

Article

Picture-Perfect Fish Stories: Homemaking through American Tall Tale Photographic Postcards

Esther Scholtes 

Dordrechts Museum, 3311 XP Dordrecht, The Netherlands; e.a.g.scholtes@gmail.com

Abstract: Photographic postcards featuring farmer culture on the American Great Plains hold a tangled relationship to the concept of home. As both personal and tactile keepsakes to be taken home after travel and souvenirs directed to loved ones, the postcard bridges spaces of home, travel, and migration. Furthermore, postcards are significant vehicles in storytelling and community building. In the early twentieth century, a peculiar type of photographic postcard became popular in the Midwest and Great Plains regions depicting farmers with outrageously oversized crops and livestock. This article explores photographic postcards by William H. Martin (1865–1940) that equivocally glorify white farmer culture and their presumed economic productivity. It posits that through an elaborate act of photomontage, these photographic cards demonstrate the boundaries of home and convey ‘homeland’ as an ambiguous landscape.

Keywords: photography; postcard; landscape; storytelling; regionality; tall tale; home

1. Introduction

Three fishermen occupy a narrow boat, throwing out their rods into the river they sail (Figure 1). Yet, there is something off with the trout they try to lure with their bait. The fish are absurdly sized, looming over the fisherman in their small boat. Yet, the men’s tussle with their catch lends the image a humorous touch. Another image (Figure 2) shows stalks of wheat towering high above a bunch of farmers who attempt to harvest the ears, clearly struggling to keep the stalks in line. The image is provided with a small caption at the lower middle-left side, that amusingly reads, “The way we harvest wheat”. The photographs are printed on a postcard, measuring roughly 10 by 15 cm. Despite their relatively small size, they boast a narrative of abundance and wealth.

This article argues that these picture postcards hold a tangled relationship to the theoretical concept of home. The two photographs of the fortuitous farmers and fishermen depict the picture-perfect life on the American Plains, i.e., a life in a fresh homeland that could yield produce bigger than any settler could possibly wish for. The central argument follows a threefold structure to explore the significance of home through these photographic postcards. First, it explores a dual interpretation of American landscapes as empty frontiers or as dwelled vernacular landscapes. Second, it probes the tall tale as a form of storytelling and the photograph and postcard as a carrier and transmitter of stories that demarcate community boundaries. Third and last, it analyses the postcard’s aesthetic production of photomontage as practices of homemaking and unmaking.

The picture postcards described above are housed in the collection of photographs of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. They are accompanied by a bunch of similar photographic postcards, each depicting farmers, hunters, and fishermen with their extraordinarily large catch, haul or harvest. According to a copyright sign marked on the negatives, the photographs were taken by the American photographer William H. Martin (1865–1940), who owned a photography studio in Ottawa, Kansas (Union List of Artists Names ([Getty Research Institute 2004](#))). As an entrepreneur, he started a postcard manufacturing business on the side, and traded humorous postcards commercially starting in 1908. His business



Citation: Scholtes, Esther. 2023.

Picture-Perfect Fish Stories: Homemaking through American Tall Tale Photographic Postcards. *Arts* 12: 88. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12030088>

Academic Editor: Ali Shobeiri

Received: 28 March 2023

Revised: 22 April 2023

Accepted: 25 April 2023

Published: 29 April 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

existed for a few years only—he sold the company again in 1912—but it turned out to be a huge commercial success. Postcards bearing his markings are now found back in junk sales, markets, and in numerous institutions, including historical societies, archives, and museums.

One of those organisations is the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which purchased the postcards in 2018 and 2019 for its collections as part of an acquisitional focus on American photographs¹. As a young nation that quickly developed culturally and economically throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States of America is deemed the most influential nation-state in twentieth-century photography. Yet, emerging nationhood in the United States has been eminently relational and closely associated with Europe. Photographs ultimately played a part in transatlantic migration and deepened the bond between Europe and the USA through the mutual exchange of photographs tucked along with letters from friends and relatives (Lien 2018).

Additionally, the Rijksmuseum particularly concentrates on collecting functional and vernacular photographs, objects as diverse as advertisements, playing cards, and jewellery with incorporated photographs. Vernacular photographs are those photographs that are generally settled outside conventional art categories. Art historian Geoffrey Batchen coined the term as an umbrella concept to describe those photographs that have “always been excluded from photography’s history: ordinary photographs, the ones made or bought (or sometimes bought and then made over) by everyday folk from 1839 until now, the photographs that preoccupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum or the academy” (Batchen 2000, p. 56). This category of photographs is thus associated with the functional, and above all, the domestic. Although it has long been neglected in academia and beyond, notions of home and the domestic have become increasingly prominent on the theoretical stage throughout the last three decades (Holloway and Hubbard 2001; King 2008; Hurdley 2013; Blunt and Dowling 2022). The increasing relevance of theoretical conceptions of home intersect with a growing institutional and curatorial interest in vernacular photographs such as postcards and provides fertile ground for further analysis.

The reason that American picture postcards are closely associated with notions of homemaking and the unmaking of home is thus twofold. The United States is a young nation, complexly and violently built through an amalgam of peoples. Throughout this history, the homemaking of one equaled the loss of home for another, including the displacement of millions of indigenous peoples from their homelands. Vernacular photographs, as lived objects, have always inhabited these spaces of conflict.



Figure 1. William H. Martin, *Great Sport Fishing Here*, 1910, gelatin silver print, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam inventory number RP-F-2019-202-5.



Figure 2. William H. Martin, *The Way We Harvest Wheat*, 1909, silver gelatin print, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam inventory number RP-F-2019-213-2.

2. From Frontier Landscape to Vernacular Landscapes

Traditional views on American photographs often confine attention towards the spectacular landscapes of the American West. For instance, the acclaimed image of the ‘Grizzly Giant’, a gigantic sequoia tree in Yosemite National Park, photographed in 1861 by Carleton E. Watkins, epitomises the photographic representation of majestic landscapes that the viewer looks at in awe. The photograph was taken using a mammoth glass plate negative, which resulted in an extraordinarily large albumen print reinforcing the grandness of the tree. Indeed, the most iconic photographs of the American landscape depict the striking natural scenery of the American West. Many of these images have been catered to advance domestic tourism to the region. The construction of railway lines and national parks generated a prolific trade market for photographic albums, loose photographic prints, postcards and stereographs, which in turn became vehicles to develop local tourism (Schaffer 2001).

The photographs at stake in this article address a different kind of landscape. William H. Martin’s postcards picture the less impressive landforms of the Great Plains, an expansive plateau of open grassland in the interior of the United States. Far from large-format scenic celebrations of pristine natural beauty, the modestly sized postcards acclaim the presumed productivity of the Great Plains and Midwest regions, in terms of food and other resources that were specific to it. This is embodied in the postcard *Harvesting a Profitable Crop of Onions in Nebr.* (Figure 3), that presents a group of Nebraska farmers loading colossal onions onto a horse-drawn cart, presenting local commodities that allegedly outgrow specimens of other states and regions. The vegetables are so large that three farmers are needed to stack a single onion in the back of the wagon. A child is resting on a ladder leaning against a pile of onions to observe the outrageous scene unfolding. In the background a wooden building can be discerned, presumably a farm. Such postcards were known by many names including tall tale postcard, boastcard, freak postcard and exaggeration card, and were popular in small rural communities, particularly across the Midwest and Great Plains territories in the early decades of the twentieth century (Welsch 1976; Rubin and Williams 1990).

William H. Martin’s photographic postcards defy the formal features of American landscape photography, described by art historian Albert Boime as a view that invites a “magisterial gaze” through an elevated point of view (Boime 1991, p. 151). In fact, one could argue they cannot be defined as landscape photographs at all. The cards depict activities rather than vistas, yet they are intricately connected to the conceptual definition of the American landscape. That is, they capture and forward the process of adaptation and transformation of a piece of land in order to exploit and monetise it.

Photographs have assisted in and advanced ways of asserting control over territory by US governmental agencies. Prominent examples are the photographs that were taken during nineteenth-century federal geographical surveys to map and seize territories (Tra-

chtenberg 1989; Kelsey 2018). Many of those images are found in contexts celebrating the impressive force of nature, and humankind's subsequent mastery over nature (Mitchell 2002). However, what remains implicit within these photographs is at whose expense these landscapes have been exploited. By minimising the presence of indigenous trails and other markers of dwelling, the western survey photographs depict huge barren and seemingly 'untouched' landscapes (Berger 2003). 'Untouched' here has a double meaning: first, referring to a primal state of nature that is not yet spoiled by human presence and activity, and second, describing the landscape as a virgin, neutral stage, and a full supply of resources that could be activated and cultivated according to the whims of the settler farmer.

This idea aligns with the influential theory of the American frontier, put forward by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago—coincidentally the same occasion as the first commercially printed American souvenir postcard was sold. In Turner's theory a frontier exists as a conceptual place and contact zone at the margins of civilisations in expansion. It is a flexible place that is destined to continuously move westward. As the frontier comprises the outer edges of colonised land, Turner thinks of it as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization", (Turner [1893] 1920, p. 3) and foregrounds the inventiveness and self-sufficiency of pioneers and settler farmers. These values were considered to be explicitly distinct from their European ancestors, and thus would constitute the formation of an American national narrative. In this process, the migrants from eastern territories were slowly transformed in the interaction with indigenous peoples and the 'wilderness', and subsequently became sturdy individuals who valued their freedom and selfhood. In this framework of frontier significance, settler farmers and homesteaders were the actual protagonists; the heroes 'taming' the barrens. The very concept of a frontier line that divides settled and unsettled land suggests that there are areas of 'free land' at the pioneer's disposal. Consequently, it portrays the land beyond as a pristine, vacant wilderness prime for cultivation and occupation, yet ignores the indigenous nations, animals, and ecosystems that already populated the continent of North America for a very long time. As Anne Whiston Spirn, landscape architect and writer, asserts, "landscape was the original dwelling", and humans started to shape their environments before they even had words to describe it (Whiston Spirn 2008, p. 52). The meaning of landscape is thus complexly layered and relational, as it is contained within the etymology of the concept as a compound. As Kenneth Olwig has demonstrated, the linguistic origin of landscape in old Scandinavian and Germanic languages predates the coupling of landscape to (painterly) scenery. The root word 'land' refers to the place and the political belonging of people to that place, rather than to a distant sovereign. The affixes 'shaft' and 'skab' relate to the verb 'to shape,' accentuating the active and creational dimensions of a place in relation to its inhabitants. However, recent dictionary entries of landscape rather underscore its static aspects, by associating it to a static picture of a natural expanse to be comprehended visually by a (disembodied) eye in an instant (Whiston Spirn 2008) that was established in the service of a distant regulatory regime, such as the nation-state (Olwig 1996).

Refraining from such a grand national narrative, influential cultural geographer J.B. Jackson preferred to set his sights on the more peripheral and spontaneous landscapes in small community settings. To him the domain of everyday is not immobile nor sentimental, the vernacular world is instead coming forth in continuous adaptation with its surroundings. This rather liquid notion of American landscape is grounded in the deep sense of Americanness as always transformed through fleeting moments of contact, underscoring identity and presence (Jackson 1986). Although his thoughts might encompass an optimist, free-market spirit that lacks a form of social critique, Jackson's call for a stronger interaction with the sensual daily environment liberates us from pursuing the total meaning of landscape. William H. Martin's postcard *The Largest Ear of Corn Grown* (Figure 4) that presents two men driving a horse-drawn wagon carrying one huge corn cob along a forest path, follows more closely this jumbled and messy reading of vernacular landscape. It conveys a sense of experiential landscape that involves more than a view to be encountered but

undergirds what geographer Paul Groth defines as “the interaction of people and place”, where they “derive some part of their shared identity and meaning” (Groth and Bressi 1997). The postcard foregrounds the stakes of the next section, that extends the interactional value of home in storytelling, and mirrors the perception of landscape as lived and experienced. “Landscape”, Jackson said, “must be regarded first of all in terms of living rather than looking” (Meinig 1979, p. 236).



Figure 3. William H. Martin, *Harvesting a Profitable Crop of Onions in Nebr*, 1909, silver gelatin print, RP-F-2018-84-2.



Figure 4. William H. Martin, *The Largest Ear of Corn Grown*, 1908, silver gelatin print, RP-F-2018-84-1.

3. Home as Regional Identity through Storytelling

Evidently, the images of monumentally large livestock and crops taken by William H. Martin are photographic exaggerations. As such, they are a form of visual tall tale storytelling. Tall tales, or fish stories, are stories that are presented as if they were true, however they contain many implausible elements. They often take the form of specific exaggerations, and sometimes unfold as heroic stories in which the narrator takes a protagonist role, for instance, the farmer bragging about the size of his crops. The oral tradition of telling tall tales had existed for centuries in many cultures, and the rise of photography added yet new possibilities to visualize certain effects that had previously only existed in the vivid imagination of storytellers, their readers, and listeners. In the process of American nation formation, the tall tale became framed as a distinctive element of national folklore that was uniquely American (Brown 1989).

Historians have attributed various functions to such tall tales. Folklorist Steve Siporin argues that tall tales, including the physical manifestations on postcards, served commercial functions of marketing a region (Siporin 2000, p. 87). They were a means to convey a sense of welcome to the visitor, in which positivity and entertainment were foundational. The Great Plains and Midwest regions of the United States had been settled by farmers for three to four decades by the early 1900s, and close-knit communities had formed in the meantime.

Vital to the formation of communities is a form of local folklore that manifests itself in specific ways of doing, indicated by sayings as ‘the way we harvest wheat’ mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, the tall tale disseminates what folklorist Suzi Jones has described as “a ludicrous image which rests on truth” (Jones 1976, p. 115). As opposed to the myth of agricultural abundance, the woes of settler farmers in the Midwest were manifold and include the physical resistance of the landscape in opposition to a smooth application of farmer colonisation. The Great Plains and Midwest regions were plagued by severe droughts and subsequent sandstorms in the 1890s and 1930s. Harsh winters killed cattle, and lack of rain caused crop failures (Mock 1991). Ultimately, these tribulations induced depopulation of the Plains, reopening the ‘frontier’ again. William H. Martin’s tall tale postcards sit enigmatically within these adversities. They picture land as property to be owned and exploited, yet simultaneously ridicule the frontier myth of wealth and abundance.

The origin of American tall tale storytelling is commonly traced to the harsh conditions of frontier life (Brown 1989). The overwhelming experience of being ‘alone with nature’ and dealing with the hardships provoked by natural forces were processed in part through storytelling and half-truths. As Susan Stewart observes, in western culture the gigantic has functioned as a metaphorical intermediary between an individual and the outer world, as something that stands for the natural environment. The giant is an interface between the human and the natural (Stewart 1993, p. 71), and thus provides a method to make sense of the natural world. Landscape and nature were, especially during the nineteenth century, intricately connected to a developing American national identity. America was perceived as ‘without history’, as unlike Europe, it was perceived by immigrants as a land yet untouched by human hands. Art historians Miller, Berlo, Wolf and Roberts contend that “the landscape came increasingly to embody what Americans most valued in themselves: an “unstoried” past, and “Adamic” freedom, an openness to the future, a fresh lease on life. In time, Americans came to think of themselves as “nature’s nation”. And yet one of the paradoxes of American history . . . lay in the unresolved tension between the subduing of the wilderness and the hono[u]ring of it” (Miller et al. 2018, p. 24).

The unfathomable immensity of nature was made feasible through the figure of the giant in storytelling, which was apparently met with great demand. The body of tall tale postcards that still circulates through institutions, collectors, and markets is extensive. Although it is not yet quite clear how the tall tale postcard originated, and by whom they were made, it is most probable that it was a practice that started within rural American communities. Each specific crop or animal that figures in tall tale postcards has a strong regional tie based on state identities. For example, potatoes are to be found on postcards from Idaho, giant corn are from Iowa, onions from Nebraska, while Oregon is characterised by its logs, and Montana boasts its enormous trout (Siporin 2000, pp. 101–2). These ‘commodities’ then turn into region-specific icons and operate in ways similar to landmarks such as church steeples; they provide a feeling of being at home to the communities that produced them in the first place.

Photographs are potential carriers of stories, as they can be altered and reproduced. Photographs based on negatives are inherently iterative, because any unique negative can be printed, cropped or enlarged and reprinted for further dissemination. One step further, the introduction and massive spread of the photographic postcard at the beginning of the twentieth century implied that photographs could easily be sent through the mail and travel across a larger physical space. Photographic postcards are construed in social and relational ways. They are bought to be sent or shared with others, kept in albums or pinned to walls or, nowadays, refrigerators. A postcard is commonly selected to share a certain experience, the significance of a place or memory, with the card’s addressee. Whereas family photo albums mostly pivot around the confines of the intimacy and privacy of domestic family life (Langford 2008), picture postcards rather fulfil a dialogic function of establishing a relationship between the destination (or its people) and the tourist, or

between the tourist sending the postcard back home and the postcard's recipients. As such, postcards are spatial vehicles of narrative. Stories can draw deep connections between people and places and have the power to pause us for a moment and reflect upon the place and systems that we are part of (Strauss 1996).

Picture postcards enable us to share or send a record of a place we visited, or a piece of artwork or monument we saw. As such, postcards are what culture historian Celia Lury calls "tripper objects". These are "objects whose travelling is teleologically determined by their final resting place, as something to be brought home" (Lury 1997, p. 79). The meaning of such objects is produced through the trajectories it follows, in contrast to so-called "traveller objects" whose meaning is innate to its location. Traveller objects are those that remain in one place, while tourists and pilgrims travel to visit it. Such artwork, monuments or other objects of cultural and historical significance can be disseminated by reproduction in postcards. As both personal and tactile keepsakes to be taken home after travel and souvenirs directed to loved ones, the postcard bridges spaces of home, travel and migration.

Postcards bear traces of their senders, found back in writings and stamps. In 1907, federal legislation permitted the back of postcards to be divided in two halves, and for the first time to have text written at the back of the card, next to the address of the addressee (Klich and Weiss 2022). One of the postcards discussed here carries a sender's message that is as enigmatic as the captions on the image. The Nebraska Onion postcard is addressed to a certain Miss Clara Moish, and contains one witty line "Clara I do hope you like onions [...] Will write soon as I can". Most of the cards lacked such writings; they were perhaps bought to be included in albums rather than sent through the mail. The short notes on some of the cards follow the linguistic style of the captions, commonly short and focused around one theme, hinting at further narrative (Welsch 1976, p. 19).

4. Boundaries of Home in Photomontage

Whereas most picture postcards of the period were printed in graphic or photomechanical processes, William H. Martin's postcards are silver gelatin prints and therefore they are so-called 'real photo postcards'. Real photo postcards were typically produced in rural areas by smaller studios and entrepreneurs (Bogdan and Weseloh 2006, p. 8). The process was labour-intensive; thus, they were usually printed in smaller circulations than mechanically produced cards printed in lithographic or photochrom processes. Printing photographs on postcards became more easily accessible to amateurs and small photography businesses, when Kodak started a special service in 1902 called 'real photo postcards' (RPPC). It allowed any customer to create a postcard from a photograph that they took, by printing their negatives on silver chloride paper with a postcard back. In 1907, Kodak produced a special camera that held postcard-sized film. Art historian Siobhan Angus points out that the possibility to print photographs on prepared postcard photo paper introduced options for "documenting, circulating, and archiving events of local significance" (Angus 2020).

Tall tale postcard images were composed in a process of photographic stitching. The photographer combined several photographs, one of which is a wide overview shot that has been supplemented with close-up images to produce a coherent picture. The Wisconsin Historical Society has some photographs in their collections that disclose the process of montage in tall tale postcards². The postcard titled Melon Party is coupled with a twin object that constitutes a mock-up version of the final image. The working image presents a number of children holding props in the shape of large watermelons as placeholders. The close-up images are cut and glued on top of the overview print, and re-exposed and reprinted into one seamless physical print. Another method for photomontage was to cut out parts of the negatives that were subsequently recombined, exposed and printed. In any case, the postcards convey an artificially constructed narrative whose historical lineage traces back to nineteenth-century trick photography, a practice of altering photographic images in post-production commonly serving the purpose of amusement.

It is highly unlikely that the targeted audiences for these cards outrightly believed the images to be true to an outside reality. Although William H. Martin's montaged photographs aim to be visually convincing, a viewer would also be aware that such a scene would never be encountered in the physical world. The history of photography is packed with examples of composite imagery modified in the service of politics, entertainment or commerce, oscillating between seamless realism and graphic fragmentation (Fineman 2012). Combining different negatives into one coherent composition and print was a common nineteenth-century practice, not in the last place to compensate for the limitations of the medium because the camera and the photosensitive plate were not yet able to evenly expose land and sky. As art historian Jordan Bear argues, claims for photographic truth value were already met with scepticism and distrust throughout the nineteenth century. Epistemologically, this opened up new ways of photographic narration that embraced the medium's natural slippery relations to truth. Traces of artifice in the final object were not flaws or deficiencies, but authorial quirks that entice viewers to start unravelling the constructed nature of photographic representation (Bear 2015).

Tall tale montages intentionally permeate the hiatus between illusion and truth and make explicit the fundamental and inherent malleability and elasticity of the photographic image. It is a means of generating multiple narratives from multiple positions, resulting in carefully distorted perspectives. The aesthetics of photomontage mirrors the principles of tall tale storytelling. Whereas photomontage relies on the indexical truth claim that goes along with the photographic medium as the mechanical product of a machine, tall tales depend on a sense of familiarity to captivate its listeners and take them along in the story. Therefore, the exaggeration in William H. Martin's postcard images could not be executed randomly. Similar to the workings of caricature, in tall tales certain locally significant characteristics, aspects or details are isolated and stretched to the extreme. Suzie Jones defines tall tales as "a humorous exaggeration of some aspect of the local environment, told by an insider to an outsider for the amusement of the insider" (Jones 1976, p. 115), thereby stressing how the success of the tall tale pivots around the constructed boundaries of the community. Thereby, the deliberate deviations in the image address the faculties of recognition or alienation in the viewer. Similarly referring to a sense of knowing and belonging, the notions of home and community are embedded in several exclusion mechanisms. The tall tale postcard constitutes such a mechanism, as it can be defined, partly, "through the social interaction surrounding its narration, demonstrating how the telling of a "windy" can be a way of drawing a boundary between insiders and outsiders in a given social context—ultimately to invoke and strengthen the bonds among insiders, who may feel threatened by outsiders and may desire to exclude them" (Jones 1976, p. 115). In this interpretation the tall tale postcard thus explicitly demarcates the confines of a home by nurturing shared experiences in an act that simultaneously banishes those not fitting in.

Hinged between the positive and negative connotations of belonging or not belonging, the concept of home is often configured in a double gesture. However, these values do not necessarily align. For instance, the tourist visiting the Midwest might feel tempted to buy a tall tale postcard precisely because of the feeling of disconnect it evokes between their own home surroundings and the vernacular landscapes of the Midwest. Such a feeling of lack of recognition might also be a fundamental reason for travel. In this sense, home's boundaries are always opaque and home should perhaps be thought of as an active doing. By focusing on homemaking, one theoretically foregrounds home as something that is processual. Whether it is achieved through materialities, places, identities, or stories, the general underlying assumption is that home is something to be constructed or built. Concurrently, this implies that home can also be unmade, in what geographers Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell define as "the precarious process by which material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally or deliberately, temporarily or permanently, divested, damaged or even destroyed" (Baxter and Brickell 2014, p. 134). However, they do not understand this process as necessarily negative. Rather, as new opportunities may arise, the unmaking of home is seen as regenerative. As such, the border

porosity of home resurfaces in the concept of unmaking home, materially manifesting itself in vernacular photography practices such as the family album.

The practice of selecting, cutting, juxtaposing and reframing images in photo albums has been an integral part of vernacular family folklore since the rise of Kodak amateur photography in the late nineteenth-century (Boom 2019). As part of a family's lore, photographs and family albums perform a double narrative function. At first photographs and other mementos such as postcards are selected because they conjure certain memories. Yet, in a later stage, new and potentially contradicting stories and memories can be formed around the photographs and the album that evolve over time and differ between individuals (Kotkin 1978). Within family photo albums, the making and unmaking of home can become palpable. The practice of creating a family album, that is not necessarily carried out by the photographer, involves a process of selecting, editing, cutting, and pasting to produce a meaningful narrative. Simultaneously, photographs can be cropped to cut out certain people or other elements deemed inessential by the compiler of the album. It is thus through the manual process of cutting and reframing that one can literally draw and redraw the boundaries of home. William H. Martin's tall tale postcards in part mirror this vernacular process of family lore. As Amy Kotkin provocatively writes, "just as a story may evolve over time into an exaggerated or atypical image of an individual because of the perspectives of successive storytellers, the meaning and interpretation of a photograph may undergo a similar transformation when viewed by relatives across the generations" (p. 5). Communal legends emerge through storytelling but are effectuated by material creation to which the tall tale postcards are testament.

5. Conclusions: Ambiguous Landscapes of Home

This article set out to explore a set of photomontage postcards equivocally glorifying early twentieth-century white farmer culture and their economic productivity on the American Great Plains. The cards develop a material visualisation of the age-old practice of telling tall tales. The tall tale postcard puts forward a deep sense of ambiguity that acts out on multiple levels. It has been analysed as an instrument to attract newcomers, a strategy to create an insider identity in newly established rural communities, and a coping mechanism to deal with hardship and failure. These diverse and contradictory functions are at the heart of the tall tale postcards. The tall tale photomontage thrives on ambivalence, and thereby, it underpins the relationality of home. Through a humorous yet elaborate aesthetic of photomontage, the picture-perfect fish story images propose an ambiguous landscape of home, where migrant settler farmers build a new home and community in a place that is unambiguously home to indigenous peoples and ecosystems.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The Rijksmuseum's print cabinet holds a collection of about 140,000 photographs, including landmark examples from 1839 to the present. Its acquisition policies are partly focused on American photography and the museum plans a large overview exhibition of American photographs in 2025.
- ² This photographic postcard and the working-image can be found at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Postcard by Alfred Stanley Johnson, inventory number 44661.

References

- Angus, Siobhan. 2020. Frank Speck in N'Daki Menan: Anthropological Photography in an Extractive Zone. *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6: 2. [CrossRef]
- Batchen, Geoffrey. 2000. Chapter 3: Vernacular Photographies. In *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 56–80.

- Baxter, Richard, and Katherine Brickell. 2014. For Home Unmaking. *Home Cultures* 11: 133–43. [CrossRef]
- Bear, Jordan. 2015. *Disillusioned: Victorian Photography and the Discerning Subject*. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Berger, Martin A. 2003. Overexposed: Whiteness and the Landscape Photography of Carleton Watkins. *Oxford Art Journal* 26: 3–23. [CrossRef]
- Blunt, Alyson, and Robyn Dowling. 2022. *Home*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Bogdan, Robert, and Todd Weseloh. 2006. *Real Photo Postcard Guide: The People's Photography*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Boime, Albert. 1991. *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, c. 1830–65.
- Boom, Mattie. 2019. *Everyone a Photographer*. Rotterdam and Amsterdam: NAI 010 publisher and Rijksmuseum.
- Brown, Carolyn. 1989. *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Fineman, Mia. 2012. *Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Getty Research Institute. 2004. Union List of Artists Names. Available online: <http://vocab.getty.edu/page/ulan/500472458> (accessed on 5 January 2023).
- Groth, Paul, and Todd W. Bressi. 1997. *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Holloway, Lewis, and Phil Hubbard. 2001. *People and Place: The Extraordinary Geographies of Everyday Life*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Hurdley, Rachel. 2013. *Home, Materiality, Memory and Belonging: Keeping Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jackson, J. B. 1986. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jones, Suzie. 1976. Regionalization: A Rhetorical Strategy. *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13: 105–20. [CrossRef]
- Kelsey, Robin. 2018. Photography and the Ecological Imagination. In *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*. Edited by Karl Kusserow and Alan C. Braddock. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 394–405.
- King, Peter. 2008. In *Dwelling: Implacability, Exclusion and Acceptance*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Klich, Lynda, and Benjamin Weiss. 2022. *Real Photo Postcards Pictures from a Changing Nation*. Boston: MFA Publications.
- Kotkin, Amy. 1978. The Family Photo Album as a Form of Folklore. *Exposure* 16: 4–8.
- Langford, Martha. 2008. *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*. Montréal: McGill's University Press.
- Lien, Sigrid. 2018. *Pictures of Longing. Photography and the Norwegian-American Migration*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lury, Celia. 1997. The objects of travel. In *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*. Edited by Chris Rojek and John Urry. London: Routledge, pp. 75–95.
- Meinig, Donald W. 1979. Reading the Landscape: An Appreciation of W.G. Hoskins and J.B. Jackson. In *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 195–244.
- Miller, Angela L., Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts. 2018. *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. Saint Louis: Washington University Libraries.
- Mitchell, William John Thomas. 2002. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mock, Cary J. 1991. Drought and Precipitation Fluctuations in the Great Plains during the Late Nineteenth Century the Late Nineteenth Century. *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences* 7: 26–57.
- Olwig, Kenneth. 1996. Recovering the Substantive Nature of Landscape. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86: 630–53. [CrossRef]
- Rubin, Cynthia Elyce, and Morgan Williams. 1990. *Larger Than Life: The American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905–1915*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- Schaffer, Marguerite S. 2001. *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Siporin, Steve. 2000. Tall Tales and Sales. In *Worldviews and the American West*. Edited by Polly Stewart, Steve Siporin, Charles W. Sullivan III and Suzie Jones. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, Logan: Utah State University Press, pp. 101–2.
- Stewart, Susan. 1993. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Strauss, S. 1996. *The Passionate Fact: Storytelling in Natural History and Cultural Interpretation*. Golden: North American Press.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. 1989. *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*. New York: Noonday Press.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1920. The Significance of the Frontier in American History. In *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. First published 1893.
- Welsch, Roger. 1976. *Tall-Tale Postcards. A Pictorial History*. New York City and Philadelphia: A.S. Barnes & Company.
- Whiston Spirn, Anne. 2008. One With Nature: Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination. In *Landscape Theory*. Edited by Rachel Ziady DeLue and James Elkins. New York: Routledge, pp. 43–67.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.