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Review of *Taming the Land: The Lost Postcard  
Photographs of the Texas High Plains* by John Miller  
Morris

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*Taming the Land: The Lost Postcard Photographs of the Texas High Plains.* By John Miller Morris. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009. x + 220 pp. Maps, photographs, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

The advent of the real photographic postcard (RPPC) and the burgeoning growth in the early twentieth century of the Texas Panhandle area of the southern Great Plains coincide. More than 100,000 “optimists” spilled into the region after 1906. The frontier receded as farmsteads grew around railroad towns. The era also witnessed a surge in popularity of the real photographic postcard from 1906 into the 1920s, mailed by the tens of thousands and collected in albums documenting the region. As the population grew, photographers increasingly worked for land developers making images of farmland and also of excursionists traveling to see the area. The new medium was also employed to transform the perception of the Plains as desert to a dream of agrarian abundance.

John Miller Morris notes that these postcards are more than typical ephemera, as they are, in fact, original photographs that document “material culture, architecture, sociology, and regional history.” In addition, annotations by postcard senders and postal dates often provide further information about the locale and its inhabitants. An interesting fact pointed out by the author is that before 1907, the postal law prohibited note writing on the address side of the postcard. Therefore, the sender often wrote a few sentences on the front, sometimes defacing the photograph. After the regulation was changed, the “divided back” card became popular, allowing more space for messages.

*Taming the Land: The Lost Postcard Photographs of the Texas High Plains* is an interesting, well-written,

beautifully illustrated book on real photographic postcards of northwest Texas. After the introduction on the area’s history and geography and the medium of the real photographic postcard, the book is divided into sections by region, starting in the north with the High Plains of the Panhandle, traversing through time and place south to the upper Red River, to Amarillo, and ending at the rugged canyons and Cap Rock in Biscoe County. When addressing the image makers themselves, the author appropriately makes distinctions for three groups of postcard photographers: the town studio professional, the itinerant, and the amateur. Morris provides detailed information on the photographers, giving biographical information on some of the more prolific of them. Most importantly, this work is a valuable contribution to the little-documented turn-of-the-century history of Texas photography, particularly in its High Plains. The decade of original research is evident in the quality of Morris’s book.

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