

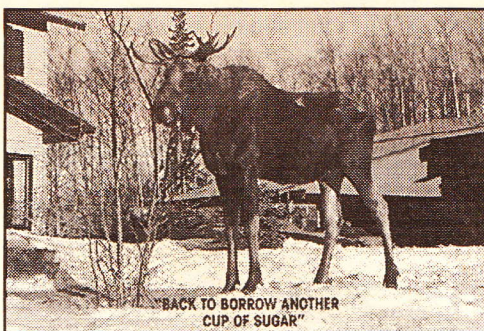
Alaska: Yielding Today's Bumper Crop

by Cynthia Elyce Rubin

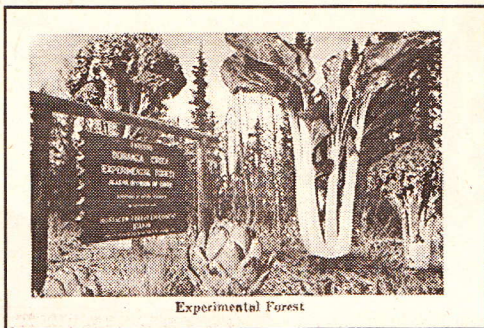
Not surprisingly, Alaska, America's one true frontier (defined as region with the largest remote land area beyond the farthest settlement) and the largest state in the union, remains a stronghold for the early-20th century phenomenon of the exaggerated or tall-tale postcard.

It used to be, in the 1800s, that western North America was represented on maps as largely empty and unknown. Early visitors to America's frontier often recounted the settlers' love of exaggeration. Travelers recalled hearing incredible tales swapped on stagecoaches, steamboats and around campfires. They described the antics of huge animals, giant insects, eccentric hunters and fish that got away in rivers too thick to drink and too thin to plow. Others dealt with hard times, the land's fertility and the weather, which "if there weren't bad weather, there wouldn't be no weather at all!" In the Midwest and Great Plains where distances and natural resources appeared to be endless, the boundary between fact and fantasy was often hard to distinguish. Local rural photographers turned this early American homesteaders' tendency to stretch the truth into the folk-art form of the exaggerated or tall-tale image.

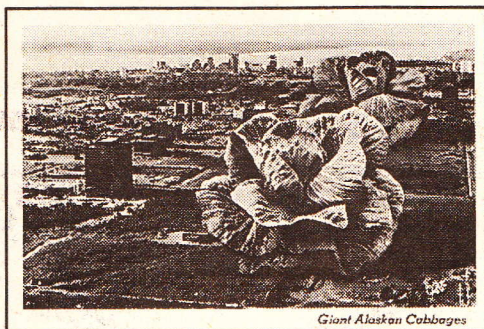
In 1893, speaking before a group of colleagues convened in Chicago, historian Frederick Jackson Turner read an essay that profoundly revised previous interpretations of American history. He declared, "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line." In essence this brief official statement marked the closing of a great historic movement. The American frontier had been declared officially dead; however, the Westward movement in reality did not come to an end at that time, and to some extent has not ended at all. Americans continue to surround themselves with persistent frontier metaphors. Today, Alaska's unique terrain of the biggest, the tallest and the longest, makes it a frontier, a land of extremes and superlatives. That is pretty much the



The caption on this postcard reads: This young bull moose spent over six hours visiting one neighborhood, enjoying all the bushes and trees, for a leisurely "branch brunch." It may not be an exaggerated image, after all!



At Alaska's oldest fair, Tanana Valley Fair in Fairbanks and the State Fair in Palmer, both in August, 50-pound cabbages and other legendary, giant agricultural products are the norm.



"Hearty vegetable behemoths of the subarctic, Brassica Oleracea Gigans (var. Anchorage) grows to prodigious size due to excess summer sunlight. The harvest of these leafy leviathans marks the onslaw of the cole season."

truth. For Alaska is a state of unimaginable scale. At a whopping 586,000 square miles, it is twice the size of Texas, with 100,000 glaciers, 3,000 rivers—including the third longest of all U.S. rivers, the Yukon—bordered by two oceans and three seas, and containing three million lakes, including Iliamna, the

largest natural freshwater lake.

In addition, Alaska contains North America's tallest mountain, Mount McKinley, and also houses 17 of the 20 highest peaks in the United States. During December in some parts of Alaska's interior, daylight can cut down to a mere half an hour a day; whereas, during June, sunshine lasts some 23 hours. As for vagaries of temperature, in the far north, temperatures can drop well into the minus degrees, with 60 degrees below Fahrenheit not uncommon.

Physical size is so great that this state encompasses seemingly endless ecosystems from the dry Arctic tundra to the rain forests of the Southeast, from a desert of sand dunes to ancient glacial ice. Residents share their land with more than 400 species of animals. And even though mosquitoes are commonly referred to as the unofficial state bird of Alaska, the truth is that they look like any other known mosquito. Now that's fact, not fiction.

Whereas conquering the American frontier at the turn of the century took a special brand of courage, one might say that living in Alaska today takes a special brand of person. Ideas of frontier and the West, embedded in the notion of who we are, continue to dominate American development and fashion our consciousness of what it means to be an American. Eskimos, igloos, glaciers, wildlife, the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, great expanses of virgin land, all images associated with Alaska's narrative as well as the frontier, maintain a presence in our lives. Although Alaska's extremes of temperature and geography certainly make good yarns, in today's media age, spreading the good news and ignoring the bad is not tolerated. So in a land where personal safety and fortune may instantly take a dramatic turn at anytime, a man's ability to wear a smile is an important trait: Is it no wonder that exaggerated postcards are so popular? ☼

Peripatetic deltiologist, Cynthia Elyce Rubin, is a curator, writer and lecturer. She has a Ph.D. in Folk Art and has written numerous articles and books, including the text for Larger than Life: The American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905-1915 with postcards from the collection of Morgan Williams. You may reach her at 20 West 72nd Street, New York, NY 10023-4100; e-mail cynthiaelyce@earthlink.net