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Old post cards are highly prized as Michigan municipal memorabilia



Jean Day

Ann Arbor resident Wylan A. Stevens, an avid collector of Michigan post cards and memorabilia admits he "got into selling to support my habit." "I was going to all the shows as a collector," he says, explaining how he

became a dealer as well to help pay his way.

Stevens, the son of the late Albert K. Stevens, a member of the University of Michigan English Department faculty for 41 years says his interest in local history really began 25 years ago while he was a U-M student.

In the early 1960s he recalls buying atlases and books about the University of Michigan for five or ten cents. Post cards, too, were in his growing collections.

"I had more than 100 in the 1960s when I met a man with several thousand. I now have better than 5,000 cards of Washtenaw County and 3,000 of Ann Arbor."

Stevens says that post cards depicted not only municipal buildings and town landmarks but also railroad depots, hospitals prisons and, yes insane asylums.

Around the turn of the century, says Stevens, "post cards were issued almost on demand by the local photographer or druggist who had a dark room in the rear of his store."

Especially in Michigan's small towns, post cards were prized, and residents today look for cards from communities like Dundee, Manchester or Tecumseh. Rare views of towns' main streets are sought. In Northville, Stevens mentions, views of its early fish hatchery are in demand.

Both post card collectors and collectors of Ford memorabilia look for pictures of old Ford plants of the 1920s and '30s.

Prices have risen lately on post cards of railroad depots, Stevens says, relating that a view of an Ypsilanti depot sold six or eight years ago for \$4 and today is selling for \$25 or \$30.

Old views of railroad stations and Great Lakes ships are hard to find today because both post card collectors and specialized collectors of railroad memorabilia or Great Lakes

shipping buy them.

"From 1900 to 1915 was the so-called Golden Age of post cards," says Stevens. Photos from that period are the most sought after cards with cards from the 1920s and '30s not so hard to find. Collectors fill out their gaps with such printed cards, according to Stevens. "People also are into a second wave of collecting with these cards," he adds.

The very earliest picture postal cards date to 1898, he says, as it was not until that year that the government permitted picture post cards to be sent with adhesive stamps. Earlier, in 1873 the United States first issued penny postal cards with printed stamps. Stevens says that in 1893 views of the Columbian World Fair in Chicago were printed on the backs of such cards.

In 1907 the post office permitted messages on the same side of the card as the address, leaving the reverse to be covered completely with a picture. This was the post card mailed throughout the country for one cent.

By 1910, however, domestic producers were worried about competition from German imports of better quality than their own. They were successful in getting tariffs imposed. World War I then ended the problem, and the Golden Age.

Stevens sets up his booth in shows as far west as Chicago and as far east as Cleveland. At such out-of-town shows, he says, he has the best chances of buying Michigan cards from other dealers.

This year he will be setting up his folding card table at the Adrian Antiques Markets at the Lenawee County Fairgrounds, held the fourth Sunday of the month, May through October, and at the Caravan Antiques Markets at the Centreville fairgrounds, which will be held on the following Sundays this year - May 5, June 9, July 14, Aug. 11 and Oct. 13.

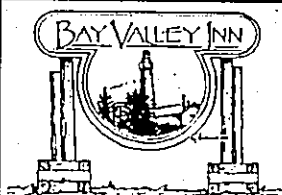
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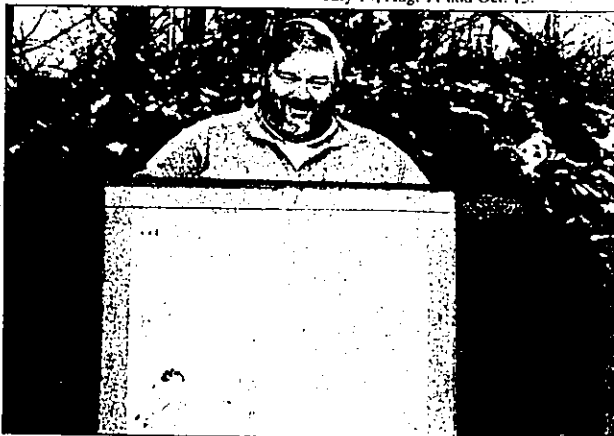
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MAIZE AND BLUE MEMENTO— Wylan Stevens displays his colorful map of Ann Arbor as it was in the 1920s. The maps were sold to finance the construction of the Michigan League on the U-M campus.