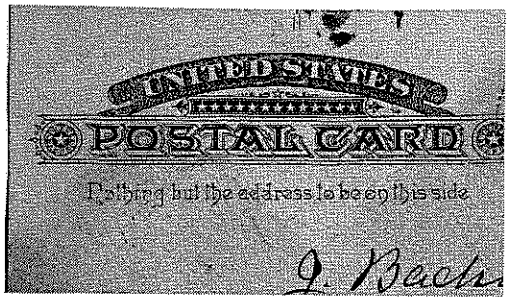
GOLDEN AGE OF POST CARDS
IN CAMPBELL HISTORY

By: Sandy Austin, Town Historian




Post cards in America have an interesting beginning. In 1872, Congress approved government production of postal cards. The first one was issued May 1, 1873. One side was for the address and the other was for the message. At that time, the government postal cards were the only post cards allowed to bear the term "Postal Card". Privately printed cards were allowed, but cost 2c to mail instead of the government cards for 1c. Prior to 1898, sometimes called the "Pioneer Period" [1870 to 1898], people would send greeting cards in the mail and some would use envelopes that had a picture on it. The first class 1-oz. letters also cost 2c to mail.

In 1898, Congress passed an Act [*the Private Mailing Act*] allowing private printing companies to produce post cards, but it had to have the words ***"Private Mailing Card, Authorized by Act of Congress of May 19, 1898".*** This was the "Private Mailing Card Period" – [1898 to 1901].

In 1901, updated legislation made a distinction between government-mailed post cards with postage of 1c ; and private-mailing post cards with postage of 2c. Regulations changed to allow the words "Post Card" only instead of the previous "Private Mailing Act" verbiage. Messages still were not allowed on the address side, which side typically carried the wording to indicate that the back side was exclusively for the address of the recipient. If the front did not have a photo, it could be used for the message, otherwise the message and photo would have to share the space. Some of the printed cards of that era would have a white space along the side of the photo for a message. This was called the "Un-divided back Period" – [1901 to 1907]. During this time period, historians say that millions of post cards went through the mail in the United States.

In these early years, many post cards were produced in Germany and imported here because the German photographic technology was of a superior quality than what was here in America, and gradually during these years, the postal regulations and cards and post cards kept evolving.

In 1903, during the height of the worldwide postcard craze, the Eastman Kodak Company introduced a groundbreaking product: the postcard camera. This innovative device was designed to expose a post card-sized negative, allowing direct printing onto blank cards. The resulting images captured scenes with extraordinary detail and allowed for real photo post cards and people could create their own post cards from their photographs.

During those first two decades of the 1900's the post card allowed for communication when people did not often travel; telephones were few and the postal system was quite efficient. It was convenient tool for the

general public to keep in touch with friends and relatives. While the post card was a means of communication, it also provided a portrait of life in America and even in our little Town of Campbell. It was during this span of time that some of the images of places in Campbell have been preserved. There were photographers who travelled from town to town capturing life in various places. This resulted in a collection of real photos contributing to history of small towns and rural areas where photography was often considered a luxury. These cards are a valuable record of life and history in Campbell.

When 1907 came along, Congress adopted legislation to allow a post card message to be written on the left half of the address side. This changed brought about a new craze to produce, publish and sell photographs post cards, and it allowed the image to cover the entire front of the card.

The "Golden Era of Post Cards" is generally considered to be the "Divided Back Period" which was between 1907 and 1915. It was a period when post cards were extremely popular with millions printed, imported, sold and mailed. This is when Post card photographers and publishers found a clever way to make a living. Big postcard publishers tended to play it safe, issuing sets that showed celebrated sites from towns across the United States like town halls, historic mills, and post offices. But the photographers who walked the streets or set up temporary studios worked fast and cheap. They could take a risk on a scene that might appeal to only a few, or capture a moment that would otherwise have been lost to posterity. They were always looking for ways to reach a larger group of buyers for their post cards.

Our historical library has a small interesting collection of old post cards with some quaint old buildings on Main Street such as the Cottage Hotel, the Smith Block, the Red and White Store, the McCabe house, the JD Hamilton House and others. In other areas of Town, we have post cards of an old Curtis Public School and a horse-drawn "Campbell school bus", a view of the old Hope Cemetery and a post card of the old Union School, [all from the undivided back period 1901-1907], and D L & W Railroad bridge from about 1909. These old post cards show structures which are long gone and replaced, and sadly, gone are the people that remember them. Now they are historical clues to our local history.

The year 1914 came along with the outbreak of WWI [1914 to 1918], and the American peoples' priorities changed. Following the war came the days when the economy flourished, often called "the Roaring 20's" which ended suddenly with the "Great Depression" – [1929-1941]. These years would account for the post card era called the "White Border Era" – [1915 -1930]. There were no more German post cards coming into the States. Postcards were on the decline but local photographers and printers were still in the business, but the quality was significantly decreased. Most were printed with a white border which print companies said would save about 20% on ink.

Beginning in the 1930's, post cards began to be produced with a high-rag content, giving them an appearance of being printed on linen, but the printers usually used cheap inks. This was referred to as the "Linen Period" – [1930 to 1945].

Post cards continued to evolve after that, as printers took advantage of newer technology and produced post cards in bright colors and a shiny finish, some with colored borders, or partial borders or even scalloped edges.

They would use glossy color photos or a matt finish. This is known as the "Photo-Chrome Era" – [1939 to present]. Still today, the post card is a popular item to pick up on your vacation to show the family where you've been and while you're out there relaxing, you can a card home to Mama!

Historians today, like myself, look for those real photo post cards that give us a little insight on our local past. Sometimes it's "a great find"! Then, of course, we have to go through all the historical clues to determine about what date it was.

Postmarks can give you a "not-newer-than" date, but there are other clues to consider. The style used confirms the era in which it was printed. Another clue to be aware of is, if there is a "stamp box" on the address side, it might contain the name of the company that printed it, or produced the photo paper.

Although most carry a dated postmark, you can't assume that it is the actual date of the photo. It could be that it had been set aside in someone's drawer for a time before it was mailed. Dating the post cards is sometimes difficult, but the clues I've outlined in this article will give you a close idea.

The following pages will show you samples of post cards we have mostly from the "Undivided Back Era" and the "Divided Back Era". There is one "White Border Era" and one "Linen Era".

EXAMPLE - Pre-1901 Private Mailing Card

# Samples of Campbell Post Cards to follow ...

FROM: "The Undivided Back Era"
1901-1907

POST CARD

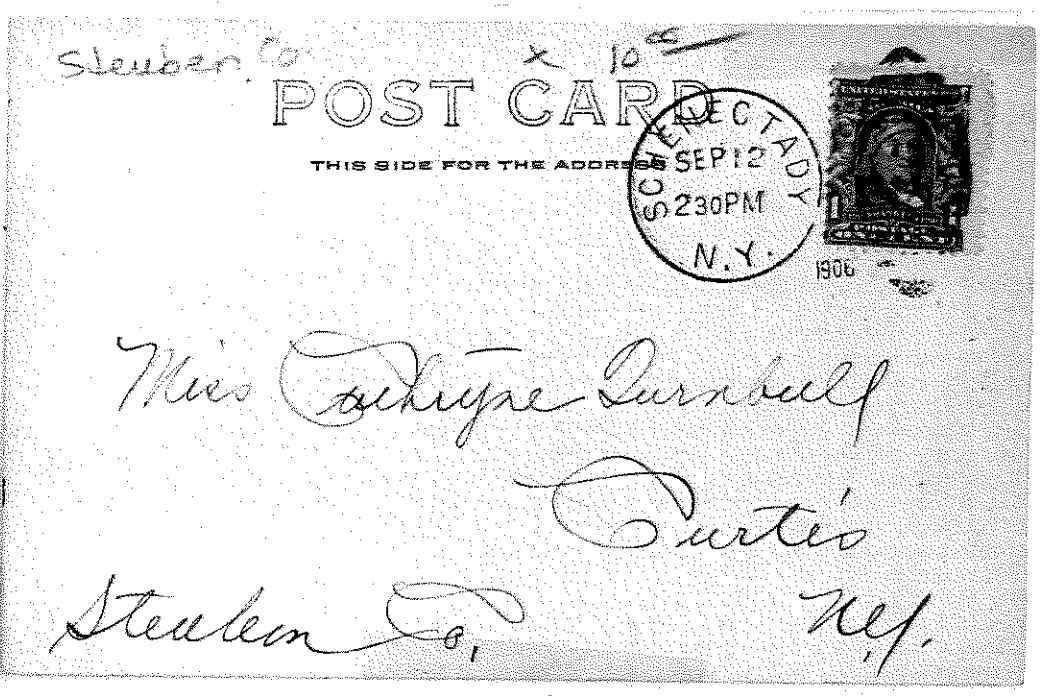
THIS SIDE FOR THE ADDRESS

PLACE ONE CENT STAMP HERE

Horton House
Campbell, NY

Horton Mansion located at The end of Horton Lane

SAMPLE




from: "undivided Back Period"

In 1901 The Postmaster General issued an order which allowed The words "Post Card" instead of "Private Mailing card" on the back.

From "Undivided Back" period.
1901-1907

Many thanks for my Christmas present rec'd Yesterday. Jean R.

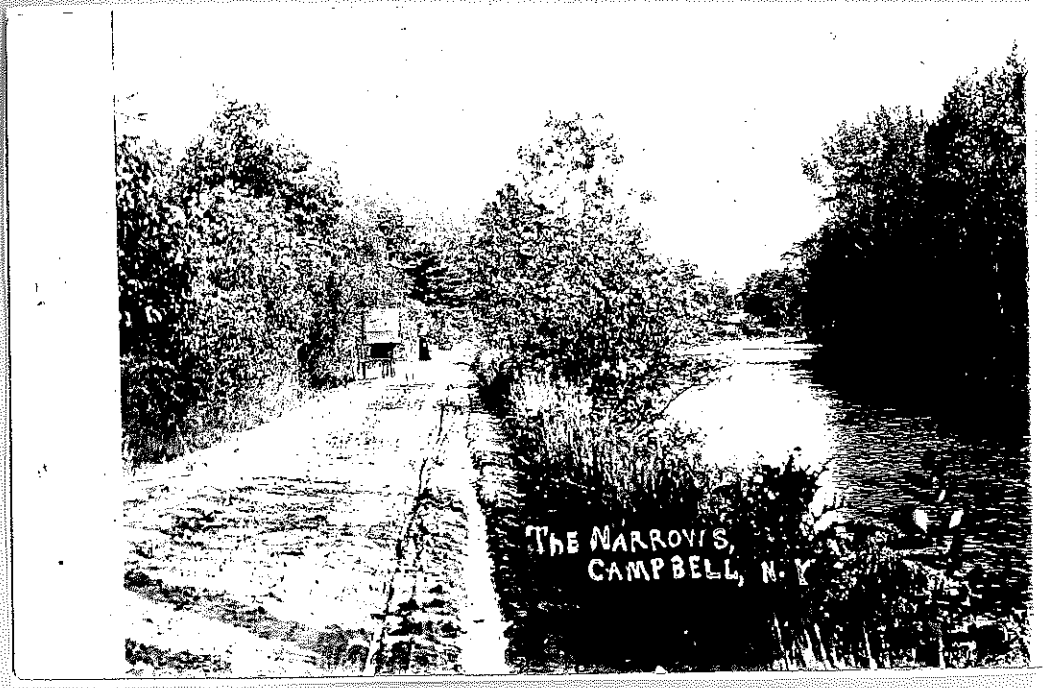
Real fine letter when I can get time. Will write more then. Glad you have it. Guess I'll close for now. Yours truly, G. M.

POST CARD
THIS SIDE FOR THE ADDRESS

BATH
DEC 12 1907
N. Y.

Mrs. H. N. Babcock
Bath, Steuben Co.
New York.
Lock Bx 156.

Campbell NY



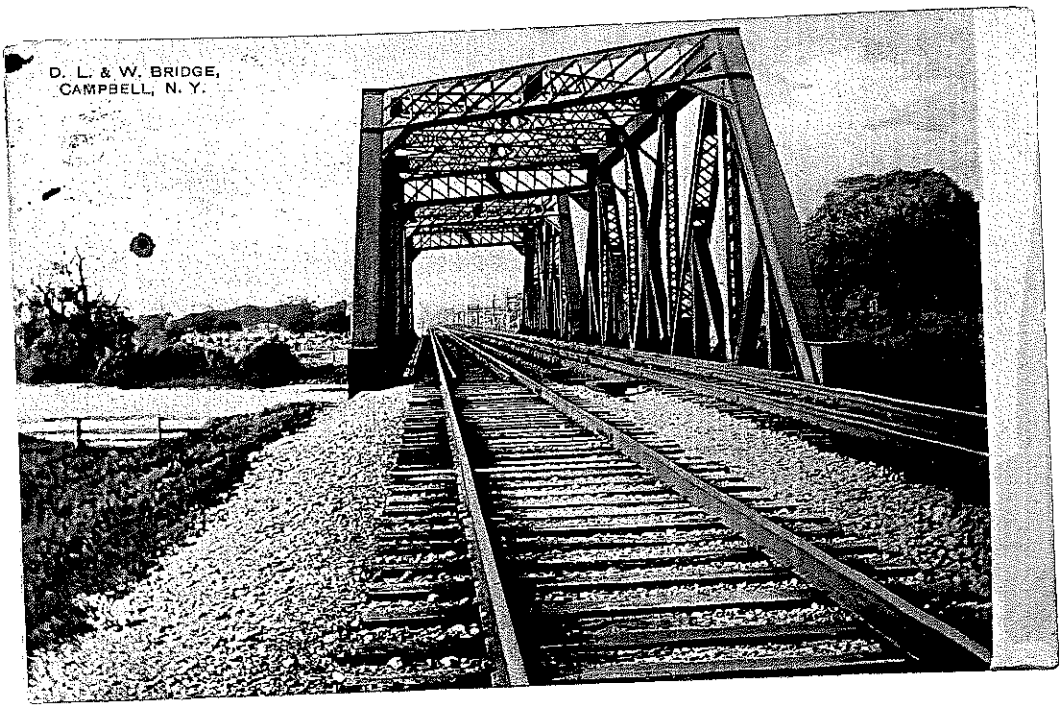

from:
"The Divided Back Era"
1907-1915

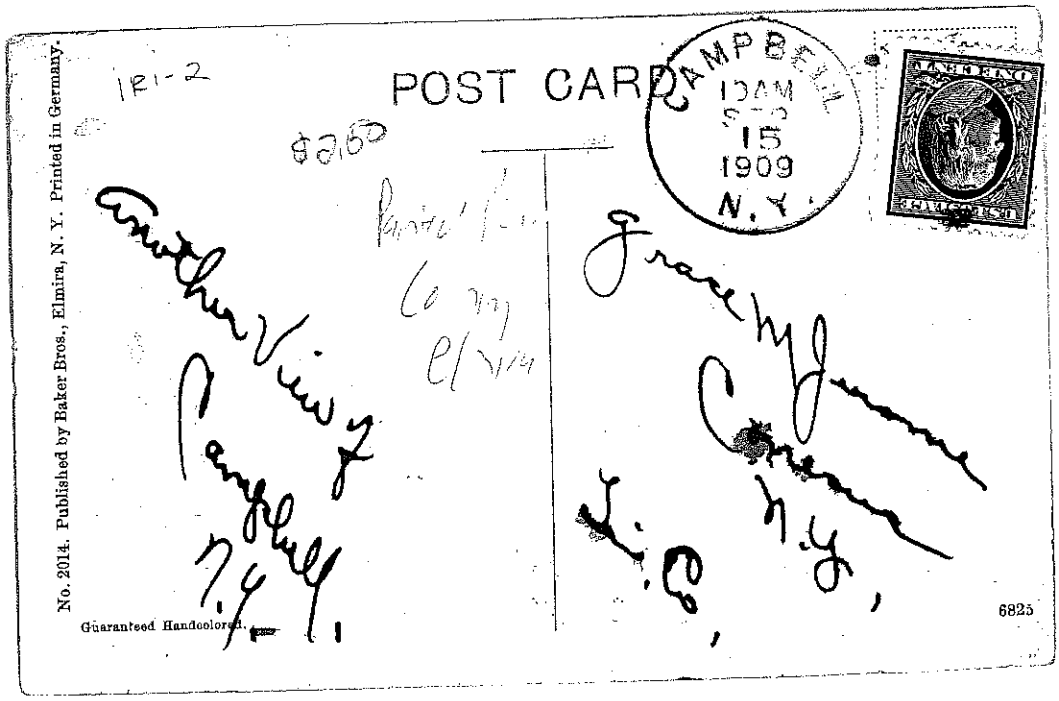
POST CARD
CORRESPONDENCE
ADDRESS ON

CAMPBELL
AUG 23
1907
N.Y.

1.25

Mrs Rude.
Lyon.
N. York.




FROM: "Divided Back Era" 1907 – 1915

This is a dead Autown

Home sweet Home
Dead but not forgotten

POST CARD

CORRESPONDENCE | ADDRESS ONLY

CAMPBELL 5PM OCT 1908 N.Y.

Do you suppose "Neg" will know you when you get back? How is Billy?

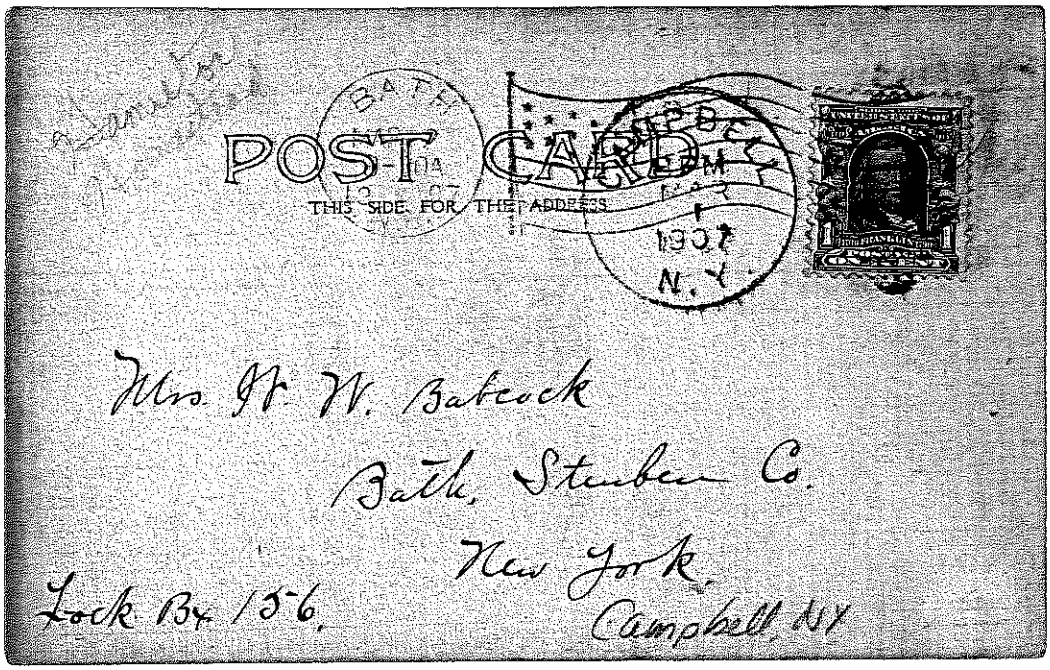
M.L.M.

Miss Mary McCabe
c/o Loudey Store
Bath
N.Y.

Sample of Divided Back Period
1907 - 1915

During this Period, people could only write a message on the front

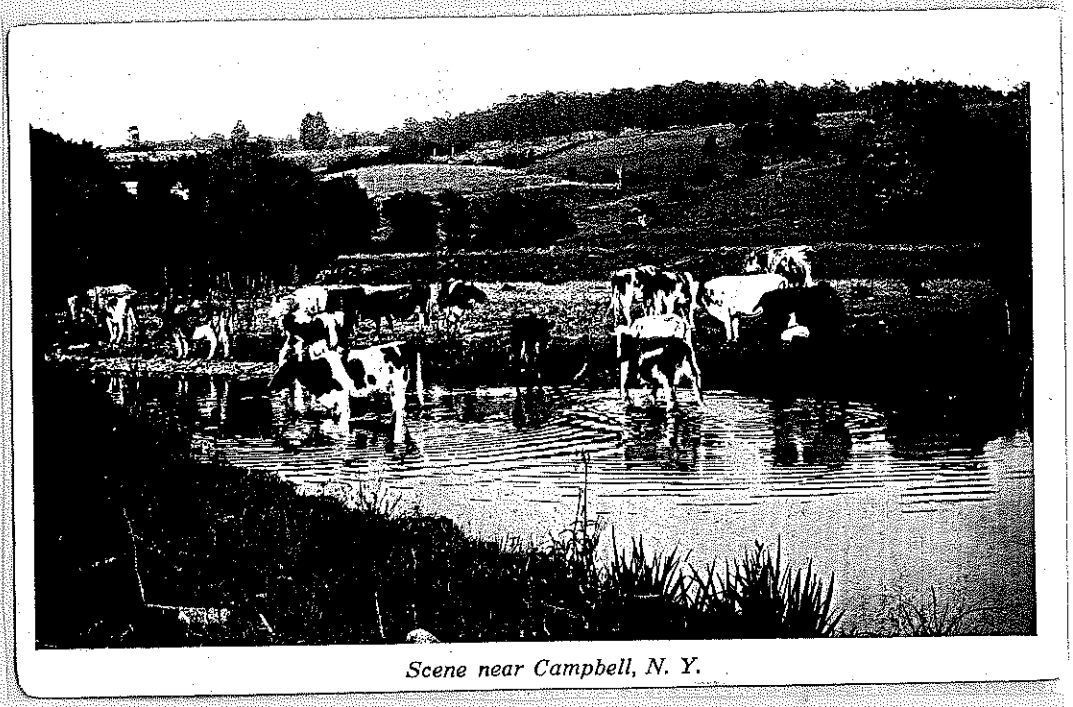
Many thanks for my Christmas present rec'd yesterday. Jay R.



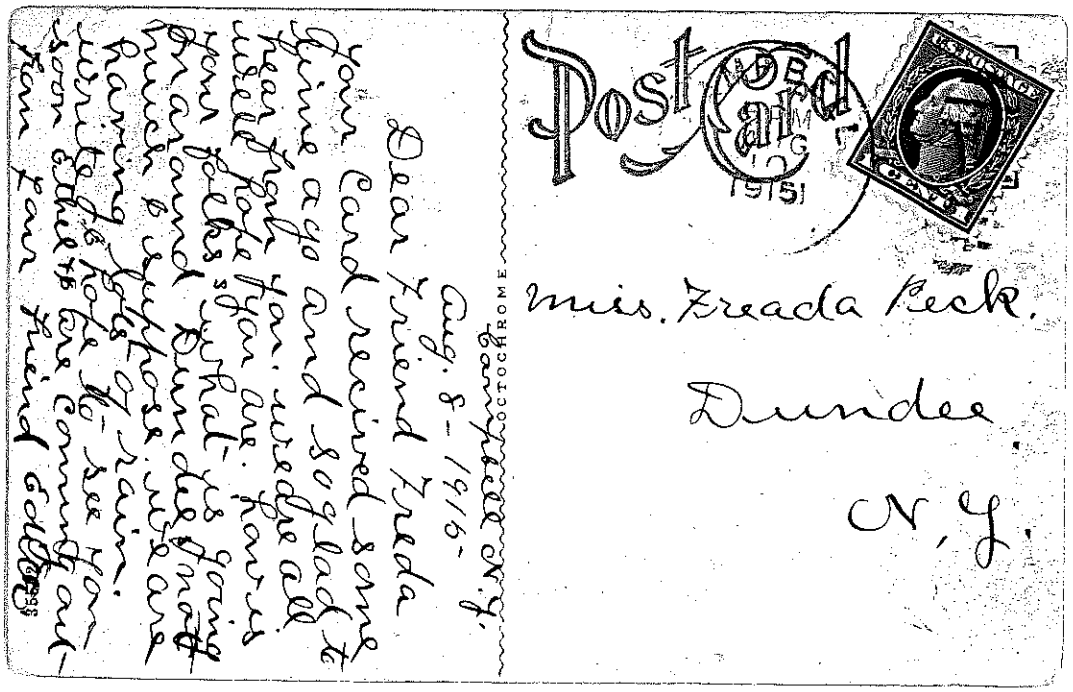

This' post card —
from the undivided Back Period

1901 - 1907

This was a color photo →

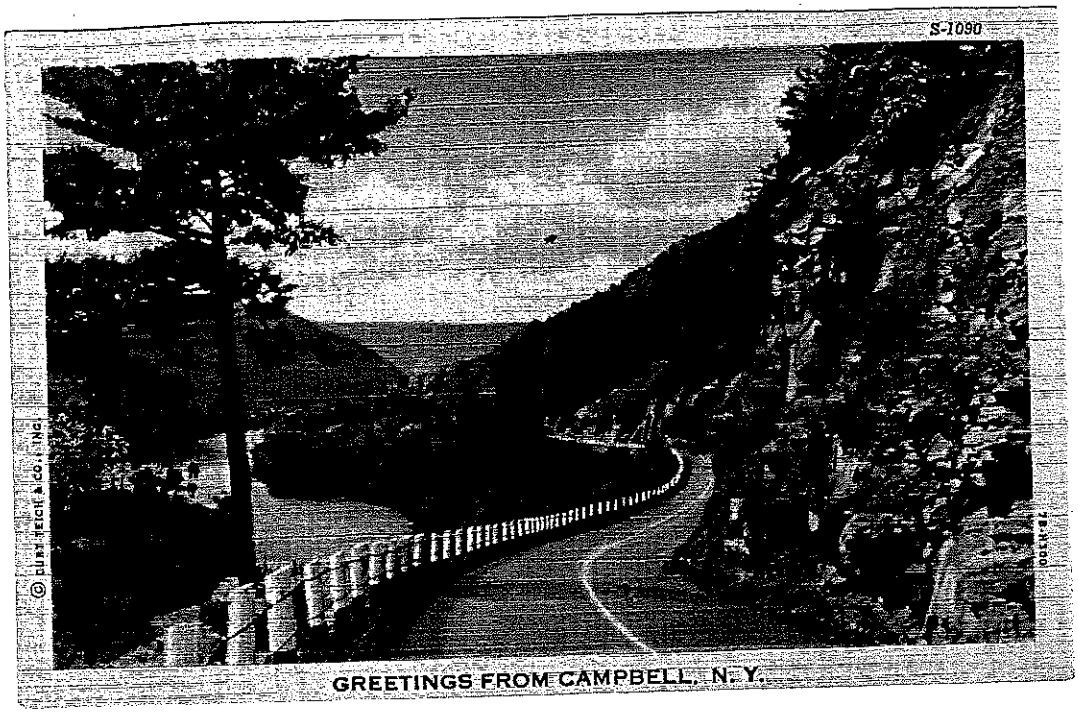


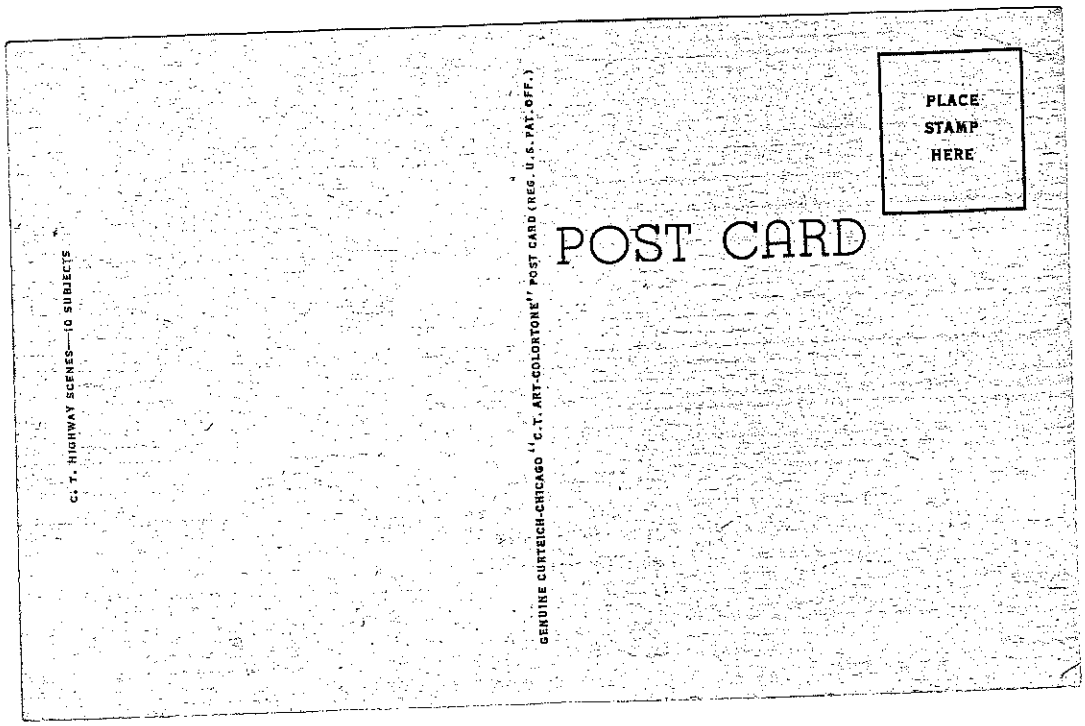
*Scene near Campbell, N. Y.*




From the "White Border Era"
1915 - 1930

Postmarked 1915




Believed to be from "White Border Era" /
"Linen Era"

these eras tended to overlap sometimes.