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**Reading Family and Community Histories
(in a sparsely-catalogued, early twentieth-century Photographic Postcard)**



Figure 1 Written on verso: "Barn raising party, women's spoon race, Missouri."

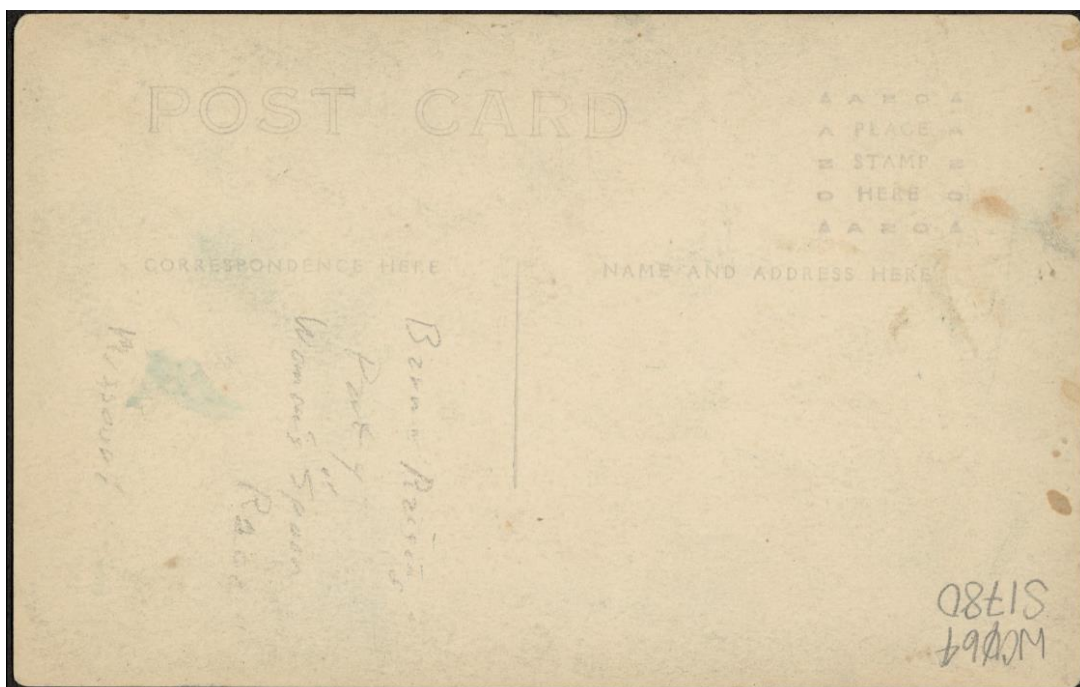


Figure 2 "Divided back" post-1907 postcard, printed on Kodak AZO photographic paper.

Of the billions of postcards produced in the early twentieth-century, a few million were photographic postcards – a rather remarkable and proliferative photographic medium which captured and captivated much of the American West between 1904 and 1920.¹ These photographic postcards – also referred to as real photo postcards or silver gelatin prints – were actual, usually original photographs, “developed from glass plate or film negatives onto heavy, sensitized photo stock, cut to postcard size.”² Whereas the billions of mass-produced postcards – sold for a nickel in drugstores and novelty shops across the country – were typically printed in color or black and white, the few million photographic postcards produced in the early twentieth-century were characteristically monochrome. Black or brown in tone, the photographs were sometimes faded to sepia and occasionally featured additional hand-tinting.³ In a study of American photographic postcards, Rosamond Vaule characterizes these visuals as “diverse and intimate” yet distinctly “public” images which, perhaps “more than any other twentieth-century photographic expression,” “blur the lines between professional and amateur photograph[y].”⁴ Indeed, while professional town and itinerant photographers did print some of their best negatives on mass-produced postcard paper, the photos featured in most photographic postcards were taken by amateurs and processed, usually anonymously, in small, local photography studios equipped with a darkroom and necessary processing materials.⁵ Though slightly more expensive than their mass-produced counterparts, these postcards were nevertheless affordable for print and circulation by ordinary Americans.

While photographic postcards today constitute a valuable visual artifact, they were, at and around the turn of the twentieth century, produced primarily for a home market – for sharing and documenting the lives and locales of ordinary Americans. Speaking eloquently to their value as visual artifacts, John Miller Morris, a scholar of Western American social geography, suggests that photographic postcards offer a “glimpse into social behavior” by providing small but significant details about material culture, archaeology, sociology, and regional and family histories. The anonymous photographers responsible for the images featured on these postcards, he describes, “quietly produc[ed] magnificent visual documents of their communities.”⁶ In thinking critically about these postcards as historical sources, however, it is important to note that the term “real photo” was often deployed strategically by their makers to, as Vaule proposes, distinguish these images from the photo-

¹ Rosamond B. Vaule, *As we Were: American Photographic Postcard, 1905-1930*, (2004) 21-22.

² *Ibid.*

³ Vaule, 22.

⁴ Vaule, 19.

⁵ John Miller Morris, *Taming the Land: The Lost Postcard Photographs of the Texas High Plains*, (2009) 8. According to Morris, approximately 95% of photographic postcards featuring photographs taken by amateurs are unsigned.

⁶ Morris, 8.

mechanically reproduced and printed postcards which dominated the market.⁷ Particularly in light of their contemporary characterization as “real photo” postcards, or RPPCs, it is essential to consider the biases and limitations of what these images, and their photographers, convey. In this paper, I endeavor to read the photographic postcard included on page one as Morris or Vaule might, attempting, in the process, to uncover the community and family histories located therein. By visually analyzing and historically situating the postcard within a selection of thirty-seven other photographs also connected to the Snyder family, I suggest that this photographic postcard – featuring a women’s spoon race at a barn-raising party – at once highlights important community rituals and obscures community tensions in the county of Barton, Missouri.

The front of the postcard features a landscape photograph (about 3 ½” by 5” in size) of three seemingly joyous, carefree adult women racing one another in long skirts and whilst balancing an egg on a spoon. The spoon-racing women are flanked on either side by dozens of cheering men, most dressed in dark suits and hats, and a smattering of young children. Though not much can be discerned in the background, part of a well-sized house or barn is clearly visible in the distant right. Ultimately, the photograph appears to depict a community – perhaps a comfortable one, judging from the quality of dress and the size of the building – that has come together in celebration or commemoration of some event, individual, or ritual. The photo is clearly worn, scattered with small stains, what appears to be a fingerprint, and a blue smudge stretching across the upper right quartile. The photograph is unmounted and, save for a white vertical strip along the right side (most likely intended for a written caption), is not obviously a postcard. Details on the opposite side provide more insight into the scene depicted and the nature and time period of the artifact. Labeled “POST CARD” across the upper right half and printed on Kodak’s Azo photographic paper, there can be little doubt that the document constitutes a photographic postcard.⁸ The Azo paper is spatially organized such that a thin vertical line divides the reverse of the postcard in two, marking the left side for correspondence and the right for an address. Though this particular postcard features no stamp, correspondence, signature, or address, its spatial organization provides important clues about the year in which the postcard was produced (ca. 1915, according to the catalogue). As a postal product, the design of RPPCs were carefully regulated by the U.S. Post Office according to standards which, unsurprisingly, changed in time. Prior to March 1907, for instance, no

⁷ Vaule, *As We Were*, 24.

⁸ Morris, *Taming the Land* 8; “The History of Postcards,” VH Productions (2003).

The mass-produced photographic paper on which the image is printed can be identified as Kodak’s Azo paper according to a characteristic design printed in the upper right corner, where a stamp would be affixed. Other photographic postcards in the Snyder family collection were printed on AZO and Velox paper. Top manufacturers included Azo, Cyki, Solio, and Velox. Also worth noting: the words “Post Card” or “Postcard” were not permitted to be printed on the reverse of privately printed post cards prior to December 24th, 1901, after which a previously required authorization inscription was no longer required by law.

writing could appear on the reverse (address side) of a postal card; instead, senders penned messages on the photographic side, often obscuring or defacing the image in the process.⁹ Given that this postcard explicitly demarcates space for correspondence on the non-photographic side, it is clear that the image was produced after March 1907 and, most likely, before 1915. This period, oft referred to as the “Divided-back” or “Golden” Age of postcards, predated the “early modern” or “white border” period (1915-1930), during which most postcards featured white borders in order to save money on ink.¹⁰ That the photographic postcard examined here was not dated, stamped, etc. is also revealing. As Vaule points out, photographic postcards were rarely printed individually; more typically, ten to twelve postcards featuring the same image were printed at once.¹¹ Supposing that was the case here, and ten to twelve postcards featuring this women’s spoon race were printed, it follows that nine to eleven other copies may have been mailed out to family or friends while this single copy remained a Snyder family keepsake. Where a correspondence might have gone, a caption reading “Barn raising party, women’s spoon race, Missouri” instead appears in penciled cursive.

When pieced together, the captions of the thirty-eight photographs in this collection not only clarify content but also provide clues about who authored the captions, and when. Because the word “Missouri” was penciled on so many of the Snyder family images, handwriting comparisons were relatively straightforward: the penciled handwriting matched on every labeled image. Two additional clues, detailed in the footnotes, link the handwriting to 1980s Sacramento.¹² Finally, almost all the captions, e.g. “Jim Snider ancestors,” “Jim Snider grandfather,” “Jim Snider’s mother,” etc., identify photographed individuals *in relation* to Jim Snyder - featured as an adolescent or young boy in a majority of the images in this collection. Based on these captions, a cursory reconstruction of the Snyder family tree sketches the family’s movement from Western Pennsylvania in the early 19th century, to Western Missouri by 1851, and to Barton County, Missouri by 1890 – where three generations of Sniders eventually resided. There, Jim G. Snyder was born (on July 21, 1914) and raised in the rather curious town of Liberal.¹³ As the stamps of local photography studios confirm, otherwise unlabeled

⁹ Morris, *Taming the Land*, 8.

¹⁰ “The History of Postcards.”

¹¹ Vaule, *As we Were*, 23.

¹² *Photographs of the Snider Family, 20th-Century Missouri*, Western Americana Collection, Princeton University. In reference to the two clues placing the cursive, penciled handwriting in 1980s Sacramento: First, the caption of an early image of about twenty Snyder-family members posed in front of a log cabin read “Jim Snider ancestors, died last week – Dec (1988),” thus pinpointing the penciled cursive handwriting to the 1980s. Second, included with an image of Jim Snyder’s Church Choir was a handwritten caption, penned on a small piece of scrap paper ripped from an advertisement for a public-television pledge drive and featuring the heading “Channel 6,” the corner of a mug, and a license plate holder with “KVIE6” appearing in bold. A quick search indicates that KVIE6 is a PBS-affiliated, Sacramento-based channel which first aired in 1959, thus placing the author of the captions, at least for a time, in Sacramento, California. Also of note: while some handwritten and catalogued captions spell Snider with an “i,” others spell Snyder with a “y.” Because the thirty-eight photos examined here have been grouped under the tag “Snyder Family,” I chose, in this paper, to spell Snyder with a “y.”

¹³ Genealogical records were constructed on ancestry.com, using information about a Snyder who died in Sacramento in 1988 and lived, at some point, in Liberal, Barton, Missouri. That individual was discovered to be Jim Glover Snyder and a tree was

images from Jim's childhood and adolescence can be situated within Verdella, Lamar, and Liberal, three towns located in Barton, a sparsely populated county on the Kansas-Missouri border.¹⁴ Presumably, then, these captions, genealogical records, and the divided-back format place the photographic postcard in question in Barton County, Missouri between 1907 and 1915. If this is the case, Barton County's unusual history layers and nuances readings of community in what may otherwise seem a straightforward photograph of a women's spoon race.

Community – and especially women's centrality therein – has long been overlooked in the American West, erased by popular depictions and dominant histories which emphasize and esteem rugged individualism and the solitary (male) frontiersman. In his seminal 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner argues, for example, that the frontier "is productive of individualism." The "wilderness," he proposes, pushes "complex society... into a kind of primitive organization based on family. The "tendency" of the West, he concludes, "is antisocial."¹⁵ Ultimately, historical narratives like Turner's "Frontier Thesis" neglect community life in the American West. Not unrelatedly, such narratives also erase extensive evidence of women's contributions to Western life and communities. As feminist social historian Margaret Walsh argues, part of this gap exists due to the under-examination of historical sources *other* than newspapers and public records, e.g. diaries, letters, journals, oral interviews, photographic postcards, etc., which, if studied, would bring to light the narratives and experiences of a diversity of women.¹⁶ In his essay "Transformation of a Rural Community," American historian John Mack Faragher uses a variety of such sources to investigate Sugar Creek, Illinois as a case study of Western community, exchange, and interaction. In the Old West in particular, Faragher argues, farm families like the Snyders "reached out... to their neighbors for work and play, politics and prayer," often "with a remarkable degree of gregariousness."¹⁷ Indeed, from the mid-19th to early 20th century, a rich network of social exchange and mutual assistance, often referred to as the borrowing system, brought together entire neighborhoods and allowed for the community-wide sharing of tools, labor, and other products.¹⁸ The force and success of this system, Faragher suggests, is perhaps best epitomized by barn- and cabin-raising, both of which involved the participation of men

constructed, primarily on the side of his father, Wilbur. As indicated by one of the captions in this collection, this research confirmed that Jim Snyder died on February 15th, 1988 in Sacramento, California.

¹⁴ *Photographs of the Snider Family, 20th-Century Missouri*, Western Americana Collection, Princeton University. Images feature at least five local studio stamps, including Sullivan photography in Liberal, E.F. Miller in Verdella, Dixon, Liberal, Grogen in Lamar, MO, and Carter, in Liberal.

¹⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 221-222.

¹⁶ Margaret Walsh, "Women's Place on the American Frontier," (1995): 241-55.

¹⁷ "Transformation of a Rural Community" by Mark Faragher, 264, Sean Wilentz and Jonathan H. Earle, eds., *Major Problems in the Early Republic 1787-1848: Documents and Essays*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 267.

and women in collective labor and, afterward, competitive “frolics.” Women, Faragher emphasizes, “were not merely in the background, preparing the “edibles” for the hungry workers, but were just as likely engaged in productive frolics” – like spoon-racing – “of their own.”¹⁹ As this early 20th-century photographic postcard indicates, women played both a *central and celebrated* role in local, exchange-based economies (like Barton’s) and essential community rituals (like barn-raising). Via the particularized medium of a photographic postcard, that centrality – already commemorated by local farm families and communities at social events like barn- and cabin-raising – could be communicated and celebrated even more broadly through contemporary postal circulation and the deliberate preservation of photographic evidence, such as this postcard, for posterity.

Examined in light of Barton’s local history, however, it seems that the postcard captures and celebrates not only a sense of local community but also – and perhaps more remarkably – the *persistence* of a sense of community, despite underlying tensions and the ongoing contestation of local community values. In the decades following its 1880 founding as an atheist utopia by Mr. G. H. Walser, the town of Liberal, Barton, Missouri became renowned – locally and across the country – as a fractured community and failed experiment. In 1910, an article in the *Trenton Sunday Advertiser* described Liberal as, “for the second time since its founding,” decisively “divided against itself.”²⁰ If, at the end of its first year, Liberal constituted a “healthy town of three hundred persons,” the community quickly descended into bitter conflict, aggravated by tensions between incoming church-goers and Liberal’s original population of free-thinkers who sought to legally prohibit religiously minded individuals and institutions from entering town limits. As religious individuals formed rival towns, some of which – including the short-lived Denison – promptly fell into decay, Liberal’s founder constructed a barbed-wire fence to keep out non-members of his atheist utopia.²¹ Meanwhile, American journalists continued to condemn the town, characterizing Liberal as “singular and rather offensive,” “heavy and malaria-laden,” and “liberal only in name.”²² Though the Snyders did not come to Liberal as a founding family in 1880, they were mid-19th century settlers of Barton County and early 20th-century residents of Liberal itself; this localized divisiveness, then, would not have gone unfelt by the family, particularly not by Jim’s grand-parents or great-grandparents on his father’s side, both of whom lived in Barton between 1880 and 1910.

Interpreting, or re-interpreting, this postcard in the context of Barton’s local history was, for me, a thought-provoking task. In concluding this paper, however, I ultimately found myself thinking less

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Quaint Community Had Ups and Downs,” *Trenton Sunday Advertiser*, (1911), 10.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Brevities, News and Opinions” (1882), “White-washed Christians” (1886), and “It is Liberal in Name” (1893).

about the limitations of images as visual artifacts and more about the incredible – seemingly infinite – variance of their interpretation. This seemingly light-hearted, celebratory photographic postcard perhaps functioned to obscure or distract from the divisiveness which plagued Barton County and the town of Liberal, MO at and around the turn of the 20th-century. Alternately, the postcard – in spite of a history and present reality of local conflict – may have been designed to capture and celebrate a *prevailing* sense of community which, despite other conflicts, was nevertheless evidenced and experienced in long-standing, regional community rituals. With just the limited information I was able to gather about this photographic postcard thus far, this artifact might be interpreted in myriad other ways; undoubtedly, however, there remains much more about the lives and locale of the Snyder family to be gleaned from this postcard – a document which, when I first encountered it, was barely catalogued.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

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