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A Short History of Trade Cards

AMBROSE HEAL published in 1925 a book entitled *London Tradesmen's Cards of the Eighteenth Century*, and in the preface to this very fine volume he made the comment that "it is perhaps remarkable that no book has hitherto been published dealing with tradesmen's cards. . . . Not only has no book ever been published on the subject, but references in archaeological journals and collectors' magazines are of the scantiest nature and hard to track." What Mr. Heal said six years ago is equally true today of American material, with one important exception. In 1927 a volume entitled *Early American Trade Cards*, from the collection of Bella C. Landauer, with critical notes by Adele Jenny, was published in New York. In this volume there are forty-four illustrations, taking us into the history of American trade cards from about 1730 to 1877. Recently Mrs. Bella C. Landauer made a generous gift to the George F. Baker Library of several hundred trade cards of the latter part of the nineteenth century. These cards supplemented two previous gifts, for there were some trade cards in the Trotter Collection, and Mr. Charles H. Taylor has given a number of such cards to the Business Historical Society.

Let us pause long enough to ascertain the nature of a so-called trade card. Originally they were sheets of paper ranging up to folio size and were variously designated as "tradesmen's cards," "tradesmen's bills," or "shopkeepers' bills." With the advent of the Victorian era (though there were one or two earlier examples) came the reinforced variety on pasteboard, and this variety was in fact such a card as we would today call a business card. With the popularization of the lithographing process in the latter part of the nineteenth century came the type of trade card that makes up the bulk of our

collection, cards ranging from "calling card" size to the larger handbill variety (usually highly colored), the latter apparently being also known as "counter" cards.

It seems unbelievable that such an important phase in the history of advertising should have been so totally neglected by historians and advertising experts alike, for surely the modern business card is a direct descendant of the early trade card. That the business card is assuming an important place in modern business advertising is attested to by an article in *System* for January, 1914, by Kendall Banning, entitled *Business Cards — How Some Modern Houses Express Their Individualities and Activities in These Bits of Significant Stationery*. After discussing the conventional card, he turns to the more decorative type of card which, with the use of a trade mark, bright colors, unusual paper, embossing and conspicuous design, has achieved an individuality and a note of salesmanship. He concludes by giving a page of illustrations of German business cards. For example, he shows the card of one Naumann, a landscape architect. It is seven inches wide and is printed on earth-colored paper with a charming, conventional, flowered border and a basket of flowers in the upper center. The type is to be considered as a single decorative unit and is carefully treated as such — a scheme that is a distinguishing feature of this artistic German business card. "Business cards," continues Banning, "are but a detail of business, but they are a significant detail. The American business man has much to learn concerning their possibilities from his foreign confrère, who is learning to inject into them an interest and selling value that the Yankee has largely overlooked."

But those who know of early English and early American trade cards would rather add that a knowledge of the historical developments of the trade card would be just as helpful, if not more so, in achieving an artistic and individualized business card. Ambrose Heal remarks that "for their aesthetic qualities, those of the eighteenth century are far in advance of our equivalents of today. The lettering is invariably well drawn and well spaced, and the designing of the devices, if sometimes crude, is always direct and interesting. They reflect the art of the engraver through two centuries." There is about these old prints an air of quaintness, of the romance of changing fashions in architecture and costume, and they give to the student of economics first-hand evidence of markets and prices, and particularly so when these cards include indications of business connections or quotations of prices.

Trade cards first came into current use after 1700, though there

are one or two rare specimens as early as 1630. These early cards were either those belonging to what we would now call the professional class or of those merchants who catered to the educated classes. Mr. Heal roughly classifies these old English tradesmen's cards into the following groups: first, the earliest ones, those in which is featured the trader's sign more or less heraldically treated, with a simple panel of well-drawn lettering below. Then comes the enclosure of the card in an ornamental frame. In the third stage, the sign is still retained, but "yields pride of place to the representation of wares which figure prominently in the design of the ornamental frame," or, as an alternative, the sign is reduced to a more subservient position and the main interest is on an elaborate and symbolic representation of the trade. Many of the cards of this type show the influence of Thomas Chippendale and the vogue for the Chinese motive. Then we come to the time (1762) when the hanging signs, because of the public menace, were replaced by street numbering. At this time the interest of the cards is concentrated on the type of goods and we find a descriptive form of address such as "Richard Severn, Jeweller & Toyman, The corner of Paul's Grove-Head-Court near Temple Barr, London." At this time there frequently appeared a scene on the card giving a pictorial representation of the trade being carried on. This style was a favorite with the artist, William Hogarth. The beginning of the nineteenth century saw a decadence in the art of the trade card which was further accentuated by Victorian affectation.

When we turn to America during this period, we find a similar trend in the history of trade cards. In the volume already referred to on early American trade cards, the author comments on this phenomenon as follows: "What is most remarkable about these cards is that with the country's increase in facilities, greater wealth, growth in trade, and accessions of transportation mediums, there are, instead of signs of development in aesthetic perceptions, astonishing signs of decadence. . . . Surveying the cards in chronological order, one feels that life in America became less and less rich in emotional feeling — and this was the outcome of social process." The early examples in this book are chiefly copper-plate engravings with an occasional wood block. F. Weitenkampf, in his book *American Graphic Art*, tells us that at this time many well-known engravers, such as Paul Revere, Joseph Callender, William Hamlin, St. Memin, Peter Maverick, and Childs & Carpenter, "were turning an honest penny in producing card plates for business purposes." In fact, one of the most attractive of these old cards is a

Pears' Soap

FOR TOILET AND NURSERY.

Specially Prepared For the delicate skin of Ladies and Children and others sensitive to the weather, winter or summer.
Redness, Roughness and Chapping prevented.

**Fair white hands.
Bright clear complexion.
Soft healthful skin.**

MRS. LANGTRY writes
Since using Pears' Soap I have discarded all others.

ADELINA PATTI, writes
Pears' Soap I have found matchless for the complexion.

MARY ANDERSON writes
I find Pears' Soap the very best.

Sir ERASMUS WILSON.
Late President of the Royal College of Surgeons writes Pears' Soap is a balm for the skin.

HENRY WARD BEECHER writes
I am willing to stand by every word in favor of it, I ever uttered.

Gaunt & Janvier,
SOLE AGENTS IN THE U.S. FOR Pears' Soap.
55 GRAND ST. * NEW YORK.

This Placque sent upon receipt of 5 cents in postage stamps.

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An early handbill included in the Landauer gift to the George F. Baker Library

copper plate engraving by Paul Revere, portraying a bell and cannon and advertising "Paul Revere & Son, At their Bell and Cannon foundry, at the North Part of Boston." Thus we can see that this

versatile son of the Revolution was in reality a "jack of all trades." Occasionally these old cards employed lettering only, but more frequently a vignette appeared to illustrate the type of goods sold, or the work done.

Lithographing came later. The first lithographed card of Miss Landauer's collection — which incidentally is now in the possession of the New York Historical Society — is dated 1838. This process, done with the grease crayon on stone, was new at this time and was sponsored by some of the more progressive merchants. From that time on, the hand of the lithographer was frequently applied to the trade card, but the art was crude, to say the least, and Weitenkampf remarks that "lithography passed into a long serfdom of commercial activity. The word 'commercial,' to be understood, in such a case practically always means not that the art has been commercialized, but that it has been cheapened or debased by commercial interests." Incidentally, the business card of Louis Prang, an American lithographer, which appeared at the Vienna Exposition in 1873, was the incentive for the first American Christmas card.

The cards in our collection, as was previously remarked, are chiefly lithographic cards of fifty or sixty years ago, many of which are extravagantly drawn, highly colored, and lacking largely in artistic merit, but as a mirror of the fashions and of the type of products sold at the time, they are interesting and entertaining indeed. These cards seem to fall roughly into four classifications. First, there are those bearing merely the printed announcement of the wholesaler or retailer, and secondly, similar cards with a "cut" of the place of business or of the wares to be sold. These two types appear to be the earliest cards in our collection. Then there are the extravagantly colored cards depicting the business conducted or the products to be sold, and finally, those cards which are pictorial but bear no relation to the product sold. For example, "Acme" soap, and "Marseilles White" soap each published several cards that appear to run in serial form, all, however, of a similar type, depicting various romantic subjects. Pearline and Pear's soaps launched out into the poster or handbill mode of advertising, and the latter employed testimonials and endorsements of popular actresses of the day. In fact, on a "plaque" dated 1886, bearing the picture of Lillie Langtry, appears the caption, "I have discarded all others," and, after lauding the advantages of the soap in question, the back of the "plaque," which is shown in the illustration, offers a duplicate copy upon the receipt of five cents in postage stamps. A study of the cards of the closing years in the nineteenth century

shows in one form or another almost all of the tactics of the present-day advertiser with, however, none of the artistry which is now so effectively employed.

Revival of the Title Controversy

LAST month the century-old title controversy was revived when Mrs. Pinchot, wife of the Governor of Pennsylvania, in a radio talk, made the assertion that she had always objected to the use of the expression "First Lady"; declaring that "it is a foolish, high-hat kind of a label, whether it is the first lady of a city, a state, or of the whole country — and is not especially appropriate in America."

The subject of titles has in the past caused endless discussion, not only when the Constitution of the United States was drafted to include a section specifically forbidding the government to bestow any title of nobility, but later when Congress debated whether to address the President as "His Excellency," "His High Mightiness," or by the title suggested by the Senate — "His Highness, the President of the United States of America and Protector of their Liberties." Finally, the matter was suffered to drop, but, according to Albert J. Beveridge in his book *The Life of John Marshall*, "this all-important subject had attracted the serious thought of the people more than had the form of government, foreign policy, or even taxes."

In *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, a Boston newspaper, for Thursday, August 20, 1789 (one of the items in the Baldwin Collection which is a recent loan to the Baker Library by James R. Baldwin), there is a contribution on this subject by one who signs himself "A Real Republican." After commenting on "the multiplicity of shrewd arguments which have lately been offered the public on the *propriety and consistency* of adopting Titles," he refutes the arguments of his opponents who question whether the giving of a title to the President will prevent us from paying our debts or will disable the people from paying their taxes, by rejoining that "merely *the title* will not; but I dare affirm, that the etiquette of it will *eventually* produce these pernicious consequences. The *parade and pomp* of 'MAJESTY' will in a few years be as anxiously urged by certain individuals, as they now plead for the Titles themselves." This would have the noxious result of causing the people to lose the idea of a republican government in the