

## Obliterated Postcards – Postal History or Trash? Both.

by Patrick Crosby

A collector might think that picture postcards sent without a complete, useful address and having no return address were sent to the Dead Letter Office (DLO) for destruction. I envisioned incineration. But this is not the case at all. Firstly, these items were not to be sent to a DLO branch and secondly, they weren't necessarily destroyed. On the other hand, similarly addressed first-class letters would be sent to a DLO branch. Western states including Nevada would send them to the San Francisco DLO branch.

Case in point are the picture postcards shown. All were mailed with insufficient addresses and without return addresses. These are referred to as "Dead Letters" or "Dead Mail", and are classified in U.S. Postal Laws & Regulations (PL&Rs) under Unmailable (or Nonmailable) Matter as "Address Defective". This means the addresses were either illegible, incorrect, or insufficient.

U.S. PL&Rs state that this type of first-class unmailable matter was not to be sent to a DLO branch, but instead "All other undeliverable domestic cards shall be held for reclamation two weeks and then, if not delivered, shall be disposed of as waste by the postmaster...Before being disposed of as waste, the written communications...shall be canceled or mutilated so as to prevent the improper use of the correspondence." Most postmasters took this latter statement to mean obliterating names and/or the partial addresses. If the cards were only advertising matter no mutilation was necessary.

The postmasters were instructed to sell these items, if practical, to the highest competitive bid with the proceeds going to the office's "other postal revenue". If there was no sale, then these items could be delivered by postmasters to municipal authorities for distributions to hospitals, asylums, or other charitable or reformatory institutions. Under no circumstances were the postmasters to pay for disposal.



The first example, on the left, was mailed in 1914 at El Dorado, CA and addressed only to Placerville, CA, four miles away. There is no street address, box number, rural free delivery number, or General Delivery request. The addressee's name, Dora Kimball, was obliterated with black ink, but, as is often the case with these cards, can

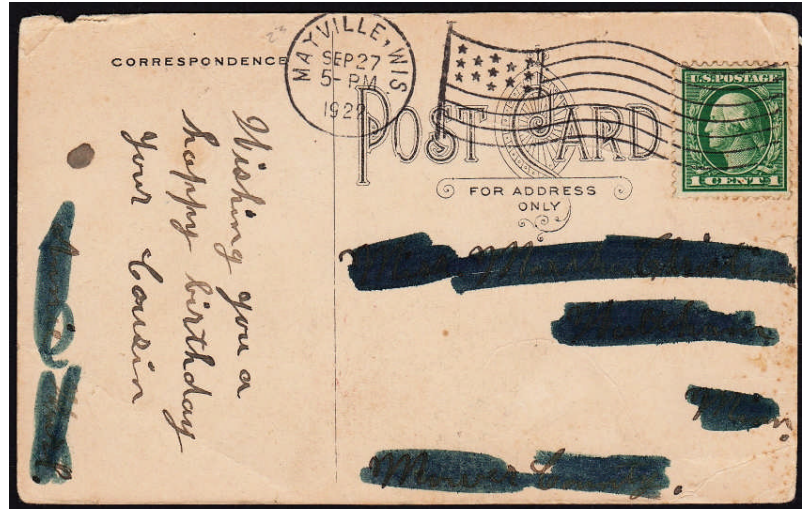
still be read.

The second example, on the right, was mailed in 1909 from Columbus, IN for local delivery in Columbus, which had a population of about 8,800 in 1910 – too many people for a postmaster to recognize every name. Having no street address, the entire address area was obliterated with scribbled pen. If there had been a return address, being for local delivery, this card would have been returned to the sender for free.



The card is addressed to Miss Mary Ellen Galbraith, and I wish I could make out the bottom scribbled out word (it is not the county name).

The final example, from 1922, has all of the names and address obliterated with ink. It was addressed to Waltham, MN, Mower County. In 1920 Waltham had a population of about 180. The sender may have figured that everyone in Waltham knew everyone else, and so no further address was needed. But it was the responsibility of the postmaster at Mayville, WI where the card was mailed to determine that the item was undeliverable-as-addressed and process it as unmailable, and he did so in a thorough, heavy-handed fashion.



In the examples shown the address deficiency was the street address or other detailed directions. But the deficiency could also have been the lack of a city or state name. A postcard mailed to just Columbus, for example, would leave a postmaster scratching his head since there are at least 13 states with a Columbus.

An interesting point about all unmailable paper matter from the 1942 PL&Rs (World War II era) is the statement "In view of paper shortage, the burning of dead letters will be discontinued during the present emergency."

The latest obliterated postcard I have in my collection is from 1962. The cards I have cost from below \$.50 to \$2.50, so a small collection can be had cheaply. However, they are unsettling to look at and I fear an exhibit would not be a show favorite.

References:

Postal Laws and Regulations, see the free [uspostalbulletins.com](http://uspostalbulletins.com) site for PL&Rs and Daily Postal Bulletins

U.S. Domestic Postal Rates 1872 – 2011 by Beecher and Wawrukiewicz, available from the American Philatelic Society at [stamps.org](http://stamps.org)

*Patrick Crosby is a member of the Nevada Stamp Study Society and collects U.S. postal cards, especially used, including first days; the 1886 Grant Letter Card (or Sheet); UC16, the first U.S. aérogram; and postal history on business or picture post cards.*