

EPHEMERA

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With this issue of *Heritage of the Great Plains* we inaugurate a new feature for our journal, a small section called "Ephemera."

Ephemera is a somewhat nebulous term. Trying to pin it down is reminiscent of the observation of the U.S. Supreme Court justice who, experiencing difficulty in coming up with an all-purpose definition for obscenity, nevertheless proclaimed an ability to know it when he saw it. As used here, ephemera consists of printed objects on paper, made for immediate, nonpermanent use.

That definition takes in a pretty large piece of territory. Theatre tickets and bookmarks are ephemera, but morocco-bound books are not. Sitting Bull's moceasins are not ephemera, but holiday cards and political handbills are. We will take a broad view of ephemera from or pertaining to the Great Plains: postcards, dime novels, stereopticon views, leaflets, advertisements.. the list goes on and on. In fact, we invite our reader's suggestions. If you have access to a piece of ephemera you would like to share, please let us know.

Many of us turn to an era's ephemera in an attempt to better understand that time and its people. There is something altogether magical about the capacity objects from vanished times possess for transporting us at least partway back into the past. Take, for instance, the example appearing here.

This is one of a series of fifty cards published in 1892 by Arbuckle Brothers. New York-based purveyors of a type of coffee so pervasive on the Great Plains that "Arbuckle" came to mean coffee itself. Brothers John and Charles Arbuckle got their start in the big-time commercial coffee world in 1865, after patenting their process for preserving roasted coffee beans. The Arbuckles coated the beans with a sugar-and-egg mixture to seal in freshness.

The brother included various customer incentives in the one-pound bags of their Ariosa product, including coupons and sticks of peppermint candy. They eventually settled on capitalizing on the trading card craze, which swept Gilded Age America. Cards like the one illustrated here were eagerly collected and traded by consumers of Arbuckle's coffee and their children. Today, they are sometimes found glued to the pages of dusty scrapbook albums.

A funny thing about these Arbuckle cards: it seems that the farther west the printed parade progressed, the less accurate the images became. This particular card, for example, purports to show vignettes intimately associated with Nebraska, about which more is gleaned from perusing the reverse side. But it is a Nebraska almost entirely of the imagination, all but totally unrelated to the actual place itself.

On the lower right appear settlers, moving into the West with their ox-drawn wagon. This is an illustration with which Nebraska's pioneers would probably have readily identified. In their America, such a scene connoted progress.

The Spanish soldiers, armed with crossbows and swords, clad in armor and wearing morions on their heads, raise a wooden cross atop an elevated point as a priest looks on. But just where in Nebraska did this occur? We can only wonder.

Then there is the Indian, who dominates the center of the card. This is, for any number of reasons, a truly weird image. In fact, this fellow appears to be from a Southwestern, not a Great Plains, tribe. Nothing quite like the dwelling behind him ever existed in Nebraska. Indeed, the structure can be nothing other than a multi-story Pueblo houseblock, located somewhere in northern Arizona or New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley. As for the potter's wheel on which he creates his pot, it was unknown to American Indians.

None of which, by the way, detracts from the card's historical value. As with so much ephemera, it is not going too far to suggest that we learn infinitely more about people's perspective at the time this card was manufactured than they could possibly have learned from the card itself. That is why ephemera is worth giving a second look, for it serves us well as a window into our heritage.