

Figure 1. This illustrated advertising cover proclaims that L. W. Stilwell of Deadwood, SD, was a dealer in Indian crafts and artifacts, as well as minerals and other assorted materials. It bears a Deadwood flag cancel of 1914.

Indian Trader Advertising Covers

By Richard W. Helbock

Aboriginal crafts and artifacts have always held a special fascination for me. Although I can lay no claim to being a student or even a collector, I have always admired the well crafted pot, the tightly woven basket, the delicately carved piece of wood or stone and the intricately designed rug or blanket. Over the years, I have always preferred to purchase pieces directly from the craftsperson where possible, and it has been my pleasure to buy pottery directly from the homes and small shops of artisans in several New Mexico pueblos, rugs from an auction conducted by a local Navajo co-op in Shiprock, and a turtle shell necklace from a small store operated by a Nez Perce in rural western Idaho.

Often, however, I have found it necessary to acquire certain artifacts from third parties—individuals and organizations engaged in trading with aboriginal craftsmen. Occasionally, this has been a pleasant and memorable experience, as was the day back in the mid-seventies when I stopped by the Hubbell's Trading Post near Ganado in northern Arizona and purchased a beautiful Ganado Red Navajo rug, which has remained one of my prize possessions to this day.

Today, whenever I look at that rug, I can still see the wonderful, rustic trading post with its piles of beautiful red, black and white rugs in my mind's eye.

Always on the lookout for ways to connect aspects of my broader interests with my postal history hobby, I began acquiring covers with corner cards of American Indian traders a few years ago. While it would not be fair to say that I have made a great effort to locate such covers or conduct any sort of in depth research into them, I have acquired a few interesting pieces which I thought it might be fun to share.

INDIAN TRADERS AND TRADING POSTS

The history of Indian traders in North America is as old as the history of European contact. Indeed, evidence is plentiful that the native peoples of North America had a rich trading history among themselves well before the first Europeans arrived on the scene. Our legends and histories are rich with anecdotes of classic trades with the Indians, i.e., Manhattan Island for \$24 in beads and trinkets, and, although many have no doubt become embellished through exaggeration

and clouded perception over the years, there can be no doubt that trading with the Indians is deeply ingrained in the American story.

As enterprising whites pushed west across the Appalachians in the early 19th century, Indian trading became the primary economic activity of the region. By 1840 there were some 150 trading posts of varying size scattered across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, and a, more or less, broadly accepted rate of exchange was in place which included such trade values as one buffalo robe equaled 1½ yards of calico, 30 beaver pelts equaled one keg of rum, and one riding horse equaled one gun plus 100 rounds of ammunition.¹

Much of this early Indian trade was, of course, centered on furs and buffalo skins, and some of the trading posts were operated by large companies such as Hudson's Bay Company, the American Fur Company, and others. As the beaver and buffalo became harder to find, and surviving members of the various Indian tribes were relegated to designated reservations, the nature of the Indian trade changed. By the late 19th century, Indian traders had largely become small scale owner-operators involved in trade for handicrafts and relics. The Hudson's Bay Company continued to operate many of its remote trading posts in Canada, but insured its success by becoming major urban retail department stores in the cities.

The nature of the Indian trader business in the United States appears to have diverged along two distinctly different lines in the late 19th or early 20th century. On the one hand we see the emergence of businesses specializing in the sale of Indian relics such as arrowheads, beadwork, and elk teeth. These operations—including some which combined Indian artifacts with a trade in fossils, stamps and coins—were not necessarily located in the West near Indian settlements. Businesses of this type may have purchased their merchandise direct from Indians in some instances, but they were just as likely, it would seem, to have bought stock of middlemen or even their customers, who must have been collectors. For purposes of this article, I shall refer to such traders of Indian goods as *Indian relic dealers*.

On the other hand, some small business people followed the traditional pattern of trading directly with the Indians and set up shop immediate adjacent to where the Indians lived. The trading post of John L. Hubbell at Ganado, Arizona, is a perfect example.

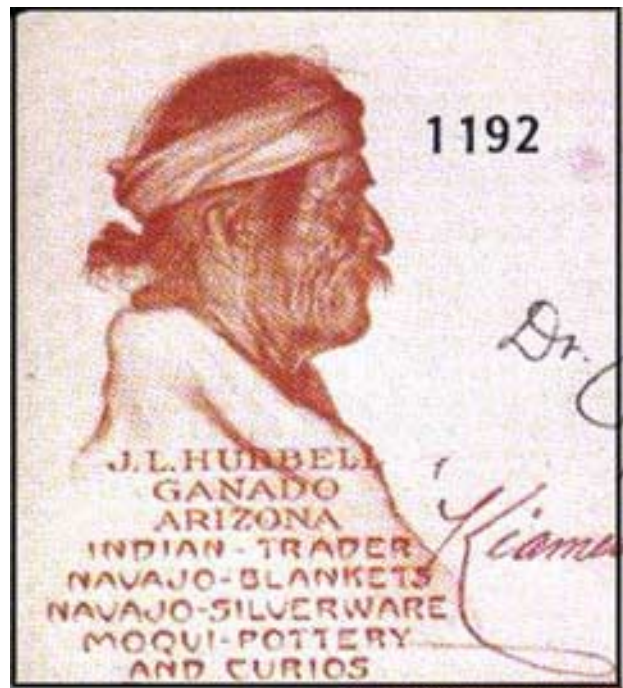


Figure 2. Detail of the Hubbell advertising cover sold as lot 1192 in the Biddle Collection. (Source: American Illustrated Cover Catalog, David Phillips, 1981.)

Hubbell purchased the post in 1878 and quickly turned it into a center of Navajo life in that portion of the reservation. The post operated continuously until 1967 when it was sold to the National Park Service. It continues to operate under the auspices of a non-profit organization.

The Ganado post represents one extreme of locating the enterprise immediately at the source of supply. Other traders, perhaps more mindful of marketing their wares, set up shop in large towns and small cities located not far from Indian populations. Gallup, Farmington, Flagstaff, Winslow, Santa Fe, Tucson and Phoenix all hosted dealers in Indian arts and crafts. Businesses such as these, which operated at or near large concentrations of Indian populations, shall be referred to in this article as *Indian crafts traders*.



A Ganado Red style Navajo rug.

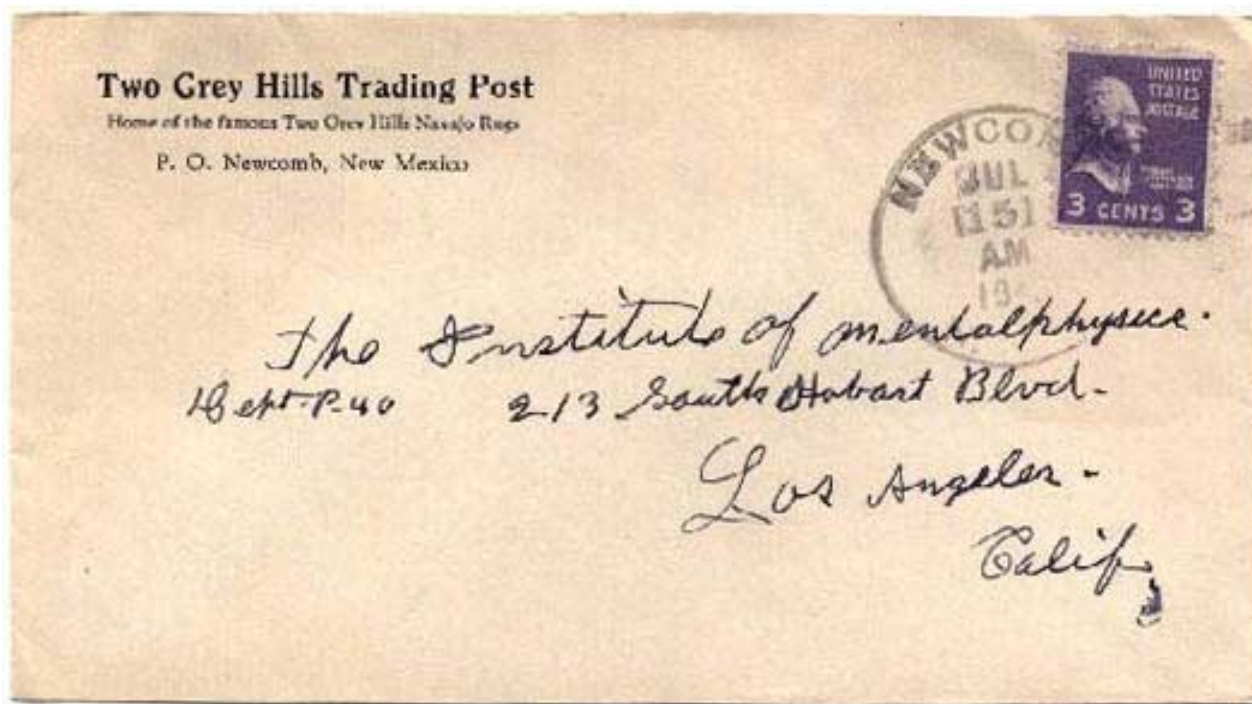


Figure 3. This commercial cover displays a printed corner card of Two Grey Hills Trading Post. It was postmarked at Newcombe, NM, about 1943.

CORNER CARDS & ADVERTISING COVERS

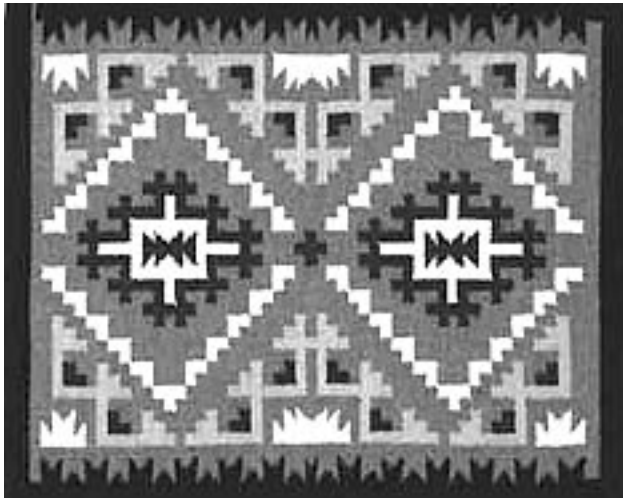
The *American Illustrated Cover Catalog*, that marvelous color illustrated catalog of the great John Biddle collection published by David Phillips in 1981, lists but a few Indian trader covers. Those that are listed appear starting on page 113 under the heading “Indian”, and have lot numbers between 1185 and 1201. This particular category includes quite a hodgepodge of subjects related only by the fact that they have some connection to American Indians. Some simply picture Indians while advertising hotels, shoes, fairs and what not. Others represent dealers in Indian relics and Indian traders.

Indian relic dealers are represented by covers listed in 1195 and 1198B. The former is a 1905 cover from N. E. Carter of Elkhorn, Wis., who sold Indian artifacts along with a list of other collectibles including coins and stamps. Lot 1198B is a two cover lot. The fully visible cover is from an 1891 Ada, Ohio, dealer in Indian relics and the partially visible cover is a 1923 illustrated arrowhead piece from a retailer in Mukwonago, Wis. Lot 1199B deserves mention although it is not really a cover associated with American Indian crafts. The cover bears the likeness of an Indian in headdress and reads “Indian Rug Company”,

but if one reads the fine print it becomes clear that the Indian Rugs are in reality manufactured from “worn-out carpets.”

Two other lots—1196 and 1197—illustrate advertising covers of L. W. Stilwell of Deadwood, SD. These Stilwell covers date from about 1907 and their designs, while consisting of the same elements, differ slightly from one another in placement, borders and wording. *Figure 1* illustrates another variation on the basic Stilwell design. This examples bears a Deadwood flag cancel dating from 1914.

The only cover included among those offered in the Biddle Collection which originated from an Indian crafts trader was an attractively illustrated Hubbell Trading Post cover postmarked at an indistinct New Mexico office in 1909 (*figure 2*). It seems entirely likely that early 20th century illustrated advertising covers, or even printed corner cards, from Indian crafts traders are exceptionally scarce. These were very small businesses located in remote locations in lightly populated parts of the country. Many would not have gone to the expense of preparing specially printed stationery, and those that did probably used it sparingly.



A Two Grey Hills style Navajo rug.

Figure 3 illustrates a commercial cover with printed corner card from the Two Grey Hills Trading Post postmarked Newcombe, New Mexico, dating from about 1943. This trading post is located seven miles northeast of Newcomb and was first owned by a family named Ritz. The Crozier post office operated here from 1903 to 1919. Along with Ganado Reds, Two Grey Hills rugs represent one of the more easily recognizable Navajo rug designs.

Newcomb, about fifty miles north of Gallup on Route 666, was originally called the Newcomb Trading Post after Arthur J. Newcomb who established it in 1914. The Newcombe post office—no explanation for the extra “e”—was established September 1, 1929, and operated until June 30, 1944.

Figure 4 illustrates a commercial cover bearing an illustrated corner card of the Whiterocks Trading Post of Whiterocks, Utah, dating from 1944. Whiterocks Trading Post is the modern successor to an historic fur trading post established by William Reed in the summer of 1828. Located near the confluence of the Whiterocks and Uinta rivers, the post operated until 1832 when Reed sold out to Antoine Robidoux, who built his own, more substantial, operation known variously as Fort Uinta or Fort Robidoux. Robidoux was eventually driven out by the nearby Ute Indians who had become tired of his increasingly unscrupulous business dealings.

Wide Ruins is located just east of Route 191 north of Chambers, Arizona. The community is well known for its production of high quality Navajo rugs which feature a broader range of colors than those of other areas. Rugs produced in the Wide Ruins area are

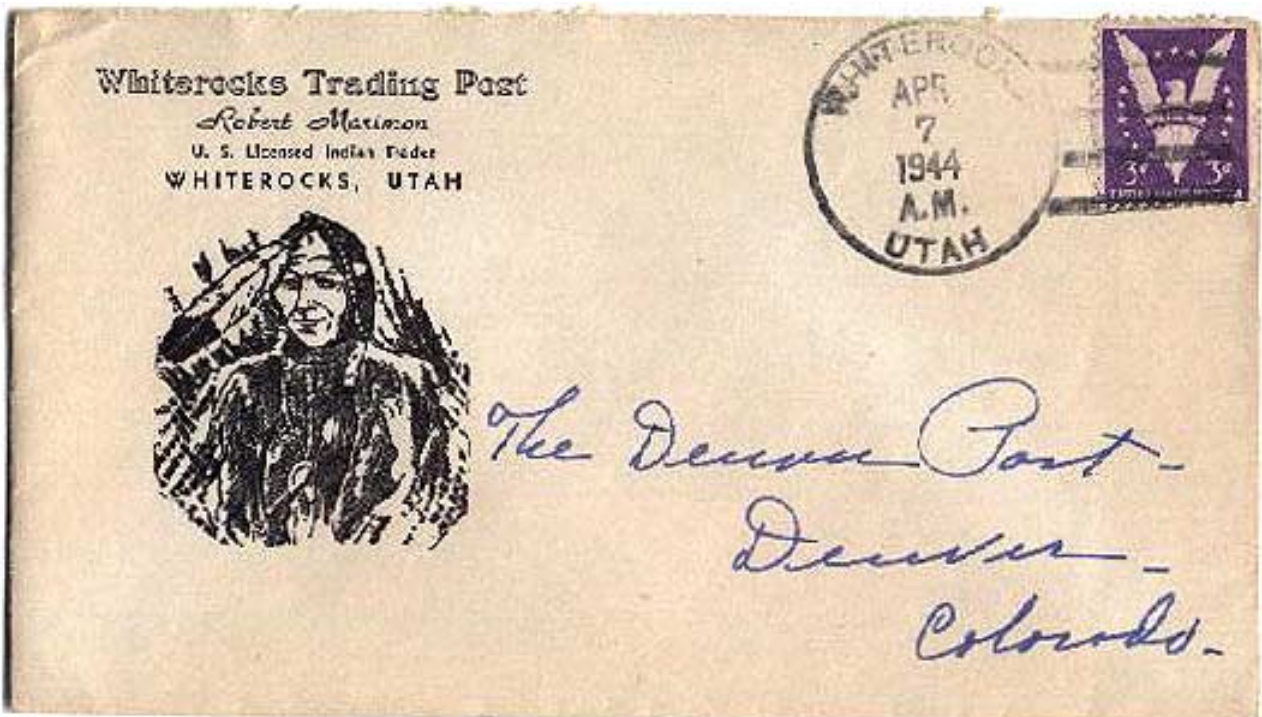


Figure 4. A World War II era illustrated advertising cover from the Whiterocks Trading Post proclaims the proprietor to be a U.S. Licensed Indian Trader.



Figure 5. This philatelic cover was postmarked with examples of the recently established Wide Ruins Rural Station handstamps. As a bonus, it received a hand struck impression of the Wide Ruins Mercantile Center corner card.

known as vegetable dyes. Wide Ruins was recognized in 1962 by the establishment of its own rural branch of the Chambers post office. Figure 5 illustrates a philatelic cover which was postmarked in Wide Ruins shortly after the rural station opened. The cover was also handstamped with the corner card of the Wide Ruins Mercantile Center which calls attention to the area's craft specialty.

The final Indian trader cover to be presented in this article is definitely a philatelic souvenir. Figure 6 illustrates an envelope bearing the printed corner card of Smith & Chandler, Indian Traders, West Yellowstone, Montana. The envelope was apparently acquired at the Smith & Chandler store in West Yellowstone, which is located at the western border of Yellowstone National Park (Map 1). It was then used as a philatelic "passport" constructed by acquiring postal markings from each of the post offices and

postal stations then operating in and around the park. Since some of the stations had more than one postmark in use, our passport maker decided to employ an additional "document" and added the picture post card shown in figure 7 to display postmarks.

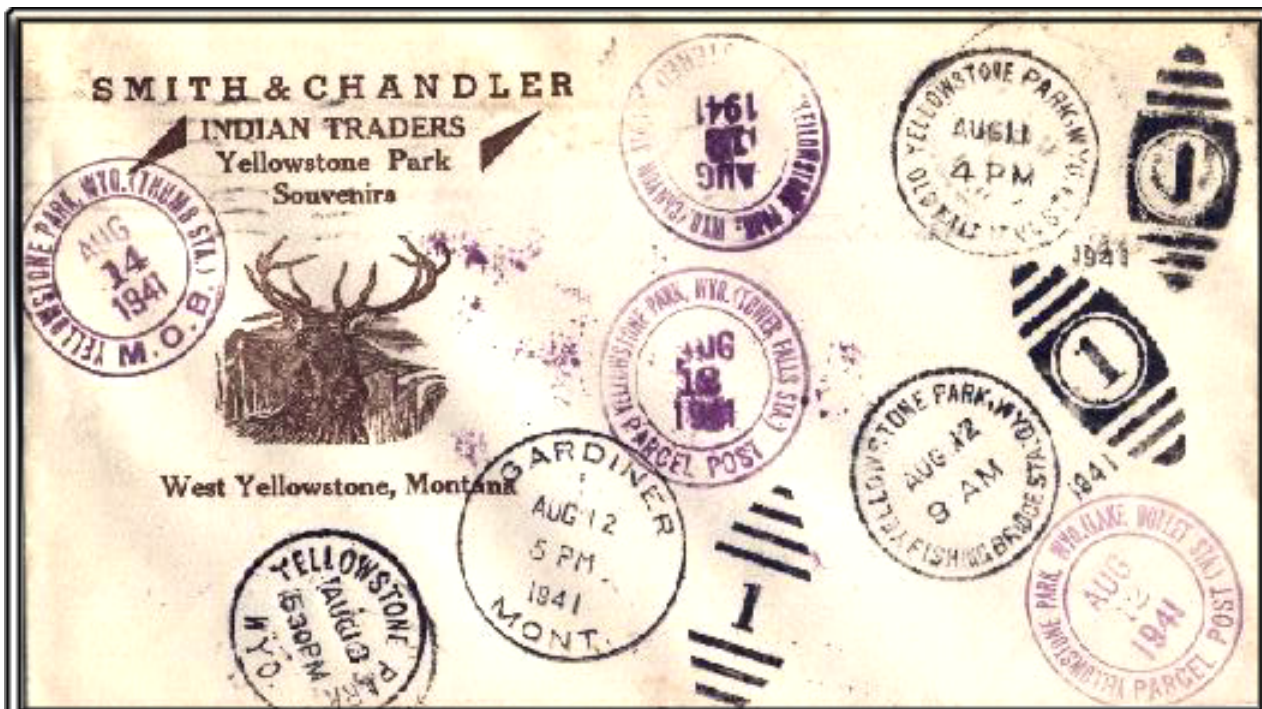


Figure 6. During the summer of 1941, a visitor to Yellowstone National Park turned this advertising cover from Smith & Chandler Indian Traders into a "passport" by collecting postmarks from all the park's postal stations.



A Wide Ruins, vegetable dye, style Navajo rug.

When this souvenir was created in 1941, the primary park post office was known as Yellowstone Park, a name it operated under from 1902 until it became Yellowstone National Park August 31, 1962. There

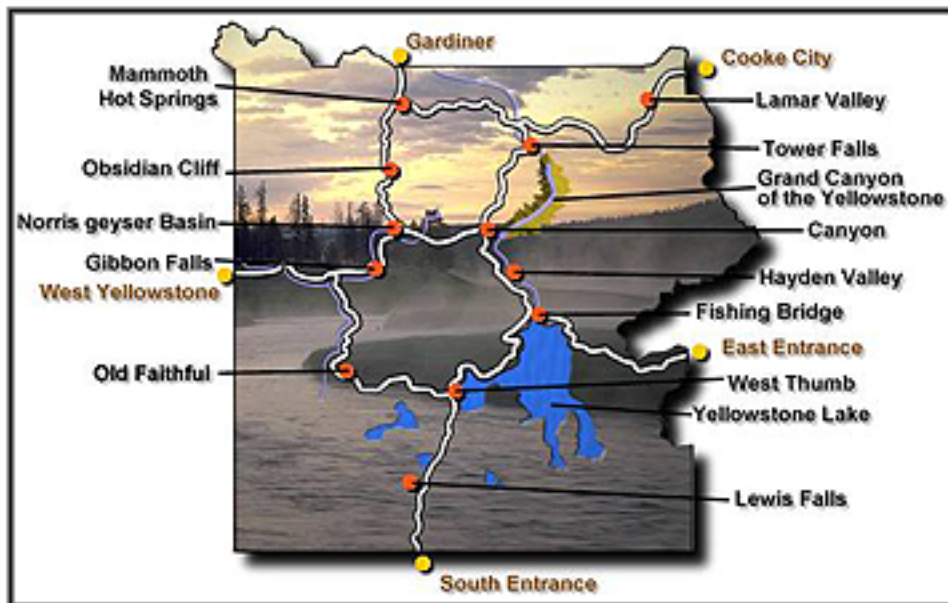


Figure 7. Overflow passport postmarks were applied to a post card.

were six operating stations at that time, and they were:

Station	Established	Discontinued	Notes
Canyon	19 Jun 1928	14 May 1958	Summer Only
Fishing Bridge	19 Jun 1928	30 Apr 1973	Changed to Lake
Lake Outlet	19 Jun 1928	31 Mar 1954	
Old Faithful	19 Jun 1928	Operating	
Thumb	1 Jul 1936	30 Apr 1973	Summer Only; Changed to Grants Village
Tower Falls	19 Jun 1928	30 Sep 1951	

In addition to Yellowstone Park and its stations, the passport maker also acquired a postmark from Gardiner, Montana, at the park's northern entrance, for good measure.



Map 1 Yellowstone Park roads and features. (Source: <http://www.westyellowstone.net>)

In summary, while advertising covers and corner cards from America's Indian traders may be fairly uncommon items given the small scale nature of the business and the remote locations of many of its practitioners, they do represent an interesting challenge for cover collectors seeking to infuse a bit of Western Americana in their collections.

Notes:
¹Capps, Benjamin *The Indians*, Time-Life Books, 1983, p. 62.