

Contemporary Collectibles: The Tom Turkey postcard

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Back in the day when it cost a penny to send a postcard and three cents for a letter, at a time when most people did not have telephones and mail was delivered two or even three times a day, people regularly exchanged holiday cards not only at Christmastime, but at New Year's, Easter, St. Patrick's Day, Halloween, April Fools' Day, Arbor Day and Thanksgiving. Bright, colorful, well produced, often embossed, yet still inexpensive, they make an accessible and festive collectible.

The concept of Thanksgiving arose when George Washington issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation, declaring Thursday, Nov. 26, to be set aside as a day of public prayer and thanksgiving to commemorate the successful launch of the new national government under the Constitution. A second was issued by John Adams in 1798 and then again by James Madison in 1815, with not another until the Civil War period.

It was Sarah J. Hale, editor of Ladies Magazine and then Godey's Lady's Book, who campaigned for its annual celebration on the last Thursday in November, which President Lincoln finally proclaimed as a national holiday in 1863, celebrating victories of the Union army at Vicksburg and Gettysburg. Thanksgiving cards were made primarily in the postcard form, in an era when postcard exchanging and scrapbooking had reached the proportions of a craze, beginning at the time of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

Various themes appeared and reappeared, but, obviously, the featured player was Tom Turkey. Other motifs included pilgrims, Indians, bountiful harvests and family gatherings around tables laden with food. A large number of the cards incorporated patriotic motifs, including the American flag and red, white and blue ribbons and shields, Uncle Sam (sometimes serving the bird), Miss Liberty and the American eagle, celebrating the fact that it is a holiday unique to this country. Children also figured largely - as they did in most holiday cards - playing with pumpkins and frolicking with turkeys.

Among the most valuable of the types of Thanksgiving cards are those known as "hold-to-light." These are die cut so that various colors show through when the card is held up to a light. Other novelty cards sought after by collectors are "projection" cards, which added die-cut projections to flat, often previously designed cards, other "mechanical" cards, such as kaleidoscope specimens incorporating pinwheels with rotating disks or levers that pull, and there are also attractive cards with silk inserts or small, fine glass beads glued to the surface. Examples of pop-up cards are difficult to find intact, one amusing example being an elaborate pop-up turkey designed by Ernest Nister for E.P. Dutton & Co.

One outstanding publisher of these cards was John O. Winsch of Stapleton, N.Y., who operated from 1910 to 1915, employing such talented artists as Samuel L. Schmucker - considered the pre-eminent practitioner in the Golden Age of the postcard (which ended with the introduction of the folded greeting card) - Helen P. Strong, Fred Kolb, Charles Levi, Jason Freixas and Kathryn Elliot. Like several of the other card producers of his time, Winsch had his printed in Germany, known for the quality of its lithographic work. Other notable producers are the celebrated Raphael Tuck and Co., Ullman Manufacturing Co., Leubrie and Elkus Co., M.W. Taggart, and International Art Co.

In addition to those mentioned above, other artists to look for are Ellen Clapsaddle, Frances Brundage, Bernhardt Wall and H.B. Griggs (who signed only with her initials). One of Griggs's most memorable cards depicted nightmarish figures surrounding a young boy in bed, perhaps suggesting that he had eaten too heartily at the feast. So, diner beware!

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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