

November 2014

Collection Synergy: Making a Scholar- Photographer's Legacy Images More Widely Available in a Digital Environment

Allan T. Kohl

Minneapolis College of Art and Design, allan_kohl@mcad.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://online.vraweb.org/vrab>



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#), and the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kohl, Allan T. (2014) "Collection Synergy: Making a Scholar-Photographer's Legacy Images More Widely Available in a Digital Environment," *VRA Bulletin*:Vol. 40: Iss. 2, Article 1.

Available at: <https://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol40/iss2/1>

Collection Synergy: Making a Scholar-Photographer's Legacy Images More Widely Available in a Digital Environment

Abstract

A two-year project originally focused on digitizing a retiring faculty member's original location slides of Midwestern architecture expanded its scope to include the professor's collection of historic picture postcards documenting the same structures. Assessment of the copyright status of the postcards showed them all to be in the public domain, and hence shareable. A final component of the project was to add embedded metadata to the digital images documenting these photographs and postcards.

Keywords

architectural photography, postcards, copyright, public domain

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Art historian **Allan T. Kohl** is the Visual Resources Librarian at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, and also teaches special topics art and cultural history courses for the College of Continuing Education at the University of Minnesota/Twin Cities. He did his graduate study in Library/Information Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and in art history at the University of Minnesota. He is Past-President, and current Treasurer, of the Visual Resources Association, and has served for more than a decade on the VRA's Intellectual Property Rights Committee, with a particular interest in copyright issues as these affect the educational use of images documenting works of art and visual culture.

Synergy [Greek: synergos, "working together"]: the interaction of two or more independent entities to produce a result not independently obtainable from either acting alone.

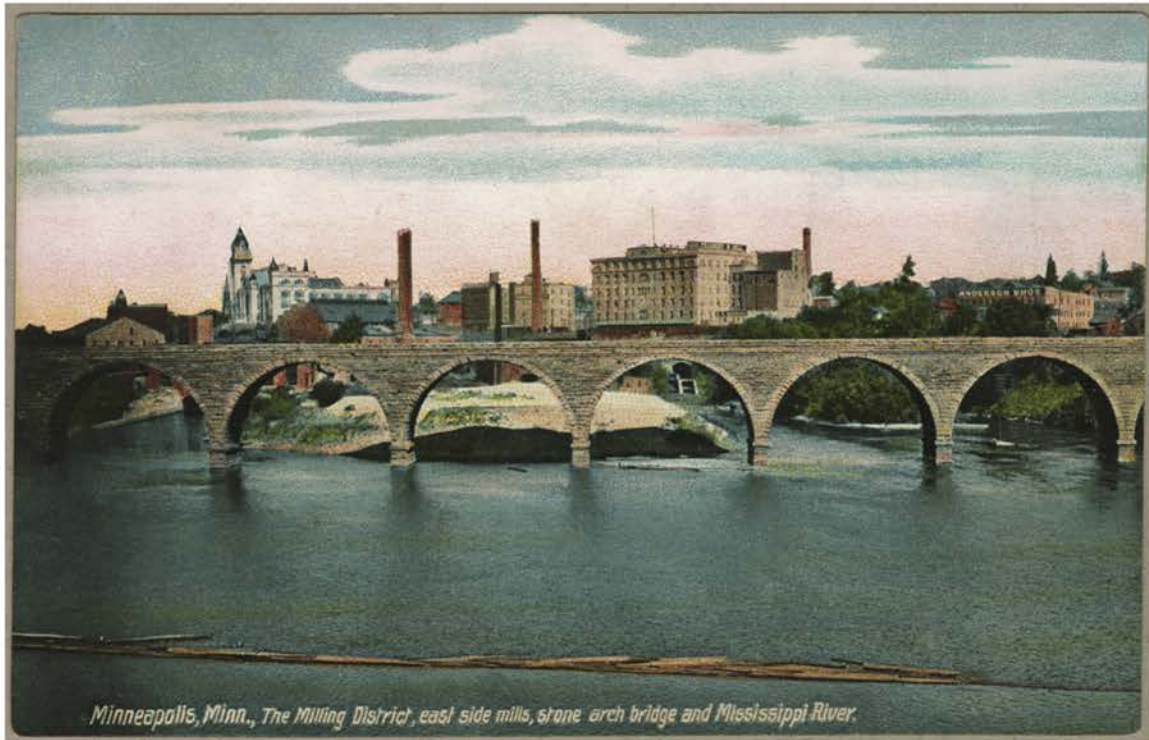
*This article continues the description of a multi-year collaborative project with Dr. Philip Larson, recently retired art and architectural historian at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, and Allan T. Kohl, MCAD's Visual Resources Librarian, as described in the article "Heritage Seeds: Preserving a Scholar-Photographer's Legacy Slides in a Digital Environment" (*Visual Resources Association Bulletin*, Volume 39, Issue 3).*

During the course of this project, which involved scanning and cataloging the best of Dr. Larson's location photography of significant Twin Cities buildings, I learned that he and his architect daughter, Ursula A. Larson, had also compiled a complementary collection of historic picture postcards dating from the first half of the twentieth century, many of which documented the same structures he had more recently photographed. In some instances, Dr. Larson's photographs were intentionally made from vantage points and viewing angles similar to those used by postcard illustrators and photographers a century or more in the past. Many pairings of older postcards and modern photographs revealed dramatic changes in the Minneapolis urban environment over the intervening years.



[L] Magney & Tusler (American architectural firm, established 1928), Foshay Tower, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1929. Once touted as "the tallest structure in North America northwest of Chicago," the Art Deco office building assumes the form of an Egyptian obelisk (or, if you prefer, a 4/5 scale replica of the Washington Monument). This 1929 Curt Teich postcard presents an artist's imaginary view of the soon-to-be-completed landmark. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection; [C] Today the once-prominent Foshay Tower is surrounded by newer, taller skyscrapers, and can be clearly seen and photographed from only a few limited vantage points. Photograph by Philip Larson; [R] Curt Teich postcard from 1935 shows that, when originally constructed, the Foshay Tower, at 449 feet in height, dwarfed every other downtown Minneapolis structure. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection.

For instance, the Foshay Tower, an Art Deco-style office building, once proudly styled itself as “the tallest structure in North America northwest of Chicago.” For decades it stood in splendid isolation, visible from miles away across the prairie in all directions. But today, hemmed in and obscured by taller International Style and Post-Modernist skyscrapers, the Foshay Tower appears much less impressive than when it was built in 1929. Juxtaposed with a postcard artist’s imaginary nighttime view of the Foshay around the time of its construction, and another from the mid-1930s, Dr. Larson’s recent photograph documents the vertical transformation of Minneapolis’ downtown core.



The Stone Arch Bridge, inspired by ancient Roman aqueducts, was originally constructed in 1882-1883 to carry passenger trains for James J. Hill’s Great Northern Railroad. This postcard, dated ca. 1906-1909, shows the prominence of Minneapolis’ flour milling operations in the early twentieth century. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection.

Minneapolis, the “City of Waters,” occupies both banks of the Mississippi River, a source of hydropower energy that spurred the city’s early growth as a flour-milling center. The city’s bridges have been frequently photographed as picturesque subjects in themselves, but buildings incidentally visible on the shorelines in the background point to significant changes through the years in urban topography, and mark the transformation of the city’s economic base. Oldest and most distinctive among these bridges, the Stone Arch Bridge, inspired by ancient Roman aqueducts, was originally constructed in 1882-1883 to carry transcontinental passenger trains for James J. Hill’s Great Northern Railroad.



Third Avenue Bridge (St. Anthony Falls Bridge), engineering design by Frederick William Cappelen, 1914-1918. View from southeast. This contemporary photograph shows Minneapolis' Mississippi River waterfront bordered on both sides by high-rise buildings. Photograph by Philip Larson.

Reflecting a more modern style, the Third Avenue Bridge was built in 1914-1918 to carry Minneapolis' burgeoning motorized street traffic across the river. Dr. Larson's photograph (taken from atop the Stone Arch Bridge) shows the Third Avenue Bridge bracketed by new condominium towers, and framing a spillway constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to reduce riverbed erosion caused in part by the collapse of the old hydropower sluices.



This 1943 postcard, based on a colorized promotional photograph taken ca. 1939, shows the Chicago & North Western Railroad's streamliner "Twin Cities 400" crossing the Stone Arch Bridge. Minneapolis' milling district still figures prominently in the background. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection.

Both bridges are visible in the Curt Teich postcard "Streamliner Crossing Mississippi River over Stone Arch Bridge" [No. 3B-H1439, published in 1943], a hand-colored version of a widely distributed publicity photograph taken ca. 1939 showing the Chicago-bound "Twin Cities 400" express passenger train operated by the Chicago & North Western Railroad. The color artist carefully reproduced the green and yellow livery of the matched pair of new EMD E3A diesel locomotives.



[L] Emmanuel Louis Masqueray (US, 1861-1917), Basilica of St. Mary, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1914. This A. C. Bosselman & Co. postcard documents a rejected preliminary design featuring a Beaux-Arts style dome above the crossing. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection; [R] Curt Teich postcard ca. 1935 showing the actual appearance of the Basilica as constructed. Dr. Larson based his photograph on this view taken from the southeast, now largely obstructed by subsequent construction. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection; [B] Dr. Larson's recent photograph, taken from the southwest. Photograph by Philip Larson.

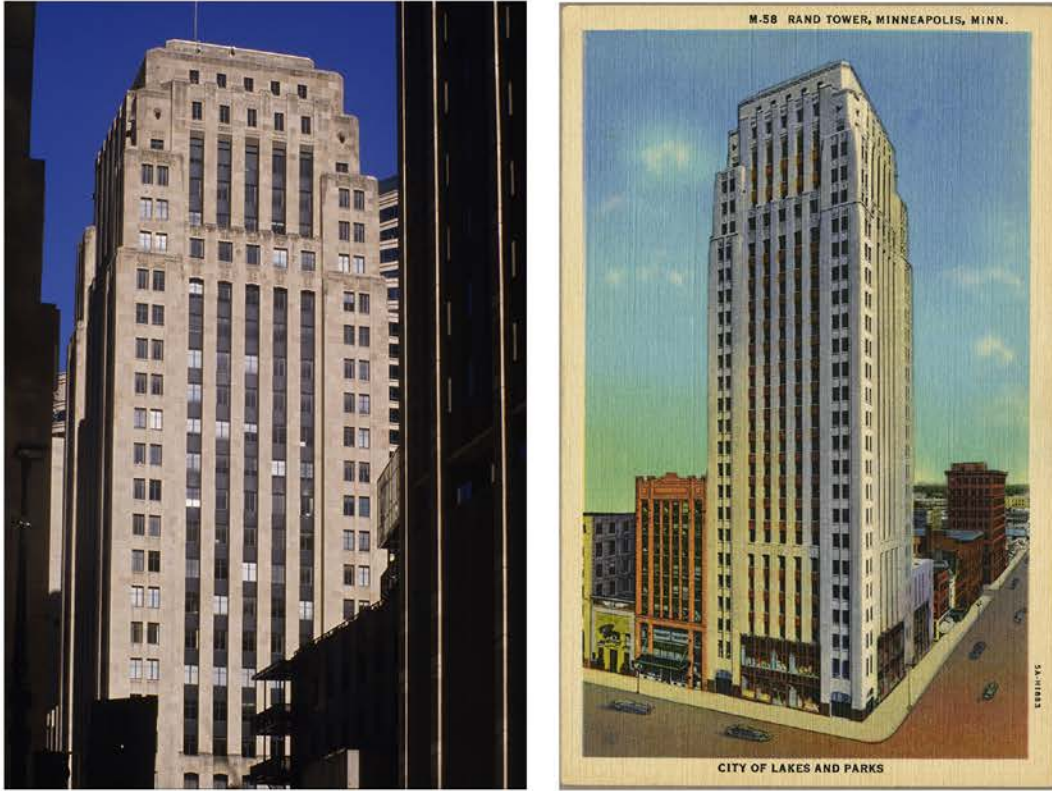
Dr. Larson confronted interesting obstacles in making some of his “then and now” photographs to pair with the historic postcards. Two of his postcards showed Emmanuel Louis Masqueray’s Basilica of St. Mary (1914) in a view from the southeast now partially obscured by a parking ramp. A “mirror-image” vantage point from the southwest is today occupied by flyover ramps for the adjacent Interstate highway. So the photograph shown here was taken from a traffic island in the center of a major corridor.

Together, Dr. Larson and I made a selection of postcards depicting the same sites and structures documented in his recent photographs. Once these had been scanned, I began cataloging each card as an independent work related to the building or site it depicted. On the plus side, since we had already created a cataloging record for each subject building, we could treat each postcard as a related work. The down side was that we seldom began with any information beyond what was printed on the postcard itself. Nonetheless, captions, publishers’ names and addresses, and, in some cases, the publishers’ inventory numbers provided useful starting points in the information gathering process.



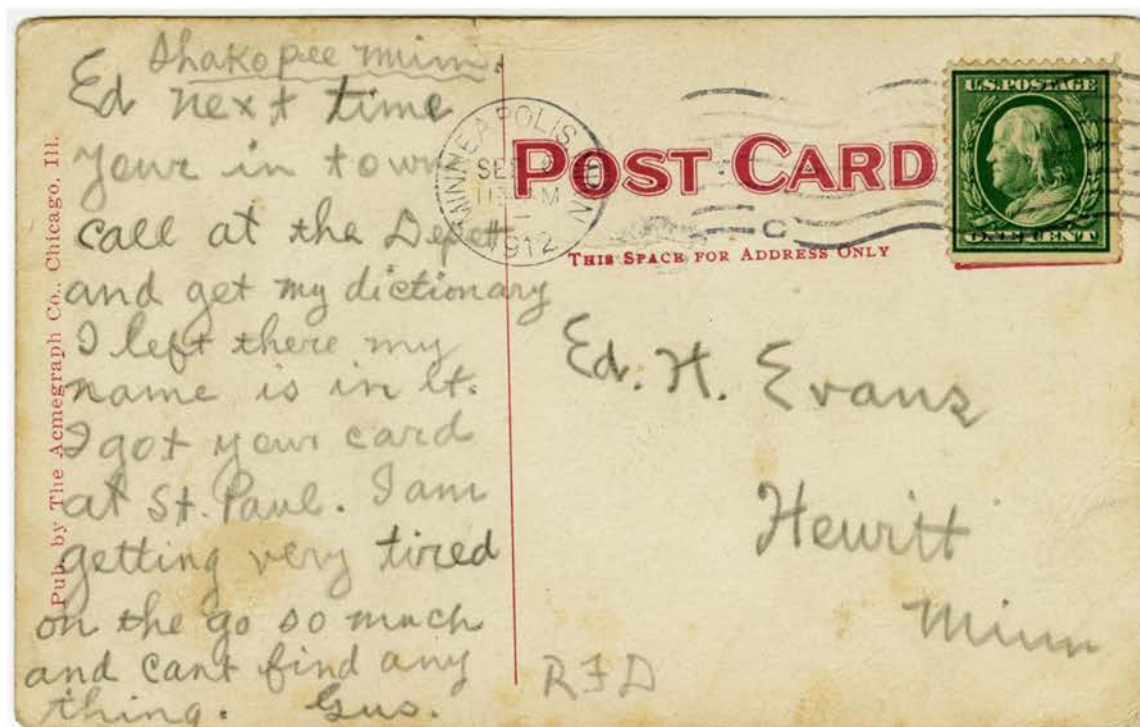
[L] Long & Kees (American architectural firm, 1885-1897), *Masonic Temple (Hennepin Center for the Arts)*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1888-1890. This Richardsonian Romanesque structure was renovated in 1979 for use by a variety of visual and performing arts companies. In 2011 it was joined to the adjacent historic Shubert Theater (1910) to become the Cowles Center for Dance and the Performing Arts. Photograph by Philip Larson; [R] An Acmeograph Co. postcard ca. 1910-1911 shows that, except for the removal of an unstable decorative cupola above the original crowning angle, recent renovations have preserved the integrity of the historic facade. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection.

One of my goals as a visual resources curator has always been to facilitate the widest possible availability of resources with minimal use restrictions, and in this I have been fortunate in having the full cooperation of Dr. Larson as a content creator and owner. However, while he could freely assent to the unrestricted sharing of his own photographs, and their distribution through ARTstor's Shared Shelf Commons or the SAHARA Project, I also wanted to assess whether we could similarly, without restriction, display and distribute our scans of the postcards. While many web sites display historic postcards, these have typically been posted at low resolution; a scant few of the specific cards we selected are currently available on the web. But if Dr. Larson's cards were in the public domain, there would be no copyright impediments to the kind of unrestricted sharing we hoped to facilitate.



[L] Holabird & Root (American architectural firm, 1917-1959), Rand Tower, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1929. Photograph by Philip Larson; [R] Curt Teich postcard from 1935 shows that, when originally constructed and surrounded by much smaller buildings, the Art Deco-style Rand Tower made a much more dramatic visual impression. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection.

My assessment of the copyright status of each card depended on two factors: first, could we with reasonable certainty determine the publication date of each card? second, did any of the cards contain a valid notice of copyright? Fortunately, many of the postcards in the Larson Collection had been produced by the Curt Teich Company of Chicago, a color postcard specialty firm that began operation in 1898 and ceased business in 1978, four years after the death of its namesake and founder. The Teich company archives were subsequently acquired by the Lake County (IL) Discovery Museum, which provides extensive web-based documentation of the Teich Company's *oeuvre*. Of particular value is the Museum's online "Guide to Dating Curt Teich Postcards," based on the company's meticulous inventory records.^[1] Most Curt Teich postcards produced between 1908 and the firm's demise in 1978 bear alpha-numeric identifying numbers, allowing the researcher to determine reliable publication dates.



“Masonic Temple, Minneapolis, Minn.” Reverse of Acme Graphic Co. postcard (ca. 1910-1911) contains inscription, postmark dated “Sept 6 1912” and one cent U.S. postage stamp (issue of 1908-1909). These provide reliable *terminus ante quem* and *terminus post quem* dating information. Postcard from the Philip and Ursula Larson Collection.

Deducing the dates for cards produced by other firms was often more difficult, as postcard manufacturers sometimes operated under a variety of names, merged with former competitors, or issued cards under arrangements with third parties such as regional news agencies. However, nearly half of the postcards in the Larsons’ collection had been “used,” and evidence such as postage stamps and postmarks provided useful *terminus ante quem* and *terminus post quem* dating clues as well.[2] In the end, we found that all of the Larson Collection postcards had been published prior to the implementation of the current Copyright Law in 1978, and that none had been published with a valid notice of copyright, as required under the older Copyright Law of 1909. Consequently, I felt safe in determining that all of them were in the public domain, and that our reproductions could be freely shared.



Dr. Philip Larson has recently retired after 37 years teaching art and architectural history at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, before which he was a curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. He holds his doctorate in Art History from Columbia University. He also maintains an active studio practice, executing commissioned designs and architectural décor in a wide range of media for public and private buildings throughout the Midwest.



Art historian **Allan T. Kohl** is the Visual Resources Librarian at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, and also teaches special topics art and cultural history courses for the College of Continuing Education at the University of Minnesota/Twin Cities. He did his graduate study in Library/Information Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and in art history at the University of Minnesota. He is Past-President, and current Treasurer, of the Visual Resources Association, and has served for more than a decade on the VRA's Intellectual Property Rights Committee, with a particular interest in copyright issues as these affect the educational use of images documenting works of art and visual culture.

Notes

1. Lake County Discovery Museum, "Guide to Dating Curt Teich Postcards," <http://www.lcfpd.org/docs/teich_guide_dating.pdf> (6 October 2012)

2. *terminus ante quem* = a notation used by archaeologists to indicate that a given object must have been created or deposited by or before a given date; *terminus post quem* = a notation indicating that a given object must have been created, deposited, or used on or after a given date.