

Wish You Were Here

An Exploration of Adventure, Travel, and Vacations
by Peg Johnston



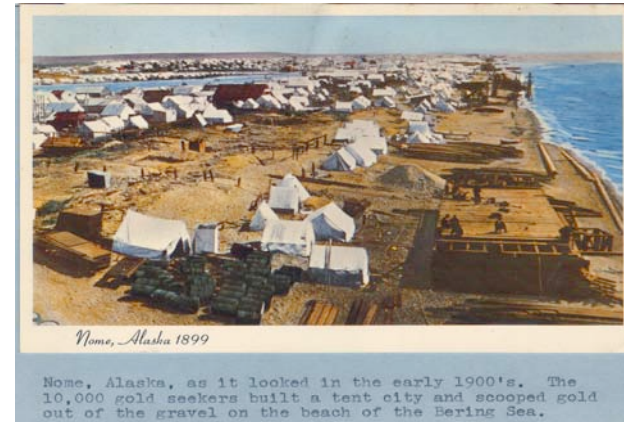
A conceptual map of Wish You Were Here
September 3-27, 2009
Cooperative Gallery 213 Binghamton NY

\$2.00



The Adventure: Our journey begins with Carl Wittman, a distant relative whose papers included a quantity of turn of the century postcards. Wittman came to this country from Germany at the age of 14 and made his way to the Yukon Territory where he mined for gold, earning enough to fund his world travels. His adventures took him to Hawaii, to Europe, to Egypt, and to Russia, China, and Japan via the newly built Trans Siberian Railroad. Postcards were

then the popular way to document exotic places and people and to send home a picture of your experience to say, "wish you were here."



He traveled across the Klondike on foot by dogsled and earned a small fortune with very hard work and thrift. He traveled by covered wagon across

the Plains, spending time in many cities and staying for a time in Chicago where he paid dues to the Socialist Party. He met many people along the way and corresponded via postcard with them. These postcards chronicle the sights of

America at the turn of the century as well as more exotic places such as China, Japan, and Hawaii. He wooed his wife-to-be via postcard, “Even when soon we’ll be separated by half the world, I’ll try all the more to keep my trusting darling a mindful friend—to earn her empathy and high regard.” (translated from the German). After many years of travel Carl and Mary Wittman settled down in Paramus NJ where he published a weekly regional newspaper which gave him a forum for his radical views on politics and world affairs, sometimes directly drawing on his travel experiences.



Port Said, in Egypt.

You Are Leaving the American Sector: Carl’s son, Walter, and his wife Jeanette (my aunt and uncle) believed with a missionary zeal that socialism was a better way to govern. They made it their life’s work to visit virtually every Communist and Socialist country in the world at a time when it was radical and in some cases forbidden.



An important part of their mission was to bring back “the truth” in the form of slide shows for Rotary, women’s clubs, and schools. Sorting through tens of thousands of slides, I



selected many that captured their passion to show what it was like ‘behind the Iron Curtain,’ breaking the American blackout of the achievements of Communism. Their ‘travel for a cause’ goes to sometimes comical lengths to wish that everyone could “be there.” For instance, the bounty of the harvest shown in this picture, if you look closely, is packed in boxes marked “USA.” Another shot features the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl that enabled industrialization. Still,

their people-to-people diplomacy brought eye witness accounts to life behind the Iron Curtain. These images reveal that both Communist and “Western” cultures were

ensnared in relentless propaganda, leaving only what the eye can discern.

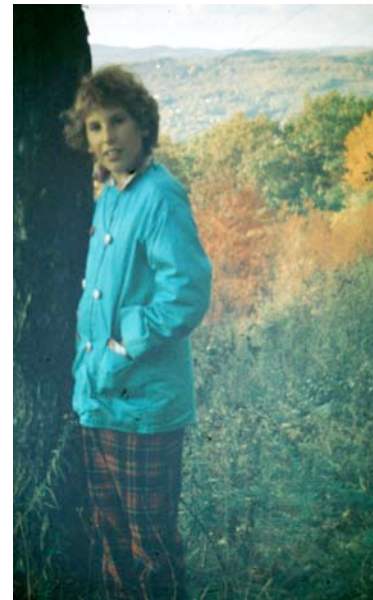


Netty and Walt were avid travelers visiting virtually every Socialist or Communist country in the world (except China) and reporting their experiences via slide shows and lectures. The captions to this section of the show are taken directly from these scripts. Their notes on Grenada, which had a progressive government (shortly before we invaded it), included campaigns by ordinary citizens to build an airport, roads, and to eradicate illiteracy.



The View:

They had a fondness for photographing public sculpture that depicted the revolution.



Finally, my own arduous journeys following my father in search of the “perfect view” from mountain tops, waterways, and beaches are documented with a child’s eye view of the family camping vacation. Nuclear family-on-a-long-car-trip or in-a-leaky-tent will no doubt resonate with those that attend **Wish You Were Here**. With very little justice to my parents and their desire to expose me to Nature, I have reproduced devastating images from interminable slide shows. These images invoke hilarious

moments while, in the end, affirming the value of “the forced march,” “pushing beyond endurance,” and, ultimately, the beauty of the natural world. My adult child can re-experience the family vacation with a humorous and nuanced equanimity.



Commentary throughout the show is inscribed on vintage postcards and include original quotes whenever possible. In documenting Carl Wittman's travels I have reproduced some existing photographs and personal memorabilia and slightly enlarged color copies of some of the most unique postcards from his collection.

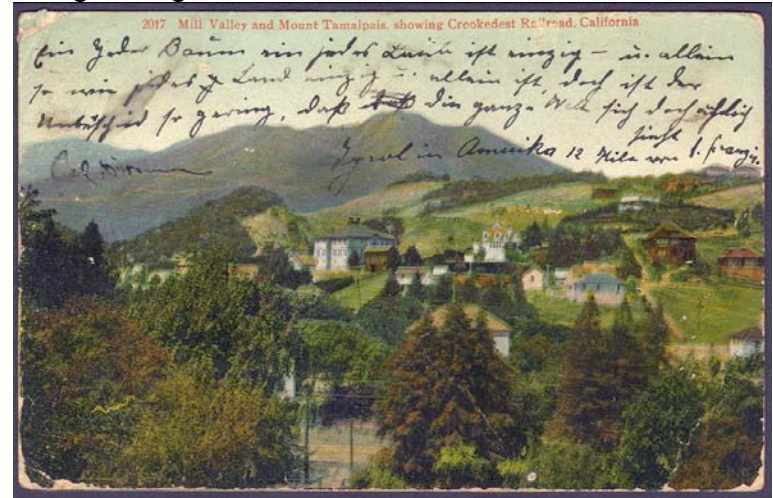


Images for the other two sections are from the slide collections of Walter and Jeanette Wittman and Ruth and Robert Johnston, respectively. I have photographed a projection of the slides, revealing the darkness, the dust particles, and the “askew” nature of the slide medium. Digital enhancement (or perhaps distortion) of color saturation, highlights, and exposure further make my point. In the name of artistic license, I beg the pardon of my parents and of the spirits of those who left their slides in my care. At least they are seeing the light of day!

Wish You Were Here is an interactive installation and participants will have the opportunity to write their own

postcards about their vacation experiences. I am curious about which images conjure up a collective consciousness about vacations. Ultimately, I believe that **Wish You Were Here** illustrates the human need to validate “being there” and sharing that experience with others. As the turn of the century postcards show, short inconsequential statements of being are no different than the current trend of texting and twittering WSH U WR HERE, except the pictures are better!

Wish You Were Here Souvenirs: A collection called ‘Lost and Found’ of vintage photos and stamps on bookmarks, as well as greeting cards are available for sale, as is this map.



*I want to acknowledge the considerable contributions of my co-conspirator and artistic muse, Allan Troxler, who is happily attached to this tangled family tree. (Peg Johnston is a founding member of the Cooperative Gallery 213 Binghamton, NY which houses **Wish You Were Here** September 3-27th, 2009. Inquiries, PegJohnston@stny.rr.com.)*