

Reflection in the Glass Doorway: The Mystery Man Behind the Van Tine Postcards

by Diane Lapis

I have always admired the beautiful printed postcards of Beacon, New York: Mt. Beacon with its majestic views of the Hudson River, the Fishkill Creek, and Main Street's stately brick buildings. This Fishkill Creek Falls postcard scene is simple and direct, showing natural wonders and man-made structures found in the area (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Postcard of Fishkill Creek Falls, Beacon, N.Y., early twentieth century.

Picturesque views like these were made as souvenirs for travelers to the Hudson Valley. But it was the photographer's artistic vision that captured time in a frame for today's inhabitants to hold dear.

But who, I've wondered, was the image maker for these century-old postcards? While some real photo postcards include the photographer's name as part of the caption, printed cards rarely identify their creator. As an inveterate collector of postcards and a local historian, I set out to discover the photographer behind these artistic images.

In some instances, the postcard photographer was born and raised in the area, with a penchant for photography. In other cases, it was an itinerant photographer traveling through town with camera in tow. Clues about the producer are often provided on the flip side of the postcard. The inscription on the left edge may list those involved in its production such as the publisher, distributor, printer, sales rep, or photographer, as well as a logo and copyright. By studying a collection of cards from a specific geographic area, we may be able to tease out the story of the postcard photographer while learning more about the life of the town and its cultural and architectural heritage.

Van Tine Printed Postcards (1902-1941)

One group of printed cards of Beacon, and its antecedent villages of Fishkill Landing and Matteawan, includes four different inscriptions, united by a common element: R.T. Van Tine Fishkill Landing, R.T. Van Tine Fishkill-on-Hudson, R.T. Van Tine, Beacon NY, and Van Tines, Beacon (Figure 2). An analysis of cards from the Beacon Historical Society and the Historical Society of Newburgh Bay and the Highlands and other private collections has revealed 220 Van Tine produced cards printed between 1902 and 1941.

Over 70 of the images are of Mt. Beacon—the Incline Railway, the Beacon Hotel and Casino, the cottages, and the DAR Monument. Other subjects include the Fishkill Creek, the Hudson River, local schools, churches, firehouses, hotels, factories, the railroad station, Main Street, the Post Office, Memorial Hall, the Veteran’s Hospital at Castle Point, Mat-



Figure 2. Flip side of printed postcards of Beacon, NY, published by R. T. Van Tine. Collection of Diane and Peter Lapis.

teawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and views of Newburgh. It is not surprising that Van Tine cards catered to both locals (pictures of local schools and other important buildings) and tourists (scenes of Mt. Beacon and hotels on Main Street), as postcards provided an inexpensive way of communicating both within a town and across the country.

The “Van Tines, Beacon NY” series included mostly reprints of earlier cards with the exception of newly built structures such as the Post Office, South Avenue School, and a “modern” Main Street, the latter three published in 1941. These postcards depict scenes from a tight-knit geographic area in Beacon and its neighboring communities. To date, little evidence of cards produced outside these boundaries can be found. Creating a database of the Van Tine product line has proved to be a useful tool in understanding the depth and breadth of Beacon’s history and neighboring areas at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as an aid in learning about the photographer who produced the images.

Robert Van Tine—Dean of Beacon Merchants (1860-1941)

Let us return to the printed name on the flipside of the Van Tine cards... who was R.T. Van Tine and was s/he the mastermind of these iconic images of our area? We know from historical records and newspaper accounts that R.T. or Robert T. Van Tine was the proprietor of a stationery store centrally located on Main Street in Fishkill Landing, near the railroad and ferry depots, and a short walking distance from Matteawan’s bustling factories. Van Tines was originally a haberdashery when it first opened in 1880. A few years later, Robert Van Tine expanded the business and moved to larger quarters, dropping the men’s clothing line and instead featuring newspapers, magazines, postcards, greeting cards, sporting goods, school and office supplies, and the latest in Kodak cameras. Soon thereafter, Van Tines became the go-to place for current local and national news.

Van Tines continued to be a thriving establishment, especially after the opening of the Mt. Beacon Incline and Casino in 1902, followed by the Beaconcrest Hotel a few years later. Three factors, Robert’s business acumen, the propitious timing of the Incline, and the change in the United States Postal Service regulations, led to the production of the Beacon postcards that we know today.

Beginning in 1902, the U.S. Postal Service started to allow private publishers to enter the postcard market, and provide rural free delivery, all for the cost of a penny stamp. The sale of postcards became a national

craze as tourists and locals sent friends and family missives, and postcard exchange clubs formed across the country. Robert Van Tine capitalized on this opportunity by publishing postcards of local scenes, and selling these and other postcard views for “2 for 5 cents.” (Figure 3)

By 1905, his wholesale and retail business was selling over one hundred thousand postcards.



Figure 3: Interior of Van Tines Stationery Store, c. 1908. Photograph. Collection of Louise Pittack.

Robert Van Tine became known as the “Dean of Beacon Merchants,” maintaining a robust wholesale and retail newspaper and stationery business in Beacon for sixty-one years until his death in 1941. On many anniversaries of the founding of his store, the local papers would feature an article about the success of the business and Van Tine’s dedication to local organizations. Yet, there is no mention about his photographic abilities. If Robert was the publisher and distributor of these local postcards, who was the photographer?

Harry Van Tine—News Photographer (1885- 1968)

Robert and his wife Elizabeth Moore Van Tine had one son named Harry, born in 1885. As a young man, Harry clerked at the Van Tines store, and was proficient and productive with his camera, photographing hundreds of local scenes of Beacon, Cold Spring and Newburgh, and nearby village



Figure 4. Harry Van Tine, Exterior of Van Tines Stationery Store, December 1907. Photograph. Collection of the Beacon Historical Society. Harry Van Tine can be seen in reflection in the glass of the front door.



Figure 5. Harry Van Tine, Exterior of Van Tines Stationery Store (detail), December 1907. Photograph. Collection of the Beacon Historical Society. Harry Van Tine with his photographic equipment can be seen in reflection in the glass of the front door.

of Fishkill. The local newspaper often reported on Harry's photographic endeavors "producing many pictures suitable for postcards" Harry's reflection, camera and tripod is visible in the glass doorway at Van Tines in this photograph from 1907 (Figures 4 and 5). Glass plate negatives, discovered in the basement of Van Tines after the business closed in 1968, revealed original images of Mt. Beacon later published into postcards (Figures 6-9).



Figure 6. Harry Van Tine, Donkeys atop Mt. Beacon. Donkeys provided entertainment for guests, transported supplies, and were featured in the silent films directed by D.W. Griffith. Collection of Gene Trifolo, Sr.



Figure 7. Hand-colored postcard published by R.T. Van Tine of donkey photo taken a few seconds apart. Collection of Diane and Peter Lapis.



Figure 8. Harry Van Tine, Looking down the track from Mt. Beacon. Collection of the Beacon Historical Society.

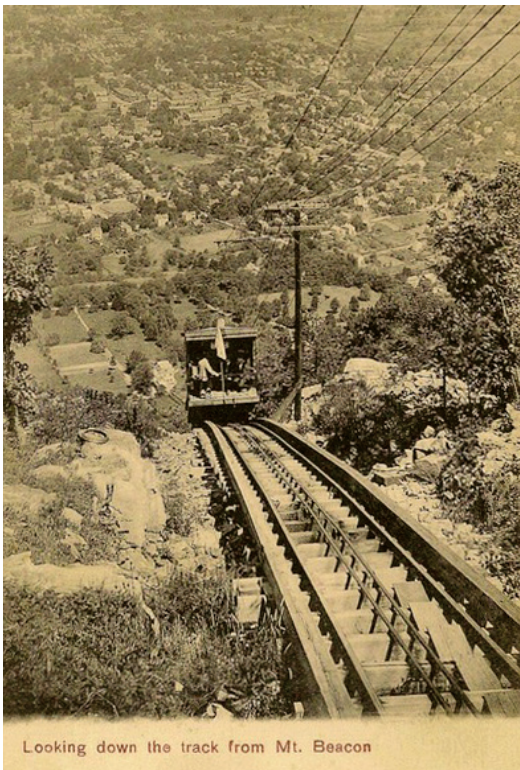


Figure 9. Postcard published by R.T. Van Tine of the same photo. Collection of the Beacon Historical Society.

When the American Biograph Company filmed three silent movies on the summit of Mt. Beacon in 1909 and 1910, Harry was the “unofficial” still photographer capturing images of director D.W. Griffith, actors Mary Pickford and her sister Lottie, and dozens of others dressed in Native American and Civil War garb. These images were sold as postcards at Van Tines’ stationery store. Harry also worked as a photographer and correspondent for the *Newburgh Daily News* from 1910-1915. His professional breakthrough came in 1913, when Harry Thaw, the convicted murderer of architect Stanford White, escaped Matteawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Harry’s photographs and James Forrestal Jr.’s ace reporting of Thaw’s daring getaway gained national attention. (Forrestal would later become the Secretary of the Navy under F.D. Roosevelt and the first Secretary of Defense under Truman.)

Harry’s photographic accomplishments at the newspaper gained him entrée into the Hearst-Selig News Pictorial in New York City as a “moving pictures” operator in 1915. Three years later, he was sent by the Hearst Company to Washington D.C. to open the International News Photo (INP) bureau. While there, Harry and a group of dedicated photographers from the major news agencies and photography studios banded together to form the White House News Photographer’s Association (WHNPA) in 1922. Its mission was, and continues to be, to promote, protect, and advance the interests of its members who cover the White House and other events in Washington and beyond. Harry would serve on the board as president, vice president, secretary and treasurer over many decades. Harry’s work as a White House news photographer and manager with INP, and later, Reni News Photo Service, spanned almost 50 years, photographing presidents from Wilson to Kennedy in the United States and abroad.

Harry stayed connected to Beacon throughout his illustrious career in Washington D.C. Upon his father Robert’s death, Harry ran Van Tines as an absentee owner thanks to Gordon Wilson, a Beacon local, who acted as general manager (Figure 10). A few years ago, when Wilson’s children sold his home, they left items on the sidewalk for trash pick-up. A neighbor, who was also the local librarian and aware of Wilson’s connection to Van Tine, retrieved a box that contained letters sent to Gordon alongside hundreds of photographs by Harry and his colleagues at the INP. This discovery helped to convey the scope of Harry’s work as a White House news photographer and manager.



Figure 10. Photograph of Gordon Wilson (left) and Harry (right) in front of Van Tines with examples of Harry’s photographic work. Many of the images seen on display were made into postcards. Note below the numbers “1880” are photos of Harry Thaw, Evelyn Nesbitt, and Lewis Tompkins.

Conclusion

Investigating the Beacon postcards proved to be a rewarding endeavor. Harry documented his photographic career in scrapbooks that combined newspaper clippings, personal narratives, letters, and photographs, some of which were later published and distributed by his father as postcards. This body of material attests to the depth of Harry’s work from his youth until his death in 1968. It was thrilling to discover and follow the span of Harry Van Tine’s career, from the postcard-making days as a young man in his father’s store at the turn of the century, to his later years as a professional photographer capturing images of world leaders.

¹ Bob Bogdan, and Todd Weseloh, *Real Photo Postcard Guide: The People’s Photography*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), p. 195.

- ² Mark Werther, and Lorenzo Mott, , *Linen Postcards: Images of the American Dream*(Canada: Sentinel Publishing, 2002), p. 35.
- ³ Bodgan and Weseloh, p. 196.
- ⁴ Special thanks to David Turner, Doug Story, and Diane and Peter Lapis
- ⁵ Rosamond B.Vaule, *As We Were: American Photographic Postcards, 1905-1930* (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 2004), p. 50.
- ⁶ “Guide to Dating Curt Teich Postcards.” *The Newbury Library*.
www.newberry.org
- ⁷ *Beacon News*, February 28, 1929.
- ⁸ Alan Petrusis, “A Not So Concise History of the Evolution of Postcards in the United States.” *Metropolitan Postcard Club*, www.metropostcard.com.
- ⁹ “A Successful Business Man.” *Fishkill Standard*, December 2, 1905.
- ¹⁰ *Fishkill Standard*, 1905.
- ¹¹ *Beacon News*, May 8, 1927, and February 28, 1929.
- ¹² *Fishkill Herald*, May 7, 1904.
- ¹³ *Fishkill Standard*, September 16,1905.
- ¹⁴ *Fishkill Daily Herald*, November 6, 1909 and October 4, 1910.
- ¹⁵ “Van Tine Enters the Movie Field,” *The Newburgh Daily News*, September 23, 1915.
- ¹⁶ Morg Hoyt, “Turning Back the Clock,” *Beacon News*, April 1949.
- ¹⁷ “Daily News Man In Peace Party,” *The Newburgh Daily News*, November 27,1918.
- ¹⁸ Dennis Brack, *Presidential Picture Stories: Behind the Cameras at the White House* (2013) p. 10.
- ¹⁹ “About: Our Mission.” *White House News Photographers Association*, www.whnpa.org.