

# Deltiology with Donna Braden

## Ologies Podcast

### June 18, 2018

Ohhh, hello. Ol' Uncle Alie Ward here, back with another episode of *Ologies*. Now this one, well... it's something to write home about. We're talking deltiology, which is the study, or just the collection, of postcards. Yes, kiddos. There is an ology for that. I wanted to know what in the frikken' frick that was about. I was outside of Detroit shooting the CBS show *Innovation Nation* at the Henry Ford Museum. I was like, "Hey. Hey, you guys got any ins with a deltiologist?" And they were like, "What is that? Is that a word?" And I had to be like, "Well, according to some dude named Randall Rhoades of Ohio, who coined this term in 1945 based on the Greek *deltion*, meaning little tablets, yes! Yeah, it's a word." And they were like, "Okay cool, 'cause yeah, we have a museum curator who studies and collects, who cherishes, and archives, and displays postcards!" And I was like, "Let's get it on, let's do this!"

Also, sorry Henry Ford, sometimes there's swear words in my podcast. I think I kept them to a minimum. I'm just me being me. But I'm pretty sure it's pretty clean. But, before we get into what is, according to Wikipedia, the third most popular hobby worldwide – I guess people like stamp and coin collecting more and I'm not sure if by coin they just mean money, like amassing wealth, but whatever. Before we get into it, let's say thank you to the patrons for their coin that they toss at the podcast in exchange for getting to ask the ologists questions. Twenty-five cents an episode gets you in. You can also support for no money, just by telling a friend, or your secret lover, or someone handing out pizza roll samples at Costco, or your accountant, about the podcast. Spread the word! You can rate and review on iTunes, that also helps keep us in still the top 20 or so science podcasts. It's so exciting. And also, I'm really creepy, and I read all your reviews that you leave because I want you to feel seen, and I'm kind of thirsty.

So this week, MallardtheDuck says:

*No divorce required. Amazing podcast, can take any topic and make it interesting through Alie's personality and the guest ologists. (Aww, thank you!) This podcast kept my wife and I entertained and happy on a 2,000-mile road trip to Canada. So, can't wait for the return trip home to listen to new things and I won't need to find a divorce attorney after 4,000 miles of driving. Thanks, Alie!*

So, MallardtheDuck23, I hope you and your *continued* wife are enjoying this episode about postcards. You better send me one.

Okay. Your deltiologist. She got her bachelor's degree in anthropology, a master's in early American culture, and is now the Curator of Public Life, which is a thing, at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. She's been there – are you ready for this? – 41 years! Forty-one! I checked her LinkedIn profile, and I also just looked up to see what the traditional 41-year anniversary gift would be, and it looks like it's land. When you commit to something that long, you just deserve chunks of the Earth!

She curates artifacts relevant to, according to the museum website, vacations and world fairs, to civil rights and social activism, to advertising and retail, and has referred to the museum's vast collections as "a bottomless pit of wonderfulness." She loves her job.

I nabbed her for a chat in the museum. We ducked into a little classroom off the main hall to talk shop about postcards. So yes, we'll cover some history and their uses, but this talk turned into a

really fascinating look at how we tell our own narratives, and how we want others to see our lives, and the luxury of travel, and how etching out a message changes the way that we remember things. So, it's a loving gaze at postcards of course, but it's also a look at how we live, and how a curator is tasked with collecting and presenting back our own story for us. It's really cool.

You can hear in my voice that I'm – and I'm almost apologetic, but not really, to you guys – how excited I was to be having this conversation because she's just so down to earth. She's this bespectacled hero because she's an artifact badass, and I kind of was fangirling for a lot of it. So, collect these museum musings and postcard wisdoms from Deltiologist Donna Braden.

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**Alie Ward:** It looks like your levels are good. I feel like I am about to inform you that you are a... deltiologist.

**Donna Braden:** That was a new word to me, but I love the fact that there is a word about the love of postcards.

**Alie:** You don't just love them, you also are a curator here at the Henry Ford, so you also deal with the collection of them, the inspection of them, the cataloging...

**Donna:** Yes, I have looked through huge swaths of our postcard collection, and we have many.

**Alie:** How many postcards do you think you have in the collection here?

**Donna:** A few thousand? We have a lot.

**Alie:** How do they get stored? Are they in like, U-Haul boxes, or are they in all acid free paper?

**Donna:** Imagine shoeboxes that are acid free. So, they're a protective certain kind of cardboard that is okay for the quality of postcard paper. They're all nicely organized by topic, usually state, but then by topic.

**Alie:** Ohhhh, so like, "Wisconsin – Fishing," "Wisconsin – Bears."

**Donna:** Right, and we have two different collections. The main one is indexed in our computers so we can look up any topic, or any state, or any year, and find those postcards, and then just dig them out and look at them. There are pictures of most of them as well. There is a whole other collection that I found more recently that you have to know we have.

**Alie:** Whaaat...

**Aside:** So, the museum recently discovered a pristine postcard collection by this publishing company, which was kind of like this papery time capsule into postcards past. I don't know if they had to wear gloves to touch them, but I'm going to picture them wearing gloves to touch them.

**Donna:** They're not indexed. They were not written by people and mailed.

**Alie:** So, they don't have messages like, [*old-timey voice*] "Betty – I wish you were on the boat with us!" and then a licked stamp. Those are separate?

**Donna:** Right. Exactly. Those are great because you get postmarks on them and you can date them that way. But the ones that have no messages, in this one company's collection, you get a more complete run of every postcard they ever made. So, a couple of years ago I was delving deep into the history of Yellowstone National Park, and I found that... Those postcards tend to be earlier as well, these really early teens and twenties-era postcards of

every attraction at Yellowstone. I was like, “Oh my gosh. We’re not finding these on the computer but I’m going to get them digitized so people can see them now.”

**Aside:** So, what is the history of postcards? Did they always exist, like forever? Did the dinosaurs pop ‘em in the mail, and they’re like, “Hey, down in Mexico for vacay. There’s some huge comet or some shit. I dunno man, made for some rad sunsets though. Talk to you later!”

No, not so much. Postcards were invented for a reason, relatively recently, because they were cheap to mail. They were like a penny. Everyone was like, “Dude, these rule. Technology. It’s so crazy.” And from there, they evolved. So, let’s get all up to speed on the history of postcards. I swear this is fascinating. You’ll never look at them the same way. You’ll be like, “OMG, look at the border on that. Ooooh, a linen finish!” And maybe you’ll join a deltiology club and meet the love of your life. I don’t know. The world’s crazy. But let’s get into it.

**Donna:** The first postcards were put out by the government, the Post Office, and you had no choice over what you got. Then an act passed where private companies could produce postcards, and it became a bigger deal, and that’s when you got, kind of, that golden age of the early 20th-century postcards put out by these companies.

If you’re familiar with postcards, there’s that early look on, kind of, a rag paper, that looks almost like a painting sometimes. That’s those early 20th-century postcards.

**Aside:** Okay. More little tidbits. So, the first, first, first postcard ever was invented by this British author, prankster, and playboy, [*“Heeeeyyyy!”*] this guy named Theodore Hook, and he sent this hand-painted postcard to himself in 1840. On it, unflattering drawings of a bunch of postal workers. He’s like, “Ya been served! Boom.” Now, that postcard sold at auction in 2002 for £27,000, to some Latvian guy, his name is Eugene Gomberg. I looked him up on Facebook. I spent some time looking through his vacation photos last night, I’m not going to lie. None are photos involving this postcard. I bet he legit forgot that he bought it.

Anyway, I’m going to give you a quick rundown. In 1861, the US allowed postcards to be sent through the mail, and then 10 years later they were like, “Hey! Let’s make some! And sell our own pre-stamped postcards for God’s sake. Let’s make a little money!” And from there, in the late 1800s to early 1900s, this was officially the golden age of postcards. What a time to be alive! They really started taking off. People were like, “They’re so cheap. They’re so easy. I won’t get hand cramps writing these long-ass, inky letters.” Wagons with photo equipment started travelling and printing pictures onto these mailable postcards.

Now, there was also a white border period, that was in the early 1900s. That saved ink by printing on a smaller surface. In the 1930s there was a shift to linen texture; 1950s some scalloped edges; and now what we know today, they’re printed to the edges with modern, chrome, full color. So congratulations, you now know the whole history of postcards – we did it!

Isn’t it weird that postcards have an origin story? They’re like a superhero or a rescue dog. It just makes you love them more! And Donna loves her work.

**Donna:** There’s a big shift in how they look. What tends to happen, the reason you can’t date that that well unless they have postmarks is that... those early postcards continued to be offered for years and years after they’re not made anymore.

**Alie:** Oh really, so they keep going?

**Donna:** Yeah, they keep going. You see people in outdated clothing, and you're like, "I know this wasn't taken this year..." It's because it's so much cheaper just to keep producing those postcards."

**Alie:** Right, like when you see people with feathered '80s hair on Venice Beach postcards, and you're like, "Whoa man, this is *very* '92."

**Donna:** Oh yeah, those are still around, definitely still around. Or ladies with big hats, or Gibson girl looking outfits, and it's the 1940s, and that's like 1910. Like, okay, that needs to be updated. The discoveries here are every day. Even for me, and I've been here 40 years. Every day, new things, that's what's so great about it.

**Alie:** So when you digitize them, do you have to scan them or photograph them, and then does someone have to catalog, like, "Okay this one has a barn in it and a bucket, so I have to put those keywords in"?

**Donna:** That's a great question. I think they do put the keywords in but in the old days, before computers, when I was here, we had to actually physically describe them. We do have to do the company, the date, those keywords. I think material sometimes, and we put a title at the top so that it's descriptive. Then something that curators add is something called a narrative, which is a short write-up explaining the context of each thing, which keeps us really busy, and we'll never catch up, but it's something that's ongoing that we try to do. Every time somebody looks something up on our website they find a little writeup about it.

**Alie:** So it might be like, "Woman picks apples in an orchard while a puppy looks on," or whatever?

**Donna:** We actually try to be more interpretive than that. We try to explain why the woman is there, what she's looking at, why she looks the way she does, what was the occasion place, try to provide some context and some background. That's what we curators try to do.

**Aside:** I went down a deeeeeep, deep, deep rabbit burrow looking at the digital archives of postcards in the Henry Ford collection, and I was just tickled to see this one, this black and white full-length portrait. It was titled "Gentleman Posed with a Chair, 1910" and it features this small-framed man in a dusty suit and, like, a brimmed hat cocked far back on his head, and he's got this silvery mustache over an uncertain grin. Just a plucky-looking guy, and the museum caption of it reads:

*This man likely decided at the spur of the moment to have his photograph taken. He has left his tie tucked in, as he would while wearing a work apron. He probably saw the temporary setup by a travelling photographer of a painted canvas in a store, or a public building. Choosing postcard paper meant that he could mail photos to friends and relatives.*

Not to get too sentimental, but museums are so powerful, not only when they just display our past for us to see, but when they lay out moments and stories that we'd never even consider. Postcards kind of tell those tales of what aspiration meant in past eras. Donna curated promotional postcards for one exhibit about motels. They tell the story of hitting the open road in a car with your nuclear family for some time away. Just kind of weaving sunburn, and heartburn, and discovery into all these new memories.

**Donna:** So the motel postcards, for example, I looked up each motel on the internet, like what can I find on them, what can I find on the owners, what is the back saying when it says “air-cooled rooms, new mattresses,”? All these crazy things that they say –

**Alie:** “Color television!”

**Donna:** Exactly. What does that mean for the era, and is it a tiny little motel? Did it last? Is it still around? Is it a one-off? Did it go away? Is it a popular tourist area? These are the things we try to find out.

**Alie:** Why are there so many motel postcards? In your collection and your curation of postcards – deltiology – [airhorns] do you find... Okay, there are state postcards, there are motel postcards, there are get-well postcards. What are the genres?

**Donna:** Well, the get-well postcards are a very early form of postcards, which was more like greeting cards. The companies that made the early postcards actually started with holiday greetings. People sent them to each other, and it was a very inexpensive way of sending... it was amazing to have something colorful and printed to send people, and it was very cheap.

**Aside:** Postcards also ended up as a way to send stupid messages, kind of like a gif in today’s world. Okay, we were talking about light-hearted postcards:

**Donna:** ... turned more into like jokey postcards than greeting postcards, because of course you can find greeting cards everywhere now, that became a big industry. The tourism postcards is what became such a gigantic industry. Of course, everywhere you go you can go to the souvenir shop and buy a memory of someplace that you’ve been.

The motel postcards are an interesting case because sometimes you still find, but not so often anymore, you would find a free postcard in the drawer of the motel you would stay in. When I was growing up, this is what we all did. That’s free, you could send your family or your friends, “This is where I’m staying.” And they were ads for the motels, they were the best most inexpensive advertising for these motels. They become just a document. I still have... because I saved postcards when I was a kid, it was a free way to build a collection, and all these great messages I would save from my friends and family, and then people would start sending them to me because they knew I collected them.

But my parents would occasionally escape from me and my four brothers and go somewhere, you know, not very expensive, but they’d go somewhere. And we’d get a postcard from my mom that would circle the room and say, “This is the room we’re staying in!” She was so proud to let us know that they were staying in a lodging that wasn’t at home, and it just gave us... sort of painted a picture of where they were, so that was really cool.

**Alie:** Do you still have that collection personally?

**Donna:** Of course. Of course. I have savored that collection. It’s very personal. But what’s really funny is when I was, I don’t know, elementary school, I had a cork bulletin board in my bedroom, and there was a period of time where I thumbtacked all my postcards to the board. I look at these postcards now and they all have holes in the corners, or varied places where I changed the holes, and it’s surrounded by these holes, and it’s like, “Why did I do that?” But it brings such a funny memory, back when I was so proud to display these until it got to be too many.

**Aside:** So, note to potential museum curators: don't poke holes in things! [*"Damn, it feels good to be a gangster."*] Your future self will build a time machine out of lawnmower parts and come back and hurt you in the face!

Donna has her personal collection stored in a box at home. So, how many are in there?

**Donna:** How many do I have? Umm... Probably a hundred? That seems like a lot. Every once in a while I come across them and I'm like, "Oooh, I have to look at these." Sometimes I'd go to the... I grew up in Cleveland and the art museum was one of my favorite all time... I took art classes there, and it was just this magical place, and I'd always buy a postcard. So I have all these wonderful postcards of paintings and things from when I was a kid. On so many levels, it brings joy to have that little pile of postcards.

**Alie:** Do you think that postcards, back in the day, were the equivalent of a text message, whereas a letter was an email?

**Donna:** That's a great... I think you could have something there! Particularly because the back was divided in half, and one side you had to put the address on, so you were left with one half of a postcard to write the message. I have messages on some of them where, you know, people used up the space because they wrote too big, and then they're writing all around the edges, on the top. But I don't think you were supposed to. The Post Office didn't like it if you ran over onto the side with the address. That was, like, the rule. The address, the stamp, and only this side is for the writing.

So that's a great point, you were forced to write almost like a Post-it Note size message on there. That's why, when we studied messages on the back of postcards for an exhibit we did called "Americans on Vacation." It was fascinating not only to see what people wrote, but also there were certain formulaic ways that people wrote things. [*Alie's voice tuned to sound far away: "I love this!!! I love this."*] Because you had to write in phrases and there were certain things people commented on repeatedly: the weather; car breaking down...

**Alie:** They're like, "One of the kids poked the other's eye out, we're getting a divorce. See you soon!"

**Donna:** Right. But interestingly, we also found there was a lot of – we're not sure how far they stretched it – but people tended to want to make their vacations sound really good.

**Alie:** Oh my god, that's what they do on Instagram!

**Donna:** Exactly. And Facebook. It's a bragging thing, right? It's like, "We are here and you are not! Therefore, we're going to make it sound as good as possible." [*Alie laughs*]

You know, the classic, "Having a wonderful time, wish you were here," showed up repeatedly. It's not made up. It was always that kind of, "We're having a great time, and you're not." A little bit of one-upmanship sometimes.

**Alie:** No one's ever like, "The wife got salmonella from the shrimp buffet."

**Donna:** You don't hear that a lot on a postcard. Maybe a letter, where people have a little more time to play that out. Certainly, journals that we've read, trip diaries, where they don't expect anyone to ever read them. I have a lot myself, on those. But postcards, no. It's very short and sweet and it's mostly highlights. Like social media now. It is kind of like that. You get a picture and a little bit of impression, mostly positive.

**Alie:** The “Americans on Vacation” collection you put together, where did you get those postcards, and what was it like reading all those little messages and seeing the handwriting and the... was that mind-blowing for you?

**Donna:** I can’t even remember how we came up with the idea to do a presentation in the exhibit on the messages in postcards. I think because we read about vacations we realized that everybody’s familiar with the pictures on the front, but not a lot of people are familiar with what people say on the back. Nobody’s written anything about that. It was a new idea. So, when we started reading them, we went, “This is rich!” And we thought, “All right, we need to start accumulating a collection of postcards with interesting messages. How do we do that?”

We went to antique shows. There was one nearby here that was every month. My colleague and I went there for the specific goal of looking at postcards with messages. There were a few dealers we knew that had postcards. They were all organized by state, or topic, and they were freaked out by what we were doing. They’re like, “Well what topic are you looking for? I can help you,” and we’re like, “No, not really looking for a topic, we’re just reading the backs.” Eventually they just gave up and threw up their hands and said, “Okay, you’re on your own,” and they let us stay for an hour, two hours at a time, because they didn’t organize anything that way. No one ever bought postcards that way. We just had the best time reading all of them, and we made a pile of some of the more interesting, good and bad, messages and that became this media presentation in the exhibit.

**Aside:** This “Americans on Vacation” exhibit appropriately toured the country, and it featured these chronological looks at types of recreating we did back in the day. It had this audio-visual component of actors reading the backs of vintage postcards, kind of giving life to these long-gone moments and voices to people who would never know that their road trip or steamer cruise memories would be in the hands of postcard collectors and in the ears of future strangers. I tried so hard to find audio of this, but we’re just going to have to imagine. I’m imagining, and it’s super cool. Okay.

**Donna:** They would read a line or two from these postcards, and he put the thing together by showing the fronts and people reading the backs.

**Alie:** [*gasping*] Whooooaa!

**Donna:** It’s wonderful!

**Alie:** Oh, that’s so cool to see it come to life like that!

**Donna:** Yes. Sometimes you get media people who don’t do what you envisioned, but his was beyond what we envisioned. It was really great. That was a wonderful project.

**Alie:** When you go on vacation, or when you go to a museum, do you look at the postcards? Do you still collect them, or do you look at them fondly and say, “Oh that’s a cool rack of postcards, I’m all filled up here.”?

**Donna:** I still buy postcards, not for exactly the same reason, but what I tend to do with them – although we do get more than I can do this with – is I keep a daily journal, I have for many years –

**Alie:** You do???

**Donna:** I do.

**Alie:** Whoa, that’s amazing, Donna!

**Donna:** It helps me organize the chaos and come to terms with it sometimes. I go through about three different journals a year before I use one up and have to start another one. I pick my favorite postcards, and I put them in the back of the journal during the time which I took that trip, and every time I open the journal, now or in the future, I see those postcards, and it reminds me of the trips. It's a wonderful thing.

**Aside:** On the subject of archiving and personal memories, I had to ask her about this daily journaling, because I just *had* to. It's Dad's podcast, she'll ask what she wants! It turned into this really interesting discussion.

**Alie:** Wow, how many journals do you think you have?

**Donna:** Oh gosh. I'm afraid some future person is going to read them and go, "Oh my god, what was this crazy person thinking?" I kept journals when I was in high school and college a little bit, but I started a daily journal in – are you ready for this? – 1982, and I have daily writings in there ever since then.

**Alie:** You'd be a great expert witness. "Where were you on the night of the 19th?"

**Donna:** I'll tell you, how much do you forget? Myself and my family, and how often... I always keep last year's journal out, because it's always like, "When did we plant flowers last year?" and I'll go, "Let me check my journal! These are the flowers we planted, and these are the days we went shopping, and this was the weather..." It always comes in handy!

**Aside:** I find this extremely adorable.

**Donna:** A lot of times, it's like, "How was I feeling a year ago, and what kind of work was I doing?" when I have to document what I've accomplished for the year, or just so many things. It comes in handy. How many journals do I have? Probably... I hate to think... Umm... somewhere between 50 and 100 probably.

**Alie:** That's amazing! What happens if you decide you're going to go live on an island or something, and you leave your journals behind, would you be like, "burn these," or would you be like "I hope one day someone publishes these"?

**Donna:** I think that if someone published them, I would want them to be me.

**Alie:** Fair enough.

**Donna:** I think I'd freak out at the thought of somebody else reading them. I know my husband and my daughter watch me write in my journal every day. I hope... I would be nervous to think if... because I write things about them. And would I want them to know? Maybe sometimes, but sometimes not. It's a tool for me to try to figure out what happened, and how to proceed from there.

**Alie:** It's so interesting that the notion of public writing, short format, public journaling for others' consumption, versus the private journaling... It's interesting because it almost makes you wonder what memories are etched in permanently.

**Donna:** Wow. Yup.

**Alie:** If we don't write down the good *and* the bad...

**Donna:** I have forgotten details. A few years ago, I went back and got a second master's degree because I... for various reasons.

**Alie:** Donna!!!



**Donna:** I missed the deep studying of a topic and the writing about it, and it was a cool program on liberal studies, which is interdisciplinary. We took these amazing classes on time, on place, on memory, so I was always doing these crazy papers. One paper was on what's called autobiographical memory, and the whole key was that things that are more emotional, you remember better.

**Alie:** Oh, that makes so much sense!

**Donna:** It totally makes sense. A lot of times, the really bad things that happen are the things you remember because the emotions were higher.

**Alie:** Right, it imprints deeper.

**Donna:** It imprints, exactly.

**Alie:** Everyone knows where they were when they heard about 9/11, or JFK, or when an earthquake happened...

**Donna:** Exactly. And there's been studies on those, but then they sort of relate it to in general what you remember, and it just makes total sense. The little daily details, you totally forget.

**Alie:** That's so fascinating! Do you have a favorite postcard that you have ever seen? If there were a fire and you had to save *a postcard*... I know that's difficult...

**Donna:** Yeah... [*Jeopardy theme plays*] Ummm... [*still thinking*] Wow. I have a personal love for Route 66. We did a lot of that road several years ago, and we have at least one great postcard of a motel called Koronada Kourts on Route 66, and it's so pueblo-looking, southwestern-looking, and Route 66. I think it's more all of the memories and meaning wrapped up in that postcard as well as how beautiful the art is, and maybe that's the reason that that one sticks out in my mind, but I'm sure I have many favorites. I love many, many of them, but that one sticks out in my mind. Every time I look at it, I'm like, "Ohhhh, I love this postcard."

**Aside:** Okay, so I found a picture of this postcard, and it looks kind of like a double wide one, like it folds out and it's panoramic. It has a linen finish from the 1940s. Basically, right now I'm the postcard equivalent of a person who's gone to one wine tasting but changes all my online profiles to say I'm an oenophile.

Her favorite postcard depicts these super cute, kind of, cream-colored cottages with red tile roofs and manicured trees, and it says "Joplin, Missouri" underneath. So, I went digging to see if possibly that cottage motel was still there, because how awesome would that be? Number one, no. Just no. I looked everywhere. I used Google Maps to pinpoint the exact spot it was, and I think it was on Seventh Street and Schifferdecker in Joplin, Missouri, where there is now a convenience store named Casey's, and according to Yelp photos, they appear to sell sushi, which is a bold move.

Anyway, then I remembered, "Oh, man, Joplin! There was a twister there!" and then I spent like an hour getting super sad looking at aerial photos of the aftermath of the May 2011 tornado, and looking at maps of its path, and it missed the former location of these Koronada Kourts motel by like two houses. It went right through where it used to be. Nothing like the mutability of the human-made landscape to make you appreciate time captured in historical artefacts, and our fleeting presence on the planet.

Anyway no, you can't visit Koronado Kourts on a road trip because it's now a mini-mart. But you *can* see the postcard online on the Henry Ford's website, and I'll post it on the *Ologies* Instagram, which is kind of like a digital postcard these days. So, there's that.

**Donna:** I'm not sure that the Koronado Kourts are still there, I just love the postcard. It looks like a suburban city of little motel courts, and it just... "The best lodging on Route 66." It's a combination of things.

**Alie:** What do you think of the movie *Postcards from the Edge*? Did you ever see it? Meryl Streep.

**Donna:** How have I not seen that?

**Alie:** It's *Postcards from the Edge*, but it's Meryl Streep plays Carrie Fisher –

**Donna:** Is that her memoir?

**Alie:** Yes! I can't think of any other movies dealing with postcards, can you? *The Postcard Always Rings Twice*?

**Donna:** A little bit with *National Lampoon's Vacation*, they show postcards in the credits.

**Aside:** Oh man. I just pulled up the title sequence of the 1983 Chevy Chase blockbuster comedy *National Lampoon's Vacation*, and Donna, right on the money! It is postcard porn and you are going to love it. So many motel postcards! So many! [*clip from "Holiday Road"*]

**Alie:** How do you feel about the style of, you know, it'll say "Wyoming!" and then each letter has a horse?

**Donna:** Love those things! They sum up a place. I think they're so clever. They still sell replicas of those. I don't think they make new ones. We were just in Wyoming last summer, and I was like, "Oh look! One of those Wyoming postcards with the scenery!" Yellowstone has one. And then if you get to know a place, you have to identify each landmark in the letter, and go, "Well, that's not a very good version of it," or, "They really missed this thing," or, "Who were these people who picked this??" It becomes very interactive actually. because it's art... I just think they're very clever. I love them.

**Alie:** I always thought they were so beautiful. Do you want to do a quick lightning round?

**Donna:** Okay.

**Alie:** These are people who are Patreon subscribers, they get to submit questions to the ologists. I put out a call for deltiology questions, and here is what people asked.

Charles Anderson wants to know: What's the biggest thing you can rightly call a postcard? I guess there's probably a size limitation right? Like maybe...

**Donna:** You know, I have some giant postcards. I think we have oversized postcards in our collection. I think they're about a foot.

**Alie:** Wow!

**Aside:** Y'all, I looked this up. I'm too excited! Okay. Technically you *can* send a giant postcard through the mail, provided that it is "sufficiently stiff to make it through the machines." So, you don't get the cheaper rates if it's huge, but you can mail postcards up to 12 inches by 15 inches. Over a square foot of like, "Dear Aunt Nadele – I went to a lake and saw a weird bird, and then we ate corn dogs, and Barry and Jonas had a water balloon fight. And then... and then... and then..." There's so much space! So many mems! You should mail

someone – hear me out – a giant postcard, and just see what they say. Don't tell them it's coming, just mail them a giant postcard. Please do this and report back. Thank you.

**Alie:** And you can still send those by mail?

**Donna:** That's a good question, maybe they don't even allow them anymore, but there was a period of time when they were out, and whether you needed extra postage – I bet you did.

**Alie:** I'm sure you did!

**Donna:** I bet you did. But I've seen these oversized postcards. And probably they're not around too much because they're too expensive. Postcards are supposed to be cheap. You're supposed to use one stamp and be done with it. If there are some bigger, good question.

**Alie:** Al Martinez wants to know: With social media so prominent, has the romance with postcards faded, do you think? Or do you think people still have a romance about them?

**Donna:** I don't know that people send them so much anymore. I mean, jeez, you gotta find a stamp, where do you even find a stamp?

**Alie:** Bottom of your purse, stuck to something else?

**Donna:** It's amazing sometimes when gift shops have stamps at the cashier. You have to ask, because I always have to send a Mother's Day card to my mom when I'm on a vacation, so I'm like, "Uhhh, I forgot stamps!" Or, ten years ago, we were still sending postcards. My daughter bless her heart, who's 28 now, used to send a postcard to each of her dolls.

**Alie:** Aaah! Seriously?!

**Donna:** Seriously. We would go on vacation and then we would get home and there would be the postcards.

**Alie:** Did she save those? I hope...

**Donna:** Oh, of course! She saves everything. She's her mother's daughter.

**Alie:** She's the daughter of a curator. Of course.

**Donna:** She saves it away in drawers, everything... it's like, "Can you please get rid of some things?" "No, I can't get rid of anything! It's going to be collectible someday." That's her favorite line. But no, I thought that was the coolest idea ever. I don't think that postcard purchasing has gotten less because people buy them for themselves. Certainly, that's what we do. We come home with a bunch of postcards wherever we go, and we save them. We have a giant growing and out-of-space box for postcards that we just put our collected postcards from trips.

**Alie:** Well, it's lovely because a lot of times you might take a nice photo, but you're not going to print it out. It's nice to have something tangible that you can look at, especially when it's a beautiful, professional photograph. Or a photo of a jackalope, or something weird.

**Donna:** People may send joke ones. That's a good question. I think the biggest problem is the need for a stamp. Who would think to even bring them, and who even knows what it costs to send a postcard now, as opposed to a letter? I think people buy them in a spur-of-the-moment buying souvenir mania, because you want visual memories of those trips. But buying them is important when you're there, for your own memories. And you're right, you can show them to people, but I think they're more keepsakes, like other kind of keepsakes. They're just beautifully stunning visual records of a trip.

**Alie:** I think when you do buy them and send them, even if you're doing it kind of like... the same way people buy vinyl. You don't need to listen to something on vinyl. It is large, it is cumbersome.

I think it's interesting when you go on vacation and you buy a bunch of postcards and then if you have people's addresses, to sit at a café or a coffee shop or a diner and write things out. It's part of your vacation to sit there.

**Donna:** It's a wonderful idea. And I hope that people are doing that, because I find that we never have time to sit there and be reflective. I have to force myself to keep that journal going, and sometimes all I can do is write notes and write it at the airport, or when I get home, because we never have time to be reflective, and I'm sad about that. Seems like we used to have more time to do that. Postcards are part of that. You have to sit there and think, "How do I sum this experience up for somebody?" You know, one line on Facebook with a picture, just ever so much easier.

**Alie:** But postcards are so personal because I'm not going to write the same thing to my sister as I would... you know what I mean?

**Donna:** Absolutely. That's true. And for somebody to get something in the mail these days is so... exceptionally wonderful, to get a personal note. I think we should revive the writing of postcards.

**Alie:** I'm with you, Donna! Hundred percent! Sarah Nichelle says: I see your old weird postcards, and I raise you Victorian Christmas cards. Have you seen them before and are they better or worse than the postcards, in your opinion?

**Donna:** I think Victorian Christmas cards are like early postcards. They're very embellished, they're sometimes a little imprinted, a little 3D engraved, raised sometimes, if that's what the meaning is. I know in the early 20th century, for every holiday there were these postcard greeting cards. That may be – I mean, I'm sure there were more Christmas ones of those than any other holiday. That's what we were talking about in the beginning, that was the early form of greeting cards *and* the early form of postcards. I think as greeting cards became a bigger industry – you can probably thank Hallmark for that – postcards went off in another direction, which was as souvenirs.

**Aside:** I wanted some visual references for Victorian Christmas cards because I didn't know what this question was about, and boy howdy did the internet deliver! I'm sure there were plenty examples of boring bowls of winter treats and beautiful calligraphy with holiday tidings, but there are some straight-up acid trip offerings also.

Picture Victorian era postcards with drawings of frogs stabbing each other? What?! There's a robin dead, belly-up, on this plain beige surface, bearing the message, "May yours be a joyous Christmas!" There's one of an army of ants slaughtering each other, one ant holding a flag that reads, "The compliments of the season!"

Another one I saw has St. Nick kidnapping a child, and then there's my personal favorite, a message of, "May Christmas be merry," alongside the visual of a frog and a stag beetle dancing in the silvery blue dusk, while a nearby fly plays the tambourine! I kid you not! I have never considered a tattoo before, but man, that is some solid imagery.

And also, I'm like, "What!?" But I suppose people smoked a ton of opium back then. Another explanation is people didn't care about Christmas as much, and they were like, "I dunno. Let's make this weird." And/or the visuals were socially relevant references that are just

totally lost today. Like if you went back in time from the future and you were like, “Why does this Jack in the Box magazine ad have a guy in a suit, but with a huge clown head? He’s holding a burger? He doesn’t have a mouth, this isn’t normal!” I guess maybe with these Victorian Christmas postcards, you just had to be there. And on opium.

**Alie:** Ashley Perez wants to know: Is there proper postcard etiquette?

**Donna:** [*laughing*] That is a great question. You have to realize that anybody could read it.

**Alie:** Yeah, that’s true!

**Donna:** Right? The postman could read it, the postal worker could read it, your mom could read it. It’s not private.

**Alie:** Good point. [*clip of a scratchy recording of old-time piano music playing in background while Alie says in an imperious old-timey voice: “Dearest Hildegard, I have enjoyed relations with 17 nubile suitors on this sojourn to Niagara Falls.”*]

**Donna:** You probably do want to think about what you’re writing, because it’s really a very un-private form of communication. That’s what makes them so cheap, but boy, they are very public. Maybe what lent itself to that sort of formulaic way of writing, people didn’t really reveal what was really going on, and part of it might be...

**Alie:** Their postman might read it!

**Donna:** Yeah. Part of it might be they didn’t want people to know what it was really like, but part of it might be that they knew anybody could read it.

**Alie:** I am willing to wager that every postcard that has been sent through the U.S. postal mail has been read by at least 12 people.

**Donna:** It is a little funny now to read postcards in our collection that you know individuals meant for their friends and family, and here they are in this public archive, and everybody’s reading them. We’re reading them because they have some historical interest to us. It’s a little... it’s a little funny sometimes to think about the original purpose being personal.

**Alie:** Mm-hmm. But it’s like... I don’t know, I think that almost all of us strive for our narrative to be immortal in some way. You know?

**Donna:** That’s true, and I think people were conscious of that when they write those messages. Like, “Who’s going to read this, how’s it going to sound?” It’s not... you know, when I write in my own personal journal, it’s stream of consciousness. Every once in a while I think, “How can I write this a little better?” But most important is just getting all those thoughts down. If you’re writing a postcard, you sort of have to think about what you’re writing. Facebook too, it’s not unlike, “How do I want to word this exactly right so I get the most likes? Can I word it better? Is it worth sending? What are people going to think of it if I put this picture in?” There’s always that quality when you know somebody else is going to read it.

**Alie:** I think it’s great to know that our stories live on past us. Even if it’s just something mundane like, “We had a very delicious cantaloupe at breakfast and then we saw flamingos.” That’s part of your story that would be lost.

**Donna:** Exactly. That takes on an importance. I’ve read a lot about going on vacation and as soon as you leave home, you go off into another frame of mind. You are not home anymore; you are away from home. It’s a different world, you’re experiencing different things, you’re hoping to grow from it, you’re hoping to come back more relaxed, or smarter, or just a better

person, a different person, and postcards are all part of that. So yes, to be immortalized, because you feel that way during your trip, “I have done something different. I have changed in some way now.”

**Alie:** So true.

**Aside:** Also, studies show that just planning a vacation and having something to look forward to boosts your mood for months before the trip. So, get a good deal, book something in advance. Go somewhere, anywhere, even if it’s not that far away and you camp in the dirt, because it’s worth it and it’s working brain magic on you before you even go (Alie Ward pleaded with herself, via an aside on her podcast).

**Alie:** I have two more questions. What is the hardest thing about your job, especially when it comes to postcard curation, what’s the most annoying thing? Is it paper weevils? Is it alphabetizing?

**Donna:** Umm... Well, I’ve been lucky that I don’t have to be the person that does the conservation, the arrangement, the cataloging. I just get to look at them. [*Homer Simpson scream*] Possibly the most frustrating part of it is that as technology of our computer system changes, the information looks different. We did a massive cataloging and imaging of our postcard collection 20 years ago, and the pictures don’t look good anymore. You can see some weird, vague version of it, as opposed to some other collections that have been more recently digitized. Because with, how many?, 2,000 postcards, you cannot look at them all in person, you have to select. As I pick new things for projects, they then digitize them so they look nice, but that’s a very long, slow process.

**Alie:** So, photographic archiving?

**Donna:** I think that’s a good way of putting it. At the other end is, “Oh my gosh, I get to go look at postcards today?! Oh my gosh, look at these amazing things in our collection!” That’s the coolest thing. Get out of your office and go look at postcards in the archives, and it makes my day to do things like that. It’s the best job on Earth when I get to do things like that.

**Alie:** That was my next question, is what’s your favorite thing about it. Does it feel like you’re cheating because you’re getting paid to do something that you want to do anyway?

**Donna:** No, it all balances out at the end of the day.

**Alie:** [*laughs*] You’re like, “I’m still at work.”

**Donna:** That’s the high point, to escape from the emails and the meetings, and just kind of work with the pure collections. That’s always been what I’ve loved about museum work. It’s not just looking at them, but figuring out what the context is behind them, that’s the whole reason I’m in this. What do objects mean in people’s lives, past and present? That’s what I most love. Being able to go look at a collection of postcards, it’s the best.

**Alie:** Always learning is probably something that you love about your job.

**Donna:** Boy, you pick up things well! That is one of the main things I love in general. I always love to keep learning. Creativity and learning are two of the things that keep me going, in all ways. If I can bring them into my job, so much the better. If it feels creative, I’m good. If it feels like I’m learning new things, I’m good. So yeah, you got a good bead on that.

**Alie:** Thank you so much for doing this, this was so interesting! Now you know you’re a deltiologist.

**Donna:** I’m a deltiologist.

**Alie:** Isn't that crazy?!

**Donna:** It's... Wow. I love it.

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So Donna, once again, is the Curator of Public Life at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, which is such a lovely place. It's full of all kinds of history from Edgar Allen Poe's desk, to the Rosa Parks bus, to presidential limos, and postcards, and I'm a correspondent on their Saturday morning CBS show, *The Henry Ford's Innovation Nation* with Mo Rocca but they are in no way paying me to make this episode, and I try to hide this podcast from them because I swear so heavily in it usually, except not that much in this episode. I'll be there actually at the museum shooting from July 8th to 13th coming up. Just in case you see me around the halls, if you happen to be there, say hi to ol' DadWard.

You can join up on the [Facebook](#) Ologies Podcast group. Typically, if they have meetups, they usually arrange them there. We did that last time I was there a few weeks ago. Digital postcard archives are at [TheHenryFord.org](#), and I'll also post links from this episode at [AlieWard.com/Ologies](#).

You can also find photos of images we talked about on the Ologies [Instagram](#), just @Ologies. We're also on [Twitter](#) @Ologies, and I'm @AlieWard on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

Thank you to Hannah Lipow and Erin Talbert for being just lovely and wonderful friends and adminning the Facebook Ologies Podcast group. If you'd like to support the podcast, you can do so by getting yourself some sweet merch at [OlogiesMerch.com](#), there's shirts, and totes, and pins, and dad hats, and phone cases, and onesies. Thank you Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch for running all of that.

You can kick in as little as a buck a month and become a patron at [Patreon.com/Ologies](#). You get to hear what episodes are coming up next and submit questions for me to ask the ologists. Thank you all for making this podcast possible. I would not get the incredible editing of Steven Ray Morris without you.

The music was written by Nick Thorburn, and the title of the theme song is officially "Alie at the Museum." Isn't that cool? So, now you know.

And you also know, at the end of each episode, I tell you a secret. I'm gonna tell you about my latest horrible snack, because I know Shannon Feltus loves those. Tonight, a few hours ago, I really wanted cookie dough so bad, and I didn't have any cookie dough, but I took some margarine and I mixed it with a little bit of brown sugar in a bowl, and I ate it. And then I remembered that I had these lentil potato chips in the cupboard, and I was like, "Would this be a good dip?" So, *[laughs]* I put some margarine sugar on a lentil potato chip. And it wasn't as gross as it sounds.

Anyway, I've been gone a lot and haven't been grocery shopping, so the cupboards are a little bare, and I will rectify that tomorrow.

There's your secret. We all eat weird stuff, right? Okay, so please continue to ask super smart people just stupid questions, because honestly, I think those are the best questions anyway, and I think that they really secretly love it.

All right, berbye.

*Transcribed by:*

*Lauren Fenton*

*Asriel E King, from lovely Ithaca, NY. Send me postcards!!!*

**Some links which you may find helpful:**

[Postcard history 101](#)

[Oldest postcard in the world](#)

[Eugene Gomberg from Latvia bought a \\$40K postcard](#)

[Gentleman Posed with a Chair, 1910](#)

[Koronado Kortyard postcard](#)

[Oooh, you can buy it for \\$10 on eBay](#)

[What is standing where the Koronado Kourtyard used to be?](#)

[National Lampoons title sequence](#)

[How big can a mailed postcard be?](#)

[Victorian-era Christmas postcards](#)

[It's pronounced jiff. I'm sorry.](#)

*For comments and inquiries on this or other transcripts, please contact [OlogiteEmily@gmail.com](mailto:OlogiteEmily@gmail.com)*