

Three Rivers Historian

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Summer Pastime One of Several Entertainment Options

Like everywhere else in America, baseball has been a popular sport in Oklahoma for well over a century. It was a "portable" game, requiring only a couple of bats, a few balls, some gloves and a handful of players on each team. It could be played on any makeshift field around any town on any occasion and often was. Sacks of hay or tin cans might mark the bases on prairie baseball diamonds in empty lots or at the outskirts of town.

Soldiers at Fort Gibson may have played the first baseball games in Indian Territory, bringing it with them from back east. The Cherokee Male Seminary in Tahlequah boasted of a winning baseball team as early as 1885. Bacone Indian University and Henry Kendall College in Muskogee also had early teams.

It wasn't uncommon for businesses to field a team among their employees as a way to advertise their business. Both the Patterson Mercantile and the Harsha & Spaulding Mercantile were known to have baseball teams around 1900.

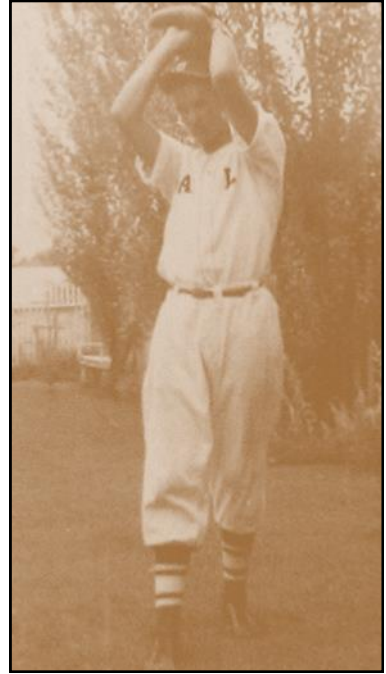
By 1889, Joe "Iron Man" McGinnity, who later played in the major leagues, was organizing town teams in Indian Territory. Checotah, Tahlequah, Eufaula and Wagoner all had teams in the 1890s. Muskogee had both white and black teams for a number of years.

Makeshift stands for fans of the game consisted of planks placed on empty barrels. Rules for fans were simple: No alcohol, no betting, no profane language and killing the umpire was strictly forbidden. On any Sunday during the summer a sandlot game was being played somewhere and only the fall harvest brought an end to this summer pleasure.

As baseball grew to a professional sport, minor league teams were developed in Oklahoma. Around WWI, 37 towns in Oklahoma had minor league teams including Muskogee and Okmulgee who were part of the Western Association. Muskogee's minor league baseball field, called Athletic Park, was located where the Civic Center is today.

In 1922, the New York Yankees, including their most famous player Babe Ruth, played an exhibition game against the Brooklyn Dodgers at Athletic Park. The Yankees, like many other ball teams visiting Muskogee in those days, stayed at the Severs Hotel

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Downtown Muskogee Had a Theater on Almost Every Corner

The theatrical history of Muskogee began before statehood. Many Muskogee old-timers remember going to the theater as a major event in their lives. Movie houses used to dot the streets of Muskogee and were not only places to be entertained, but they served as community gathering places that sparked unity in town.

Muskogee's first theater was the Turner Opera House which opened in 1894 and seated 700. It was located north of the corner of Main and Broadway. This was the beginning of a rich and colorful entertainment heritage for the city.

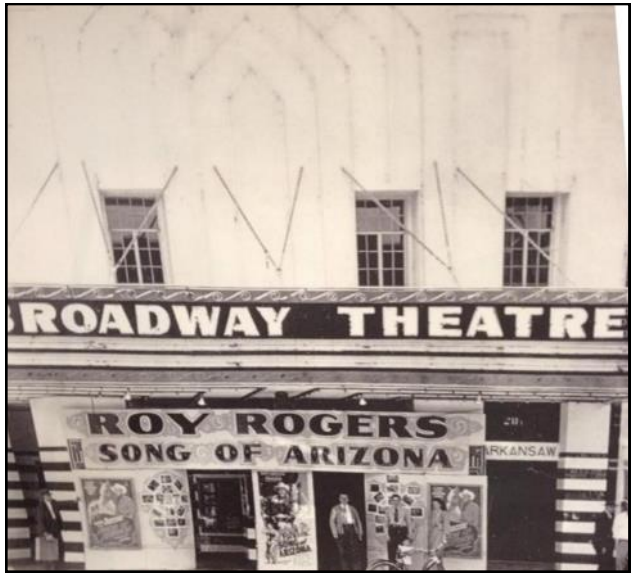
After the demise of the Turner Opera House, civic leaders believed that Muskogee needed a fancy theater to promote the town. They encouraged the building of the Hinton Theater at the corner of Third and Court. Colonel William Hinton, an entertainment entrepreneur, successfully promoted it as a first-class vaudeville house featuring top entertainers on their way to either Kansas City or Dallas-Fort Worth.

One of his most successful presentations was Miss Maude Adams as "Peter Pan" which played to huge crowds. But his major coup was getting the "Divine" Sarah Bernhardt to appear on the Hinton stage in 1905. This same year saw the Hinton host the Sequoyah Convention which was an effort to create a separate Indian state.

The invention of motion pictures doomed vaudeville and brought the public a new and exciting form of entertainment. The ownership of the Hinton Theater also changed when Fred Turner bought it in 1920 and renamed it the Orpheum.

Like many cities, Muskogee saw motion picture houses spring up on almost every corner. You could take a stroll in downtown Muskogee and have your choice of some of the new “flicks” at seven different locations on Broadway and Okmulgee. Names such as the Wigwam, Grand, Gem, Palace, Lyric, Gaiety and the Merchant’s dotted the streets of Muskogee.

From the group of early businessmen who tried to make a success from motion pictures emerged two men who would dominate the theater industry in Muskogee. George Procter and Hugh



Marsh became the major entertainment entrepreneurs in this area.

Procter and Marsh were working in Tulsa when Fred Turner hired them to wire his new Broadway Theatre in 1912. They stayed on to work for Turner. Procter as stage manager and Marsh as movie machine operator worked for handsome salaries of \$18 per week.

The Broadway, located at 211 W. Broadway, became a well-

known vaudeville house and was listed in “Herbert Lloyd’s Vaudeville Guide,” published in 1919.

In 1923, Procter and Marsh pooled their resources to lease the Broadway from Turner. Two years later, they acquired a second theater and formed a partnership with the up-and-coming Robb and Rowley Theatre Circuit of Texas. Fred Turner sold the Orpheum to Procter and Marsh in 1926.

The new owners continued to book road shows and vaudeville acts to supplement their motion pictures. Charles Procter remembers many of the acts he saw here as a small boy. His personal favorite was Oklahoma’s favorite son, Will Rogers.

Charles said, “Will’s act basically consisted of him sitting on his horse on stage and talking to his audience as he twirled a rope. The crowd loved it so much they wouldn’t let him leave the stage. Finally Will climbed on top of the piano in the orchestra pit and talked for a while

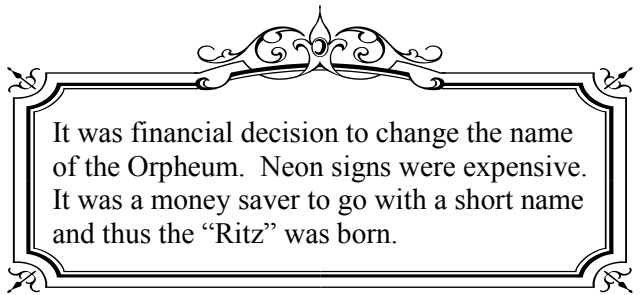
and continued to talk as he walked down the aisle and out the front door.”

In 1928 Procter and Marsh renovated the Orpheum and equipped it for

the new and somewhat controversial “talking” pictures. They also changed the theater’s name.

“This was a financial decision,” Charles remembered. “Neon signs were just being used and they were expensive. It was a money saver to go with a short name and thus the ‘Ritz’ was born.”

The “talkies” and the motion picture industry boomed over the next decades and so did the fortunes of Procter and Marsh.



The “Joy Boys,” as they were known , acquired several other theaters in Muskogee. At the height of the movie industry, they operated ten theaters.

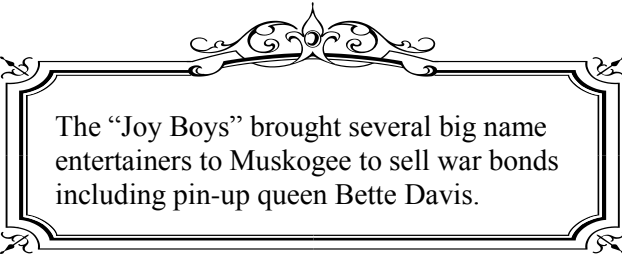
The flagship house was the classy Ritz, seating 1,500 people at 300 Court Street. The Broadway Theater was a 211 N. Broadway and the Yale was across the street from it.

The Grand served the black community and was located on Second Street. The new Roxy still stands where it was built in 1947 when it replaced the old Roxy lost to a fire. Their two drive-in theaters were the 64 and the P&M.

Their peak years occurred during World War II. Business was so good, with Camp Gruber in the area, that Procter and

Marsh opened a theater in Braggs to bring entertainment to the troops.

The theater industry took the lead in promoting war



The “Joy Boys” brought several big name entertainers to Muskogee to sell war bonds including pin-up queen Bette Davis.

bonds and the local “Joy Boys” more than did their part. They gave free shows and arranged concerts for the cause. They were able to get several big name entertainers to Muskogee to sell war bonds including the pin-up queen Bette Davis.

The biggest event of the 1950s occurred when the Ritz hosted the world premier of “Jim Thorpe: All American” in 1951. Part of the movie had been filmed in Muskogee and the Procters went all out to make the premier a success. There were parades, food, receptions for the stars, and, of course, the first showing of the movie itself.

In 1957, when the movie industry had fallen on hard times,
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Golfing Comes To Muskogee

In the summer of 1902, residents in Muskogee started talking about establishing a country club. This led to the organization of a club near Fort Gibson named the Town and Country Club.

Tams Bixby, a newspaper publisher, served as the first president. J. Fentress Wisdom was the club secretary. Within five years, however, use of a site on the east side of the Arkansas River drew opposition.

During the first month of 1907, organizers formed the Muskogee Golf Association. Their purpose was to establish a club closer to Muskogee. In addition, it was the new club's intention to absorb the Town and Country Club in Fort Gibson

The golf club, limited to 100 members, paid \$160 an acre to purchase a hundred acre tract from a Mr. Garland. This land northeast of town had been a cotton farm.

The new location was near Hyde Park and was accessible by trolley. It was located three miles outside of the Muskogee city limits. While being more convenient, it was still far enough away from the noise and dust of town life.

The new location already contained a large house that could serve as a temporary clubhouse. Having a connection to the city water line was a bonus. The organizers planned to spend \$25,000 more for new buildings and landscaping.

Just after Independence Day, the club sold the property at Fort Gibson to Frank J. Boudinot. This property included the barracks building and other structures used by officers stationed at the post decades earlier. With funds in hand, planning for the new site began.

The club brought in a specialist from St. Louis to help with the landscaping. George E. Kessler had previously been in charge

of city parks for both St. Louis and Kansas City. He also landscaped the 1,200-acre property used for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition.

Kessler, a German, was a pioneering American landscape architect. Kessler envisioned a fountain, immense flowerbeds, shady walks and vine-covered pergolas. He also thought a vegetable garden should accompany the wide stretch of lawns. He drew plans for tennis courts, too.



Construction of the new clubhouse began almost immediately. The new building cost between six and seven thousand dollars. About the same time, the club built a golf course. Underbrush, weeds and old cotton plants made way for the first nine holes. This was the second nine-hole golf course built in Oklahoma. J. F. Darby, president in 1908, promoted the expansion of membership. By the end of April that year, there were a hundred and thirty-five members, a third more than the old limit allowed.

On May 23, 1908, the club hosted its first handicap golf tournament. The grass barely covered the golf course. A dance followed the game that evening. The club's first golf pro arrived two weeks later.

William Nichols arrived in June, having learned the game in his native country of Scotland. Besides giving golfing lessons, he would win the first Oklahoma Open Golf Tournament in 1910. He followed this with another win the next year. He also won in 1914 and 1920. Muskogee's golf pro was truly Oklahoma's master golfer. Many local residents learned to play golf from his tutoring.

— *Wally Waits*

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- Barber Dimes, Halves, Bust and Capped Dimes
- Quarters and Halves
- Morgan, Peace, Trade and Seated Dollars



Misc.

- Maps
- Pre-Statehood Cancelled Bank Checks
- Paperwork & artifacts of the Cherokee, Choctaw and Creek Nations

Auto Racing in Muskogee

In the early part of 1910, the citizens of Muskogee passed a \$50,000 bond issue to build a half-mile horse track at the fairgrounds. By October 1910, the local newspaper stated that it was the best horse race track in the entire southwest, and the grandstands, then under construction, would seat 3,600 people when completed.

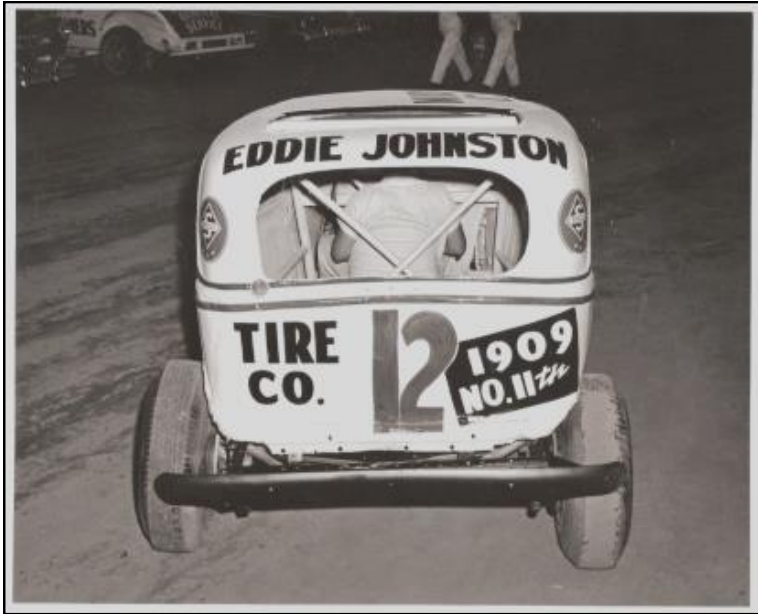
There would be at least 1,000 seats ready in time for the upcoming fair. In addition, six modern barns were to be built that would house 150 race horses and they could be wintered here in Muskogee. They stated that the new race track and stables would create a number of year-round jobs.¹

Muskogee followed the national interest in “motor cars,” and it wasn’t long before auto-racing became a new sport across the nation. Local racers began to look at the horse-track at the Muskogee Fairgrounds. Muskogee’s auto-racing history goes back to that period. Over a century ago, the *Muskogee Times-Democrat* contained a front page article dated August 19, 1912:

“Muskogee is to see in action a half-dozen of the world’s greatest speed creations and four celebrated automobile drivers next Saturday at the fair grounds.

“Arrangements were made this morning for the famous racing machines and daredevils to stop over in the city on their way north to the big Elgin Road Race. All the cars and drivers are coming from Galveston where they have been taking part in the World’s Championship Beach Meet. The star of the bunch is Louis Disbrow, generally regarded as the ‘World’s Racing Monarch.’

“The idea in coming to Muskogee is not a money-making proposition, but to endeavor to lower the world’s half-mile track marks. Disbrow already holds the world’s five and ten mile dirt course records and he wants the half mile and mile records, both currently held by Barney Oldfield, and made at Toledo, Ohio, two years ago.”



Louis Disbrow was well-known in the auto racing world, and one of his cars was the “great 300 horsepower Fiat racer,” known as the “Jay-Eye-See.” At Galveston this car had covered the mile course on the beach in 31.11 seconds. In Daytona, Florida, it had run the measured two mile section in 57 seconds.

“Since then they have improved it in many ways and it is much faster. Disbrow will also bring his Simplex Zip to Muskogee, the holder of seven world’s dirt track marks. The only records it does not hold on a half mile track are the half mile and mile figures and Muskogee speed fans may see it acquire these two records next Saturday.²

“The other drivers who will appear in Muskogee are also well-known in the auto world. Joe Nikrent of California, holder of seven world speed records and driver of the famous Case Bullet, and Heinie Ulbrecht, the German pilot who came to this country a short time ago, are two of the best known speed demons who are also entered in the Elgin Road Race.”

The *Muskogee Times-Democrat* on August 26, 1912,

reported that Disbrow failed to break any records on the previous Saturday. The hot day and whirling clouds of dust held down the speeds for the day, but mile after mile was driven at speeds of about fifty miles per hour, which are excellent speeds for a half-mile track.

“A crowd of about one thousand persons was in the grandstand while about twice as many more saw the races free from the fences along the backstretch. The feature of the day’s racing was the driving of Disbrow, the star performer, who far out-shone the other drivers in daring bursts of speed on the stretches and around the turns.

“Honors in the one-mile trials went to Disbrow and his ‘Jay-Eye-See,’ with a time of 1:19.” [Apparently two laps.] This was said to be the fastest that Disbrow had driven the big 290 horsepower racer on a half-mile track.

The newspaper reporter summed up the event with: “To those who expected to see the miles reeled off in forty or fifty seconds, the races were a disappointment. But to those who know anything about the sport, the drivers put on some creditable exhibitions, and took many risks in order to make a better showing on the watch by a second or two.”³

Many of the early race drivers toured the country and put on “exhibition races” and time-trials because there were not enough cars to conduct a real auto race. The biggest race in the U.S.A. soon became the Indianapolis 500 which began in 1911 at the now famous speedway.

Muskogee continued to hold special auto races at the fairgrounds track leading up to World War I when racing was curtailed for the war effort. After the war ended, the newspaper began reporting on racing again, especially during the Muskogee Free State Fair.

— *Glenn Smith*

Muskogee Times-Democrat, October 3, 1910, page one.

Muskogee Times-Democrat, August 19, 1912, page one.

Muskogee Times-Democrat, August 26, 1912, page seven



The Lyric Theater in Muskogee

the Proctors were still able to arrange for the premier showing of “The Oklahoman.” Its star, Joel McCrea, came to Muskogee and attended numerous receptions all the while signing autographs for the fans. By the 1950s it was evident there was going to be another revolution in the entertainment industry.

Television brought the motion pictures right into

people’s living rooms and the theater houses were in trouble. One by one Muskogee’s theaters closed until, by the late 1960s, only the Ritz was opened on a regular basis.

The final blow to downtown theaters like the Ritz was the change in American lifestyle. Downtowns were dying all across the nation as the population moved to outlying areas. New shopping centers and malls sprang up in the suburbs. Major corporations built small multi-screen theaters and these new malls and the older downtown malls could not compete.

The time of small independents like the Proctors was now a thing of the past. The Ritz closed its doors for the final time in 1977.

After providing Muskogee with its major entertainment for more than half a century, the downtown theaters became a part of the city’s history.

— *Lillian Jayne*

Upcoming Events at Three Rivers Museum

Three Rivers History Explorers

Tuesday, February 25

6:30 p.m.

Hear a presentation on *Manard Bayou and the Manard Bayou Community* by Jennifer Sparks

Greenhill Cemetery Trolley Tour

Saturday, March 8

10:30 to 3:00

Enjoy a leisurely guided tour through a local historic cemetery and learn about interesting people buried here, gravestone symbolism, and community history

Girl Scout Day

Saturday, March 22

Celebrate Muskogee's scouting tradition and the world's first Girl Scout cookie sale. Enjoy Thin Mint truffles, a display of vintage uniforms and special presentations. Admission is free.

Historic Trolley Tours

Month of April

Enjoy a trolley tour of Muskogee's historic districts and beautiful Honor Heights Park during the Azalea Festival.

Historic Homes & Buildings Tour

Saturday, June 7

10:00 a.m. to 4:p.m.

Tour some of Muskogee's beautiful historic buildings.



The City of Muskogee steamboat brought river traffic back to the Three Forks region.

A Fine Resort

The Fort Gibson Post

September 16, 1909

Muskogee people are aware of the fine summer resort afforded here in Fort Gibson, where cool, refreshing breezes blow on the hills and along clear, cool Grand River, where there is fine boating and bathing right here in town.

The fine river steamer, *The City of Muskogee*, has been tied up here all summer, occupied by Mr. J. J. Harman and family of Muskogee; Mr. Harman being engaged in the gravel business.

The boat is 120 feet long and 20 feet wide, with three decks, being finely fitted with state-rooms, dining room, kitchen, bath rooms and other accommodations, affording rooms for guests, of which there have been a number from Muskogee and other places during the summer.

continued on next page

Last Saturday they entertained the following guests: Mr. and Mrs. Murry Haskell; Don D. Collie; Mr. Harry Greiner; Mr. and Mrs. E.F. Paxon, all of Muskogee. Mr. Hunter Winsett, Higgins, Texas; Mr. Wm. C. Capps, Shawnee, OK; Miss Ruby Geirns, Mountain View, OK; Miss May Calkins, Wagoner, OK.

Mr. Murry Haskell is the son of Governor Haskell, and a fine young man, while his wife is a most lovable woman. The Sunday before, Miss Lucy Haskell and other young ladies were the guests of Miss Harmon. The Haskell's and Harmon's were old neighbors in Ohio, and are still fast friends.

—*Transcribed by Glenn Smith*

Your Ad Here

To help us cover printing costs, The Historian is offering this ad space to museum members. We will be pleased to help promote your business, special upcoming event or cause. Contact the museum at 918-686-6624 or Historian editor Jonita Mullins at 918-682-0312 for more information on placing an ad. Our rates are quite reasonable and The Historian reaches all museum members and visitors. Let's work together to promote your business and ours!



Call for Articles

The Three Rivers Historian welcomes articles about the history of the Three Forks region of Oklahoma covering Cherokee, Mayes, McIntosh, Muskogee, Okmulgee, Sequoyah, and Wagoner Counties.

Please submit articles of 750 to 3,000 words in length to The Historian, 220 Elgin Ave., Muskogee, OK 74401 or by e-mail to 3riversmuseum@sbcglobal.net.

From Our Archives



This hand-held Stereoscope was an early optical viewer that magnified an image from view cards called stereographs. It was an early fusion of photographs and binoculars that provided a greater depth perception to an image than just a photograph alone.

The stereoscope provided a right-eye and left-eye image that would merge when viewed through the lenses. It would have been a novel and fascinating form of entertainment for folks around the turn of

the last century. This artifact is currently on display in the “Miss Alice’s Parlor” exhibit at Three Rivers Museum.



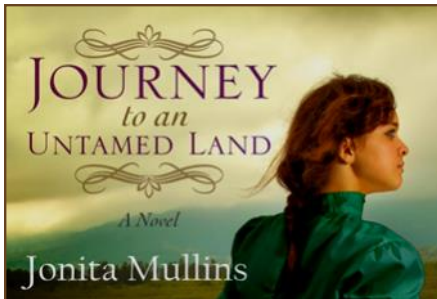
The Muskogee Reds played ball at Muskogee's Athletic Park

because it was close enough for the players to walk to Athletic Park.

Buck Ross, a Muskogee resident, remembered pitching for the Muskogee Reds at Athletic Park in the late 40s and early 50s. He won 16 games in one season here in Muskogee and usually would pitch the entire nine innings. He recalled pitching against Mickey Mantle when he played for the Joplin Miners.

Baseball was just one of several pastimes that provided entertainment in Muskogee in years gone by.

— *Jonita Mullins*



The story of the first schoolteacher to journey westward and teach among the Osages in Indian Territory. Leaving betrayal and heartache behind, she finds the journey will test her courage and faith in this untamed land.

Available now at the
Whistlestop Gift Shop!

We Need Your Support

Last year, Three Rivers Museum took possession of the Oak Grove Schoolhouse after it was moved from its historic location near Wybark in Wagoner County. This African-American, one-room school was donated to the museum by Mark and Mitzi Bowser.

Museum staff and volunteers will restore the school and develop a teaching curriculum for students.

This effort will require funds above the normal costs associated with the museum and donations are needed.

Visit 3riversmuseum.com to learn more about making a donation to the Oak Grove School Restoration. For a minimum gift of \$50, you will receive a commemorative brick to be placed in a walkway to the school. Your gift is tax deductible.



The interior of the schoolhouse will need extensive renovations to prepare it for students..



The exterior of the building will require paint, new windows, a porch and steps.

Shop the Whistlestop!

The Whistlestop Gift Shop at Three Rivers Museum offers several old postcards for sale.

You'll also find a great selection of books, artwork and mementos at the Whistlestop.

Open Wed~Sat, 10~5 or online at 3riversmuseum.com.



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