

Tall Tales from the Darkroom
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Franklin County has raised some mighty fine agricultural products through the years, but 1908 to 1911 must have been humdinger bumper-crop years for area farmers.

That is, if photographs don't lie.

Pictures exist from those years that "document" absolutely astonishing local bounty: Colossal cabbages, monstrous melons, gigantic jackrabbits, fabulous fish, stupendous strawberries, Gulliver-size geese...well, you get the picture.

These "whopper" photos were, of course, about as real as any yarns spun at a local Liar's Club. They were the clever creations of Ottawa photographer W. H. "Dad" Martin.

Martin is one of several creators of exaggerated picture postcards who are highlighted in a newly published book appropriately entitled "Larger Than Life."

Besides the Martin connection, the volume has another important local tie as it was co-authored by Ottawa native Morgan Williams, with the text being written by Cynthia Elyce Rubin.

This delightful book is giving Ottawa some national exposure these days, with favorable reviews being published in *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *New Yorker* magazine, among others.

Americana magazine's article "Boast Cards," especially chose to highlight Dad Martin's work.

And with good reason. Of the 150 tall-tale postcards pictured in the history, no fewer than 33 are Martin photos, including four of the six on the cover. Williams, who claims to have the country's best collection of exaggerated cards, said recently that he submitted 500 images to the publisher (Abbeyville Press) for consideration. "They picked what they thought were the best, and Martin's were heavily favored," he said.

Martin's cards are prized in part for the "sense of action notably absent in others," co-author Rubin writes. By careful posing of shots and subsequent slicing, splicing and reshooting of images, Dad Martin produced some real giggle-getters.

In one, three Buick roadsters, filled with Franklin Countians, chase and try to lasso a rabbit as big as a horse. Another shows a derrick being used to hoist a boulder-size peach into an equally huge canning jar. A forlorn-looking farmer in another surveys a broken wagon wheel crushed under a load of gargantuan spuds. The droll caption reads, "We raise tons of sweet potatoes."

These and dozens more were posed and faked using local "models" and sets. Box cars to be loaded with mammoth produce were photographed at the Santa Fe depot. The Hewitt-Evans Fruit Co. wagon, stacked with huge strawberries, was captured on film just up the alley north of the present First National Bank drive-through window on Third Street.

The Franklin County Fair in Forest Park is represented by a picture of a man sitting on an ear of corn as big as a log.

Surely the most grisly picture in the book is a Martin card that shows two man-eating fish chomping off the legs of a would-be fisherman. The hapless man is none other than Ottawa native Bert Underwood, co-founder of the world-renown Underwood and Underwood Studios, an important photography pioneer.

Morgan Williams credits his mother, Mary Lou Williams, 116 W. 10th, with doing much of the research on Dad Martin and the Martin Post Card Co.

Martin came to Ottawa at the age of 24, worked for a local photographer, and bought out his boss in 1894. He began to experiment with the exaggerated cards in 1908 and operated the business in the basement of his home at 815 S. Main.

Within a year, he had a staff of 20 that reportedly turned out 10,000 cards a day. In 1909, a two-story building was erected behind the house to hold the expanded operation. But within just a few years, Martin apparently tired of the enterprise and sold the company to Ottawans Williams S. Fallis and William H. Jones. They moved it to Kansas City under the name of the North American Post Card Co.

In an abrupt change of career, Martin founded National Sign Co. in Ottawa, which is still in operation, and built a new home for himself at 1204 S. Main. His daughter, B. Martin Peck, is remembered by many latter-day Ottawans for her work with the animal shelter.

“Larger Than Life” briefly details the careers of several other tall-tale postcard producers and displays many fun examples of their silly genius. Several of these photographers were also Kansans, and yet another Ottawan gets brief mention—the late J.B. Mickey (Muecke). A Mickey postcard in the book shows a fellow fishing in a sidewalk puddle in the 100 block of S. Main.

Ottawa is fortunate to have this comical, yet important piece of its heritage, partially preserved in this volume of historical whimsy and folk art. “Larger Than Life” is not a book for just postcard collectors, but is a delight for all ages.

The book is at the Ottawa Library, or can be purchased through Mary Lou Williams, 242-2832.

A display of Dad Martin postcards and other memorabilia can be seen at the Old Depot Museum for the next two Sundays.