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The social media of the early 20th century: a collection from the golden age of postcards

In the period 1900–15, postcards were the equivalent of what we now term ‘social media’. Mail deliveries were more frequent at the time, and local correspondents could interact on a daily basis. With developments in lithography and then photography, a wealth of images became available, and postcard collecting, known as ‘deltiology’, was almost as popular as stamp and coin collecting.¹

The introduction of postcards

Postcards came into common use in a number of countries in the second half of the 19th century. In January 1869 Viennese professor of economics Dr Emanuel Herrmann wrote an article for the *Neue Freie Presse* (New Free Press) highlighting the effort in writing a letter when you only had a short message to transmit and suggesting an alternative, cheaper option, the postcard.² The Austrian postal service adopted the idea and in October 1869 introduced *Korrespondenz-Karten* (correspondence cards, later known as postcards). Initially, these were cardboard cards the size of an envelope with one side reserved for the address and the other blank for a short message. The Austrian version featured an imprinted stamp with half the value of a letter’s postage. Thus, *Korrespondenz-Karten* allowed the writer to dash off a quick message while also saving on postage and the cost of an envelope.

Opposite: Postcard from the Gertrude Berres Postcard Collection, Manuscripts Collection, MS 16311



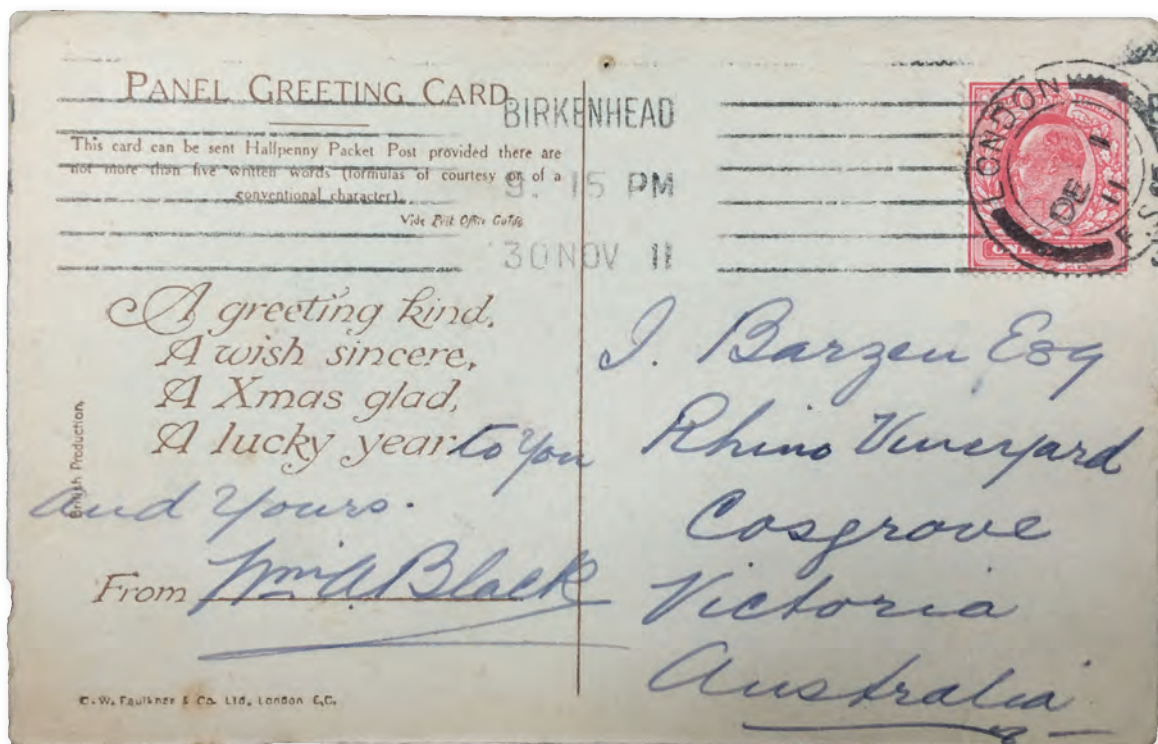


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Correspondents in other countries took up the idea, and postcards became a widely utilised means of communication and, as they evolved, a collector's item. For the year 1903, it was reported that over 1 billion postcards were posted in Germany, followed by the United States with 770 million, Great Britain with 610 million and Japan with 490 million.³ Over time the initially blank upper side was transformed, firstly with the addition of a vignette, a small image or design in one corner, or a border, with space left for the message; the lower side content was restricted to the mailing address and postage stamp.

A significant development came with the introduction of divided-back postcards: these allowed the message, mailing address and postage stamp to all be on the back, and the front could be fully illustrated. Developments in lithography and photography made images more readily available. Further embellishments included embossing, frosting, appliqué and hand-tinting and hand-painting of postcards.

Several factors put postcards at the centre of a correspondence explosion. They could be mass produced and thus were affordable as well as practical at a time when postal services improved greatly, especially into rural areas. Travel increased, including for holidaying, and 'greetings from' postcards abounded. The late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw



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increased literacy. Postcards were a means of quick communication, and usually carried a lower postage fee. It is estimated that in 1905 over 7 billion cards were mailed worldwide, and that total does not include significant numbers of postcards bought by collectors for their albums and not mailed. The years 1905–15 have been termed the ‘golden age of postcards’. Their usage declined as the telephone became more widely available and the next social media preference.⁴

The Gertrude Berres postcard collection

The Gertrude Berres postcard collection consists of several hundred postcards mailed to her by overseas and local correspondents in the first decades of the 20th century. Many of the postcard images are spectacular: one photographic image of a beautiful woman enhanced with real hair comes to mind, as do hand-painted cards and ornately embossed floral images. Across the collection, life in its diversity is recorded, with a focus on Europe and Australia.

The cards, generally in chronological order, were placed in albums, which passed some years ago to Gertie’s daughter, Pauline, and recently to me, a granddaughter of Gertie. The collection was donated to State Library Victoria in early 2020.⁵ Who was Gertrude Berres, and what are the origins and nature of her postcard collection?



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Johanna Gertrude Berres (1892–1961) was born into a German-Australian family in Victoria’s Goulburn Valley. Known to her family and friends as ‘Gertie’, she was the only child of Wilhelm and Johanna Berres. Their marriage, in the German village of Reil, in January 1892, united two well-known wine-producing families of the Moselle Valley, the Berreses of Ürzig and the Barzens of Reil. The records of both families indicate a centuries-long tradition of winemaking. Following their wedding Wilhelm and Johanna left for Australia.

Wilhelm was a vigneron and younger son of a large family. So that estates did not become uneconomically small, many younger sons left the Moselle Valley to seek their livelihood in the ‘new world’. While it was a time of economic hardship in the Moselle Valley, the Berres family was in a position to provide some capital to enable Wilhelm to establish himself in Australia. A younger brother, Fritz, had migrated there several years earlier. It was said that the attraction of Australia was not the lure of gold but rather a climate favourable for viniculture.

Upon arriving in their new homeland, the Berreses bought land in north-eastern Victoria at Dunbulbalane, near Katandra North, and established the Moselle Vineyard. This was the childhood home of Gertie, who was born in Dunbulbalane on 25 November 1892. As well as crops and orchards, Wilhelm

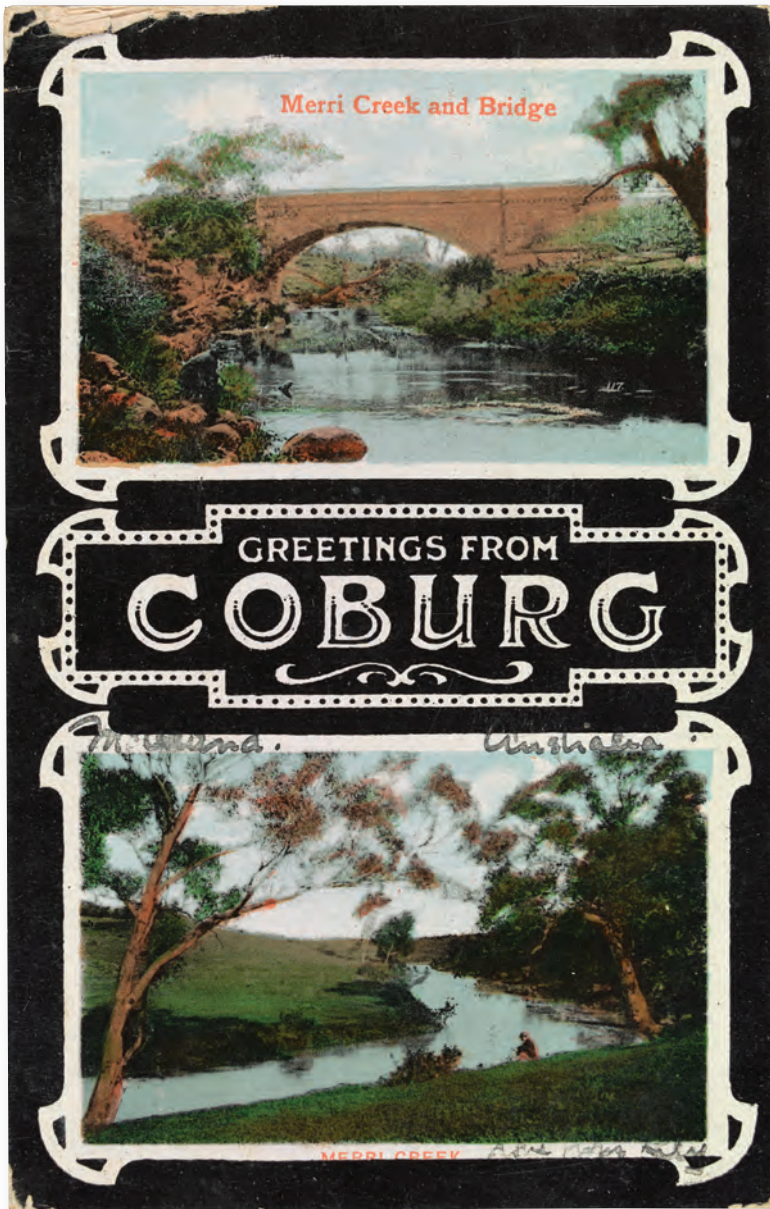


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put a large area of vines under cultivation and in 1895 sought naturalisation, which was required prior to harvest time to be eligible for a vigneron's licence.

Gertie Berres had a happy childhood in Dunbulbalane, and Wilhelm Berres was established as 'a well-known vigneron, of Katandra North',⁶ when tragedy struck with his death, in 1905, at 39 years of age. Johanna Berres sold the vineyard and took her daughter back to Germany. While there, Gertie attended the Ursulinen-Pensionat (Ursuline convent school) in Boppard, on the Rhine River. In the vacations she stayed with her many Berres and Barzen aunts, uncles and cousins and got to know her extended family. She seems to have enjoyed her German sojourn, but after two years mother and daughter decided to return to Australia. Gertie was apparently keen to make her home down under, and widow Johanna Berres accepted a proposal of marriage from her cousin Jacob Barzen, who had established the Rhino Vineyard in Dookie contemporaneously with the Berres' vineyard in Dunbulbalane.

Gertie Berres and her family were all active in the local community, and Rhino Vineyard was a favoured place for social gatherings. Gertie was described as a 'popular young lady'.⁷ She conducted extensive postcard correspondence, over decades, with many German relatives, school friends and acquaintances made during her time in Europe, as well as with Australian contacts.



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Collecting the postcards

Long-distance communication

Gertie Berres returned to Australia during the golden age of postcards. Through her two years in Germany, she had got to know large numbers of first cousins, second cousins, aunts and uncles from both the maternal and paternal sides of her family. She had made many friends at her boarding school, had become well known in her parents' little hometowns of Reil and Ürzig, and had also



made acquaintances in Rhineland cities like Bonn and Cologne, where she had relatives. Postcards were the ideal way to keep in touch with one another after Gertie's return to Australia, and the ease of writing them made it possible to send and receive them in abundance.

Cards arrived from German connections, sent from where they lived, from where they were holidaying, from military service or from sea voyages. Sometimes cards received enabled the collection of a series, capturing landscapes, animals or plants, works of art, celebrities or cartoons. Some postcards were extravagantly decorated with embossing and appliqué; Gertie's school friends may have tried to outdo one another with the ornateness of their cards.

Earlier cards in the Berres collection have the message on the front side, beside an image or within a border, and the address on the back. Later cards are of the divided-back type, with the front being a lithograph, hand-painted image or photograph. Given the latter have only half of the reverse side available for a message, some cards have horizontal text with vertical text then written over the former.

Social media

The Gertrude Berres postcard collection also includes significant numbers of local postcards, particularly from nearby towns like Cosgrove, Dookie and Shepparton. While cards from further afield, such as Australian capital cities, tend to have been sent by travelling family and friends, cards from the neighbourhood served another purpose. At a time of more frequent mail deliveries, you would not only receive a message saying 'See you at the fancy dress ball next week' but also an invitation along the lines of 'We are going to play cards this evening. Come over at 7 pm'. The guest would duly arrive for a game of cards accompanied by a glass of Rhino Vineyard wine.

Gertie Berres treasured the postcards that she received and gathered them into albums. Through her European and local correspondence, she assembled several hundred postcards.

Postcards as a primary resource for researchers

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, postcards revolutionised communication. Significantly, they made available images of places, people, events, nature and art, and subjects serious and comical, at a time when newspapers had few illustrations. They were widely utilised, popular across the globe and worthy of collection. Over a century after this golden age, such collections provide both professional researchers and family historians



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with valuable insights into the physical and social worlds of another era. Both the images and the correspondence may be important in this regard.

As the golden age of the postcard was beginning, the *Australian Town and Country Journal* highlighted an increasing awareness of the importance of the image for its own sake and its educational value:

It is pleasant to learn that taste concerning cards is steadily improving and that those of really artistic order and well printed are chosen in preference to the common place or gaudy ... the Germans first, and now we ourselves begin to recognise that the picture card is capable of educational, and even Imperial influence. Boys and girls can gain a more abiding lesson from a series depicting the daily life, the bustle of busy streets, or the quiet repose of farm or homestead overseas than from the geographical class.⁸

In contrast to letters sent in an envelope, one aspect of postcards was the visibility of the sender's message to postal authorities; the comment above regarding 'Imperial influence' is of relevance. With different regimes, for example, across Europe during the golden age, some postcards were judged to be politically sensitive or sexually explicit or to have inappropriate religious imagery when they came into the hands of the receiving postal authority, potentially resulting in non-delivery. In this regard, translation of postcards

from German correspondents in the Gertrude Berres postcard collection would provide insights into their situation and views in the period before, during and after World War I.

Conclusion

State Library Victoria has a number of postcard collections, as well as a number of books on postcards. Other collections include the David M Little collection, which among other realia has postcards of sailing ships dated c. 1910 – c. 1920 and the album in which they were collected; the Hilda Beyer collection of international postcards, an album of postcards collected during a 1911 overseas holiday; the postcard collection of Lavinia Reddish, with 207 Australian and British postcards exchanged between Lavinia and husband Jack in the early 20th century; the Rose postcard collection, produced by the Rose Stereograph Company, later the Rose Postcard Company; and the Shirley Jones collection of military postcards, over 1000 cards bought by Australian servicemen in the Middle East, France and Britain and sent home to loved ones during World War I. The Gertrude Berres postcard collection will extend the Library's collection and is both aesthetically pleasing and significant as an illustrated historical record.