
Growing up in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, I occasionally trailed after my father into Carl and Otto Kindlisbacher's Buckhorn Tavern. The walls were thick with mounted hunting trophies--moose, wildcat, bear, wolf, mountain goat--and there among them, as if real animals, were an owleyed ripple-skirper, a shovel-tailed snow snake, a dingbat, a horned owl, a fur fish, and "Old Satchelass," world's largest muskellunge. I regarded each with wonder. Were such creatures truly "out there" in the woods? My Dad and assorted patrons assured me they were; actual "in the wilds" postcards further testified to their reality.

But in later, more skeptical years I carefully examined these fantastic beasts and adjudged them taxidermic hoaxes; their photographic existence I attributed to camera tricks. As time passed I noticed similar tall-tale foolery in the postcard racks of Wisconsin resorts and bait shops; all the while I thought, "Why hasn't some folklorist written about this?" Now, delightfully, one has.

Native of Nebraska, aficionado of the great plains, chronicler of the oral tall-tale, Roger L. Welsch has combined his talents to produce a "pictorial history" of tall-tale postcards. With its elaborate illustrations, the volume would lie comfortably on anyone's coffee table; but it is more than some hobbyist's vague picture book. Welsch fixes the birth and flowering of tall-tale cards to the American picture postcard's "Golden Age" (1905-1915); he establishes, through an examination of postmarks, addresses, and publishers, that such cards were primarily a regional phenomenon of the northern and central plains. Welsch isolates the themes of tall-tale postcards as primarily rural and agricultural: they are concerned with fabulous produce (potatoes, apples, watermelons, cucumbers, and especially corn) and enormous animals (fish, rabbits, and grasshoppers); occasionally mythical beasts appear (Colorado's mountain "fur fish" and the cattle range's "jackalope" or "warrior rabbit").

Most importantly for the folklorist, Welsch compares and contrasts the oral tall-tale with its graphic version. He argues that both are brief, monothematic understatements involving gross exaggeration. But whereas oral tales most frequently stress the weather, heroes, and animals, postcards primarily treat the latter, and then in ways having no oral parallels. Moreover, "oral tall-tales generally stress the negative aspects...of the area being described while postcards overwhelmingly underline the positive elements."

Beyond statements on thematic substance, keen appraisals of the technique and artistry underlying these visual "texts" appear in discussions of works by more than a dozen individual postcard makers. How skillfully are photographic superimpositions and reproductions handled? Is perspective maintained? Are humans juxtaposed with oversize flora and fauna? To what extent do imaginative wit and action contribute to pictorial presentations? Is the verbal message on the card appropriately casual and laconic (a fisherman with two catches as big as himself announces "Just a Couple")? By applying these techno-aesthetic canons to his corpus, Welsch not only attempts to rate the quality of individual cards, but he also attempts to distinguish typologically between them and miscellaneous "spin-offs."

In addition to cards and their makers, Welsch tries to understand users as well. Representative messages scrawled on the backs of cards are examined. They reveal senders to be mostly semi-literate poor people utilizing humorous pictures to comment on everything from happiness to dire misfortune. Some too were sent without words and in envelopes for preservation in albums. An appendix on the current antique market for tall-tale postcards imparts wisdom to the reader interested in filling his own album. I, for one, value both the book and the advice.