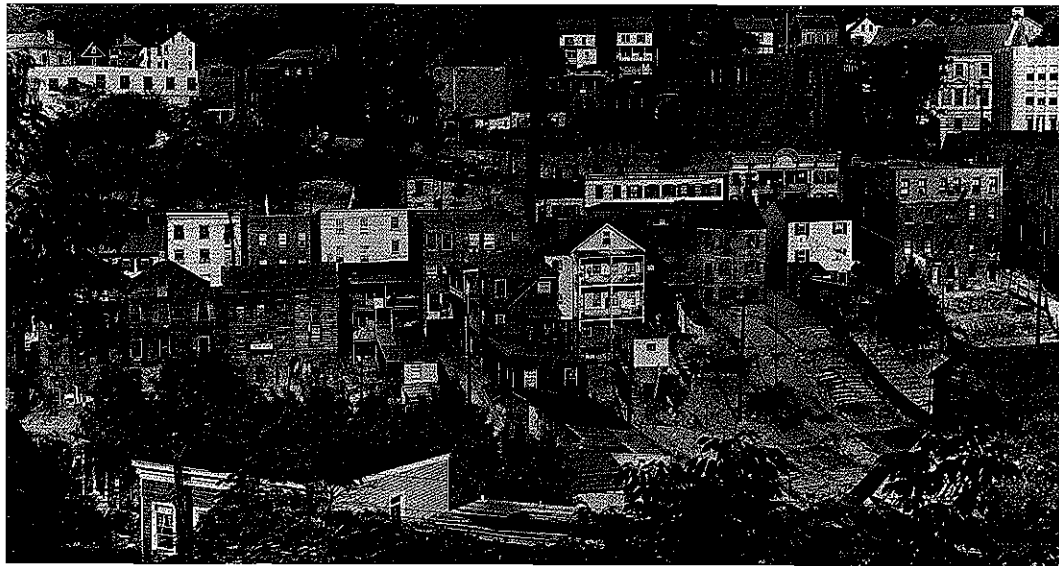


Walker Evans: "Lyric Documentary"

An Illustrated Transcript of a Lecture by Walker Evans
Presented at Yale University, March 11, 1964



Walker Evans, *View of Ossining, New York*, 1930-31. Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 1999 (1999.20.1)

Thank you Dean Danes.¹ Good evening. I'm going to examine and test an idea with you. The idea is implicit in the title of my talk which I think has been announced as "Lyric Documentary." That's a meaning I think you would have caught on the fly. It's not a sober idea to me. It's rather heady. But it's something of a challenge, and your chairman of the visiting speakers has made things much more difficult, while he thought he made it easier, by saying, You can choose your own subject. And you have to think, which is very very painful to me. And he only gave me a month to do it in, and I've been thinking ever since then. I never thought before so much in my life, and I'm not through, so I'm just going to experiment with you, and test this idea . . . My remarks will be anything but Delphic, I can assure you. *[laughter]*

Now for clarity, to begin with, if I may, I'd like to read a very brief exordium and then I'd like to speak to you. My thought is that the term "documentary" is inexact, vague, and even grammatically weak as used to describe a style in photography which happens to be my style. Further, that what I believe is really good in [the] so-called documentary approach in photography is the addition of lyricism. Further, that the lyric is usually produced unconsciously, and even unintentionally and accidentally by the cameraman, with certain exceptions. Further, that when the photographer *presses* for the heightened documentary, he more often than not really misses it.

Once the term "lyric photography" came into my head I felt that I ought to go back and think about where I got it and go into my own aesthetic autobiography . . . from the little I know about art history. And find out what I liked in early works that had this quality which led me to love it.² As I did that, I didn't do it at all in a scholarly way, but I began to find out what I had just been attracted to by love and excitement. And I owe you some little outline of such a trip back.

Leonardo for me is the father of what I call the "lyric documentary." And you all know too well what Leonardo is. But what I'm referring to particularly is Leonardo's medical drawings, his mechanical drawings, his embryological drawings. Those, too, you know awfully well and I won't dwell on them, other than to say that that line and that mental approach, that scientific curiosity and that cleanliness, and that detachment of his seemed to me documentary. And, of course, his line is lyric.

My thoughts go to Vesalius [fig. 1] more than they do to Leonardo . . . You probably know very well that Vesalius is a sixteenth-century anatomical teacher [whom] I believe [lived] in Venice, and that he published perhaps the first thoroughgoing book on the human body. The book was called *The Fabric of the Human Body*. And I discovered it quite by chance because in the 1930s, I believe, a marvelous reproduction of this book came out in Munich.³ It was printed perfectly beautifully and with huge size, I suppose elephant size. It was published because those blocks turned up in Munich. I don't know who discovered them, or how. But they were in perfect condition. They were woodblocks of the human body in all stages of, well, dissection. I never use the word, but the skeletal system, the muscles, the nerves, and the veins and arteries were all described so beautifully.

The artist was reputed to have been Jan van Calcar, a man who was working in Titian's studio.⁴ This I have never verified. Some of you probably know—those among you who are specialists and art historians know all about that. In any event, in looking just in my own books I couldn't even find Vesalius in the eleventh edition of the *Britannica*. And I do know that Vesalius rather robbed van Calcar—or whoever the artist was—because he never credited him. I was delighted to find that van Calcar is in that edition, so some justice has been done. What book you have here at Yale is a sixteenth-century edition. I don't believe you have the large Munich edition. I've seen it in the New York Public Library and it's something I'd just love to own. It's sort of . . . I would like to own the elephant edition of Audubon [*Birds of America*] and I would like to own . . . it's terribly expensive . . . it's a sort of bibliophile's prize.

I would mention Palladio [fig. 2] next in my early loves of what I call lyric documentary work because



Figure 1.

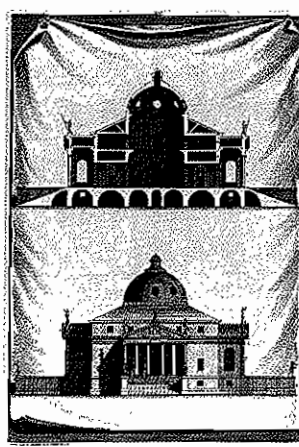


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Figure 1. Andreas Vesalius (Flemish, 1514–1564). *Musculo* from *De humani corporis fabrica*, (1555); page 221. Woodcut. Gift of Dr. Alfred E. Cohn, in honor of William M. Ivins, Jr., 1953 (53.682). **Figure 2.** Andrea Palladio (Italian, 1508–1580). *Villa Rotunda* from *The Architecture of A. Palladio in Four Books containing a Short Treatise on the Five Orders* (1715). Etching and engraving. Bequest of W. Gedney Beatty, 1941 (41.100.169). **Figure 3.** Giovanni Battista Piranesi (Italian, 1720–1778). (The means by which the large travertine blocks and other marbles were lifted in the construction of the Great Tomb of Cecilia Metella, today called Capo di Bove). Etching, plate 53, Volume 3 of *Antichità Romane* (1756). Etching. Rogers Fund, transferred from the Library, 1941 (41.71.1.3.53)

he had not directly artistic motives. He was teaching architecture. And I am referring to eighteenth-century copperplate engravings, not to an earlier one. But I recently was looking in a private library and I was so delighted with those things that I felt had this quality that I care so very much about.

Piranesi bores most of you, and alot of it bores me too. But he too did architectural diagrams and teaching drawings that I think were not at all like his ruins of Rome [fig. 3]. Although I'd call the ruins of Rome series rather documentary too, in that it was one of these projects that he set out to do. But you know them too well and, as I say, they don't have this quality as purely as his architectural drawings do. You don't see the architectural drawings as much around as you do the standard series that so many people collect of the ruins of Rome.

Now oddly enough, I would skip to Blake, of all people. But Blake as a . . . really as a hack engraver. As you know, he was a professional engraver and earned his living that way, and was an expert. And he did happen to do a book—which I'm not really sure is Blake—on physiognomy. It's [by] Lavater, [the] Swiss physiognomist—no longer a science now, but it was published very seriously in my edition [of] about 1862.⁵ And there are so many steel line engravings in there of studies of the physiognomy. Lavater would trace, let's say, the face of a fish and make it in a series of pictures much more human . . . If you find an [*inaudible*] man who looks like a fish. Or he takes a fox. And he has all the human types there. And he worked out a great bunch of theories about that. But those plates are marvelous and they're *reputed* to be [by] Blake. Now I've never been able to check this and probably some of you know whether they are or not. But whether it is Blake or not, they have this quality that I care so much about. I hope it is Blake. But as you know Blake is *purely* lyrical in doing a thing like the "Songs of Innocence" or the "Songs of Experience" or the "Book of Job." That is not documentary in any sense of the word.

There is a book in the New York Public Library that is pretty purely what I'd call lyric documentary. It is from the British Admiralty and it's called *The Atlantic Neptune*.⁶ It's a huge book of charts and views for the use, and that's important, [the] practical use of mariners all over the world. I don't know how many of you know this thing, but as a piece of printing it is beautiful. But it *also* is lyrical because . . . well, this is [the] eighteenth century. At that time, as you know, maps, too . . . some of these early maps have the vague . . . map makers and chart makers felt a necessity to beautify these. But in the case of *The Atlantic Neptune*, the beauty is documentary. And you will have views [*inaudible*] . . . They're not meant to be charming at all. But they're hand-colored and they're marvelous. And they are akin to Audubon, Audubon's birds.

I find Audubon falls into this category that I call lyric documentary inasmuch as he was setting out to document the birds. At the same time he took such care, as you know [*inaudible*] . . . But he had a trick of scale which was remarkable that also harkens back [to] Vesalius [who] had . . . [a way] of presenting his subject in a noble, heroic style, and in the background actually documenting, let's say, the waterfront of Charleston, South Carolina, or some seacoast of Maryland, which could have been used by a mariner sailing in there . . . The plan trying to make it is that this is grounded in earthy and actual fact. At the same time it gives such a sense of beauty that you grow lyrical, or I do anyway, looking upon it. And Audubon is too well known, again, for me to dwell on him as an artist . . . you all know

very well he was an artist. But I have to contrast that with, let's say, Currier & Ives, which hasn't got this quality at all. I was in disdain for that . . . in the context of what I call the lyric documentary. Currier & Ives is sweet and sentimental and therefore impure. Because I feel very strict about this phrase of mine, so we'll have to throw Currier & Ives out.

The real thing that I'm talking about has purity and a certain severity, rigor, simplicity, directness, clarity, and it is without artistic pretension in a self-conscious sense of the word. That's the base of it: they're hard and firm.

Medical books are full of these things. I have one at home with a marvelous title called *Atlas and Epitome of Traumatic Fractures and Dislocations*. [laughter] And you really ought to see that book. It's the most extraordinary thing. They are German coated lithographs from about 1890. Professor Doctor Helferich did this book. Nineteen [hundred] two is my edition.⁷ It was published in Philadelphia, as a matter of fact, but the plates are imported. You never get tired of looking at these things. There is accidental beauty in them of course, and the accident runs all through this subject of mine. I won't describe those things. As a matter of fact, some of them are quite shocking. But that doesn't bother me in the least. I am delighted to be shocked. [laughter]

There's a modern book, 1943 of all times. It once came to me for review; it was called *Biomicroscopy of the Eye*.⁸ Now that's published right in our time, post-war. Or, well, 1943 isn't post-war. This has a very curious quality. I wish I could show it to you [fig. 4]. I can't tonight because I couldn't have any slides made of it. But the curiosity of this book is that it is advanced modern abstract art, as you look at it quickly. It looks like, well, I don't know that I could call it Klee, modern abstract art. But there are some Klees in there, and it's full of . . . [It's] beautifully printed in color, too. Full of unconscious, perfectly beautiful things. And they are, to me, lyric documents.

Now, by association only, I find this quality in certain painters and I will mention them. Of course this is because there are certain self-conscious artists. These are notational artists. They are not documenters. But it is related by association to what I'm talking about. Now I would mention Constable, Goya, Degas, very much Guys, Daumier, very, very much Lautrec, our own Hopper. And Shahn practically reinvented it in his early work. He was extremely conscious of this quality that I have called lyric documentary. And I don't suppose anybody else will again. And he certainly didn't. This was very much in his mind. I know very well it was.

In literature you find it all over. I would mention Joyce is full of it. Agee is full of it. And . . . just because I would like you to see a parallel in literature, I have found—no, I didn't find it, because it . . . I do know a passage in Vladimir Nabokov which is so apt, and so brief, that I am going to take a little [inaudible] . . . [and] read it to you. *The Gift*:

The sun playing on various objects along the [right] side of the street—like a Magpie picking out the tiny things that glittered. And at the end of it, where it was crossed by the wide ravine of the railroad, a cloud of locomotive steam suddenly appeared from the right of the bridge; disintegrated against its iron ribs; then immediately loomed white again on the other side; and wavily streamed away, through the gaps in the trees. Crossing the

bridge after this, Fyodor, as usual, was gladdened by the wonderful poetry of the railroad banks; by their free and diversified nature; a growth of locusts and tallows; wild grass; bees; butterflies—all this lived in isolation and unconcern, in the harsh vicinity of coal dust glistening below, between the five streams of rails, and in blissful estrangement from the city coulisses above; from the peeled walls of old houses toasting their tattooed banks in the morning sunshine.

Where shall I put all these gifts with which the summer morning rewards me, and only me? Save them up for future books? Use them immediately for a practical handbook called "How to be Happy?" Or, getting deeper, to the bottom of things, understand what is concealed behind all this: behind the play, the sparkle, the thick green greasepaint of the foliage?

For there really is something—there is something! And one wants to offer thanks, but there is no one to thank.⁹

That I call lyric documentary writing. That is the frame of mind, and that is the psychology of it, and Nabokov is full of it, as you probably know. It just so happens, and I just thought of it now, that this is really the key to the title of this book *The Gift*. Where shall I put all these things? Whom shall I thank is what he really means.

Well, I think I may have given you an idea of the lyrical documentary frame of mind. As a matter of fact, it comes into your minds, too. If you were walking down the street and you . . . or driving your car. And you just think that instead of how much you owe on income tax, or whatever your problems are, or your quarrel with your wife . . . well, what's under that engine hood there, and what's actually going on [in] that internal combustion machine? It's a crime in itself if you start to think about the extraordinary way energy is produced with this thing that you've seen every day. When you begin to think about it, it's not at all an automobile engine. Nor is an airplane in flight anything that you ought to get used to. When we think of what it really is, and what it came from, and how just suddenly, as though by mystical magic, in 1903 or whenever it was, the Wright brothers, after pretty nearly killing themselves, managed to get one off the ground for a little while.

Of course the thing is, I'm not mentioning the obvious thing, like atomic energy, which all children are thinking about now, and maybe you and I are too. But that's too big and explosive a subject. However, I find that those who think of common things in an excited and sort of a side-stepping way have this frame of mind that I would call the lyric documentary. Mind that it's, in a sense, it's a sort of the natural childish wonder and imagination grown up. I don't urge it, I merely speak about it. As a matter of fact, if you indulge in that too much you get run over. I don't know what could happen to you.

Now I would like to move into photography, which is my special subject, and talk about the men I think who have this quality, mostly in the past. I'm not sure I'll mention any living men, but our own Mathew Brady, who photographed the Civil War as you well know, I think had this quality, again unconsciously. I don't think he knew he was such a poet. But as you know he got permission from Abraham Lincoln, either personally or by letter, to go behind the lines with cameras during the Civil

War. The work that he did, as you look at it now, largely because of the passage of time, carries to me a great deal of poetry. And they were made as documents. There they are [fig. 5]. As you know, he had no intention, no means of printing those things. Now they are printed. He just got determined to do this and he got very interested . . . he never got into battles. As a matter of fact, [later] I am going to show you a postcard [fig. 28] made obviously from a Brady, although Gardner is supposed to have done a whole lot, too. You never know which is Brady and which is Gardner.

Eugène Atget is to me the supreme lyric documentary photographer [fig.6]. You know most about him. I think he almost never missed. He was a very simple man with a marvelous eye. Knew how to select details—and not just any detail, but the most poetic detail. And he had a great humility in him and simplicity. He, as you know, lugged around a great big 8 x 10 [inch view] camera and . . . he got up early in the morning for technical reasons. The result is that you have the spirit of dawn. I didn't mean technical reasons in any humorous sense of the word—although I realize that is a funny slip [*laughter*—but *photographic* technical reasons. He had to stop traffic and the motion of traffic in his pictures, and he got up so that there weren't any troubles of this sort, and the results are marvelous.

Now I want to interrupt just a moment now to play you a sound of a conversation that I overheard about a man who was terribly enthusiastic about Atget, which I found so moving because it is purely enthusiastic and I also think it's a little bit funny. I'll tell you how this came about. I was playing with a tape recorder and I was talking about Atget and got out the book at home. And one of my guests, who is not a terribly sophisticated man but a man of great appreciation, particularly of photography, got to talking about it. Now could we get that on here . . . this is only going to last about twenty seconds, so don't be concerned about the use of the time. I'll hand this down to you . . . [*inaudible*] ". . . so beautiful and so powerful. What a shock that is. Beautiful. I think it's great. Terrific."¹⁰ Well anyway, if you could hear that at all it shows the powerful effect of one Atget photograph on one guest of mine.

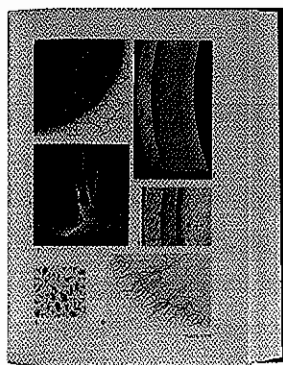


Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

Figure 4. Milton L. Berliner, M.D. Plate XVII from *Biomicroscopy of the Eye: Slit Lamp Microscopy of the Living Eye* (1943). Photomechanical reproduction. Private collection: The Burns Archive, New York. **Figure 5.** Alexander Gardner (American, born Scotland, 1821-1882). *Ruins of the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad Bridge, Richmond, Virginia*, April 1865. Albumen silver print from glass negative. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1933 (33.65.22). **Figure 6.** Eugène Atget (French, 1857-1927). *Café, Avenue de la Grande-Armée*, 1924-25. Albumen silver print from glass negative. Gilman Collection, Purchase, Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee Gift, 2005 (2005.100.133).

I wanted to mention Alvin Langdon Coburn, whom you probably heard of, but he isn't very well known. He's still alive . . . he's an old man living in England now, but the reason I'm mentioning him is that Henry James is one of the men who had this quality of mind that I'm speaking about, and you find it, although in a rather baroque way, in his prose. But Coburn was a photographer who knew Henry James, or vice versa, and James commissioned him to illustrate the famous New York edition of 1907 of James's collected works, by a single photograph in each volume. Many of you have seen these things, but they are—not always successfully so—but they're right in this vein which interests me so much. Apparently James was intelligent enough—well, you all know how intelligent he was—to tell Coburn nothing but this: "I want a London Street Scene," or "I want a Venice palace doorway," or "I want a New York brownstone." He left it to the photographer—and these are remarkable because they're unpretentious. They're not arty. One particularly—which time has enhanced, of course—of a London street with a hansom cab, taken from the rear in semi-fog, is a marvelous example of the sort of thing I'm talking about.

Now I would mention Alfred Stieglitz as somebody who tries a little bit too hard to get this. And I would call that "decadent lyric" . . . because he is pushing for it very hard. [*laughter*] No, he's going after clouds and nature and talking about really how God was behind his camera or something. Everything he did, at least to me, implied this, and it made me very angry. Although he was very nice to me, the old man, when I did know him. But he gave me an anti-art emphasis [because] he talked so much about art. I thought that was old hat, but, forty years ago . . . I don't know what you think is old hat now. You probably think I am, but . . .

But when you really get angry at that sort you produce something yourself, you act, against it. Now what I'm going to show you is some postcards. They are early twentieth-century American photographs, colored photographs, hand-colored I mean. There wasn't color then. Postcards of the period which time has lent this quality. This is colloquial, vernacular art. And they have the purity of the quality I'm interested in. Not at all when they're funny, and I'm not going to show you any funny ones. Lots of people collect old postcards because they think they are funny. I don't do that at all and I've never been able to find out how these were made or why. That is, I've never found any text on the subject. But I'm so anxious to know about them that I wrote a little piece myself which again is short. With your kind permission, I'll read it to you . . . because it applies to these things I'm going to show you on the screen, and after that I'll show them to you.

The very essence of American daily city and town life got itself recorded quite inadvertently on the penny picture postcards of the early twentieth century. The medium was hack photography; but those honest, direct little pictures have a quality today that is more than that of mere social history. Among collectors of Americana, much is made of the nation's folk art. The picture postcard is folk document. To taste them properly, one should renounce sentimentality and nostalgia—that blurred vision which actually destroys the authenticity of the past. "The Good Old Times," in any event, is a cliché of the doddering mind. That said, one can, in effect, re-enter these printed images, and situate

oneself upon the pavements in downtown Cleveland, Omaha, or Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. One can penetrate those extraordinarily unbeautiful buildings that were, withal, accented with good marble and mahogany and brass.

In the street the trolleys clang. The air is not at all free of horse smells. On the sidewalk, striding purposefully forward, because his heart is pure, is the young Horatio Alger—square-dealing, yet determined to earn one more honest dollar than the next cleanly competitor [laughter] who is just as square.¹¹ One's own father's office was on the fifth floor front. And yesterday he paid the bill for your first long pants. Somehow, this can remind you, now, that there was nothing amusing about first love, juvenile ineptitudes, and early glory.

"Downtown" was a beautiful mess. The tangle of telephone poles and wires attest to that. The architecture is simply indescribable, although at State and Madison in Chicago stood Louis Sullivan's now prized Carson Pirie Scott & Company's store building. This was the time when commercial America was solidifying into what it is today. There are many central streets in Pittsburgh or Denver or Troy, New York, that are lined with fifty-year-old buildings, in neighborhoods that still exude the atmosphere of 1911. You are reminded of some of the facts of life that bedeviled each citizen under Teddy Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. The dentist jabbed harder and hurt worse. If you had pneumonia severely, you just died. If you were shaken too much by the money panic of 1907, you were a case for the alienist.

Picture postcards were produced in enormous quantity around 1900-1915, and they satisfied the simple desire to recognize and to boast. We may thank pure corn for some admirable posthumous side values.¹²

Now may I show you some examples of postcards, limited to postcards of the style that I'm talking about? I'm ready to have these projected now. Should I push this button, sir? Yes. Oh, I beg your pardon. [laughter] That is Calcar. That is Jan van Calcar, and that is out of Vesalius, and you can see the remarkable shock value of that, and the beauty of it. [laughter] Also, I mean it looks like a Tchelitchew, it looks like a . . . I mean Dali probably would go into ecstasies over that [laughter] . . . it is sort of a stylistic forerunner of many modern things. There is one more Calcar. May I have that? Notice the nobility of this diagram of the good old human skeleton.

That is enough of that. We are going to have the postcards now . . .

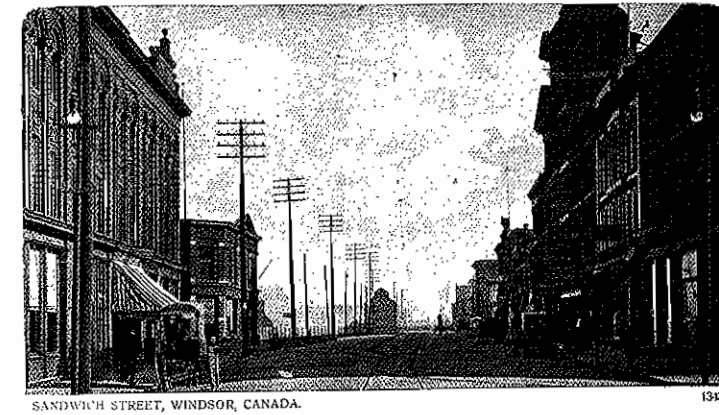


Figure 7. *Sandwich Street, Windsor, Canada, 1900s.* Postcard. WEA (1994.264.108.389)

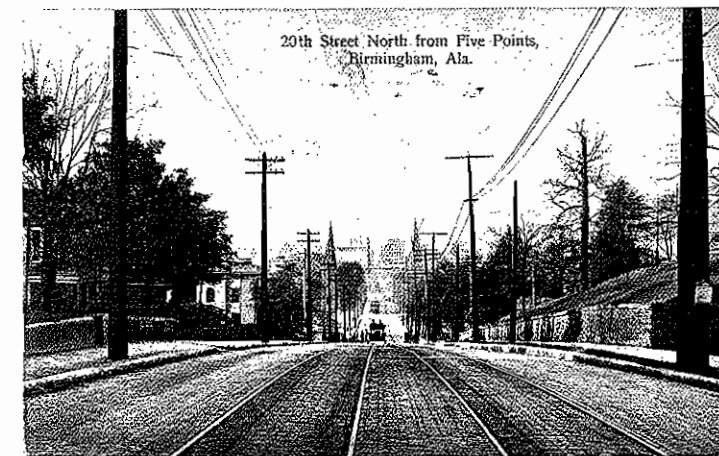


Figure 8. *20th Street North from Five Points, Birmingham, Ala., 1900s.* Postcard. WEA (1994.264.107.2)

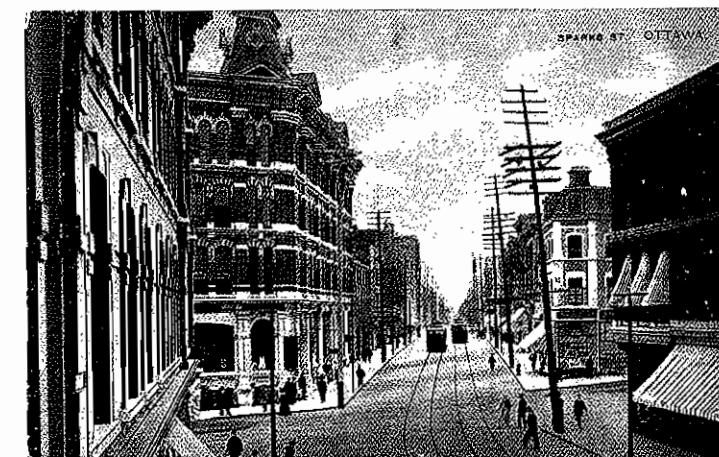


Figure 9. *Sparks St., Ottawa, 1910s.* Postcard. WEA (1994.264.108.380)

[Postcard 1: fig. 7] Now I feel that a picture of this sort has mood and authenticity, simple as it is, and also the time has lent it a poetry that obviously it didn't have. The photographer probably wanted that wagon out of the way [laughter] and now it makes the picture. [laughter]

[Postcard 2: fig. 8] I really have nothing much to say about these things. They, to me at least, they create a mood and I'm just going to let you have a look at them and whatever comes up that I feel like mentioning I will, but . . .

[Postcard 3: fig. 9] Can you imagine anything more a conglomeration of hideous things that come together casting a spell of . . . well I couldn't call it beauty, but of a certain kind of silent poetry in there? Appears to me anyway.

[Postcard 4: fig. 10] Same is true of this. Again, the photographer certainly would [have] loved to have had the street traffic out of that, and it now makes the picture.

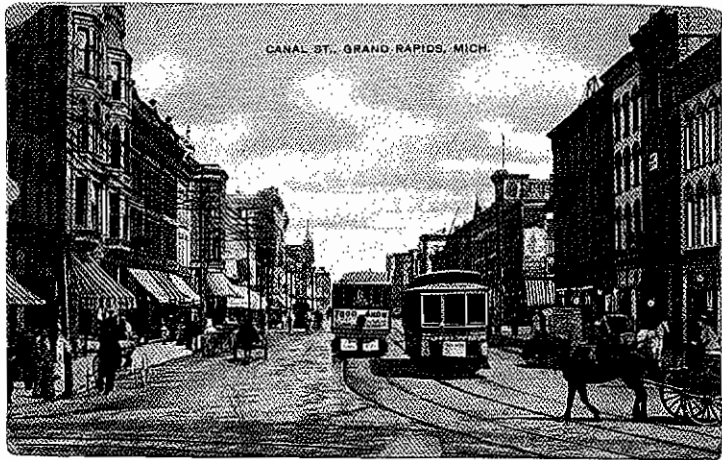
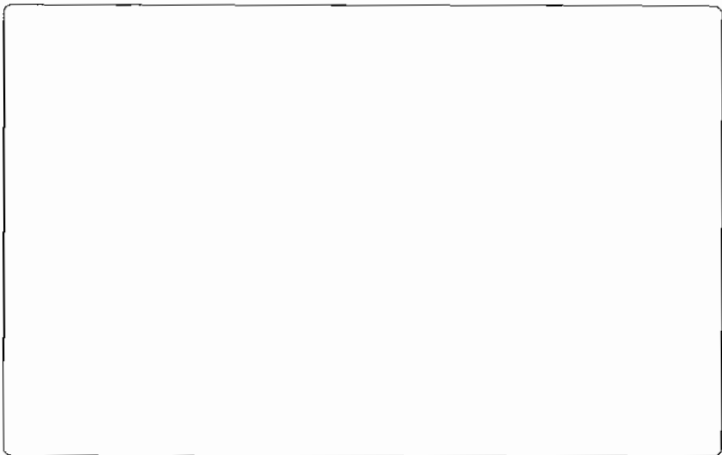


Figure 10. *Canal St., Grand Rapids, Mich.*, 1900s. Postcard.
WEA (1994.264.107.370)

[Postcard 5]¹³ These cards are not easy to come by. You know you can go into shops and buy a lot of old postcards, but I've been awfully careful to buy only the ones that have the quality that I care about.



[no known postcard]

[Postcard 6: fig. 11] As I say, I'm not interested in these in history although they are [inaudible] in this regard. But to find them is a lot of trouble, as I say.

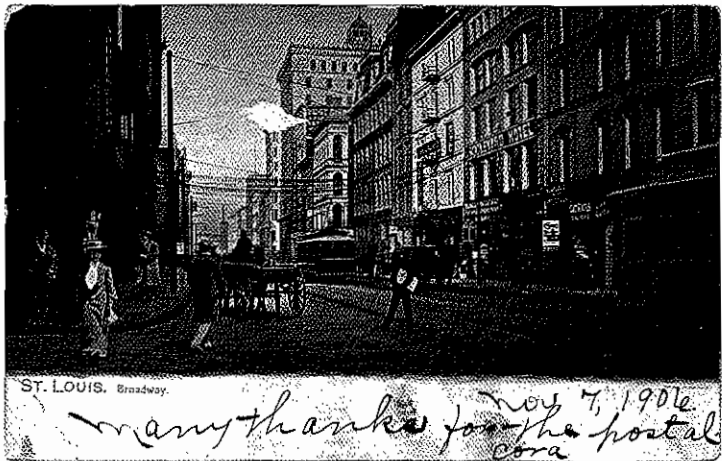


Figure 11. *Broadway, St. Louis*, 1900s. Postcard.
WEA (1994.264.107.381)



Figure 12. *State Street, Bridgeport, Conn.*, 1900s. Postcard.
WEA (1994.264.107.33)

[Postcard 7: fig. 12] You have to spend much too much time going through *junk* to pick out ones that appeal to you that have this style that I care about.



Figure 13. *Fourteenth St., East from Sixth Ave., N.Y. City*, 1900s. Postcard.
WEA (1994.264.107.601)

[Postcard 8: fig. 13] There's Horatio Alger, right there. [laughter] That's Fourteenth Street, New York.

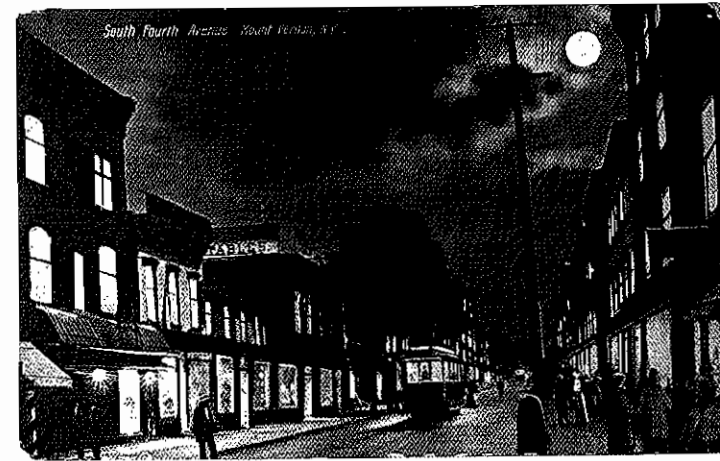


Figure 14. *South Fourth Avenue, Mount Vernon, N.Y.*, 1900s. Postcard.
WEA (1994.264.107.532)

[Postcard 9: fig. 14] That might be a Rousseau somehow, the naïveté of doing that night scene. Of course that's, as I say, photography is the base of that. It's faked up and I purposely wanted to show you a very fake one.

[Postcard 10: fig. 15] That's a beauty I think. See, [an] unpaved street. You can smell that. I don't suppose . . . it's just an accident that it has that spring poetry about it. These photographers are going around making a living doing that.

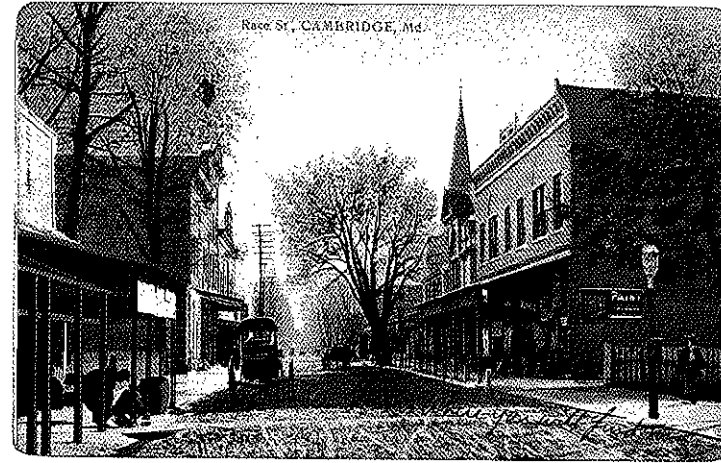
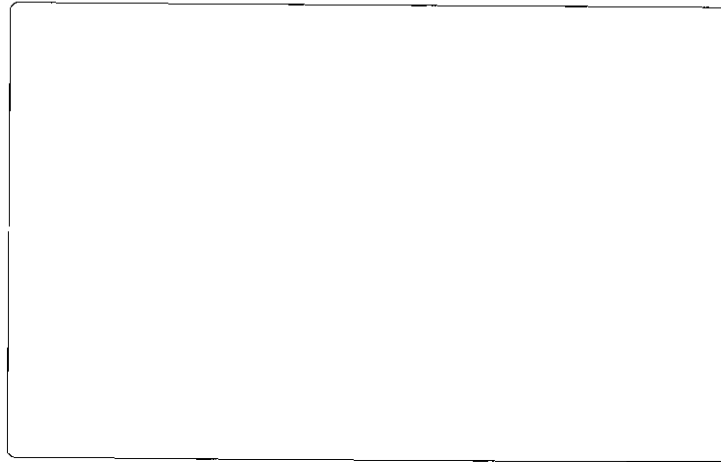


Figure 15. *Race St., Cambridge, Md., 1900s.* Postcard. WEA (1994.264.107.237)

[Postcard 11] That seems to me to be a beauty. Full of the American small town of . . . well I don't know whether I can date all these, that's probably 1906, something like that.



[no known postcard]

[Postcard 12: fig. 16] I think one of the reasons we can look at these unsentimentally is that . . . even I am too young to have been there, just about . . . I mean maybe when I was born that was like that, but . . . if this were my young manhood, I probably would not be able to look at it so purely.

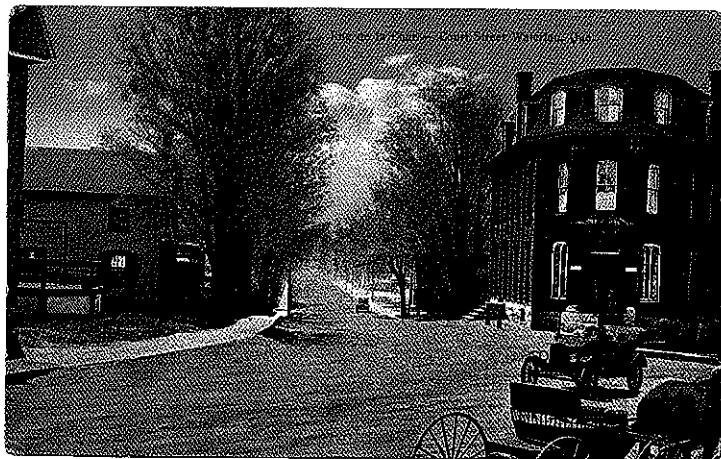
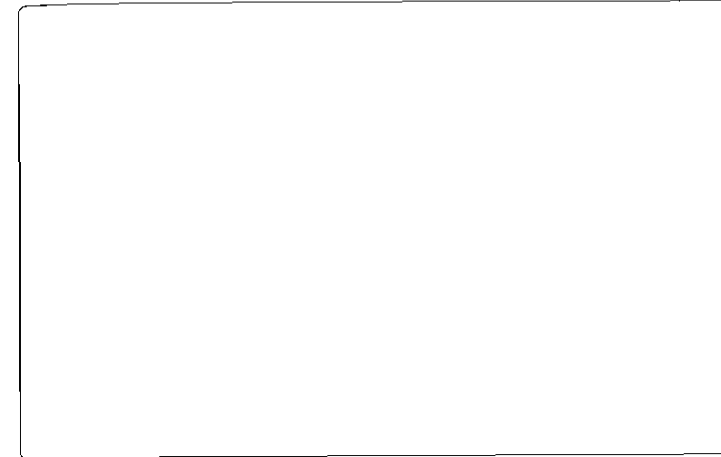


Figure 16. *Rue de la Cour—Court Street, Waterloo, Que., 1910s.* Postcard. WEA (1994.264.108.384)

[Postcard 13] [No comments.]

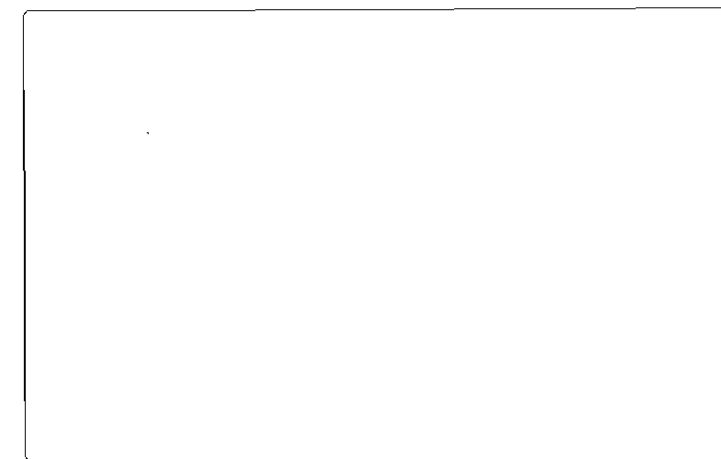


[no known postcard]



Figure 17. *Foot of the Square, Belfast, Me., 1900s.* Postcard. WEA (1994.264.107.203)

[Postcard 14: fig. 17] Oh here is an interesting thing. This is again photography, but these figures have been put in. The editor decided there wasn't enough in there and so . . . I'm charmed by the fact that . . . I'm convinced that those two people, even though they may be photography, were pasted into that picture. The people on the right, I mean.



[no known postcard]

[Postcard 15] Now again, I don't have this because I love the old railroads—although I do—but I think this is so honest and so revealing of hardworking everyday America that I wanted to show it to you as a document.

[Postcard 16: fig. 18] Santa Fe . . . another railroad thing that has a nice quality to it in my mind.

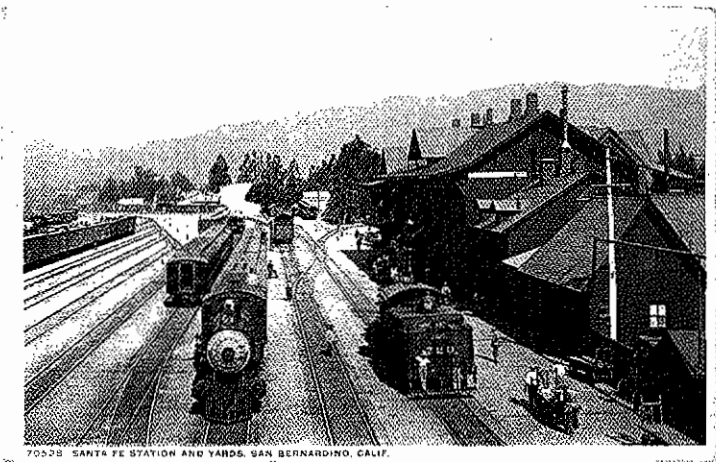


Figure 18. Santa Fe Station and Yards, San Bernardino, Calif., 1910s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.1.2)

[Postcard 17: fig. 19] Kansas City, just exactly the way it should be. [laughter]

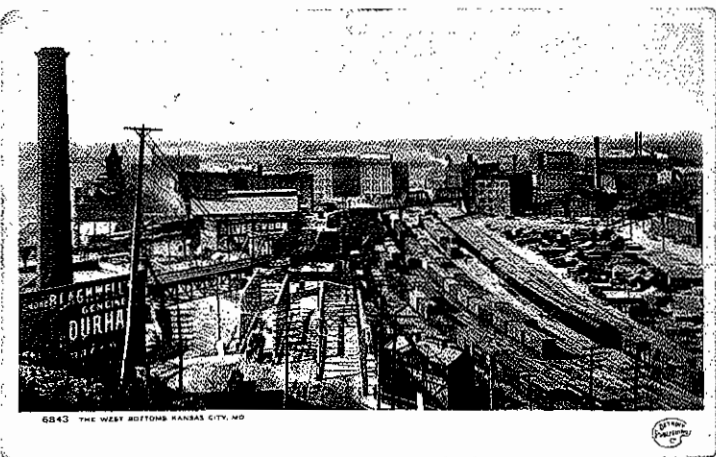


Figure 19. The West Bottoms, Kansas City, Mo., 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.36.22)

[Postcard 18: fig. 20] There is a nice bit of hand retouching . . . which is . . . I must say that is amusing, but I love it anyway. I weakened to show you that one because it's not as severe or serious. But it does have an atmosphere about it that I care a great deal about.

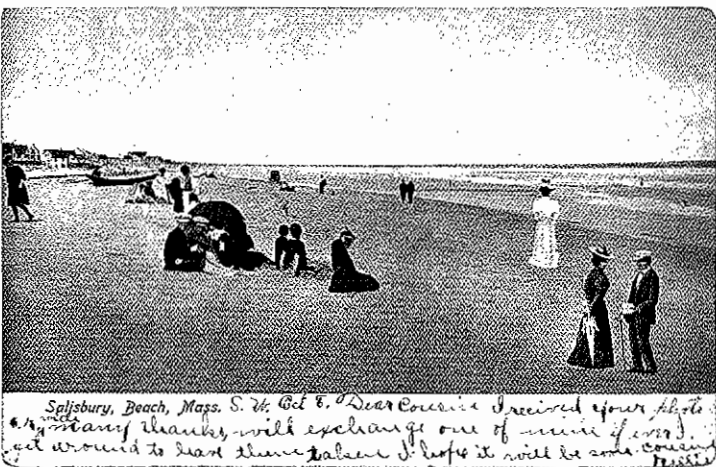


Figure 20. Salisbury, Beach, Mass., 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.18.99)



Figure 21. Friends Meeting House, Philadelphia, Pa., 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.98.29)



Figure 22. "Where All Men are Equal.", 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.109.27)

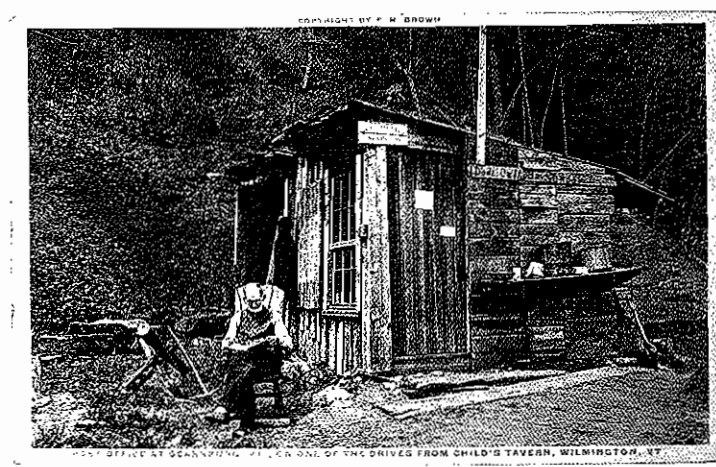


Figure 23. Post Office at Searsburg, Vt., On One of the Drives from Child's Tavern, Wilmington, Vt., 1910s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.69.50)

[Postcard 19: fig. 21] This is a very pure one. Now that is *straight* photography. How it got colored, I don't know. I think they were printed in Germany, most of these¹⁴. But there, the atmosphere of that Sunday morning, the Friends Meeting in—you can see it better than I can—Philadelphia. Couldn't be purer or truer. I'm placed right there when I look at that picture. Well, more than that, I have a feeling of . . . well the human pleasure and beauty of being. Not that I go to church with the Friends, but I feel there is spirit in that picture.

[Postcard 20: fig. 22] [laughter] Well this is a great one, and this is very pure, too. That's a *document*, and of course it's gained a great deal in time. How the postcard man got in there and made that picture I do not know. But that is *very real*. I'm actually convinced that this fellow didn't even put his hat back just for that. He probably didn't . . . I don't think they knew they were being photographed, or cared.

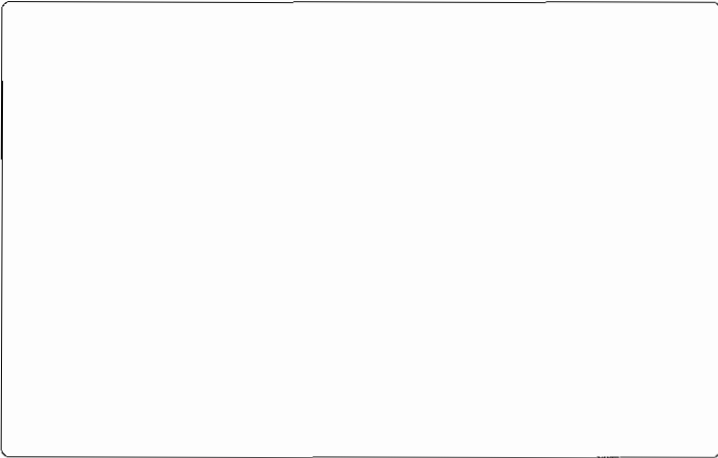
[Postcard 21: fig. 23] Of course that also can be looked upon as social document.

[Postcard 22: fig. 24] Here's another very pure one, too. As a matter of fact, I did learn that the postcard business was made profitable by cheap German color lithography technicians. A photographer would take a black-and-white picture in America. The company would send it over to Germany to be tinted and printed en masse, and then [it would] be brought back here.



Figure 24. [Winter Scene], 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.46.116)

[Postcard 23] [laughter] Now there's a Rousseau for you, or at least it seems so to me. That's just some traveling postcard photographer who decided he'd press the button at that moment.



[no known postcard]

[Postcard 24: fig. 25] [laughter] Now *that*, as a matter of fact . . . that *is* funny. [laughter] And what would Freud say about that? I mean, the symbolism there is [prolonged laughter] . . . As you know, Freud actually claimed that in his scientific belief of dreams, that that was *the* sexual symbol for that woman, and there she is, waiting for it

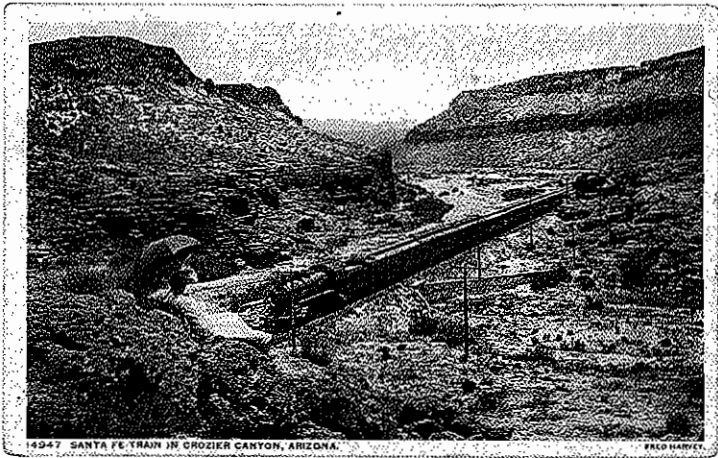


Figure 25. Santa Fe Train in Crozier Canyon, Arizona, 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.36.6)

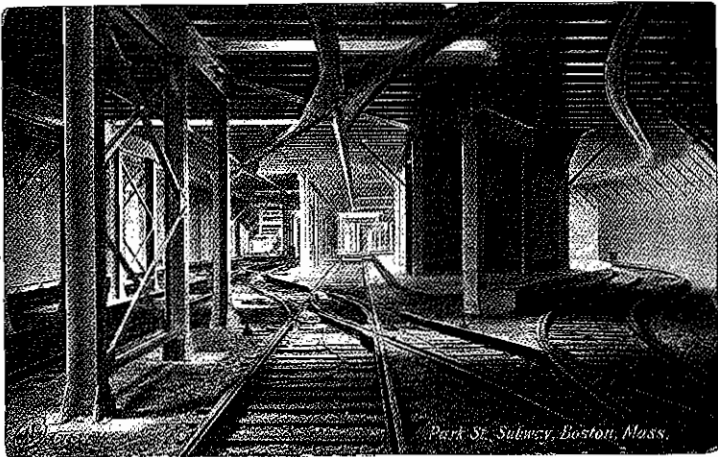


Figure 26. Park St., Subway, Boston, Mass., 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.77.10)



Figure 27. Holland Vehicular Tunnel, New York City, 1920s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.77.30)

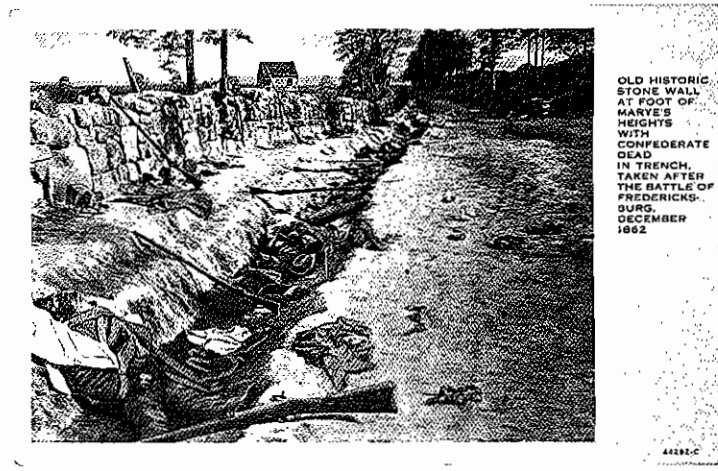


Figure 28. Old Historic Stone Wall at Foot of Marye's Heights with Confederate Dead in Trench, Taken After the Battle of Fredericksburg, December 1862, 1910s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.47.21)

[Postcard 25: fig. 26] There's a curiosity, I must say. I can't read it . . . Boston Subway, but what an abstraction of what it is.

[Postcard 26: fig. 27] Now this, as a matter of fact, is not very old. I bought that as a new card myself, I was so interested in it. That's [the] Holland Tunnel in 1930 some odd years, and I bought that right in...that was right in the business. That's not, to me, an old postcard. But it's a great example of what time does. Well, I did like it when I bought it, but I didn't realize that those Fords would look so much more interesting in their odd way . . . Well, I could hardly dare use the word lyric about those things, and yet there is, that's why I put that in there. It's the only card that I ever bought right off the stand *new*—among this collection that I'm showing you. Now, by the way, you don't [today] find any cards that you'd want to buy, although if you were very prescient you *might* get some things that would be good in another thirty, forty years. Not worth the trouble, really.

[Postcard 27: fig. 28] There is a Brady. Or a Gardner. There's a document for you. He came up just after this battle and that's the sort of thing he was doing. That's why his work is so priceless right now.

[Postcard 28: fig. 29] Now that is *comic* documentary. [*laughter*]¹⁵ I wanted to show you one really funny. But can you see that vehicle is the Department of Safety [*laughter*] . . . There's a whole branch of comic documentaries that I would like to show you, but I'm not really here to entertain you.

[Postcard 29: fig. 30] That looks like a Stieglitz, but it isn't, and it also looks like Coburn. It just happens to be a rather romantic shot. There's the Flatiron Building, but made again by time. The handsome cab certainly didn't look like anything to people who saw them in the streets all day, but to me, the combination of the wetness, and the umbrellas, and the handsome cab, and the atmosphere of autumn . . . romantic as it may be, makes this an unconscious little poem. It looks like a Coburn, but I don't think it is.

[Postcard 30: fig. 31] [*laughter*] There's a sad incident, and again that isn't funny to me. This is one of the damndest things I've ever seen. How he came along right there at that time . . . I'm convinced that this is no *act*. I think that woman has been drowned and being worked over. And of course that is now quite a document—and a great curiosity to me—that the camera should be brought up at such a moment. As I say, I really think this is no *act*. And if you look at it you'll realize that nobody would have posed that. There they are, and that's trouble.

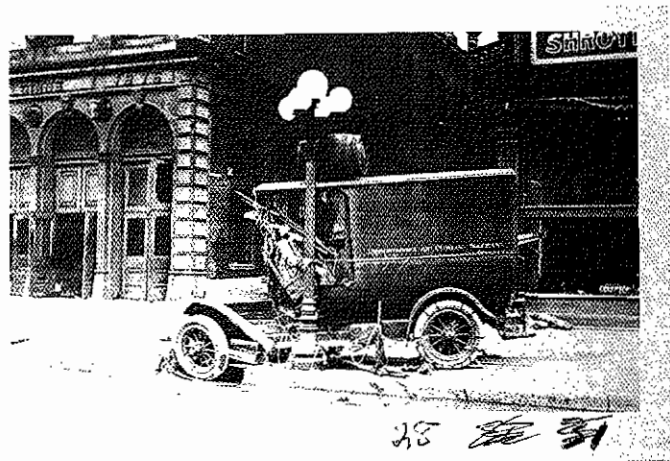


Figure 29. Photostat copy of now missing postcard. WEA (1994.250.6.12.23)



Figure 30. Rainy Day at Madison Square, New York City, 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.107.575)



Figure 31. A Rescue at Coney Island, N. Y., 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.37.9)

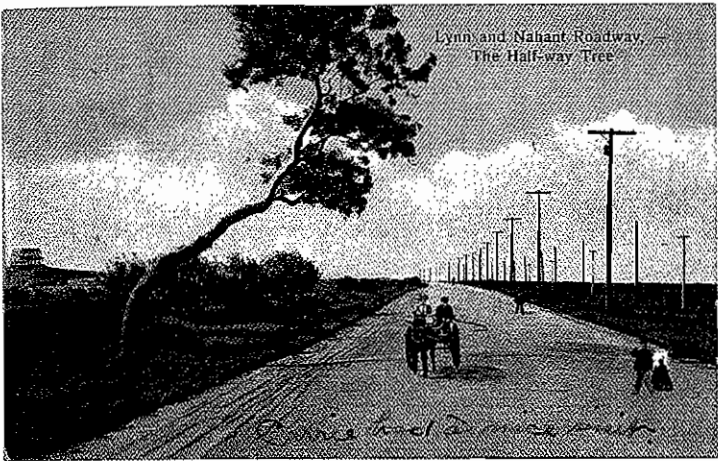


Figure 32. Lynn and Nahant Roadway,—The Half-way Tree, 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.77.51)

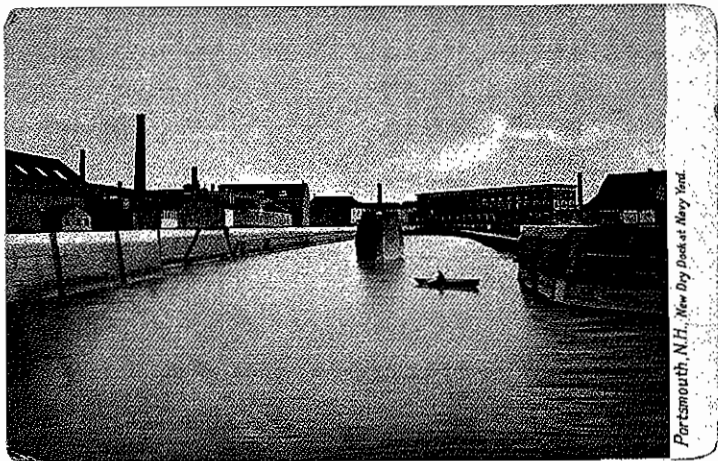
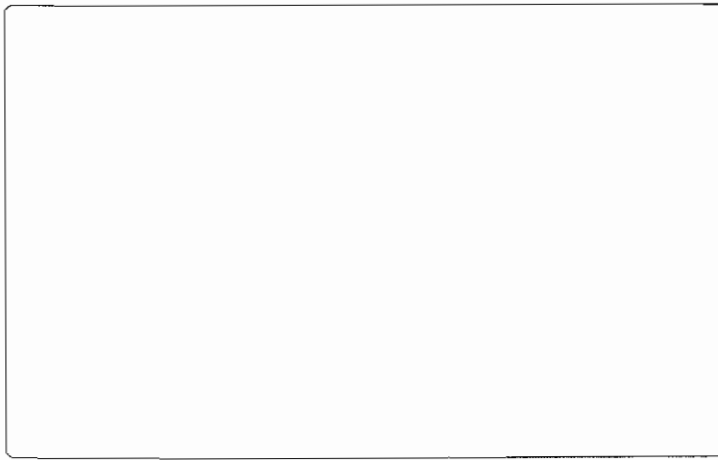


Figure 33. New Dry Dock at Navy Yard, Portsmouth, N.H., 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.89.30)



[no known postcard]

[Postcard 31: fig. 32] I haven't got much to say about that except you just probably feel it as I do . . .

[Postcard 32: fig. 33] [*inaudible*] . . .

[Postcard 33] That of course you see today, although when you see it you are carried back in time.

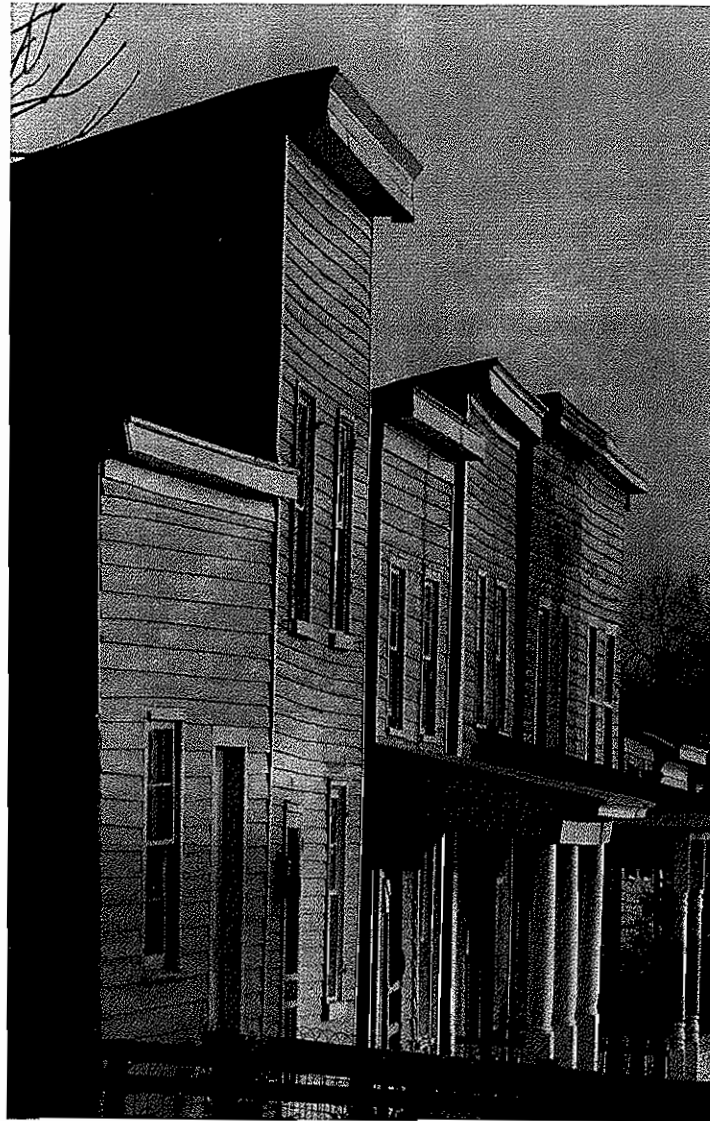


Figure 34. Walker Evans, *Frame Houses in Virginia* (variant), 1936. Postcard-format gelatin silver print. Gift of Arnold H. Crane, 1972 (1972.742.30)

Oh I've taken a great liberty. Here's my imitation of this card [fig. 34]. This is a work of my own which I think has this quality about it, and I wanted to show it to you. It's some small town in Virginia. I'm only going to show you one or two of . . . as a matter of fact, this is the end. I believe there's one more picture coming up, that's all . . .

Also, yes this is also a very recent picture of mine [fig. 35].¹⁶ And I believe that since this is absolutely unretouched . . . It's an old railroad carriage as you see, standing, still used . . . in Galena, Illinois, at the railroad station. But it just so happens that the grass behind it, and the quality of that faded wood, and the utilitarianism of it . . . *In that lighting*, which all is very important—that's late day lighting—it gives me a quality of . . . As I say, I didn't know what this was going to be like when I did it and I wasn't after such a mood as I think this picture does now produce. I claim that I've discovered—and here is something of my own—that has the quality that I wasn't going after. So I'm really editing that picture. I believe that's all. Shall I push this button?

Yes . . . that's all there is. Yes. [applause]

Thank you very much.



Figure 35. Walker Evans, *Baggage Wagons, Galena, Illinois*, 1963. Detail of film negative. WEA (1994.252.33.1)

Notes

¹ Dean Gibson Danes, director of the Yale University School of Art and Architecture (1958-68), introduced Evans as "a well-spring of inspiration for dozens of some of our finest creative artists today." This illustrated transcript was made from the original audiotape recording of Evans's lecture, not from the partial transcript made in the 1980s, which is also part of the Walker Evans Archive. The duration of the talk was about fifty minutes. WEA 1994.250.151.

² The selection here of six prints and photographs that precede Evans's postcards is an attempt to provide sample illustrations of works Evans might have wished to show had he had had slides. No list survives that confirms what images he would have projected. John T. Hill, the artist's friend and the former executor of his estate, was in the audience on the night of the talk. He does not believe that Evans presented any works of art, with the exception of two slides of Vesalius which he projected by mistake. Author's conversation with John T. Hill, November 21, 2008.

³ The first edition of *De humani corporis fabrica* (On the Structure of the Human Body), by the Flemish scientist and writer Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564), dates from 1543 and includes more than two hundred woodcuts. Evans's reference is to Andreas Vesalius, *Icones Anatomicae* (New York and Munich: New York Academy of Medicine, Library of the University of Munich, 1934).

⁴ The North Netherlandish painter and draftsman Jan Steven van Calcar (1499?-1546) was likely among the artists whose woodcuts appear in Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*. He was a pupil of Titian's in Venice circa 1536 or 1537.

⁵ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, 12th edition. London: William Tegg, 1862.

⁶ Joseph F. W. Des Barres, *The Atlantic Neptune*, London: Royal Navy of Great Britain, 1774-81.

⁷ Heinrich Helferich, *Atlas and Epitome of Traumatic Fractures and Dislocations*, 5th edition, Philadelphia and London: W.B. Saunders & Co., 1902.

⁸ Milton. Lionel Berliner, *Biomicroscopy of the Eye: Slit Lamp Microscopy of the Living Eye*, New York: Paul B. Hoeber, Inc., 1943.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, translation by Michael Scammell, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963. Nabokov wrote the novel in 1935-37, when he was living in Berlin. It was the last book he wrote in Russian and not available in English until 1963.

¹⁰ The voice on the cassette recording is Evans's friend Ben Schultz (1919-1967), a book designer and one-time layout editor at *Sports Illustrated*.

¹¹ Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-1899), author of *Ragged Dick, Or Street Life in New York with the Bootblacks* (1868), wrote hundreds of popular "rags to riches" novels.

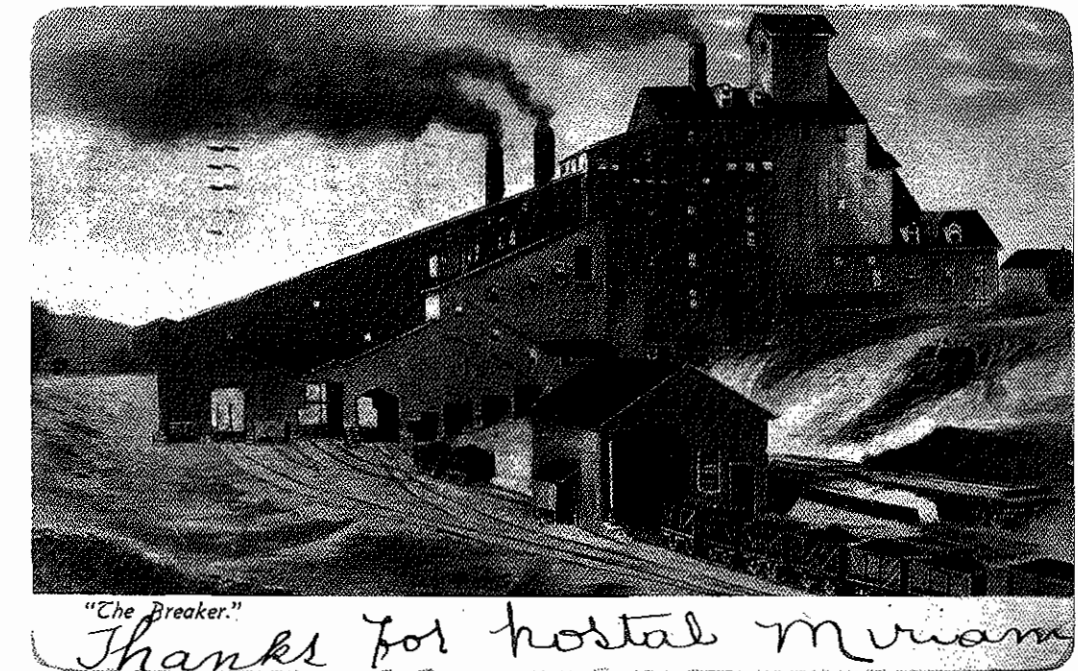
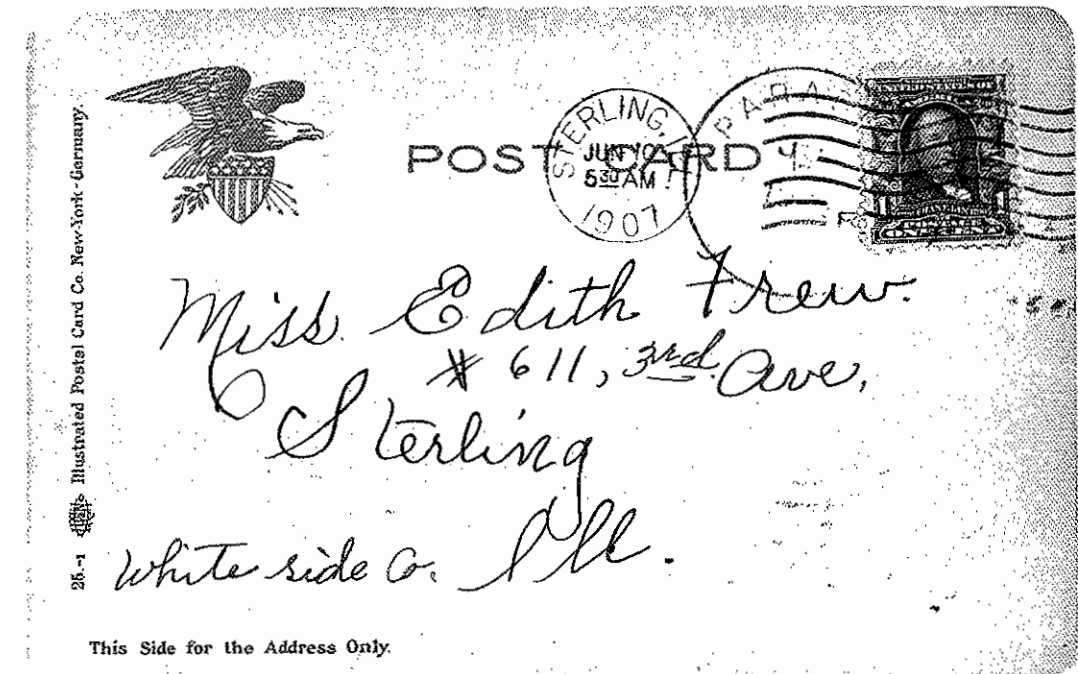
¹² Evans's quote is adapted from his own text for "When 'Downtown' Was a Beautiful Mess," *Fortune*, January 1962.

¹³ Evans prepared at *Fortune* magazine a Photostat set of the postcards he planned to show at Yale. He numbered the Photostats in wax pencil. Six are missing: nos. 5, 11, 13, 15, 23, and 33. See WEA 1994.250.6.12.

¹⁴ The postcard *Friends Meeting House, Philadelphia, Pa.* Was published by The Detroit Publishing Company and printed in Michigan.

¹⁵ Although the original postcard is not in the WEA, Evans kept a Photostat of the card with his papers. The figure illustration is a reproduction of the Photostat copy stored with the "Lyric Documentary" papers. See WEA 1994.250.6.12.

¹⁶ The photograph was later published in *Walker Evans*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971, p. 167. The date cited in the catalogue is incorrect.



"The Breaker," 1900s. Postcard. WEA (1994.264.108.361)