

'A Few of My Favourite Things', Number Thirteen: A Common Item in Uncommon Circumstances

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After a dozen contributions to this fine journal of record, my readers will have started to understand that I am passionate about all the aspects of both postal history and social history that combine to produce great covers. However, with most of my treasures locked-away in a currently unopenable safe (don't ask!), I decided it was time to demonstrate that even an outwardly modest piece can be entirely worthy of inclusion in the pantheon of My Favourite Things.

I have several rules, or perhaps guidelines is more accurate, that inform my decisions about what I should acquire for my several collections. A favourite aphorism is: "Common Items in Uncommon Circumstances".

For example, a base-rate envelope to Germany with a Kingsford Smith 3d blue tied by a Melbourne machine cancellation is unlikely to get anyone very excited. However, the same issue overprinted 'O S' - a rare item postally used, even off-cover - in combination with other stamps on a registered airmail cover from Canberra to Iraq will pique the interest of every postal historian who knows his or her onions.

On this occasion, my subject is a 1902 envelope paid at the foreign letter rate of 2½d per half-ounce to the United States. There are literally thousands of covers still in existence that conform to this description. However, relatively few of them bear attractive advertising, or were posted aboard ship, or were addressed to a major trade exposition.

I might have been happy to acquire a cover that belonged in any one of those enhanced categories. To have the opportunity to purchase a little beauty that ticked all those boxes was one of those opportunities that the modern-day hunter in me could not ignore.

So, to encourage you to also wax lyrical about My Favourite Thing for this quarter, without further ado, here it is, in all its green glory. Yes, I concede that it is a trifle soiled. But, it is nonetheless a turn-of-the-century work-of-art.



At this point, we do not know exactly when the envelope was posted. Volume Two of the marvellous *Australia New Zealand UK Mails* by Colin Tabart RDP unfortunately (on this occasion) stops at the end of 1900, just before Federation [1].

The New South Wales stamps have been struck by a boxed

'LOOSE LETTER' marking of a New Zealand pattern, which is confirmed by the Auckland transit backstamp of 5AP02 that indicates a departure from Sydney (which is also confirmed by the sender's endorsement on the flap) a few days earlier. Turning to that remarkable online resource *Trove*, it is a simple matter to learn that one of the ships expected to depart from Sydney on 1 April 1902 was the *Sonoma*, bound for Auckland and San Francisco, via Honolulu [2]. In fact, it was the only ocean-bound departure out of Sydney on April Fools' Day. (To ensure this was not a seasonal joke, I did a similar check for the following few days and could find no other Sydney departure that could have carried this mail.)

Of course, my eagle-eyed readers will have already noted that the *Sonoma* is the middle ship of three illustrated on the face of the envelope.

So, let us take a slight detour and investigate the Oceanic Steamship Company (abbreviated to the 'Oceanic Line'), the publisher of the illustrated envelope. In 1881, the Oceanic Line was founded by John Diedrich Spreckels, a German-American industrialist who has been credited with being the driving force behind the growth of San Diego, a minor port in southern California, into a major city [3].

Colin Tabart notes that, from 1885, the Sydney-San Francisco mail contract was held by a joint venture between the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand and the Oceanic Line. This arrangement lasted until 1900, after which and until 1907 the contract was held by the Oceanic Line alone [4].

Over time, the Oceanic Line owned 17 ships. As illustrated on our subject envelope, at the beginning of the 20th century, the *Sierra*, the *Sonoma* and the *Ventura*, all named after counties in southern California, were assigned to the trans-Pacific service. According to Wikipedia, all three ships were commissioned in 1900 [5].

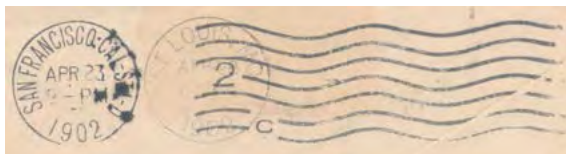
The same illustration, 'Our Sister Ships', was used extensively by the Oceanic Line in its advertising and promotional materials. On a c.1900 page from *Harper's Magazine*, shown nearby, the imprint 'WH BULL' is discernible at the lower-right above the word 'VENTURA'. The imprint was removed from the printing plate for the envelope.

William Howell Bull was a prominent commercial artist, perhaps best known



for his travel posters promoting America's south-west. I think you will agree that his commission to create this design was an inspired choice. The three ships, cutting through the waves, at full-speed, as seen through a pair of binoculars, makes for one of the most attractive advertising covers used from Australia.

In the Harper's advertisement, the company states that all three ships were built "especially for this service", and that "They will save five days in [*sic*] the voyage to Sydney, making the trip in twenty days."



The San Francisco machine datestamp on the reverse of the envelope is of 23 April 1902, twenty-two days after departure from Sydney. There may have been a delay, perhaps at Auckland or Honolulu, or 22 days may have been the scheduled 'homeward' trip, the two extra days being required because the voyage was all up-hill [6].

Surprisingly, it was another five days before the cover arrived, by rail, at its intended destination of St Louis, Missouri. Although the St Louis machine datehead was struck over and is obscured by the San Francisco marking, it is definitely of APR 28/1902.

One of the defining events in the expansion westwards of the United States was the purchase from France in 1803 of its possessions in and around Louisiana. The resulting 'Louisiana Purchase' is something of a misnomer because the United States purported to acquire a vast swathe of land, some 828,000 square miles (more than 2,000,000 square kilometres) of it, stretching all the way from the Gulf of Mexico, northwards into Canada!

This is redolent of Captain Cook 33 years earlier sticking a flag in the sand and claiming the whole of the eastern half of Australia for Great Britain. These unrelated events represent the two largest imperialist land-grabs ever successfully consummated. Black fella and red man be damned.

Of course, history is written by the winners and, thus, a vast and imposing World's Fair was planned by White America to celebrate the centenary of the absurdity of the 'purchase' of one third of the continental United States, as seen on the highest denomination in the set of five stamps issued for the event.



10-cent red brown Map of Louisiana Purchase single (National Postal Museum: https://postalmuseum.si.edu/object/npm_2005.2001.69)

Again, courtesy of Wikipedia [7], we learn that St Louis (pronounced "loo/is", not "loo-ee") and Kansas City (400km to the west but still in Missouri, not Kansas), vied for the rights to host the celebrations. Kansas City lost out to St Louis,

where the municipal government raised the enormous sum of US\$5,000,000 from the sale of city bonds, and a further \$5,000,000 from private donors.

Major planning for the event began in 1899, with invitations to exhibit sent to nations and colonies around the world. The opening was actually delayed until 30 April 1904 to maximise the participation of foreign countries, of whom about 50 booked exhibition space, along with 43 of the then 45 States of the Union.

It might have been thought that the new Commonwealth of Australia would have been an eager entrant. However, the fact that momentum gathered before Federation, on the first day of the 20th century, seems to have encouraged the individual States, rather than the Commonwealth, to be involved. Certainly, New South Wales had a grandiose, if rather small, exhibit of agricultural produce.



The 1904 World's Fair, St. Louis, Missouri: an Australian exhibit: New South Wales agricultural produce, 1904 (Wellcome Library No. 572642i: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/efjrvkn5>)

Although it is not an article of official mail, it is possible that our subject envelope, addressed as it is to "Louisiana Purchase Exposition Co/Bureau of Publicity", contained a confirmation of the Premier State's intention to exhibit. Or perhaps it was a request to advertise the Oceanic Line during the Exposition, which was also home to the 1904 Olympic Games, a lacklustre affair barely worthy of the name, especially as only two Australians competed.

Regardless of the contents, this envelope provides a wonderful link between Australia's only trans-Pacific postal service of the time and an event that attracted almost 20 million people. Is it any wonder that this otherwise humble 2½d rate cover is one of My Favourite Things?

References & notes

- [1] *Australia New Zealand UK Mails, Volume 2, 1881-1900: Rates Routes and Ships Out and Home* by Colin Tabeart RDP, Fareham: Colin Tabeart, 2011
- [2] Trove Online Search Engine: *Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 1 April 1902 at page 4: 'Projected Departures'
- [3] *The Man, John D. Spreckels*, biography by H Austin Adams, San Diego, Calif.: Press of Frye & Smith, 1924
- [4] Tabeart, cited above, at page 151
- [5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_D._Spreckels
- [6] Indulge me!
- [7] For the record, Abacus Auctions happily contributes a voluntary annual 'subscription' towards Wikipedia's operational costs