

Chapter Four:

The Trans-Mississippi Exposition of 1898

The Trans-Mississippi Exposition

Expositions were a dominant theme of early commemorative stamp issues in the United States. The initial uproar over the idea of using stamps to encourage people to attend them had faded when the U.S. Postal Department issued its second set of exposition commemoratives in 1898. This time, the occasion was the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska. Its theme was the development of the western United States, including the founding of new towns and planting of new fields. Open from the first of June to the first of November of 1898, it drew 2.6 million people to over four thousand exhibits. The Exposition featured an Indian Congress with over five hundred Indians from twenty-eight tribes, the largest gathering of its kind ever held. President William McKinley visited the Exposition on October 12th, doubtless a far more enjoyable event for him than his tragic visit to the Pan-American Exposition three years later.



Figure 4.1. View of Grand Court, looking east, Trans-Mississippi Exposition, 1898. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-68140.



Figure 4.2. Agriculture Building, Trans-Mississippi Exposition, 1898.
Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-68145.



Figure 4.3. East End of Grand Court, Trans-Mississippi Exposition, 1898.
Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-18028.



Figure 4.4. Nighttime illumination of Grand Court, Trans-Mississippi Exposition, 1898. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-18029.



Figure 4.5. Review of Indian Congress, Trans-Mississippi Exposition; photo by Adolph Muhr. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-124564.

The Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue of 1898 (“The Omahas”)

Scott #285 to 293

Like the Columbians a few years before, the nine Trans-Mississippi Exposition commemoratives were issued not to commemorate an event, but to promote it. They came about because of a request by Edward Rosewater, publisher of the Omaha Daily Bee, who asked Postmaster General James Gary for a set of stamps to advertize the upcoming Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska. The stamps were designed by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving’s Raymond Ostander Smith (who himself posed for a photograph used as the basis of the design of the 1902 bicycle Special Delivery stamp covered in Chapter Seven). Stamp designs depicted typical Western scenes. Released on June 17, 1898, the stamps became known as “the Omaha Issue” or just “the Omahas”.

Because the Columbians had been issued just a few years before, collectors at the time hesitated to buy up the most expensive stamps in this set. Some even complained that the stamps did not meet the standards of the earlier commemoratives. John N. Luff, a notable philatelist of the time, even declared that “The stamps are poorly conceived and executed, overloaded with ornaments, heavy in color and blurred in printing.” Nowadays, the stamps are much beloved by philatelists. One of the stamps in the series, the one dollar “Western Cattle”, is widely considered to be the finest U.S. commemorative ever produced.

At the end of 1898, post offices with remaining Omahas in stock returned unsold copies to the US Post Office Department, which destroyed them. Therefore, the record of how many stamps were printed does not reflect the far lower number remaining today (especially of the dollar and two dollar stamps).

The stamps were printed in one color each, although the original design had called for bi-color printing with center vignettes of black against various colors of frames depending upon the denomination. Indeed, bi-color die proofs of the Omahas still exist. Unfortunately, the

Spanish American War began in April of 1898, and the Bureau of Printing and Engraving had a sudden need to print large numbers of revenue stamps to help fund it. As a result, the Bureau could not spare the workforce nor the time to accomplish a bi-color printing project. The matter was eventually remedied; in 1998, all nine Omahas were re-issued in their intended bi-color formats.

Scott #285: 1¢ “Marquette on the Mississippi”



Figure 4.6. One-cent “Marquette on the Mississippi”, Trans-Mississippi Issue, 1898.

The one-cent Omaha depicts Jacques Marquette, Jesuit missionary, near the confluence of the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers in 1674. Marquette led a small expedition from Lake Superior into the valley of the Mississippi River, following it downstream to the Arkansas and then returning north. After spending the following winter in a cabin at the present-day site of Chicago, Marquette died of an unknown illness the following spring. The stamp’s image is based upon a painting by William Lamprecht, “Father Marquette and the Indians”, on display at the Haggarty Museum at Marquette University in Wisconsin. The stamp’s vignette was engraved by G. F. C. Smille, using a professional photograph of the painting as his model. Used to pay the one-cent postcard rate, 70,993,400 of these stamps were printed.

Scott 286: 2¢ “Farming in the West”



Figure 4.7. Two-cent “Farming in the West”,
Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue, 1898.

The image used as a model for the two-cent stamp was a photograph by John Hamlin, circa 1888-89, entitled “Plowing on the Amenia and Sharon Land Company, Amenia, N.D.” The scene, engraved by Marcus W. Baldwin, includes a line of horse-drawn plows on a field of wheat stubble in the background. The team, with 61 horses and extensive machinery, is in the process of going

back and forth across an entire section of land (640 acres) on what was known at the time as a “bonanza farm”. Farm worker Ed Nybakken, field boss Elihu Barber, and foreman Sam White are shown in the foreground from left front to back right. Alas for poor Ed Nybakken, a gust of wind snatched his hat just as the picture was being taken, covering his face – an incident reproduced on this stamp. The Amenia and Sharon Land Company benefitted greatly from the use of its photograph, which served as an advertisement for the corporation. The company purchased large numbers of the stamp and used them for all its correspondence for years afterward.

Engraved by Marcus W. Baldwin, the vignette on this stamp was originally intended for the two-dollar Omaha, and the Mississippi River Bridge was planned for this one instead. But the Congressional Postal Committee decided that, because the two-cent stamp would have much wider circulation than the two-dollar one, it ought to have this more representative Western scene on it. Because two cents paid domestic first-class postage, more two-cent stamps were printed than any other of the Omahas: a total of 159,720,800. An unknown number, however, was destroyed when the unsold Omahas were incinerated in March, 1899.

Scott #287: 4¢ “Indian Hunting Buffalo”



Figure 4.8. Four-cent “Indian Hunting Buffalo”,
Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue, 1898.

The image on the orange four-cent Omaha was taken from an engraving by Captain S. Eastman that appeared in Volume Four of Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, published in Philadelphia in 1854. The original engraving includes another Indian mounted on a horse firing his arrow at a second buffalo, but these figures were removed from the stamp design in favor of the single Indian chasing a buffalo in the foreground. The stamp’s vignette was engraved by G. F. C. Smille. This stamp covered double the regular first-class rate. A total of 4,924,500 of these stamps were printed, but an unknown number was destroyed in March, 1899.

but these figures were removed from the stamp design in favor of the single Indian chasing a buffalo in the foreground. The stamp’s vignette was engraved by G. F. C. Smille. This stamp covered double the regular first-class rate. A total of 4,924,500 of these stamps were printed, but an unknown number was destroyed in March, 1899.



Figure 4.10. Indian on horseback with two buffalo; drawing by F.O.C. Darley, circa 1840-88; Courtesy The Library of Congress, cai 2a12204 .

Scott #288: 5¢ “Fremont on the Rocky Mountains”



Figure 4.10. Five cent “Fremont on the Rocky Mountains”, Trans-Mississippi Issue, 1898.

John Charles Fremont, depicted on the five-cent Omaha planting a flag on a peak in the Rocky Mountains, was one of the most colorful characters in 19th century American history. In addition to his early career as Western explorer, he was a US Senator, territorial governor, Republican Party founder, and Presidential candidate in 1856 (under the slogan, “Free men, Free

soil, Fremont’). The original woodcut used for this image has never been found. The stamp’s vignette was engraved by Marcus W. Baldwin. Because five cents paid the first-class letter rate to Europe, many five-cent Omahas ended up there. A total of 7,694,180 were printed, although an unknown number was destroyed in March, 1899 after the remaining unsold Omahas were recalled.



Figure 4.11. Colonel Fremont planting the American standard on the Rocky Mountains. Engraving by Baker & Godwin, 1856. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-49597.

Scott #289: 8¢ “Troops Guarding Wagon Train”



Figure 4.12. Eight-cent “Troops Guarding Train”, Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue, 1898.

Based upon a drawing by Frederic Remington, the violet brown eight-cent Omaha depicts a scene highly evocative of the Wild West. As described by Lester G. Brookman in Volume 3 of his The United States Postage Stamps of the Nineteenth Century, the picture “shows a long train of covered wagons, filled with emigrants and their families, slowly wending their way across the seemingly unending

plains. Frequent Indian attacks made constant guarding of the trains a necessity....” The stamp’s vignette was engraved by Robert Ponickau. This stamp was mainly used for covering the fee to send letters by registered mail. A total of 2,927,200 were printed, though an unknown number was destroyed in March, 1899.



Figure 4.13. “Protecting a Wagon Train”, Frederic Remington, 1897.

Scott #290: 10¢ “Hardships of Emigration”



Figure 4.14. Ten-cent “Hardships of Emigration”, Trans-Mississippi Exposition

The ten-cent Omaha was based upon an 1892 painting by Augustus Goodyear Heaton, completed while he was living in Oklahoma. The painting was destroyed by fire in 1930. All that survives is this stamp depicting a dying horse in front of a lone covered wagon. As Lester G.

Brookman notes in Volume 3 of The United States Postage Stamps of the Nineteenth Century, “Such a scene

represented a tense moment in the lives of the emigrants, for loss of a horse under these circumstances was a serious thing.” The vignette was engraved by Marcus W. Baldwin. Ten cents paid a combination of the registered mail fee and first-class postage. A total of 4,629,760 of these stamps were printed, though an unknown number was later destroyed.



Figure 4.15. Pioneers in covered wagons; by Thomas Fogarty. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-126267.

Scott #291: 50¢ “Western Mining Prospector”



Figure 4.16. Fifty-cent “Western Mining Prospector”, Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue, 1898.

Based upon a painting called “The Gold Bug” by Frederic Remington, the vignette on the fifty-cent Omaha was engraved by G. F. C. Smille. This evocative Western scene shows an old prospector searching for gold along a mountain river. It was used as a “make-up” stamp for higher-postage items. A total of 530,400 of these stamps were produced, but an unknown number was later destroyed.



Figure 4.17. “The Gold Bug”, by Frederic Remington, 1897.

Scott #292: \$1 “Western Cattle in Storm”



Figure 4.18. One-dollar “Western Cattle in Storm”, Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue, 1898.

Considered by many collectors to be the finest United States commemorative stamp ever printed, the one-dollar Omaha is also commonly known as the “Black Bull”. Although the cattle pictured on the stamp are certainly evocative of the American West, the scene was taken from an engraving by C. O. Murray of a painting by John A. MacWhirter entitled “The Vanguard”, which depicted cattle in the Scottish West Highlands. The vignette was engraved by Marcus W. Baldwin. Highly valued by collectors today, only 56,900 of these stamps were ever printed, an unknown number of which remained in stock after four months of sales and were subsequently destroyed by the U.S. Postal Department. Although not terribly popular with collectors at the time it was first issued, the one-dollar “Western Cattle in a Storm” has since received much praise by philatelists. In fact, it was recently ranked #6 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.

#293: \$2 "Mississippi River Bridge"



Figure 4.19. Two-dollar "Mississippi River Bridge", Trans-Mississippi Exposition Issue, 1898.

Although the Trans-Mississippi Exposition took place in Omaha, the city shown on the most costly of the Omahas is actually St. Louis, and the bridge is the Eads Bridge, completed in 1874. At its completion, the bridge was the longest in the world, at 6,442 feet. The stamp that bears its image, featuring a vignette engraved by Marcus W.

Baldwin, is a much-sought-after rarity. Only 56,200 were ever printed, all in a single day's run on June 3, 1898. Many were destroyed in March, 1899 after they failed to sell. It is estimated that only around 25,000 remain in existence today. The two-dollar "Mississippi River Bridge" was recently ranked #8 in a book on the 100 greatest American stamps.



Figure 4.20. "The Great St. Louis Bridge across the Mississippi River"; Currier & Ives, c. 1874. Courtesy The Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-2852.