

village view

by Andrea Leonard

With the season's first snowfall there comes a hush over the world. Waking to rain is waking to a day of murmuring music, but waking to snow is waking to a soft quiet that muffles the very wind.

During the Christmas season snow is more welcome than at any other time during the winter. There's no question but that it's beautiful to look at for there's nothing whiter, nothing that seems cleaner or purer than a landscape covered with new-fallen snow; furthermore, when snow lies on the ground on December 25th, everything looks Christmassy.

After a storm, snow mounds every surface, rounds every corner, softens every sharp edge; it sticks like cake frosting to the windward side of every tree trunk, gleams and glistens where the sun's rays touch its surface, makes each view outside a wonderland.

The light, even on a cloudy day, is brightened by the blanketing billions of snowflakes, each tiny frozen hexagonal different from any of its kindred crystals. What miracle of design creates their patterns, why every snowflake forms a six-sided star, why no two alike have ever been found, baffles the most erudite scholars who've studied snowflakes and frost patterns.

Almost as diverse as snowflake patterns are the Christmas cards that come, as though on a December whirlwind, bringing seasons' greetings, words of cheer, messages of remembrance and thoughts of love and loved ones from near and far.

The first Christmas card was issued in 1846 by a London publisher, Joseph Crandall, who was indebted for the idea to Sir Henry Cote. Crandall employed English artist John Calcott Horsley (1817-1903) to design the first of the Christmas cards.

The card was lithographed by Jobbins of Warwick Court and was colored by hand. About 1,000 were sold the first year; it was the small beginning of an industry destined to become a giant. Each Christmas more cards are marketed; each Christmas the demand increases.

It wasn't 'til 1862, however, that the cards came into general favor. At that time, Goodall & Son of London began publishing cards inscribed simply with the words, "A Merry Christmas" and "A Happy New Year," in illuminated form. The following year, robins, holly branches, embossed figures and landscapes were added.

The practice caught on; in succeeding years the popularity of the holiday cards grew and the cards became more elaborate. During the Victorian era, their popularity spread rapidly from London throughout England, across the English Channel to the Continent, over the Atlantic Ocean to the United States.

In the year 1868, postal authorities in Austria-Hungary faced a large volume of bulky correspondence and decreasing revenues. In January of the following year Dr. Emanuel Herrmann, a young Viennese economist, suggested the postal card as a remedy. He reasoned postal revenues would increase with lighter, smaller, more numerous pieces of correspondence. From this came the government-issued postal card.

Following its introduction, lithographer-printers combined the pictorial envelope pioneered by the Irish genre painter, William Mulready (1786-1863) and his pupil, James Valentine, with the postal card.

An immediate success abroad, the picture postal did not appear in the United States until 1893. In May of that year the Columbian Exposition in Chicago sold the first illustrated souvenir postal cards.

From 1901 until the break in relations with Germany prior to World War I, Americans enjoyed a nationwide postal card fad. Albums for the specific purpose of preserving picture postals were sold in every price range from silver decorated velvet plush to cardboard. The family parlor was incomplete without a postal album in prominent display.

Christmas postal cards appeared in both Europe and the United States after the introduction of the government cards. Early cards depicted traditional holiday flora and fauna as well as the domestic animals associated with the manger birth. Predatory varmints such as the wolf, fox, weasel and coyote were never part of the early Christmas pageant. Colorful birds of Europe and North America, however, soon adorned the Christmas postal.

The beloved deer, an animal synonymous with gentleness and beauty, became one of the most enduring symbols of Christmas. Doe and fawn create a wilderness nativity scene as appealing today as when first offered.

In a collection of early Christmas cards we find pictured a pair of bluebirds perched on a spruce branch, one above the other, giving an impression of sounding their own cheery notes as Christmas tidings.

Another card shows Santa Claus, or Father Christmas, behind the wheel of a vehicle best described as one of the earliest British lorries, high-fendered, narrow, painted green, with gilt side-lettering announcing, "Daddy Xmas Motor Bus." Atop the vehicle (which might have been a precursor of London's double-decker buses) crowd a half-dozen smiling children, enjoying their ride through the snowy street.

There's a card decorated with holly leaves and berries, all surrounding a tiny robin perched on one leg on a snow-covered fence rail. Another shows a couple of bronze bells

swinging in the wind; in the snowy field beyond are a moose and a dog; smoke curls from the chimney of a distant house nestled against a stand of dark fir trees growing on a frosty hillside.

Kittens, puppies, chickadees and cardinals have been subjects of Christmas card illustration; they continue to be, just as do the deer. Currier and Ives winter scenes, Gramma Moses' primitives, and, of course, New England villages with steepled colonial churches have been traditional artwork for cards.

In fact, there's hardly a single theme imaginable that hasn't been employed for Christmas cards. Musical instruments, great works of art, religious symbols of every kind, books and scrolls, trees and bushes, ocean and pond scenes, brooks and rivers, doorways, houses, campus scenes and city streets, candles aglow with flame, tables laden with food, all have been pictured on Christmas cards.

Family photographs to personalize cards enjoyed a flurry for a number of years. Poinsettia plants, ribbons and bows, wreaths, candy canes, tree decorations, fireplaces and mantels, sleighs, tandem bicycles, toys, ships and boats, nativity scenes, stars, even mailboxes can be Christmas symbols.

A trend to replace Christmas postal cards with folded notes in envelopes began early in the current century; years back, when postage rates were but a few cents for each envelope, the difference in mailing cost was small.

With inflation's toll, returning to the old-fashioned practice of Christmas postals seems reasonable, even desirable; not only does it save postage, it reduces waste of paper, cuts down on weight of mailbags, saves time in preparation, and carries exactly the same message.

An even nicer touch is the resumption of sending authentic Christmas cards, cards that closely resemble those that first came out in merry old England in 1846 when Londoner Joseph Crandall accepted Sir Henry's suggestion to publish a special holiday greeting, the first Christmas card.

And like snowflakes, each one different from every other, your postal card greeting may be unique among the many received this year when envelopes shower into mailboxes throughout the land.

May you waken on Christmas morning to the hushed world of new-fallen snow. At Christmastime, may you find joy in simple things.