

Real Photo Postcards: 'Selfies' of Another Era

George Matheson examines an early form of the 'Selfie', popular long before the advent of the Internet and social networking

(All photos courtesy of author)



Two sides of an "undivided card" with a personal message written on the preprinted picture.

card in the same dimensions (3-1/2" x 5-1/2") as standard vintage postcards.

These 'new' cameras introduced the first visual means for the average person to document and record, in a casual, unstaged way, life events from the historical to the mundane.

People took pictures of their friends and in turn their friends took pictures of them, and these photos were printed as postcards that could be mailed and shared with others.

Postcards, known then as "Private Mailing Cards," with a commercially produced picture on the back, were already popular but postal regulations required that the face be reserved for the address. Any personal message had to be written around or on top of the picture on the back.

But in December 1903, the Canadian Postal Service, followed by the United States in 1907, introduced the 'divided card,' creating "a space reserved for communication on the face of the cards to the left of the address."

The Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2013 was "selfie;" a digital picture one takes of oneself and then sends to friends or posts on a social network site. While the word is new, an earlier version was already popular over a hundred years ago at the turn of the 20th century: the Real Photo Postcard (RPPC).

Just as the selfie is a current offshoot of digital photography and high-speed internet, so the RPPC was the result of earlier developments in photography and the postal system.

CDVs and CCs of the late 1800s had made way for self-portrait photographs but they relied on

the assistance of a professional photographer with large, often cumbersome, equipment. (See *Strangers in the Attic: The Era of CDVs and CCs*, in May 2015 YGT.)

Then, in 1903, the Kodak Company introduced a camera suitable for amateurs: the No. 3A Folding Pocket Kodak. While far smaller and more portable than those before it, at 4x5.5x2.5 inches and weighing several pounds, it was huge and heavy in comparison to modern digital cameras. It and others like it were specifically designed for postcard-size film or plates which made it possible for anyone to take a photograph and have it printed on a preprinted

So, with a space for writing messages on one side and these full size personal photographs printed on the other, the era of the RPPC began with a remarkable burst of enthusiasm.

Quickly RPPCs became the rage. According to the US Post Office during the twelve months ending June 30, 1908, when the total population of the US was under 90 million, over 677 million postcards were mailed. People captured the familiar and the foreign, the common and the unusual, the friend and the stranger — and, of course, themselves.

One day while searching in the attic I came across a similar camera: a *Klito Folding Camera*. A wooden camera covered in black leather, the manufacturer, Houghton Ltd., had described it as “thoroughly well made of well-seasoned mahogany with aluminum baseboard and nickel fittings.”

It was the one my grandparents had used over a century ago. While many of their RPPCs, I assume, had been mailed to friends and family, a number had been kept and these were mixed in with hundreds of other commercial postcards, photographs and letters in boxes in the attic.

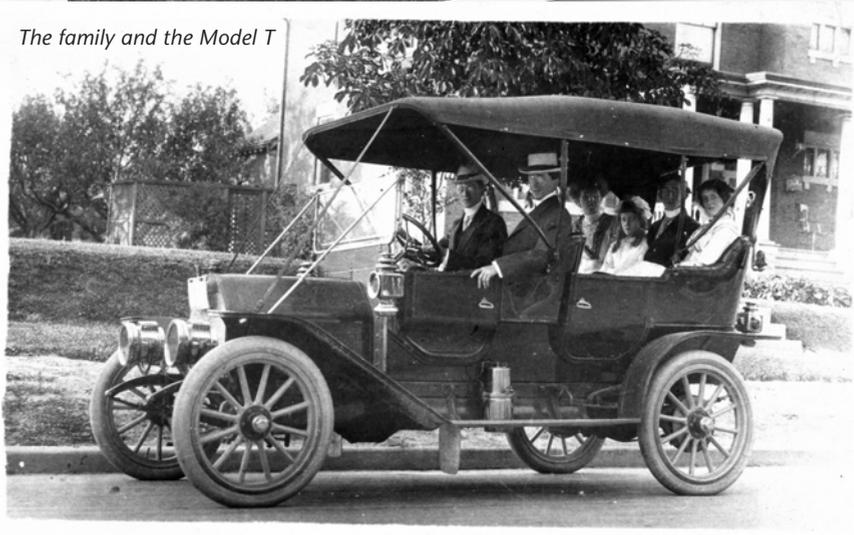
Several showed two young couples presumably on a Sunday afternoon walk in the country. In one, they pause for a moment while climbing a farm gate and the camera catches an air of spontaneity and fun. A date on the front, June 3, 1911, indicates that the photo is from a time when my grandparents, seen on the right, were in the early, playful stages of their courtship.

Another, taken outside of my great grandfather’s house, catches the moment before the family sets off for a ride

A Sunday stroll for two young couples



The family and the Model T



On the Indian Reserve

POST CARD

• AZO •
▲ PLACE ▲
Z ONE-CENT Z
O STAMP O
HERE O
• AZO •

For INLAND POSTAGE only this Space may be used for Communications

THE ADDRESS ONLY TO BE WRITTEN HERE

AZO Stamp Box with circles

Tips on identifying and dating Real Photo Postcards:

- While at first all RPPCs were unique pictures captured by amateur photographers, their popularity led card printing companies to mass-produce some of particular interest or historic value. These later reproductions, made up of a lot of little dots like those in magazines and newspapers, are identifiable under a magnifying glass. In contrast, the examination of an original photo will reveal smooth transitions from one tone to another instead of dots.
- RPPCs were printed on ready-made photographic paper that allowed the postcards to be made directly from negatives. This card stock contained silver in the emulsion and as time passed this silver tended to migrate to the surface of the print creating a tell-tale shiny metallic crust; immediate evidence that it is a “real” photo.
- As the popularity of RPPCs kept growing, a number of paper manufacturers began producing their own photographic papers, each with their own stamp box. The symbol in the four corners of these boxes varied over time, thus serving as a clue in dating the photos. For instance, one of the most popular was Kodak Professional AZO Paper, on which the Teepee photo was printed. In this case, the circles in the four corners of the box indicate that it was printed between 1908 and 1911.



The Klito Folding Camera

in their Model T Ford. The soft-topped Touring car shown was introduced by Henry Ford in 1909 and the CYKO stamp box on the card's front suggests that the photo was taken not long after that when both the car and the camera were new.

A third, quite different set of RPPCs was notable more for the social context and physical surroundings than for the people. My grandfather, shown on the left in the back row, was a Baptist minister for over 55 years and, early in his ministry, he served at a church in Brantford, Ontario, close to the Six Nations Indian Reserve. From time to time, he and others from the church would visit the Reserve. What catches the eye is the formal clothing of the minister and his parishioners, the living conditions of the natives, their cooking pots and the primitive conical teepee (tipi) with hides and clothe sewn together. For them it is where they lead traditional lives on their land; for the church-folk it was an outing — an exotic place to visit.

As the adage goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. For RPPC enthusiasts caught up in the excitement of those early days of photography, every picture told a story. Not all were ‘selfies’ but all were moments caught in time, records of personal experiences as well as a glimpse into the social history of the period. ☞☞



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