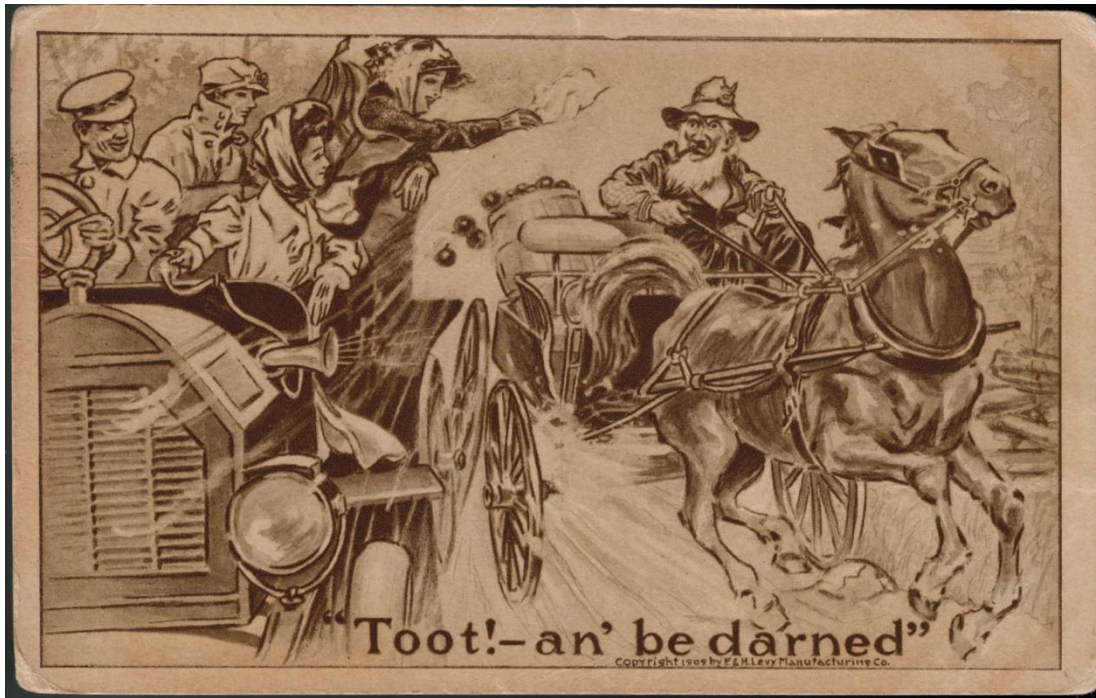


You're so Vane (You Probably Think This Is About You)

The Provenance of the Dave Redmon Historic Postcard Collection

Chapman Center for Rural Studies
by Griffin Page

If we are fortunate in life, we may make a discovery that alters the face of human existence and society. The Historic Redmon Postcard Collection is not one of those discoveries. But nonetheless, it does provide a unique insight into early 20th Century America. In March, 2014, Chapman Center for Rural Studies received the gift of 301 postcards, a single preserved collection. As a rural studies research center, we are an excellent match for these early 20th century cards. The United States, and Kansas in particular, was still very rural at this time. Most people lived in communities of populations under 2,500 and were restricted to where they could go by how far they could walk. This began to change as the automobile became more prevalent, but the decade prior to World War I was known as the “Golden Age of Small Towns” for a reason. It was the quintessential era of white picket fences, friendly neighbors, and small town values. The postcards in this collection were sent to Parsons (population of 12,463 in 1910) and Lawrence (12,374), but the small town values can be seen throughout even if the cards were being sent to the “big city.”

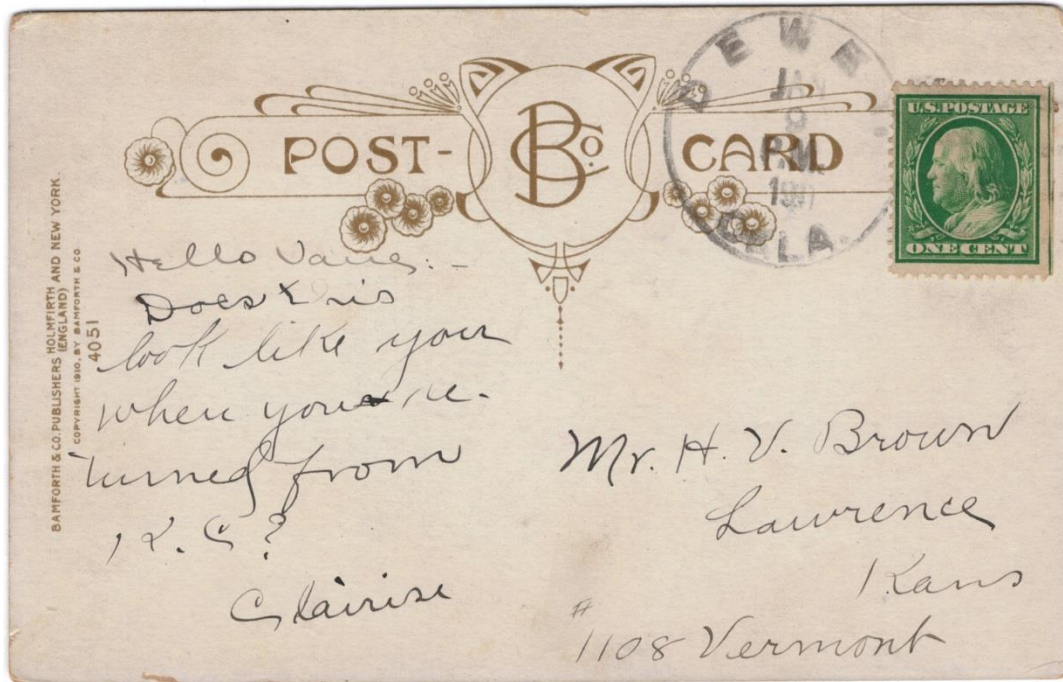


The collection also begins to paint a picture of the young man who was on the receiving end of these 300 postcards between the years 1906 and 1912: Mr. Harold Vane Brown of Parsons, Kansas. The images, paintings, sketches, and photographs on the card fronts provide insight into American culture during those years, while the handwritten notes on the back are entertaining in themselves. Readers today can gain an insight into communication among relatives, friends, and courting men and women during this time period. Postcards were the cheapest form of communication during this time, but the messages could be quite rich. While many simply stated that they would write a longer letter soon, some held intimate details of familial circumstances or romantic relationships. Many were meant as an enticement or proclamation that the receiver was not writing enough, as the sender wanted to know more of what was going on in Vane's life.

The collection was donated to the Chapman Center for Rural Studies by Dave Redmon, also a native of Parsons. He inherited the collection from his stepfather, Frank Williams, who was a feed salesman and cook/restaurant operator in Parsons until his passing in 1969. Mr.

Redmon has had the postcards ever since and has read each one several times. He decided to donate the collection to the Chapman Center because of his acquaintance with Dr. MJ Morgan, the Chapman Center Director of Research. He felt that at the Chapman Center the collection would be better served because, in his words, it provides a “microscopic view of social southeastern Kansas.” From years of studying the cards, Mr. Redmon also noted that these postcard messages were “Kinda like a tweet,” during this time because they “about make that much sense,” he observed. The small amount of information, the in-jokes, and the often private references suggest that these postcards functioned a lot like Facebook posts, texts, or tweets!





Text reads: "Hello Vane: Does this look like you when you re-turned from K.C? Claire

Mr. Redmon graduated from Kansas State University in 1966 with a bachelor's degree in history, and later returned to earn his master's degree in journalism. As a graduate student, Mr. Redmon researched and wrote an article, "Libel: Sullivan and the Kansas Connection" published in the summer 1977 edition of the *Kansas Historical Quarterly*. Mr. Redmon served in the Navy and was a journalist for both *The Kansas City Star* and *Pittsburg Morning Sun* before moving back to Manhattan in 1979. He has since worked for the university writing feature stories on research and teaching English. Mr. Redmon also taught second and third grades at Ogden Elementary, was a reference librarian at Manhattan Public Library, and served as editor of *Keynotes*, a "news magazine for older Kansans and their families." Mr. Redmon retired in 2007. Because of his background in journalism and writing, he has taken a particular interest in the postcard collection. With a lifelong interest in history, Mr. Redmon conducted further research and believes that his stepfather may have worked with, or at least known, Vane Brown. Of Vane

he commented that there were, “Lots of women interested in this fella.”

Vane Brown was the recipient of almost all of the postcards in the collection. Because he was a native of Parsons most of the post cards were sent from there or from surrounding communities, but he received “postals” from places as exotic as Reading, Pennsylvania; Pasadena, California; and New Orleans.



It cost two cents for Vane’s correspondents to send him a post card during these years. The postcards display a variety of themes including automobiles, smoking, and gender commentary. A complete list of the themes from the collection can be found as an inventory in a separate document on this website. Over 15 different sub-themes and categories are apparent. While the

postcard images do provide valuable understanding of the time, the “juicy” details from the back help paint a better picture of who Vane was as a young man. Vane was obviously well-liked. Many different individuals wrote to him, but the majority of post cards were sent by women. The most common senders were his sister Fay, Blanche Tomlinson, “Helen” from Sedalia, Missouri and “Flossie” from Parsons. While the post cards do provide a key insight into Vane and his relationships, they do not paint the whole picture of who this man was during his life. Some postcards have only one or two scrawled words, such as “Are you dead?” (A common theme of family members wanting to hear from him)!

To find and understand Vane Brown, research into a diverse variety of sources was necessary. Harold Vane Brown was born August 21, 1890 in Parsons, Kansas to Harry E. Brown, a conductor on the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad, and Sarah A. Brown. Vane had one sister, Fay, who was four years older. As a boy growing up in a railroad town, he walked to school to the sound of trains arriving and departing. The Brown family home was located at 1800 Morgan Avenue.



Figure 1. This is a map of Parsons, Kansas. The “X” marks the home of the Brown family during at least the years of 1906-1912. The train depot is circled, and the high school is surrounded by a square. Note that for much of Vane’s childhood if you wanted to get somewhere you walked, which explains why the family lived close to the depot where Vane’s father worked as a conductor.
Source: Kansas Memory.org

Vane graduated from Parsons High School and then attended the University of Kansas from 1909-1911 as a law student. However, he did not complete his degree. (We don’t know why he left school; perhaps he was too busy responding to so many admirers’ postcards!) Vane returned to Parsons and worked as a clerk at Swift & Co., a local company which processed turkeys. He married Vernus Lanham of Parsons on July 31, 1915. Vernus was a year younger than Vane, and so must have attended high school with him.



Figure 2. An image of Parsons High School located at 1900 Stevens Avenue around the time Vane and Vernus would have attended. As was typical of many urban institutions at the turn of the century, buildings were massive, often combining architectural styles.
Source: Kansas Memory.org

Her father was a locomotive engineer and may have known Vane's father as they were both railroad men. Yet it should be noted that the name Vernus is painfully absent from the postcard collection! Eventually, she was fortunate enough to land Vane anyway, and a photograph of young people in an automobile may in fact be Vernus.



Figure 3. Vane is the young man in the passenger seat, circa 1911. This photo appeared in the *Parsons Sun* on January 7, 1947, as part of Vane's obituary. It may have been submitted by his wife Vernus... and although we don't know if the young maiden seated next to Vane is Vernus, it is only fitting that we remember Vane this way: smiling and carefree, with his arm around a lady friend.

Source: Parsons Historical Society

Vane and Vernus moved to Sand Springs, Oklahoma, where Vane got a job as a cost accountant for Pierce Oil Company. According to Vane's World War I draft registration card out of Tulsa, he was described as "Tall, Medium Build, brown eyes, brown hair." He obviously had charm, as his social world revealed in his postcards was quite rich. The Browns lived in Oklahoma until 1926, when they returned to Parsons so Vane could help his father with the Hotel Faye. His father had built and opened this hotel on March 16, 1917. That it was named for Vane's sister Fay is a testament to the close family ties of this Parsons family.



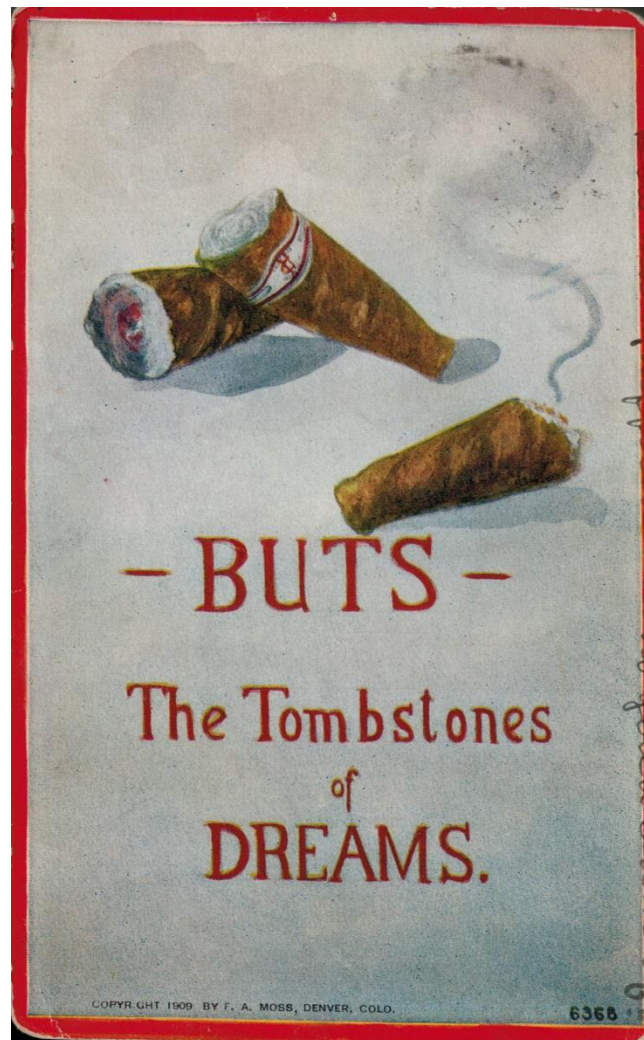
Figure 4. This is an image of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad train depot in Parsons. Here Vane arrived and departed from home on his way to Lawrence to attend law school at KU. Many of the postcards in his collection were sent out on mail cars from this depot. A card sent from Parsons would reach Vane in Lawrence in a day.
Source: Kansas Memory.org

Upon his father's passing in 1928, Vane took over the hotel which he operated until April, 1946. Due to health issues, Vane leased the hotel that April. With his worsening health, he died of coronary thrombosis on January 6, 1947, at the age of 56. His early death was unexpected, and the *Parsons Sun* carried an actual headline: "H. Vane Brown is Dead." His obituary revealed that he continued to be popular and active in civic organizations, such as the Rotary Club, and the chairman of the Labette County Republican central committee. Vane and Vernus did not have children, but in a way, the postcard collection that has made its way to

Chapman Center is Vane's legacy.

It is not entirely clear why Vane Brown kept these 300 postcards. It could be as simple as an appreciation for the postcards themselves and the photographs on the front. Perhaps it was as a token to remember his youth. Or it simply could have been that he liked to remember all those whom he had known and corresponded with. Whatever the reason, the collection provides valuable insight into a young man's life during this time period. The cards will make you laugh, make you gasp, and may even make you grimace, but each one is well-worth the read.

Here's to Vane Brown.



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