



THE 1898 TRANS-MISSISSIPPI EXPOSITION ISSUE

INTRODUCTION

The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition was held in Omaha, Nebraska, from June 1 through November 1, 1898. Over 154 days the Exposition drew an estimated 2.6 million visitors, who came to see more than 4,000 exhibits and attractions housed in 21 main buildings and hundreds of smaller structures erected on the 180-acre fairgrounds. The Exposition promoted the theme of economic and social development west of the Mississippi River. During the last three months of the Exposition, it was also the site of the Indian Congress, the largest gathering of Native American Indians in the ten years following the end of the Indian Wars.

The plan to hold an exposition to promote the American West was conceived in 1895 by a group of Omaha businessmen led by Gurdon Wallace Wattles (1855-1932), a successful banker who went on to finance the development of Hollywood, California. Among the other local promoters was Edward Rosewater (1841-1906), publisher of the *Omaha Daily Bee*, who had close ties to the Republican Party and was President McKinley's chosen delegate to the Universal Postal Congress in 1897. On December 10, 1897, Rosewater submitted his request to the Post Office Department, asking officials to issue a special commemorative stamp for the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. Two weeks later, on December 23, Postmaster General James A. Gary announced a set of five stamps, and his Third Assistant, General John A. Merritt, began soliciting design concepts from well-known artists. Around the same time, Postmaster General Gary asked Rosewater for his ideas, and in response Rosewater submitted five wash drawings of 1¢, 2¢, 5¢, 10¢ and \$1.00 designs depicting images of the West: a bison, Indian warrior, farmers plowing a field, a locomotive and Columbia standing on a globe, holding a torch.

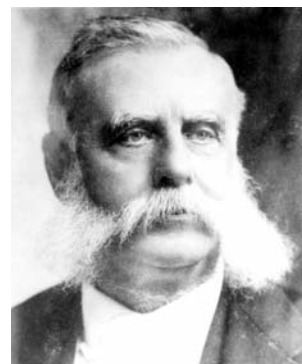
On January 13, 1898, the Post Office Department announced that a set of nine stamps would be issued, from 1¢ to \$2.00 values. The announcement listed the initial design choices, six of which were eventually used. The decision to issue another commemorative set, with a face value of \$3.80, aroused protests from the stamp collecting community, which still harbored resentment over the Columbian Issue five years earlier. Within days the newspapers reported philatelic groups' objections to costly stamps honoring what was perceived as a commercial enterprise, but postal officials were undeterred. Work on the stamps began immediately at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP).

The Trans-Mississippi Designs

The original concept for the Trans-Mississippi stamps envisioned bicolored designs, with each frame in a different color, and the vignettes printed in black. This grand plan for bicolored stamps had to be scrapped when the United States declared war on Spain, and the BEP was forced to dedicate its time and resources to increased production of revenue stamps needed for new taxes to finance the war effort. From start to finish, the design work and engraving underwent extensive revisions.



William McKinley
President 1897-1901



James A. Gary
Postmaster General
March 1897 – April 1898



Edward Rosewater, promoter of
the Trans-Mississippi Exposition
and commemorative stamps



Charles Emory Smith
Postmaster General
April 1898 – January 1902



Raymond Ostrander Smith



Douglas S. Ronaldson



George F. C. Smillie



Marcus W. Baldwin

The preliminary design work and drawings were executed by Raymond Ostrander Smith (1873-1933). Smith started working at the American Bank Note Company in New York City at the age of 14. He later he joined the BEP and continued working there until the end of 1902, when he returned to employment with American. During his BEP years, Smith designed many of the most beautiful stamps ever produced by the United States.

The nine different denominations share a common frame design, which incorporates symbols of midwestern agriculture, wheat and corn, in an architecturally-based ornamental frame. Except for the 2¢, the frame engravings were the work of Marcus W. Baldwin (1853-1925), considered to be one of the most talented and accomplished security engravers of all time. He apprenticed at the American Bank Note Company under Alfred Jones and Luigi (Louis) Delnoce. In 1880 he formed his own engraving company, Baldwin, Gleason & Co., in New York City. Baldwin joined the BEP in 1897 and spent more than two decades there before returning to American.

The letters and numerals in the frames of all values were engraved by Douglas S. Ronaldson, who is also credited with all of the work on the 2¢ frame. There are, in fact, some stylistic differences between the 2¢ frame and the others, particularly in the bottom scrollwork and shading lines. Ronaldson was born in England in 1825. He came to Philadelphia in 1840 and worked in that city as an engraver until 1858. In 1860 he joined the American Bank Note Company. In 1897 Ronaldson joined the BEP and worked there until his death in 1902.

Marcus Baldwin engraved the vignettes for the 2¢ Farming in the West, 5¢ Fremont on Rocky Mountains, 10¢ Hardships of Emigration and, what is considered to be the most beautiful of all United States stamps, the \$1.00 Western Cattle in Storm. Baldwin also engraved the Indian Chief vignette, based on Frederic Remington's *Cheyenne Warrior*, but this striking depiction was replaced by the Indian Hunting Buffalo vignette.

Another renowned engraver who worked on the Trans-Mississippi Issue is George F. C. "Fred" Smillie (1854-1924), who studied under his uncle, James, and Alfred Jones. After engraving for the American Bank Note Company from 1871 to 1887, and for various other bank note printers from 1887 to 1894, Fred Smillie joined the BEP in March 1894 as chief engraver. He worked for the BEP until 1911, when he left to join American. His diary of work records approximately 300 portraits and 135 vignettes, including the vignettes for the 1¢ Marquette on the Mississippi, 4¢ Indian Hunting Buffalo, 50¢ Western Mining Prospector and \$2.00 Mississippi River Bridge.



Robert F. Ponickau

The fifth and final engraver contributing to the issue is Robert F. Ponickau (1846-1920), who produced just one vignette, the 8¢ Troops Guarding Train. Ponickau subsequently engraved numerous stamp vignettes, including the 2¢ Jamestown.

1898 TRANS-MISSISSIPPI ISSUE DESIGNS, ENGRAVERS AND QUANTITIES



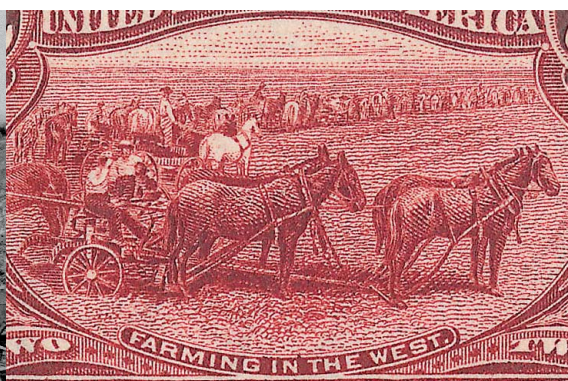
Source of Design for 1¢ “Marquette on the Mississippi”

Father Marquette and the Indians, painting by William Lamprecht, located at Haggarty Museum at Marquette University in Wisconsin, engraved from a photograph taken for the BEP

Note:

This depiction of Father Jacques Marquette is believed by some scholars to show him on the Wisconsin River, not the Mississippi.

Vignette	Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
G.F.C. Smillie	M. Baldwin	D. S. Ronaldson	70,993,400



Source of Design for 2¢ “Farming in the West”

Photograph taken on a farm owned by the Amenias and Sharon Land Co. in North Dakota, circa 1888

Note:

Three living persons—worker Ed Nybakken, field boss Elihu Barber, and foreman Sam White—are shown in the foreground from left front to back right. A gust of wind caught Nybakken's hat just as the picture was being taken, covering his face. This vignette was originally selected for the \$2.00, but postal officials decided to use it for the more widely circulating 2¢ value.

Vignette	Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
M. Baldwin	M. Baldwin	D. S. Ronaldson	159,720,800



Source of Design for 4¢ “Indian Hunting Buffalo”

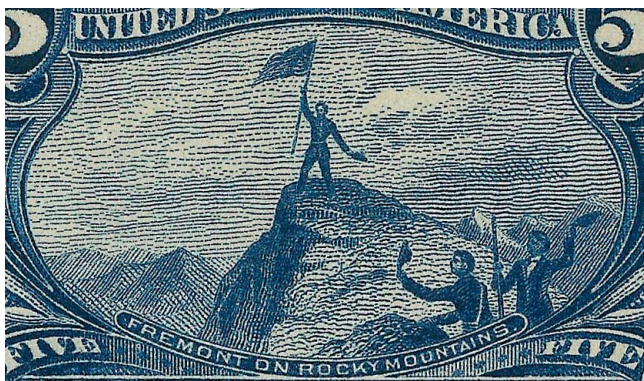
Buffalo Chase, an engraving by U.S. Army Capt. Seth Eastman, published in *Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, published in Philadelphia in 1854

Note:

This vignette replaced the first engraving by Baldwin of an Indian Warrior Chief, based on a Frederic Remington painting.

Vignette	Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
G.F.C. Smillie	M. Baldwin	D. S. Ronaldson	4,924,500*

*some destroyed



Source of Design for 5¢ “Fremont on Rocky Mountains”

Most similar to a woodcut engraving by J. W. Orr in *The Young American's Life of Fremont*, by F. C. Woodworth, published in 1856

Vignette

M. Baldwin

Frame

M. Baldwin

Lettering/Numerals

D. S. Ronaldson

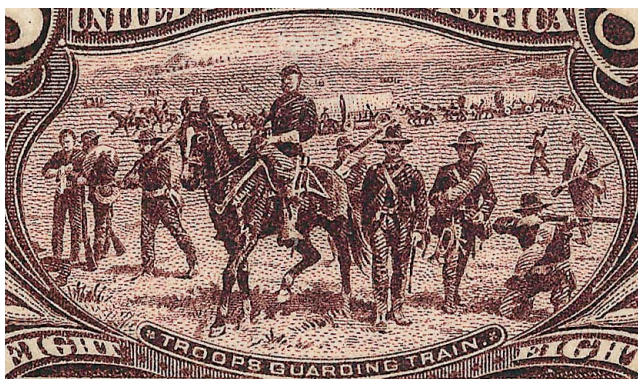
Quantity

7,694,180*

*some destroyed

Note:

Postal officials intended from the start to portray Col. John C. Frémont, the famed Western “pathfinder” and unsuccessful presidential candidate, on one of the stamps, but rejected the photographs provided by Frémont’s widow. Instead, they created an engraved depiction of Frémont’s flag raising on the Rocky Mountains summit, probably using Orr’s similar woodcut as a model.



Source of Design for 8¢ “Troops Guarding Train”

Federal Troops Convoying a Wagon Train, wash drawing by Frederic Remington, from *Drawings by Frederic Remington* published in 1897 by Robert Howard Russell

Vignette

R. Ponickau

Frame

M. Baldwin

Lettering/Numerals

D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity

2,927,200*

*some destroyed

Note:

This is one of the two Trans-Mississippi vignettes based on the work of Frederic Remington, a hugely popular artist of the time who created romantic depictions of life on the Western frontier (the other is the 50¢). This image of U.S. troops defending a wagon train—the soldier in the foreground at right actually takes aim—was placed on a stamp in the aftermath of the Indian Wars, which resulted in the defeat of the last remaining tribes. This was the only vignette engraved by Robert Ponickau.



Source of Design for 10¢ “Hardships of Emigration”

Hardships of Emigration, long-lost painting by Augustus Goodyear Heaton

Vignette

M. Baldwin

Frame

M. Baldwin

Lettering/Numerals

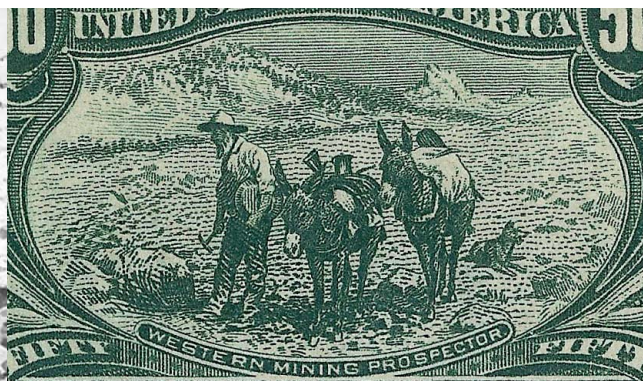
D. S. Ronaldson

Quantity

4,629,760

Note:

The original canvas painting by A. G. Heaton was irreparably damaged by fire and destroyed in 1931 by his heirs. The vignette was engraved from a retouched print, the original of which was discovered in 1992 in a desk drawer at the BEP by Gary Griffith and BEP archivists. This stark depiction of life on the Immigrant Trail is affectionately known as the “Dead Horse Stamp.”



Source of Design for 50¢ "Western Mining Prospector"

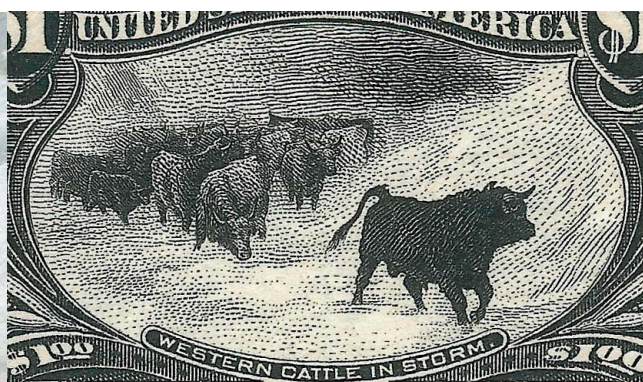
The Gold Bug, wash drawing by Frederic Remington, from *Drawings by Frederic Remington*, published in 1897 by Robert Howard Russell

Vignette	Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
G.F.C. Smillie	M. Baldwin	D. S. Ronaldson	530,400*

*some destroyed

Note:

This is one of the two Trans-Mississippi vignettes based on the work of Frederic Remington, a hugely popular artist of the time who created romantic depictions of life on the Western frontier (the other is the 8¢).



Source of Design for \$1.00 "Western Cattle in Storm"

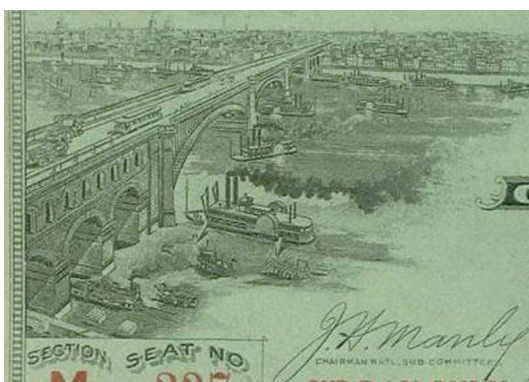
The Vanguard, painting by John A. MacWhirter, engraved reproduction by C. O. Murray

Vignette	Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
M. Baldwin	M. Baldwin	D. S. Ronaldson	56,900

*some destroyed

Note:

The image of cattle in a storm was shown to postal officials in the form of a cattle company's advertisement, and the C. O. Murray engraving was used by Marcus Baldwin to engrave what is today regarded as the most beautiful commemorative stamp ever issued by the U.S. Post Office. After the stamp was issued, officials were alerted to the fact that the engraving was based on a painting by a well-known Scottish artist, John A. MacWhirter, and it was likely that the cattle were from the Scottish highlands, not the American West (although MacWhirter traveled there in 1877). In 1898 the painting was owned by an Englishman, Lord Blythwood. Apologies were made through diplomatic channels, and Lord Blythwood was presented with a die proof.



Source of Design for \$2.00 "Mississippi Bridge"

Photograph of the Eads bridge across the Mississippi River in St. Louis

Vignette	Frame	Lettering/Numerals	Quantity
G.F.C. Smillie	M. Baldwin	D. S. Ronaldson	56,200*

*half destroyed

Note:

The Eads Bridge vignette was originally chosen for the 2¢ value, but it was switched with the \$2.00 when the decision was made that the Farming in the West vignette was better suited for the higher volume 2¢. A similar engraving appears on the 1896 Republican National Convention ticket.



Proofs of original bicolored designs (note the 2¢ and \$2 vignettes were transposed)

The decision to change from bicolored to monochrome designs involved considerable work to adjust the vignette dies, which had been sized for two-step bicolored printing. Baldwin retouched the dies (finishing on May 24, 1898), plates were made and the stamps were hastily produced, but not in time for the June 1 opening of the Exposition. Supplies reached post offices by June 15, and they were officially issued on June 17.

The issue was recalled from post offices in mid-December 1899, although sales of full sets continued in Washington D.C. until February 10, 1900. The unsold remainders were destroyed one month later, but no record was kept of the number of each denomination incinerated; therefore, some of the “issued” quantities include an indeterminable number of stamps that were returned and burned.



U.S. Post Office at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, photograph by F. A. Rinehart

© Omaha Public Library, 1998