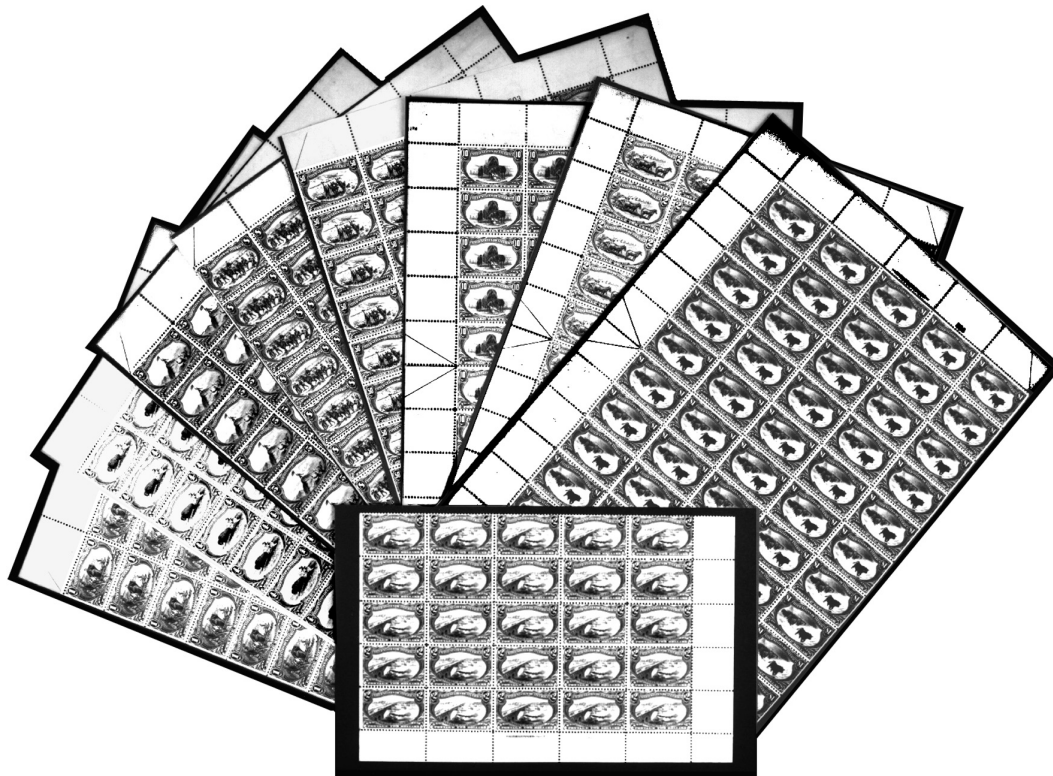


THE UNITED STATES REFERENCE MANUAL

The Trans-Mississippi Issue Scott 285-293



The Trans-Mississippi Issue, or Omahas, may be overshadowed in popular philatelic lore by the Columbian set, but it is nevertheless one of the most highly regarded and closely studied commemorative sets in all of United States philately.

*Modern philatelists are particularly indebted to the research and writings of our predecessors. Most noteworthy among these is George B. Sloane, whose studies of the Trans-Mississippi appeared at various times in STAMPS and was brought together in *The Stamp Specialist*, Volume 9. Another important reference source is the specialized study that appeared in the U.S. Specialist of the Bureau Issues Association in the 1970s.*

In preparing this summary Reference Manual series we have called upon the material above as well as the writings of other philatelists, including the more recent work of Randy Neil with Jack Rosenthal. And, of course, we are indebted to the staff of the American Philatelic Research Library

for assisting us in pulling together much of the original material.

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As America's interests began to shift towards the West in the final years of the 19th century, a movement sprung up in the Midwest to stage an international exposition from June 1 to November 1, 1898, in Omaha, Nebraska, to further the progress and develop the resources of the region west of the Mississippi River. The official name of this planned event was the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition. Given the length of its name, even when shortened to Trans-Mississippi, the contemporary name of the stamp set quickly caught on with collectors as the "Omahas". As time passed and collectors identified more with the subject matter of the stamps and less with the site of the Exposition, we have reverted back to the "Trans-Mississippi," or "Trans-Miss." issues.

The idea for a postage stamp set commemorating the Exposition is

credited to Edward Rosewater, the well-connected activist publisher of the *Omaha Daily Bee*. Rosewater, who was Chairman of the Committee on Publicity proposed the set to the Post Office Department on December 13, 1897. Just ten days later, Postmaster-General James A. Gary notified Rosewater that an issue of five values (1¢, 2¢, 5¢, 10¢ and \$1) would be issued.

When this decision was announced, the stamp collecting community—still smarting from the 1893 Columbian set, with its 16 stamps and face values up to \$5, protested in vain. In the ensuing days, as subjects were considered, the set not only was not reduced in size, but was *increased* to nine stamps, with a \$2 denomination among the added stamps!

PMG Gary's perspective was very different from that of collectors. In an interview, he stated "I found I had the

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power to authorize this issue and did it because I wanted to help the people of the West. The Trans-Mississippi Exposition means a great deal to the people of that section of our country, and its character is decidedly an international one, no less than fifteen foreign nations having promised their support. While I am pleased to hear the opinion of any American citizen in regard to this issue, I do not consider philatelists greater patriots on account of the interest they take in the stamps of their country. No one is compelled to buy the high values unless he wishes to do so.”

We will discuss the designs in greater detail in subsequent columns. Suffice it to point out here that as beautiful as this set is regarded by many collectors, it could have been even better. The original plan was to print each stamp in two colors, with the center vignettes in black and the outer frames in different colors. The plans were well along in their execution—and even got as far as some plates being prepared for bi-color printing, and bi-colored die proofs being printed.

This was to be the first postage stamp set produced design-to-printing by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing; so even under the best of circumstances, some problems might have been expected. Then, in April 1898, with just two months to go before the opening of the Exposition, the Spanish-American War broke out. With that, the resources of the Bureau of Engraving & Printing had to be diverted to the urgent task of printing large quantities of revenue stamps, and the bi-color plans for the new commemorative set were tabled, new dies were quickly prepared,



plates laid down from those dies, and the Bureau set about squeezing the Trans-Mississippi stamp production into its schedule.

Given the pressures under which the BEP was working, it is no wonder that some of the sheets were heavily inked and the designs at times appear somewhat blurred.

With time fleeting, and less than a month to go before opening day, on May 16, 1898 Third Assistant Postmaster General John Merritt announced the change in plans and provided this further information:

“The Trans-Mississippi stamps differ materially in size from the ordinary series, the engraved space being about seven-eighths of an inch wide by about one and three-eighths long. The designs are also radically unlike those of the ordinary stamps—consisting of a border (substantially the same in all denominations, except that the figures and letters representing values are different) and a central scene indicative in some way of the development of the great region beyond the Mississippi River. The scenes and the borders are all printed from lined engravings on steel, executed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

“The border, which forms in its inner line an irregular oval framework to each of the scenes represented, consists of a fluted figure on each side,

with interior crossbars, beginning in a single line near the bottom of the stamp, and enlarging until it reaches a shield in each of the upper corners, wherein is engraved in white the Arabic numeral of denomination—the dollar mark being also included in the case of the one and two dollar stamps. At the top, connecting the two shields, and united to the fluted framework on the two sides, is a curved tablet, on which are engraved in small white capitals the words ‘United States of America.’ Above this, on either side, are heads of wheat, and between these a small scroll. Immediately below the central scene is the title of the picture in diminutive white Gothic letters on a curved tablet, and below this on either side, in scrolls, are the words of value, ‘one,’ ‘two,’ and so on, in white capitals... in the case of the two highest denominations, ‘\$1.00’ and ‘\$2.00’ are substituted for letters. Above each of these is a projecting ear of corn, and at the bottom of all on a straight black tablet are the words, ‘Postage One Cent,’ ‘Postage Two Cents,’ and so on, in white capitals.”

Time was rapidly running out and it began to become apparent that the hard-pressed Bureau of Engraving and Printing craftsmen would be unable to get the stamps out in time for the opening day of the show. This was confirmed by another announcement from Merritt, on May 26, as follows:

“Postmasters have been advised that the Trans-Mississippi stamps would be issued about the 1st of next June. It is now found impracticable to do this and postmasters and the public are therefore informed that the filling

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of requisitions from postmasters for these stamps will be delayed until the 15th of next June—i. e., they cannot be placed in the hands of postmasters before that date.

“It is also found expedient to change the first announcement of the color of the \$1 stamp which was to have been light brown, to black; and that of the \$2 stamp, to which sapphire blue was assigned, to light brown.”

The earliest known date of delivery to postmasters is June 15, 1898. The assigned first day of issue was June 17, as that is the day the Post Office Department instructed postmasters to place the stamps on sale. With the publicity in the daily press that had attended the stamps’ production and release, there was an early rush for the limited supplies that were first available at post offices.

Such interest was short-lived, especially as post offices replenished their stocks, the novelty of the new stamps wore off, and speculative interest waned. Another factor that dampened speculation was the knowledge that five years after their issue date, and even as post offices were receiving the new stamps, the Washington Post Office still had unsold stocks of the high value Columbians.

On December 31, 1898, as originally planned, sale of the stamps to

postmasters was discontinued; not that this much mattered, because a supply of all the stamps could be had in Washington as well as many other post offices. And when, in December 1899, postmasters were directed to return unsold stocks to the Redemption Division for credit, the returns were considerable. (Unfortunately, when these remainders were destroyed in March 1890, no count was made by denomination, so we do not have a precise record of the quantities not returned—i.e., sold.)

Printing and Production Characteristics

The Trans-Mississippi stamps were printed from plates of 100 subjects. These were arranged in ten horizontal rows and ten vertical rows, with full arrows in the center of the sheet at the top, bottom, and on both sides.

Before being distributed to postmasters, the full sheets were cut into panes of 50, down the center vertical guide; thus, full top or bottom arrows, or vertical line multiples, are not found (see full sheet photos, Page 1). Full arrows can be had from the left or right position, and horizontal line pairs and other multiples are available.

The stamps were perforated 12 horizontally and vertically, except

down the center vertical gutter, where the sheets were to be cut in half. This cutting process, therefore, created straight edges along either the left or right side of each pane, but with all horizontal rows perforated and the sheets only divided vertically, there were no straight edges created at the tops or bottoms of any stamps.

A plate number and imprint was printed at the top and bottom of each pane of 50, but there were no numbers or imprints at the sides.



Specimen Stamps

One hundred sets of the stamps, handstamped “Specimen,” in small letters (photo above), usually in black, but sometimes in dull purple, were prepared for exchange, distribution to UPU postal administrations, private distribution, and similar uses.

Postal Cards

A postal card had been proposed, but ultimately was rejected by the Post Office.

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The Trans-Mississippi The Designs, Part 1

The Trans-Mississippi Issue is becoming increasingly regarded by collectors as one of the classic sets in U.S., and indeed, worldwide philately. The \$1 “Western Cattle in Storm” design was always highly regarded, and the other designs, with their turn-of-the-century Western motif, have taken on increasing luster with the passing years.

When they learn of the story behind the design and production of the Trans-Mississippi, many collectors are left wondering “what might have been” if the Bureau of Engraving and Printing had been given sufficient time to produce these stamps. A formal proposal for a stamp issue to recognize the Trans-Mississippi International Exposition and the growth of the west was not made until December 13, 1897—with June 1, 1898 set as the opening day for the Exposition.

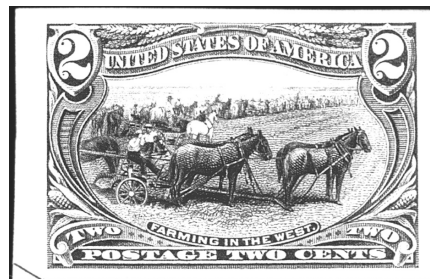
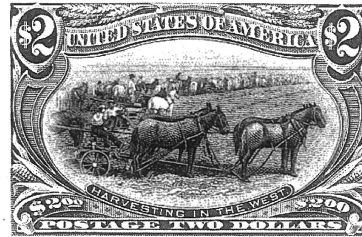
At that time, the suggestion by Edward Rosewater, publisher of the *Omaha Bee* and Chairman of Publicity for the show, was for a single stamp, but ten days later, Postmaster-General James A. Gary not only agreed—but declared that five stamps would be issued, in the denominations of 1¢, 2¢, 5¢, 10¢, and \$1. Stating the obvious, he remarked that time was short in which to prepare for the issue. Then, despite this, on January 13—with less than six months to go—the Post Office announced that nine stamps would be issued.

Compounding the lack of time as an obstacle for the Bureau was the fact that this was to be the first set designed and produced start-to-finish by the Bureau, and that they would be bicolored stamps (central designs in black with various colors for the frames). Under the best of circumstances it was going to be difficult to get the stamps into post offices by the June 1 opening day of the show.

Then the Spanish-American War broke out in April 1898, and the first priority of the Bureau became production of revenue stamps to finance the war. The Bureau fell behind in its production schedule and the two color idea had to be abandoned.

Fortunately, collectors do have bicolored proofs that were produced before the change in plans.

Such was the appeal of the bicolored designs that when proof sets were prepared by the Bureau, there were two types of large die proofs on India prepared, one in the regular issued colors and one bicolored as the set was originally planned. In the first printing 50 sets of each were made, but the bicoloreds were so attractive that the P. O. Department ordered a second printing of another 150 sets of the bicoloreds.



Note as well, in the proofs of the stamps as eventually issued, and illustrated here, that the farming vignette in the \$2 bicolored proof is that which eventually was used on the 2¢—and that the “Mississippi River Bridge” design was moved from the 2¢ to the \$2. In addition, the “Harvesting in the West” title on the bicolored proof was changed to “Farming in the West.”

With all the other production pressures the Bureau faced, these changes were decided upon by the Post Office Department on May 7, 1898—less than one month before the opening day of the Exposition. That the stamps came out as well as they did is in itself a noteworthy accomplishment.

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The Trans-Mississippi Issue: *The Designs, Part 2*



We will have more to say about the design selection process as we discuss the individual stamps in later installments. To complete our review of the pressures and changes faced by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing in designing and producing these stamps, first, here are the subjects as announced on January 13, 1898:

- 1¢—Marquette discovering the Mississippi*
- 2¢—An Indian Chief
- 4¢—A Buffalo hunting scene*
- 5¢—Fremont raising the flag on the Rockies*
- 8¢—A wagon train of emigrants crossing the plains
- 10¢—A mining scene
- 50¢—A cowboy and cattle
- \$1—A harvesting scene
- \$2—The Union Pacific railroad bridge showing part of Omaha

Note that the three designs with the asterisks are the only designs that are found in the set as issued, and on the same denominations as originally planned. Every other design was changed in one form or another (and the 5¢ Fremont was moved to the 8¢ denomination before being restored to the 5¢ value).

In addition to the Fremont design being moved, there were other intermediate changes. Thus, on January 15, 1898, the design selections were announced as:

- 1¢—Marquette on the Mississippi*
- 2¢—Engraving of the St. Louis Bridge
- 4¢—Mounted Indian Chief

- 5¢—Indian hunting Buffalo
- 8¢—Fremont raising U. S. flag on Rocky Mountains*
- 10¢—Hardships of Emigration*
- 50¢—Mining Prospector*
- \$1—Cattle in Storm*
- \$2—Harvesting scene on Western Wheatfield

At this point we had five stamps with asterisks, but still four designs that were not yet settled.

And it was not until May 7—with the June 1 opening day of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition less than a month away—that the final decision and design assignments were made—and not until May 11 that the decision was made to change the title of the 2¢ to Farming in the West. As announced on May 16, here are the stamps and their single colors:

- 1¢—"Marquette on the Mississippi," Dark Green
 - 2¢—"Farming in the West," Copper Red
 - 4¢—"Indian Hunting Buffalo," Orange
 - 5¢—"Fremont on Rocky Mountains," Dark Blue
 - 8¢—"Troops Guarding Train," Dark Lilac
 - 10¢—"Hardships of Emigration," Slate
 - 50¢—"Western Mining Prospector," Olive
 - \$1—"Western Cattle in Storm," Light Brown
 - \$2—"Mississippi River bridge," Sapphire Blue,
- and even then there were still more changes, as the \$1 and \$2 were subsequently changed to black and orange brown.

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