

Victorian Trade Cards

Before the days of magazine advertising, German printers brought their expertise to America and gave businesses the advertising medium of trade cards.

BY CYNTHIA ELYCE RUBIN

The trade card, an advertising giveaway that dates from 1876 to 1900, is collected today for its colorful graphics and studied as an historical artifact reflecting America's cultural values. A Victorian collectible with European antecedents, trade cards, widely popular throughout the nation in the 1880s, constituted the first national marketing campaigns in American advertising. However, little known is the fact that the trade card's very existence is a commentary on the continuing vitality of German ingenuity and innovation on American soil.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century following the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution ushered in an unprecedented era of consumerism with America's emerging middle class wanting goods and services on a grand scale. "To fully understand the unique value of trade cards as a reflection of American social history in this period, one must consider the enormous industrial and commercial growth, as well as the sheer increase in population," writes Robert Jay in *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America*. As

an extensive railroad system assured accessibility of goods to western consumers, new and improved products, inventions, and imported goods flooded the frontier marketplace from urban centers such as sewing machines, European laces and notions, patent medicines, soaps, cooking ingredients, furniture, and household appliances. Nothing was immune, but how to publicize a product so as to gain the consumer's attention?

The trade card answered this need by advancing a new advertising medium. At first printed in black and white on lightweight card stock, the trade card's popularity soared when the inexpensive method of color printing called chromolithography replaced earlier, expensive, copper plate, engraving techniques. Print historian, Jay T. Last acknowledges in *The Color Explosion: Nineteenth-Century Lithography* that the "relatively simple and economical mass-production of image print" was the German invention of lithography in the 1790s by Alois Senefelder.

Last describes a steady advance in German color-printing technol-



This trade card is an advertisement for Ariosa Coffee (seen on the backside), but you might think it advertises wurst. The enormous influx of German immigrants in the last years of the nineteenth century was reflected in trade cards in many ways. Here the good-natured parody of the rotund, wurst-loving German butcher with a bit of an accent appears as a central character.

ogy beginning with the example of the serial publication of *Ornamente aller klassische Kunstepochen* (Ornaments of all Classical Periods in Art), produced by C.G. Herwig and C. Hildebrandt in Berlin from 1830 to 1859. A pattern book whose copious six-color plates educated designers in neoclassical, medieval and Renaissance styles, its evolution culminated in mass-production color printing that guaranteed Germany's role as the world's foremost low-cost producer of multi-color lithographs. As nineteenth-century German immigrants adapted to life in America, a large number of talented and skilled lithographers turned entrepreneurs and contributed, Last writes, "a decided German flavor to the American lithographic industry."

