

Trans-Mississippi Exposition Commemorative Stamp Issue and  
National Identity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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In 1898, with the country settled from ocean to ocean, and the frontier declared closed, the nation struggled with unifying its multiple identities. The Trans-Mississippi Exposition was both a method of raising the morale of a concerned people, and a venue to promote a sense of national nostalgia as a way of unifying the East and West through the blurring of the literal and the metaphorical depictions of the west. A commemorative series of postage stamps, (figures 1-3) issued by the federal government for this exposition, was a means for the government to endorse a combination of western nostalgia and the reality of progress to reassure the nation, and create a sense of national pride in its characteristics. The nine postage stamp designs spoke to Eastern and Western citizens differently, masking some realities and emphasizing others, in a way that solidified national confidence in achievement and future progress, creating national nostalgia of its internal imperialism.



Figure 1: *1c Marquette on the Mississippi, 2c Farming in the West, 4c Indian Hunting Buffalo* 1898, Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum (1980.2493.1785, 1787, and 1789)



Figure 2: *5c Fremont on Rocky Mountains, 8c Troops Guarding Train, 10c Hardships of Emigration* 1898, Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum (1980.2493.1791, 1793, and 1795)



Figure 3: *50c Western Mining Prospector, \$1 Western Cattle In Storm, \$2 Mississippi River Bridge 1898*, Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum (1980.2493.1798, 2000, and 2003)

I have divided the nine stamps (designed by Raymond Ostrander Smith and engraved by G.F.C. Smillie and Marcus Baldwin) into three categories: Native American Relations in the United States, Western Industry, and United States Westward Expansion. Not only do the stamps visually lend themselves to this vision, but they were also three of the most charged topics around the turn of the century. The Trans-Mississippi Exposition was a prime venue for these postage stamps, and the promotion of unification around national nostalgia towards westward expansion.

In the 1860s, the country had been sorely divided internally by the Civil War, and by 1898, the reunification of North and South was still fragile and weak. Racial and sectional divisions were very apparent by the country's centennial and persisted through 1898.<sup>1</sup> An additional contributing factor to this lack of national unity was that, by 1890 the frontier had "closed", meaning that the land had been settled from coast to coast, leaving the west, a region larger than the north and south combined, ill-defined and relations between east and west were politically strained. Because the West as a region was so new at this time, it was more like a colony of the East, dependent upon the federal government economically.

Anxiety over the end of the frontier led to the construction of national mythologies and nostalgia in the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> There were certain archetypes that helped to solidify a western myth and the national idea of the western frontier, all stemming from the first frontier thesis posited by Frederick Jackson Turner. The qualities needed for the frontier were strength, acuteness, inquisitiveness, restlessness, and dominant individualism, according to Turner.<sup>3</sup> The west itself was appealing for the qualities that it embodied, such as opportunity and a future outside of the “old” east that was fully populated and small in comparison to the vast expanses of the west<sup>4</sup>; however, not all of Turner’s notions of the west were glorious. He acknowledged that those venturing westward must be ready to face hardships that could result in deprivation, labor, and death. It became popular to depict the “dignity in defeat”, in order to demonstrate a sort of unflinching self-sacrifice.<sup>5</sup>

After the depression of 1893, a national synthesis was important to establish. Realizing that progress and industrialization were hardening class lines<sup>6</sup> and regional lines, fair organizers sought to unify the population through these annual events. The Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska, was planned on the heels of continued hardship across the country.

Edward Rosewater, owner of the newspaper *The Omaha Bee*, took on the challenge of exposition development as head of its department of publicity.<sup>7</sup> Rosewater had connections with the Department of the Post Office, and had the idea of having a commemorative issue for this fair, to “give to the project the prestige of government recognition and support.”<sup>8</sup> A fairly broad set of criteria for the stamp selection was outlined by the Third Assistant Postmaster General in late 1897<sup>9</sup>; however, due to the short amount of time given to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to create these stamps, pre-existing images were selected. These postage stamps largely

ignore all non-white races other than Native Americans, and therefore largely appeal to white American majority.

With the “end of the frontier” announced by the census bureau in 1890, most native populations had been moved onto reservations, and the last few Native American uprisings were coming to a close. Focus had turned to the project of subjugation, assimilation and education of the native population. The three stamps focusing on Native Americans visually demonstrate education of or protection from Native populations while also reminding Americans of their savage majesty.

“Marquette on the Mississippi” is based upon an 1867 painting by Wilhelm Lamprecht entitled *Father Marquette and the Indians* (figure 4).



Figure 4: Wilhelm Lamprecht, *Père Marquette and the Indians*, 1869  
Oil on canvas, Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University,  
Gift of Rev. Stanislaus L. Lalumière, Courtesy of the Department of Special  
Collections and University Archives, Marquette University Library (00.3)

Marquette was a Jesuit priest sent from France to Canada in 1666 as part of an expedition party that sailed down the Mississippi River to the Arkansas River in 1673. This image shows Marquette preaching to a group of seated Natives on the bank of the river. Marquette gestures upward during his sermon, disconnected from many of the Natives by the boat and river itself. He is centrally located in the image. The only Native American standing is gesturing towards Marquette, possibly imitating him as he teaches the Gospel, so that he may then go to the rest of his tribe and preach the ideals of Christianity. The Native holds a peace pipe, emphasizing the overall positive nature of their interaction. The other Natives in the image look up at him, almost like young children ready to learn.

Subjugation through the education of Natives was seen by the greater public as being of critical importance to make them completely American. With foreign immigrants, freed slaves, and Native populations, the value of education and literacy was not only seen as enlightened, but of national and democratic importance.<sup>10</sup> Education was seen as salvation for Natives around the time of the fair.<sup>11</sup> This informs the image of Marquette providing salvation and education to Native Americans. Easterners and westerners both could understand this image as Natives willing to turn their backs on savagery and assimilate into a unified American national identity, despite the fact that in reality they weren't seen as truly American in 1898.



Figure 5: Seth Eastman, *Buffalo Chase*, 1854  
 Courtesy of the Nicollet County Historical Society,  
 St. Peter, Minnesota (umn10277)

They were, however, seen as wild, as depicted in, “Indian Hunting Buffalo”, based on *Buffalo Chase* by Seth Eastman (figure 5). The design of the postage stamp eliminates any environmental context from the scene. The Native is solitary, and thus, not as threatening to Americans as an entire tribe riding with weapons. Despite the fact that this is a hunting scene, it is surprisingly nonviolent. The emphasis is more on the majestic appearance of both animal and Native as wild and free. The landscape in the design seems to echo the speed at which this Native rider pursues the buffalo,

This postage stamp addresses the national nostalgia of westward expansion by recalling a more innocent time, marked by a fascination with Native Americans when ethnologists travelled to immerse themselves in their savage culture for research. This stamp illustrates the first discoveries of the west, the beginning of what would expand the country ten-fold. It comes at a time when buffalo were all but extinct, and most Native people were contained on reservations,

quite the opposite of what we see here. Visual art depicting western subjects had changed greatly in both method and popularity by 1898, and the notion of the western myth was in full swing, perpetuated by the huge success of Wild West shows and dime novels. By the end of the century, western painting style had shifted from ethnography to depictions of action and excitement, drawing the viewer in.

By the time of the fair, painting had made that same dramatic narrative so popular that it greatly narrowed the scope of what was considered by the public to be “the west”. At the same time, there was moral concern in the U.S. about the representation of the “indelicate” or “sordid” side of life in the west.<sup>12</sup> This postage stamp makes the viewer a secret on-looker observing hunting practices, but also has a sense of movement, action, and drama. Yet, no actual violence is depicted here, alleviating any worry that this image might be too unseemly. This image appealed to easterners nostalgically looking towards the past, when the Native American could nobly hunt and roam the frontier, as they read their dime novels and attended Wild West shows. It appealed to westerners as an escape from the former violence they dealt with during settlement of the frontier. Overall, it is a unified national vision of the excitement of the frontier, and Native as formerly noble, a fascinating aspect of the past.

That nobility is countered with the final stamp in this series of Native American imagery, “Troops Guarding Train”, based upon a Frederic Remington drawing entitled, “Protecting a Wagon Train” (figure 6).





Figure 6: Frederic Remington, *Protecting A Wagon Train*  
 Courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History Collection,  
 Denver, Colorado (Remington MMS WH1691)

The design is about Native Americans, but excludes their physical presence in the image in favor of showing the might of the United States military, a paternal presence, protecting its westward-bound citizens. Native Americans, in this image, are an inferred threat. In the far right lower corner of the stamp, a soldier kneels down, aiming his shotguns, indicating that there is a potential attack on the horizon. Of course, in reality, the threat of attacks on migrants was minimal, and most deaths on the road to the west were disease-related.<sup>13</sup> This message of protection runs counter to the previous two stamps addressing Native Americans; however, it is a necessary addition to the category. The frontier thesis and the western myth appear in “Troops Guarding Train”, where the federal government is placing itself as protector of this frontier ideal, protector of those brave Americans willing to risk everything, including their lives, to move

west. The military is the guardian of innovation, tenacity, individualism, and ultimately the spread of democracy. Visually, the federal creators distributing this image are placing the government within such a beloved context, linking it to popularity when the country was divided in its support.

These three stamps touch upon the very mixed feelings towards Native Americans, and the varied facets of exposure and opinion regarding Native Americans in the east and west, be it the need for education, the mythical Wild West image, or protection against them.

The next three stamps depict scenes of western industry, both a popular attraction at the Trans-Mississippi fair, and a conflicted area of history. These stamps emphasize and exaggerate innovation while simultaneously omitting industrial failure and charged topics, in order to unite the nation around economic successes.



Figure 7: *Plowing on the Amenia and Sharon Land Company, Amenia, N.D., 1888-1889* gelatin silver print, Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo (5.5.1)

The 2-cent “Farming in the West” stamp is the only one in the series that is based on a photograph, which depicts the Amenia and Sharon Land Co. in North Dakota (figure 7). As there are several identifiable individuals in the postage stamp it is the first to show living people.<sup>14</sup> Originally this image was intended to be used on the \$2 stamp, the highest-denomination of the issue. It was changed to the 2-cent stamp at the last moment by the Post Office Department because the 2-cent was the most widely used postage stamp, and it was determined that this subject matter would be of particular interest to citizens.<sup>15</sup>

This image shows great success despite the frequent reality of farming failure in the west. The line of plows and farmers is almost infinite, as is the amount of farm land that the company owns. The most modern and sophisticated farming equipment is featured front and center, to showcase the innovation that came out of necessity in such a harsh environment, just like the fair itself. However, farming in the west, in general, did not fair so well. As more and more Americans moved to the frontier in search of freedom and prosperity, they learned that the west was actually ruled by the east’s “big money and big business,”<sup>16</sup> rather than independent, individual farmers. There was deep bitterness between the rich east and struggling west. The farming experiment labeled the prairie states as a place for failure.<sup>17</sup> Whereas the idea of the rugged individual was held high on a pedestal in the romantic notion of the west, in reality, that individualist usually ended up as a poor laborer.<sup>18</sup>

Visually, the “Farming in the West” postage stamp is both encouraging to easterners, who due to visual censoring of western failure would likely not be aware of the grave hardship and disappointments of western farming, and flattering to westerners for their inventiveness and perseverance over a seemingly impossible task. Thus, interest in western investment would continue in the east, and having received recognition on a national level, westerners would be

encouraged to continue innovating. By featuring actual living farmers, thus giving them a small amount of notoriety, the stamp adds another level of adulation to the western cause.

Contemporary praise transitions to sentimental recollection with “Western Mining Prospects”. It is the second of three stamps in this issue based on a drawing by Remington, this one from “The Gold Bug.” The image is of a prospector, two donkeys, and a dog. Thousands of Americans flocked to the West in search of gold beginning in 1848. However, the impression of thousands of men trying to get rich is not present here. The prospector is alone in the wide landscape. There is also no visual evidence here of the large majority of individuals who ventured west to get rich, and failed. The image is open-ended, full of that tension and anticipation that both Remington and western mythical frontier art glorified.

The man in the image appears to be much older than that young, idealized adventurer that Turner’s frontier thesis emphasizes. There is no sense of family; rather the emphasis is on the individual. The image shows that Americans, no matter what age, are filled with a sense of power encouraged by the frontier myth. But like farming, mining was wrought with greed, corruption, and unrest, even after the gold rush. Most who traveled west to make their fortune in gold, especially those after 1849, left empty-handed.<sup>19</sup> The federal government was facing a population of easterners that went west and failed to bring profits back to their families after expenses. However, this postage stamp manages to recall this time in western history with fondness. It shows the west as a land of opportunity and potential wealth, while not directly acknowledging the sacrifices that easterners made when they traveled out in search of gold. It both exaggerates and omits aspects of the gold rush to appeal to the broader national audience.

Exaggeration plays an important role in “Western Cattle in Storm”, designed from a painting entitled *The Vanguard* by John MacWhirter. Interestingly, neither the artist, nor the

subject of the original painting is American. The large black bull boldly leads the rest of the herd through the harsh weather to safety. The image is highly atmospheric, creating extreme drama. It's impossible to see the landscape even feet behind the herd, yet they push forward, mirroring western settlers' perseverance. Greed also abounded in the cattle industry. As early as the 1880s, cattle barons in a hurry to get rich quick, grabbed enormous amounts of grasslands for grazing, but could not maintain their herds. This ultimately led to the collapse of the cattle industry in the west. Yet, despite this, the cattle industry rebounded and was one of the most successful industries of the west by 1898. It therefore featured prominently at the fair. This explains why it was arguably the most popular postage stamp of this issue.

Visually, this stamp creates drama and action that the eastern and western consumers of art desired. There are no fallen cattle here. They are rock solid in the face of extreme weather, and steadfast through hardship, just as the industry itself was after its collapse from unforeseen conditions and over-ambitious growth. There is a tension in the image that suggests that the cattle at any moment could come up against any number of other difficulties, or find their way home. The potential in the image appeals to that frontier myth so popularly perpetuated in the east with its high drama and action. All three stamps depicting western industry mask failures and promote exaggerated nostalgia that east and west could find appealing.

The "end of the frontier" had been declared,<sup>20</sup> causing anxiety over the perceived loss of the western myth. At the time the postage stamps were created the government had no idea of the imperialistic properties it would gain, nor did it anticipate being thrust into the status of major world power. Yet, with the next three postage stamps, the federal government wanted to solidify the idea of a unified nation with a decidedly more internal focus.



Figure 8: *1896 Republican National Convention Admission Ticket*, ca. 1896  
 Engraving on paper, Cornell University Political Americana Collection  
 Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections,  
 Cornell University Libraries (2214.PM0053)

Bridging eastern and western regions together is literally manifest in “Mississippi River Bridge”, taken from the admission ticket design for the Republican National Convention held in St. Louis in 1896 (figure 8). It is an impressive show of transportation progress, and of literally “bridging” the east and west. From this birds-eye view looking westward, the modern St. Louis skyline displayed behind the bridge seems to promise prosperity. The viewer is standing on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River, looking westward towards a future. Importantly, the eastern bank is hardly visible in this image, placing all of the emphasis on the opposite bank, where the city meets the horizon. Not only that, it suggests a certain sophistication that the west hoped to establish at the Trans-Mississippi fair, a way to prove to the east that the west was a place of refinement as well as hard work.<sup>21</sup> Yet, by this time, St. Louis was considered “middle-west”, lacking the typical ruggedness commonly associated with the far west.

Politically, use of this image is a highly charged act of attempting to associate the eastern Republican Party with western urban advancement. The 1896 Republican National Convention was during candidate William McKinley's run for the White House. He succeeded in gaining the presidency over the western Populist Party, and was faced with uniting the entire expanded country behind him. This image flatters the west with the depiction of western city sophistication and it expands the refined east westward visually.

Quite the opposite of that promising image of expansion, "Hardships of Emigration" depicts a family emigrating west, facing the hardship of one of their horses collapsing from exhaustion. They appear to be completely isolated and alone in the expansive landscape. No wagon train (like that in "Troops Guarding Train") or civilization can be seen. This stamp, above all the others in the issue, is the most emotional. The loss of a horse could spell disaster for a family traveling west. Not only does it limit their transportation to their destination, but they have lost a valuable asset once they arrive as well. Even the stamp's gray color contributes to the foreboding mood.

Depictions of families and adventurers in the process of traveling west via covered wagons was certainly popular during the nineteenth century. This postage stamp is another romantic, highly dramatized image to appeal to the west, and recognition of what those that found success in the west had to endure to get there. Much like "Troops Guarding Train", the bravery of these individuals is showcased, both recognizing westerners' sacrifices and tugging at the heartstrings of the east.

Where "Hardships" leaves the viewer uncertain, "Fremont on the Rocky Mountains" features a triumphant explorer John Charles Fremont on the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains in 1842, just before planting an American Flag firmly in the ground. As the 5-cent

international rate postage stamp, this image is what would travel all throughout Europe on mail from America. It seems appropriate, as this stamp shows the only instance of an overt national symbol. The figure of Fremont is monumental, raised higher than the clouds, only upstaged by the flag he is holding. Beyond the figure of Fremont, there seems to be no one, as though he is the first to have laid eyes on the magnificent scene. This image truly reflects the triumphant, characteristics of Turner's frontier thesis as it depicts Fremont, an easterner, successfully conquering the Rocky Mountains.

However, there is more western myth than reality in this image. The purpose of his mission was to survey the location of the South Pass, but that was not terribly triumphant or dramatic. Historian Geoffrey Ward believes that this dramatic unfurling of the flag on what was believed to be the highest peak of the Rocky Mountains was just something "to add luster to his reputation as an explorer."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Fremont's personal account of planting that flag into the mountain, true as it was, was only acted out to perpetuate that great conquering western ideal of manifest destiny. This stamp affectionately recalls the east conquering the west, an ultimate visualization of the frontier thesis.

The messages imbedded in the nine postage stamps would not have been so widely consumed without the platform of the world's fair and the advancement of both the postal system and the development of advertising. The relatively quick rate of national expansion across the continent created a need to speedily disseminate both written and visual media for vast audiences. This new, more rapid communication and advertising across the country amplified and perpetuated the western myth.<sup>23</sup> Railroad expansion and wide circulation of newspapers closed the time gap between an event's occurrence and its distribution to the greater public.<sup>24</sup> This closing circulation gap also affected postage stamps, making them both functional and a



potential form of propaganda. In fact, they passed through over 70,000 post offices. These elements came together to form a successful national advertising campaign, which spread the visual language of both the nostalgic western myth and the reality of progress.

World's fairs, for as long as they have been held, have captured the interest of national and international audiences. Robert Rydell, a world's fair scholar, posits that these expositions were intended to "win popular support for national imperial policies"<sup>25</sup> and carry forward into the cultural realm the political efforts to reconstruct the United States after the Civil War"<sup>26</sup>. The Trans-Mississippi fair is a prime example of this, particularly in light of historical and political context. The fair was critical to the popularization and financial success of these stamps. By making them a "commemorative issue" and associating them with the collection of memorabilia, along with the popularity of stamp collecting in general, the stamps enjoyed a higher circulation.<sup>27</sup>

Values of American innovation, triumph, ruggedness, democracy and independence are encompassed in the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition postage stamp commemorative issue. While glossing over the more unpleasant aspects of westward expansion and advancement, as was a trend of visual depictions of the west at the time, the federal government created a series of images that appeal to the eastern vision of the triumphant western frontier myth as well as to the western viewer by showcasing the progress of western innovation. This combination of images shows a great deal about how the government was attempting to unite the country around this nostalgic internal imperialism. They reaffirm that although the frontier was no more, the characteristics the frontier created were still fundamental to America as a cohesive nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian W. Dippie, "Drawn to the West," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 35(1): 8.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," *Cinema Journal*, 23(4): 12.

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- <sup>3</sup> Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," 12.
- <sup>4</sup> Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Dippie, "Drawn to the West," 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Robert W. Rydell et al, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 7.
- <sup>7</sup> Rydell, *Fair America*, 592.
- <sup>8</sup> Rydell, *Fair America*, 592.
- <sup>9</sup> Gary Griffith, "The Source of the Five-Cent Trans-Mississippi Stamp," *The Collectors Club Philatelist*, 77(1): 32.
- <sup>10</sup> David Traxel, *1898: The Birth of the American Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 312.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert A. Trennert, Jr., "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs and Expositions," *American Indian Quarterly*, 11(3): 203.
- <sup>12</sup> Traxel, *1898: The Birth of the American Century*, 74.
- <sup>13</sup> Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 99.
- <sup>14</sup> Gary Griffith. "The 2-Cent Trans-Mississippi is an American Classic." *Stamp Collector* 72(12): 6.
- <sup>15</sup> Griffith, "The 2-Cent Trans-Mississippi is an American Classic," 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Hoch, 1.
- <sup>17</sup> "Omaha 1898: Trans-Mississippi Exposition." In *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*, edited by John E. Findling, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 152.
- <sup>18</sup> M. Hoch, "How the West Was Really Won," *U.S. News and World Report*, 108(20): 3.
- <sup>19</sup> J.S. Holliday. *Rush for Riches: Gold Fever and the Making of California*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 60.
- <sup>20</sup> Traxel, *1898: The Birth of the American Century*, 66.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert W. Rydell "The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition: 'To Work Out the Problem of Universal Civilization,'" *American Quarterly*, 33(5): 588.
- <sup>22</sup> Rydell, "'The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition: 'To Work Out the Problem of Universal Civilization,'" 588.
- <sup>23</sup> Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," 12.
- <sup>25</sup> Rydell, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, 5.
- <sup>26</sup> Rydell, *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States*, 7.
- <sup>27</sup> The United States Postal Service. *Trans-Mississippi Issue: Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*. Washington, D.C.: United States Postal Service, 4.

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