

IMAGE FILE

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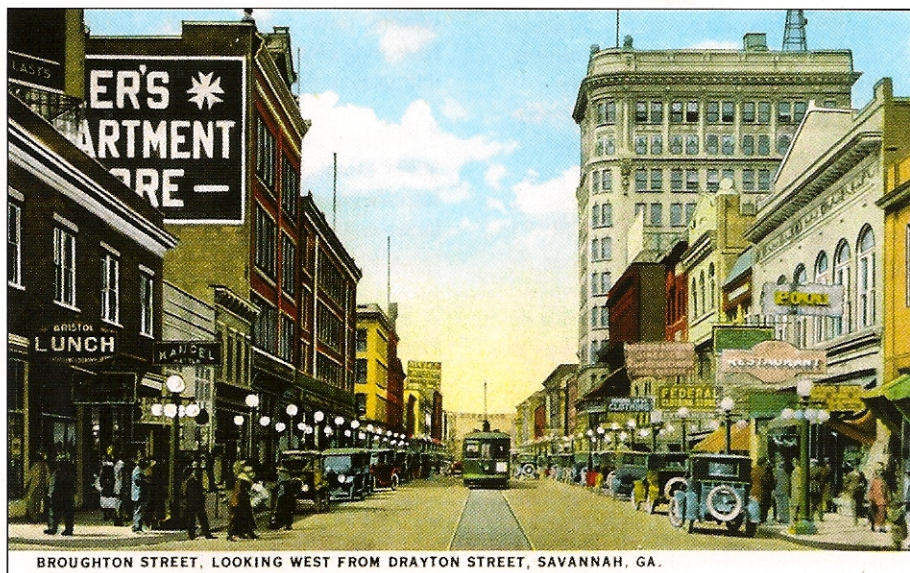
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George Ferris, Jr. introduced his wheel at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The 264-foot wheel carried 2,160 people at one time. Today, the Ferris wheel is still a popular ride at amusement parks, county fairs, and carnivals. Curt Teich Archives OCH508. 1950. See article beginning on page 3.

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WALKER EVANS AND THE PICTURE POSTCARD: Passion and Muse

By Cynthia Elyce Rubin



Photographer and postcard collector Walker Evans saw postcards as a simple, straight forward documentation of America. His photographic style was influenced by postcard views such as this street scene of Savannah, Georgia. Curt Teich Archives A99046. 1924.

Walker Evans (1903-1975) is celebrated as a documentary photographer whose stark photographs of sharecroppers and roadside Americana, including small-town main streets, simple houses, and billboards, make him the "champion of objective and truthful photographs."¹ What inspired and contributed to Evans's innovative vision of the American scene is less known but fully revealed in the exhibition, "Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Organized by Jeff L. Rosenheim, Curator in the Department of Photographs, this exhibition is the first to be drawn primarily from the vast trove of the Walker Evans Archive, a collection of the artist's negatives and papers acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1994. On view are hundreds of postcards, examples of index card subject dividers that Evans used to categorize his collection, related correspondence, Evans's three published essays on the postcard, and a rare set of photographs which the artist printed in 1936 on special postcard-format photographic paper. For postcard collectors, it is all a wondrous revelation.

We learn that Evans, himself a diehard — dare I say obsessive — postcard collector from the early age of twelve, not only collected but also wrote and lectured about postcards. In truth, he collected many different kinds of ephemera, including hand-lettered road signs and newspaper clippings, but postcards were his passion and his muse. And so one of America's great photographers took inspiration from the small, prosaic, colored images that we love so

much but that few art historians ever acknowledge.

There has emerged from this collection, really a picture of American history — of a period, let's say, prior to World War I and beginning around the turn of the century. I felt I was making a discovery and I still do... These are documents of things that interest me and they haven't been recorded any other way, so here's hidden treasure of not only American photography and documentary history but of American history and life of the period — social history.²

The influences of popular culture and the postcard and their intertwined relationship to Evans's artistic creativity cannot be underestimated. Calling postcards "honest, direct little pictures," he went on to identify the quality that so appealed to him. "Among collectors of Americana, much is made of the nation's folk art. The picture postcard is folk document," he said.³

Evans found the vernacular subjects of postcards filled with truth and meaning. He was affected by the simple, "artless" quality of the pictures and the generic, mostly frontal style that he later borrowed for his own camera work. As Rosenheim writes in the introduction to his book that accompanies this exhibition, "The picture postcard represented a powerful strain of indigenous American realism that directly influenced Evans's artistic development."⁴

Born in St. Louis in 1903 and raised in the Chicago suburb of Kenilworth, and then in Toledo, Ohio, Evans was educated in New England. He attended Phillips Academy and spent a year at Williams College, both in Massachusetts. A passion for literature impelled Evans to abandon the classroom for the streets of Paris in 1926. When he returned to New York the following year, he was intent on becoming a writer, but by 1928, he had taken up photography. Working freelance, he taught himself early on to use the camera the way a writer uses a pen to inscribe the meaning of what he sees around him.

In 1931 he received two commissions to photograph nineteenth-century vernacular architecture. For the architect Charles Fuller, he focused on Greek Revival in New York State and for cultural impresario Lincoln Kirstein and historian John Brooks Wheelwright, he documented Italian, Gothic, Egyptian Revival, "Folk Victorian" or gingerbread, and industrial architecture. This collaboration led to "Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Houses," Evans's first exhibition in 1933 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. It ran concurrently with a retrospective of Edward Hopper's paintings of similar architectural subjects. In 1933, Lippincott Publishers commissioned Evans to illustrate a book about life in Cuba under the regime of oppressive dictator, Gerardo Machado y Morales. It was in Havana that the young photographer captured some of his first images of poverty, destitution, and despair that appeared in Carleton Beals's book, *The Crime of Cuba*.

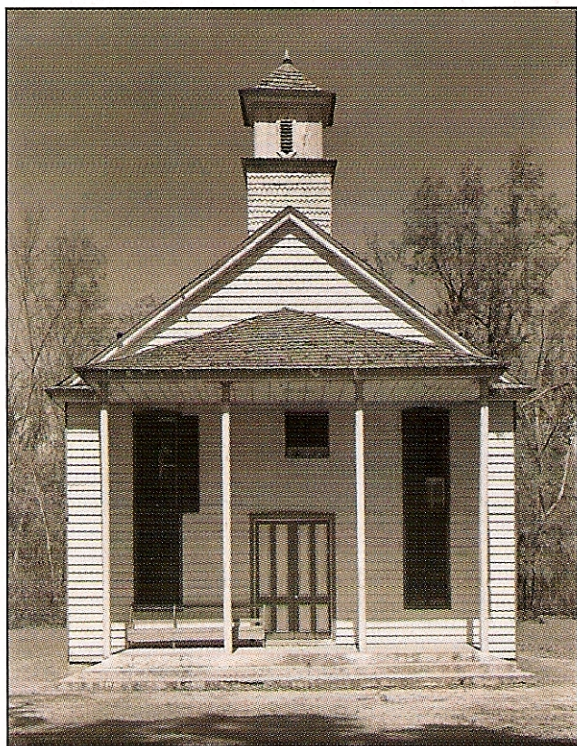
Evans was commissioned in early 1935 to photograph the finest surviving examples of Greek Revival architecture in the South for a publication that never came to fruition. Later in June of the same year, he accepted a job with the Department of the Interior to photograph a government-built resettlement community of unemployed coal miners in West Virginia. This job became a full-time position as "information specialist" for the Resettlement Administration (later renamed the Farm Security Administration), Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal agency in the Department of Agriculture.⁵ Assigned to document small-town life, demonstrating how the federal government improved conditions of the rural poor, Evans rejected any ideological perspective or propaganda. Instead, he went to work distilling the essence of American life he found in simple and ordinary subjects. Possessing an inherent grace and structure, his

observant photographs of roadside architecture, white-washed churches, barbershops, and cemeteries secured his reputation as a consummate documentary photographer.

Evans took a leave of absence from his New Deal job in 1936 to travel with writer James Agee, who had been assigned by *Fortune* magazine to write an article on cotton tenant farmers in the South. For many, the result of this collaboration, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), with its portraits of the Burroughs family — a sharecropper, his wife and children — and pictures of their home in Hale County, Alabama, are today considered among the iconic images of the century. His next work, *Many Are Called*, another project with Agee, is a book of portraits taken between 1938 and 1941 in the New York subway system where Evans, like a “spy and voyeur in the swaying seat,”⁶ hid his camera under his coat. Is there a better way to catch a person just being himself than to take a picture without his knowledge? Each portrait in the series, he later said, was “my idea of what a portrait ought to be: anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind.”⁷

In these subjects Evans found an authentic expression of what was most American about America, and his great achievement was to express that sense of indigenous national character in his photographs with a focus and clarity undoubtedly honed during childhood. Growing up during the heyday of the postcard, Evans was very early intrigued by its inexpensive and democratic form of communication. He often told stories describing his youth when the family traveled. He always made a beeline for the nearest store or hotel with racks filled with postcards.

Yes, I was a postcard collector at any early age. Every time my family would



Photographs of American life during the 1930s, such as Negro Church, South Carolina, gave Walker Evans his reputation as a consummate documentary photographer. Courtesy of the Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1936.

take me around for what they thought was my education, to show me the country in a touring car, to go to Illinois, to Massachusetts. I would rush into Woolworth's and buy all the postcards.⁸

By the 1940s, he was sharing his enthusiasm for the postcard with the public. He worked for *Time* magazine from 1943-1945 and then to 1965 as an editor at *Fortune* magazine. In May 1948, his first picture story was a portfolio of postcards drawn from his own collection, “Main Street Looking North from Courthouse Square.”

In an effort to educate the reader as to the value of these modest collectibles, he suggested how much the postcards had to say about the era in which they had first flourished (‘the trolley car period’), the innocent pride of the small-town dweller in his local

courthouse or main street, the truthful, unglamorous scenes admired by the typical Yankee traveler.⁹

Later, in January 1962, Evans produced another portfolio of postcards from his collection, “When Downtown Was a Beautiful Mess” for *Fortune* and in July 1962, he assembled “Come on Down” for *Architectural Forum*.

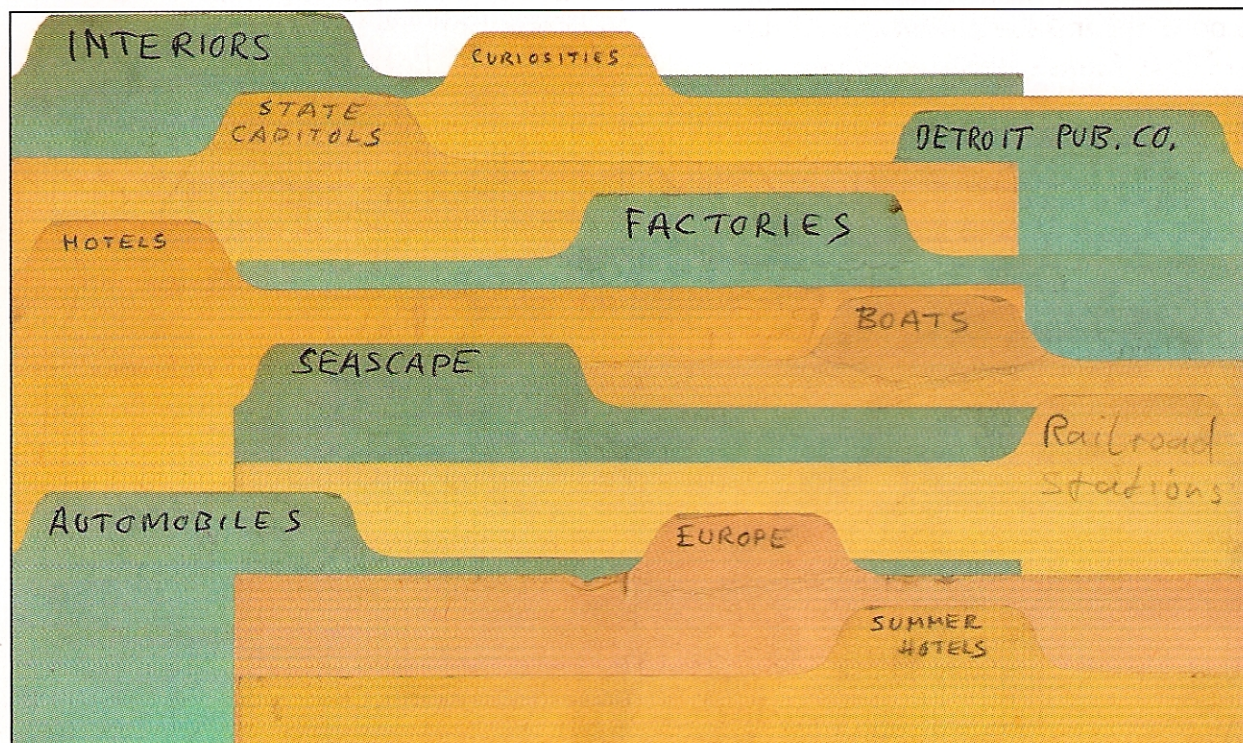
In 1963, when Yale University invited Evans to give a lecture on his choice of subject, instead of speaking about his own photographs, he chose to speak on his postcard collection. It was a pivotal event. With his lecture titled “Lyric Documentary,” he explained that an appreciation of postcards helped him as photographer to elevate the everyday without the burden of commentary and nostalgia. These qualities only distracted the viewer because they are a “blurred vision which actually destroys the authenticity of the past.”¹⁰ To this end, he wanted people to know that his work contained something more than the word “documentary” suggested.

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 so-called documentary approach of photography is the addition of lyricism. Further, that the lyric is usually produced unconsciously and even unintentionally...¹¹

He hoped to convince an academic audience that the popular, low-art postcard was worthy of serious study. The lecture proved a success and ultimately led to Evans's appointment at Yale as professor of graphic design in the School of Art and Architecture, a post he held until he retired in 1973.

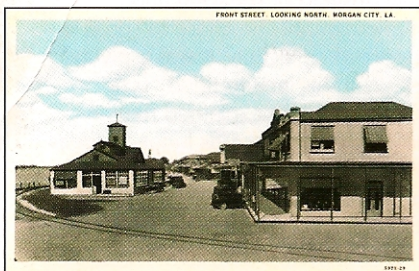
During his life, Evans amassed some 9,000 postcards, including many views published by the Curt Teich Company and the Detroit Publishing Company, which he believed “employed and trained a fleet of itinerant photographers whose simple, careful work stands today with the best ‘straight’ view photography this country has ever produced.”¹² He filed the postcards by subject in shoeboxes, leather suitcases and desk drawers with his categories including “Factories,” “Train Stations,” “Automobiles,” “State capitals,” “Hotels,” “Curiosities,” and “Madness.” The largest number of postcards in his collection is classified simply as “Street Scenes.”

Rosenheim pays special attention in the exhibition to the 1929 postcard *Front Street, Looking North, Morgan City, La.*



Evans housed his collection of about 9,000 postcards in shoeboxes, suitcases, and desk drawers. Like many collectors, he organized them by subject with tabbed index card subject dividers. The subject that contained the most postcards was “Street Scenes.” Courtesy of the Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1930s-1970s.

that, for him, raises an important question about Evans's work. The card depicts a small town on the Atchafalaya River, not far from New Orleans. In vantage point and composition, the postcard closely parallels three of Evans's own photographs from the spring of 1935. Which came first, Rosenheim asks, the postcard or the photograph? The conclusion is that probably the postcard came first. But Rosenheim explains that the postcard's generally frontal viewpoint and conceptual matter-of-factness had probably intrigued Evans for years and were significant in defining his objectives. "Picture postcards offered precisely the



The postcard view of Front Street in Morgan City, Louisiana is exactly the kind of scene that Evans appreciated most. His collection featured many street views of towns from around the country. Curt Teich Archives 5975-29. 1929.



The negative of Front Street in Morgan City, Louisiana, taken by Evans, clearly reveals how his photographic compositions mimicked the views found on postcards. Negative by Walker Evans. Courtesy of the Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1935.

anonymous, anti-aesthetic, documentary quality," Rosenheim writes, "that he [Evans] sought to achieve in his own work."¹³

That Evans saw ordinary American life as worthy of an artist's attention was not entirely new in the history of photography. Vernacular photographers who produced postcards in the early 1900s did so to some degree, but Evans charted an entirely new direction. And in doing so, he also influenced the next generation of photographers who took his ideas and used them for their own, among them, Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand and Diane Arbus, all photographers who recorded the ordinary and familiar.

Toward the end of Evans's life, postcards continued to take center stage. He was enthusiastic about a book of selections from his postcard collection that he hoped art critic Hilton Kramer would help him edit. He "urged Kramer to join him in the appreciation of the 'honest,'

small-town, turn-of-the-century American postcard."¹⁴ Unfortunately, Evans passed away before the book was finalized. Alas, for us postcard collectors, it would take an additional twenty-nine years to acknowledge and interpret Evans's postcard connoisseurship. Now we have an exhibition and a book, both eloquent testimony to the value and importance of postcard collecting, and in Walker Evans's example, the wellspring for creative genius. □

Cynthia Elyce Rubin is a postcard collector and historian. She is the author of *Larger than Life: the American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905-1915* (Abbeville) and many articles on postcards, including *Grassroots Graphics* (Image File, Vol. 13, 2004) and *Lost in Time: images of visionary environments* (Raw Vision, Vol. 61, 2007)

NOTES

1. Quote by Weston Naef, curator emeritus of the J. Paul Getty Museum's Department of Photographs, in Bernard Weinraub, "It's Walker Evans Time, And the Getty Is in Luck," *The New York Times*, 25 July 2001, p. E3.

2. Evans lecture on postcards, presented 7 November 1973 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Transcript: Walker Evans Archives, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

3. Ibid.

4. Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2009, p. 10.

5. During its ten-year existence, under Roy Stryker, this agency's Historical Section helped to provide work for unemployed photographers and established the careers of many American photographers during that time, including Jack Delano, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee and Marion Post Wolcott.

6. Quoted in James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans*. New York: Basic Books, 1999, p. 396.

7. Interview with Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, 23 December 1971.

8. Evans lecture on postcards, presented 7 November 1973.

9. Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography*. Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995, p. 206.

10. Evans lecture on postcards, "Lyric Documentary" presented to the Architecture Department at Yale University, in 1964. Transcript: Walker Evans Archives, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

11. Ibid.

12. "Main Street Looking North from Courthouse Square," *Fortune*, May 1948, p. 106.

13. Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard*, p. 19.

14. Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography*, p. 294. □

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Rosenheim, Jeff L. and Douglas Eklund. *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology*. New York: Scalo in association with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. □

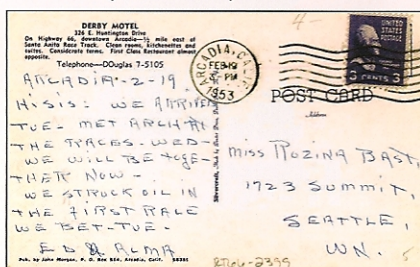
Get Your Kicks On Digital Past

By Christine Pyle

Historic U.S. Highway 66 is a 2,400-mile stretch of road that once connected the country from Chicago to Los Angeles. Better known as Route 66, the road ran through big cities and small towns as it crossed the United States from the Midwest to the West Coast. Route 66 is neither the oldest nor the longest road, but it is easily the most romanticized. Route 66 has been commemorated in books, songs, television shows, movies, and of course, on postcards. The Curt Teich Postcard Archives was awarded a National Park Service (NPS) grant, which was completed at the end of December 2008. This grant allows us to share these Route 66 postcards online with preservationists, researchers, and enthusiasts of Route 66 — the Mother Road.

In 1999 Congress passed an Act to create the *Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program* administered by the National Park Service. The program provides cost-sharing grants to private property owners, non-profit organizations, and local, state, federal, and tribal government entities. The funds can be used for preserving and restoring historically significant properties, or for "research, planning, oral history, interpretation, and education/outreach projects related to Route 66."

The Teich Archives received a grant of \$8,000 from the NPS to digitize Route 66 materials produced by the Curt Teich



The message side of this Route 66 postcard for the Derby Motel in Arcadia, California boasts that the motel is only "1/2 mile east of the Santa Anita Race Track." Ed and Alma, motel guests, took advantage of the proximity. Curt Teich Archives/James R. Powell Route 66 Collection RT66-2399. Ca. 1953.