



The following interview was conducted by At Ten's Jane Hampden for Milwaukee Public Radio WUWM. The interview was broadcast on Wednesday, January 18, 2006.

Jane Hampden: If you want to learn more about a place, old postcards can be a historical gold mine. Milwaukee writer Larry Widen is the author of "Vintage Milwaukee Postcards." It's a collection of wonderful views of the city's past. Where'd you find them all? I know people have these stored in their attics, but how'd you get them?

Larry Widen: I've been collecting postcards for 25 years, and that's exactly where they come from. Rummage sales, people's attics, antique shows. I'll always stop when I see a trough full of postcards and thumb through them. And that's how you build up a collection.

JH: 25 years. So it's something that just piqued your interest?

LW: I've always been a historian; I've always liked to write about local history. Postcards are a fun, easy way to do your research.

JH: One thing your book really makes clear is that if you're familiar with a street corner or an area of Milwaukee, you have no idea what it looked like 100 years ago, or even 60 years ago.

LW: I'm glad that comes through because that's one of the things that fascinates me the most is to take postcards and compare them to see how something like the corner of 3rd and Wisconsin has changed in the last 100 years.

JH: It really gives you an idea of what we've lost as time has gone on too.

LW: It does. And I like the idea of being able to walk into the Grand Avenue shopping mall and say to myself, 'I'm in the Schlitz Hotel, and if I walk 100 feet over here, I'm in the Palm Garden.'



JH: And that's where our studio is located, I should remind people. We're at the bottom of the four very beautiful ornate, curving staircases that have been here for a long time.

LW: We're actually in the basement of the old Plankinton Hotel, which was torn down in 1915 to build the structure we're sitting in now.

JH: And one of your postcards, I noticed, has a view down one of the hallway of this staircase we're talking about, where there's now a Linens and Things.

LW: What I like about that particular view is up until they put the Linens and Things store in there, it was amazing how much that view resembled the modern day look. The Plankinton Arcade was virtually unchanged until they just did this latest renovation.

JH: You've been doing this for many years. Were there any surprises when you came around to putting a book together? Did you find postcards of places that you didn't even know about before?



LW: There are probably 2,500 Milwaukee views that exist from what I would call that vintage era, the late 1890's to 1920. And my book has 250, so that's only one-tenth of what's out there. The most interesting ones are the privately produced cards. They're certainly the rarest, and they're the ones that a small hotel or restaurant might have produced for advertising purposes, rather than the larger body of mass produced cards that would have been sold on spinner racks or newsstands or gift stores.

JH: You point out in the introduction that there are different styles of postcards, depending on what the postal rules were at the time. Talk about these different styles of postcards who was producing them.

LW: The E.C. Kropp Company was one of the major producers of postcards, and I believe Mr. Kropp's granddaughter is still around somewhere. I heard she collects postcards. Many of the nicest cards were produced overseas, because in the early 1900's, the best presses were in Europe. Some of the cards printed here are off-register, or the colors don't quite line up. And then there are some cards in there that are just exquisite four-color renditions, are often those are the ones that were printed overseas.

JH: There was a time when you couldn't write on the back of a postcard, because it wasn't split in half with one side for the address and one side for the note. You had to write on the front.

LW: Now, I'd have to check my research to be sure, but I believe it was after 1907 that you could write on what was called the divided back. It's fun to note that in the early part of the 20th century the penny postcard was used as a same-day communication device in lieu of the telephone, which was not yet in widespread use. So with three or four mail deliveries to your home each day, it's very common to read the backs of these old cards and find messages saying, 'I won't be home for dinner tonight.' It's very much like leaving a message on someone's answering machine. When the telephone began appearing in private residences after World War I, postcard usage dropped off dramatically.



JH: And before the telephone came in, people were sending dozens, or even hundreds of postcards a year.

LW: They sure were. And not just as a form of communication, but as a hobby. People collected picture postcards. Many times you'll glean from the messages on the back that people are exchanging postcards for their collections. Pen-pal networks, or whatever you'd call them.

JH: Early form of chat rooms.
LW: Exactly

JH: What did you learn about the people who were sending the postcards? Many of these missives are more everyday sorts of communication. I didn't see a whole lot of 'I love you dearly' type of thing.

LW: Unfortunately I don't see a lot of drama in these things either. For the most part the messages are pretty mundane. What you do find is that people traveled on the train quite a bit, because there are many references to the depots and meeting someone. But I didn't find anything too exciting.

JH: That's too bad.

LW: It is, but you can imagine little stories about the people in the cards. For instance, in one there's a man with a bowler hat smoking a cigar and leaning up against a lamppost. What did he do after the picture was snapped? Did he walk across the street and rob a bank. Did he meet a friend for lunch?

JH: We're talking with Larry Widen, the author of "Vintage Milwaukee Postcards." It's a collection of images that really help us understand the city's history. There are a lot of different categories of postcards, such as churches, hotels and theaters. I understand you're a movie buff, and it seems that in this book you're also chronicling the evolution of entertainment in Milwaukee.

LW: That's true, I am a movie buff, and a number of years ago I wrote a book called "Milwaukee Movie Palaces," which was a history of movie theaters in our town. I have a new book coming out in September called "Silver Screens," which is in many ways a sequel. I guess I am a pop culture historian, because as you point out, I often write about what people did for fun.

JH: What are some of the other buildings or corners of Milwaukee that had important architecture or buildings that you're really only going to see in a postcard?

LW: There a card in the book taken from the Pabst Building. It's an aerial view looking northeast and catches the corner of Mason and Jefferson. I like the card because that area is so completely different today. This view shows the Masonic Temple, the Elk's Club, the Layton Art Gallery and a number of other things that have been replaced by the large Shops on Jefferson retail and parking structure. What's nice about the card is it's grounded in modern day because there are a few things remaining, such as St. John's Cathedral, and in the distance St. Paul's Church. These modern frames of reference really help the viewer instantly place it. That's beauty of a postcard that doesn't have everything completely leveled. It's a mixture of the old and current that really makes them relevant.



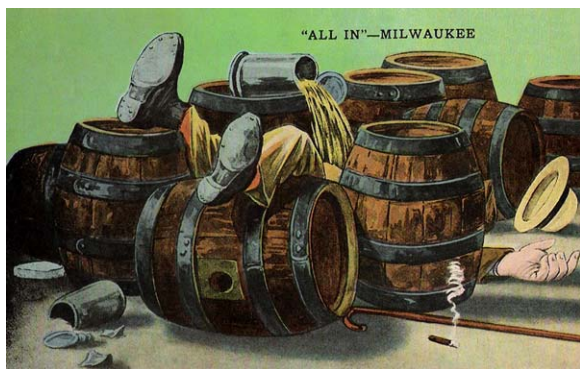
JH: You can't turn too many pages before you see the names Schlitz and Pabst. They're everywhere.

LW: Right. The breweries were certainly major economic engines of the city in those days. It was in their best interest to take the money they made from selling beer and reinvest it in hotels, theaters or restaurants. So while they appear to be these great civic-minded citizens, in reality they were just doing what they were supposed to, which was create more outlets for their product.

JH: A lot of the postcards are funny, and some of them play off the references to Milwaukee as the beer capital, like the guy who's laying on his back underneath a whole barrel of beer.

LW: (laughs) This is what I think must have passed for humor in 1905, but it's probably a little politically incorrect now.

JH: That wouldn't be something that Pabst or Schlitz would want out there today.



LW: No, now they give you free bus rides and tell you to take it easy.

JH: What other surprises were there? Some of these cards are a little more offbeat than others.

LW: The surprises for me are in seeing something that is documented anywhere else. We talked earlier about the value of the privately produced cards, and in the book there's one called the Terminal Hotel, and another called the Hotel Delaware. These were just small, mom-and-pop establishments that were located near the Union Depot and catered to a certain segment of traveler. Photos of them don't pop up anywhere else in the research landscape except on a postcard. So the surprise is seeing a picture of the Hotel Delaware, which brings it to life, instead of just a listing in the old city directory.



JH: When you follow through and print another volume of postcards, how are you to add to this historical record you're compiling?

LW: My goal for the second volume would be to focus on things that weren't in the first one. Neighborhood parks, commerce along the Milwaukee River. There's much to cover besides Wisconsin Avenue and the movies.

JH: Thanks for sharing these historical vignettes.

LW: Thanks for having me.