “What is a Tall Tale?”
http://museum.msu.edu/museum/tes/talltale/index.html


Written History of Seneca County, NY. “Postcard History.”
   www.co.seneca.ny.us/history/Postcards%20History.pdf

Wisconsin Historical Society. “About Tall-Tale Postcards.”
   http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/feature/talltales/

Wisconsin Historical Society “Alfred Stanley Johnson Family Footnotes.”

Further Exploration of Images


Fruit from Washington.com E. Morgan William’s Special Collection
   http://www.fruitfromwashington.com/Varities/art/williams_cards.htm

Found in Wisconsin: Larger than life: Tall-Tale Postcards

Hoax Photo Archive
   http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/photo_database/category/tall_tale_postcards


   http://www.lowtechmagazine.com/2008/03/manipulating-pi.html

Michigan Traditional Arts Program: Tall Tale Postcard Collection
   http://museum.msu.edu/s-program/mtap/Collections/talltale.html


Waupun Historical Society
   http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/localhistory/directory/viewsociety.asp?id=159