



1898 \$1.00 Western Cattle in Storm Stamp from the Trans-Mississippi Series

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Western Cattle in Storm

By Douglas Files

Among collectors, one of the most popular U.S. stamps has long been the \$1.00 Western Cattle in Storm issue, part of the Trans-Mississippi series of 1898. This article will explore the history and key features of this stamp which contribute to its fame in philatelic circles.

The 1893 World Columbian Exposition of Chicago had been such a success that officials in Omaha, Nebraska soon began planning a “Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition” to take place five years later. Stamp collectors had listed some complaints about the Columbian stamps which had been issued in conjunction with the Columbian expo. For example, writers in the press complained that the Columbian stamps were a single color and there were so many high values that most collectors could not afford to purchase an entire set. Philatelists lobbied the Post Office Department to make the next commemorative set more colorful and less expensive.

One of these postal aficionados was Edward Rosewater, an Omaha newspaper publisher who helped organize the Trans-Mississippi fair. In fact Rosewater was so avid about stamps that he was elected vice president of the Universal Postal Union Congress in 1897. When he requested a stamp issue for the upcoming festival, the Postmaster General instead decided to issue a set of nine stamps depicting Western U.S. scenes.

Originally the \$1.00 value of the new set was to show grain harvesting or a flour mill. Postal officials later changed their mind and chose to feature a different symbol of Western commerce:

the steer. The bison was more emblematic of the western United States but cattle better exemplified the economy of the region.

As of May 1898 the post office planned to issue the \$1.00 Trans-Mississippi stamp showing “Western Cattle in Storm” in light brown. Designers and collectors had requested that the stamps be bi-color but with contemporary printing technology this would have doubled the production time. During the Spanish-American War new taxes caused the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to be overloaded with orders for revenue stamps, so postal leaders decided against using two colors. Only a few days before printing, coal black was settled on for the color of the \$1.00 stamp, which adds contrast to its attractive design. Both this contrast and the way the artist employed perspective make the lead steer “pop out” from the paper. (Note: When the U.S. Postal Service re-issued the Trans-Mississippi stamps in two souvenir sheets in 1998, the modern stamps were bi-color as had been originally planned.)

The Western Cattle in Storm design was pulled from the Scottish painting “The Vanguard” by John A. MacWhirter. Thus this paragon of philatelic Americana probably shows Scottish Angus cattle. Apologists note that the artist had made a trip to the United States the year before he rendered the painting, so the possibility exists that he painted American cattle. Further research into the issue has been stymied by the fact that the location of the original painting by MacWhirter is not known. In any case the \$1.00 U.S. Trans-Mississippi stamp was designed by Bureau of Engraving and Printing employee R. Ostrander Smith who probably employed an etching of the original painting to create the stamp’s remarkable look.

Only one 3-day print run was ever made for this stamp so the color of the black ink was fairly consistent throughout all stamps produced. A total of 56,900 \$1.00 stamps were issued to postmasters, but some went unsold and were returned to Washington, DC for destruction in early 1900. Thus it is not known how many copies of this stamp still exist. Only a single first day cover of the \$1.00 Trans-Mississippi stamp is known. This unique item traveled in the registered mail from New York City stamp dealer J. Murray Bartels to Hermann August Kah of Baden-Baden, Germany and entered postal lore. Due to these engaging philatelic aspects and its arresting visual appeal, the \$1.00 Western Cattle in Storm stamp will continue to inspire the hearts and minds of U.S. collectors.

References

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