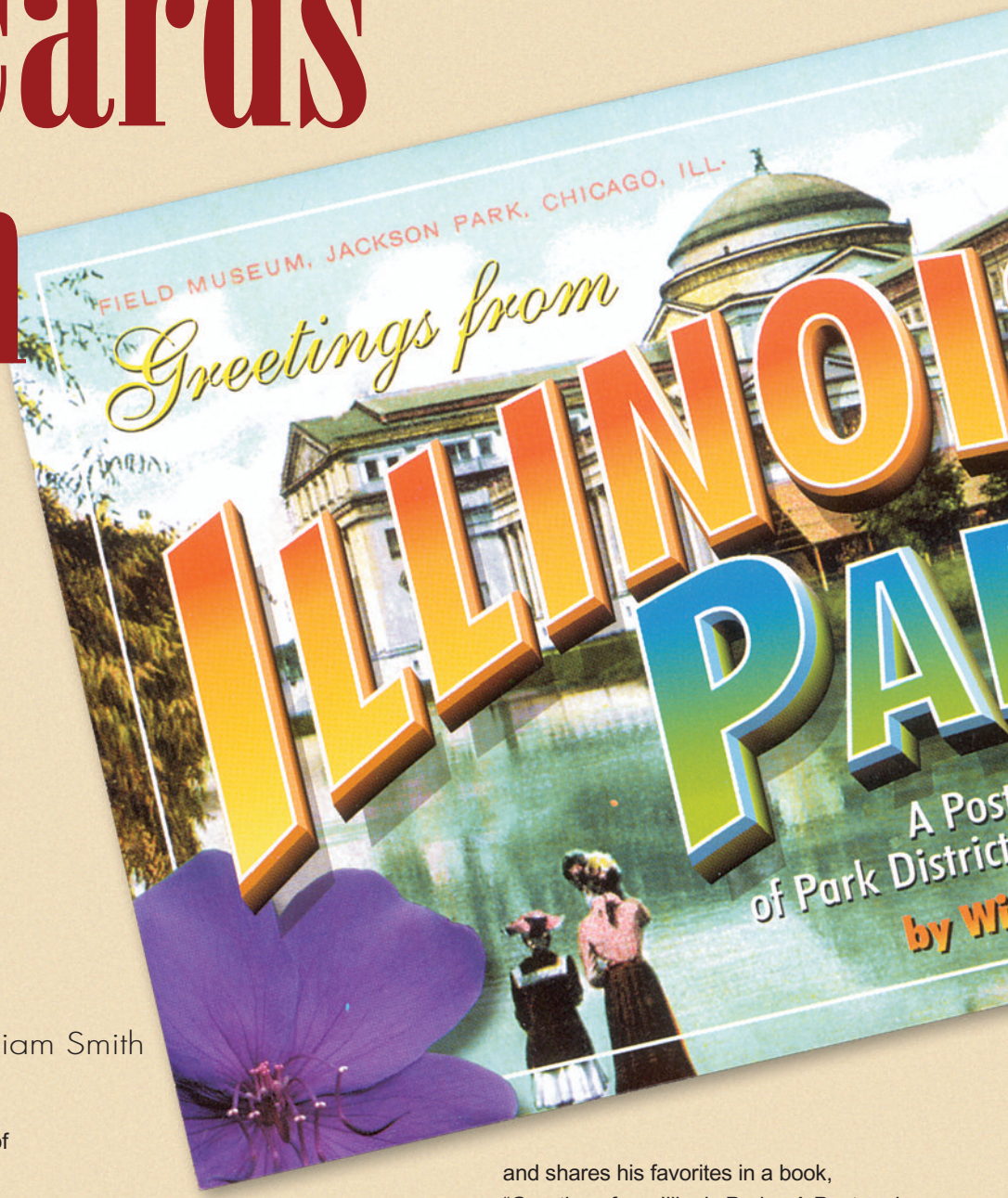
William Smith's love of parks and recreation blossomed into a collection of historical postcards, then a pictorial book.

Postcards From the Past



Story By Rich Wagoner
Postcards Courtesy of William Smith

Unbeknownst to a large segment of the population, there is an inexpensive and quick communication style that does not involve a computer or cell phone. A delivery system that was once popular, despite the fact anybody could intercept and read the message.

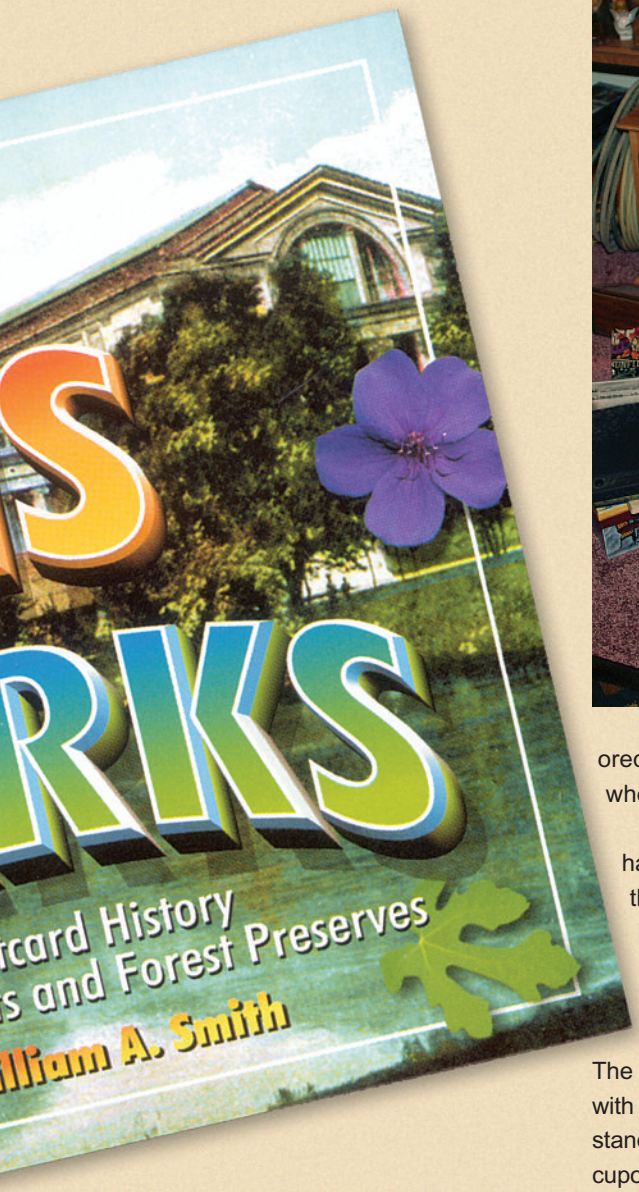
Postcards—a colorful picture on the front that drew each viewer into an exotic, interesting place visited by a friend or loved one, and a brief message on the reverse side—remain hypnotic today.

Hobbyists collecting these potent visual and literal messages get glimpses of the past, from wonderful vignettes, tragic messages, and if organized into a collection, a visual time line of our world.

William Smith, a remarkable man and passionate postcard collector from Savoy, is an associate professor of Recreation Administration at Eastern Illinois University. He has amassed a collection of more than 10,000 postcards, and shares his favorites in a book, "Greetings from Illinois Parks: A Postcard History of Parks and Forest Preserves."

Smith's love of parks and recreation started when he was a newspaper carrier and won a trip to Indiana's Turkey Run State Park. Like most 10-year-old boys, Smith had never been out of Illinois. A new world opened to him as he hiked the trails and walked across the "Swinging Bridge" over Sugar Creek.

As you browse through the 100 pages of postcards, the past seems to



(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

William Smith's passion for parks and recreation has resulted in a collection of postcards that chronicle the history of Illinois' parks.

come alive, and you may discover a park you frequent. Consider how much things have changed over the past century. Gone are hot summer-day diversions—water slides, high-diving platforms, boat houses, mineral springs and wading pools—and sheep grazing in public meadows. But they remain on the brightly colored postcards, mementos of days when the pace of life was slower.

When you have a little time on your hands, take the book and visit one of the parks to compare the postcard image with the present-day facility. I was surprised when I looked at the postcard depicting the annual fish fry in Beardstown (circa 1909). The park looks much the same today, with many of the sycamore trees still standing and pagodas, boathouses, cupolas and band shells recounting quainter days. But too often, structures in the postcards are gone, like the water toboggan on Bangs Lake at Village Park in Wauconda that featured a 30-foot drop into the lake.

Water seems to be a central theme in many postcards. Great efforts were made in creating forest preserves and parks to enhance the effects of rippling streams and glassy lakes to drift on with a friend, or to sit beside and enjoy the best nature had to offer.

The chance to escape summertime heat drew visitors to water parks at Wauconda and Antioch.

Starved Rock State Park has been a popular tourist destination for many years.

Parks were designed as a place to escape burgeoning city life and early park designers certainly realized the tranquil effect water has on a park visitor. Lyceums and religious meetings took place in stage-like settings with waterfalls and lakes in the background. Children waded in shallow streams and lovers paddled across romantic waters safe from waves and obstacles to interrupt their idylls.

Many Illinois parks often were designed around pure drinking water resources. Springfield's Washington Park is one such site and once drew people from miles around to drink from its renowned "mineral springs." The Model T was fired up and the family set off through a wonderland of tailored flora to a favorite spot—a hidden spring in a cool vale where a few hours were idled away and the problems of life forgotten while the "miracle waters" reinvigorated the body. It was a simpler time.

Historic postcards are an invitation to visit an Illinois park. Turn off the television and shut the computer down. Load the family, a picnic lunch and the fishing poles into the mini-van and retrace a route families have taken for a century.

Bring along the postcard book so you can compare past and present. But be careful. If you hook a big fish or linger too long on a swinging bridge you might be caught up in one of the newest crazes—collecting pictures from the past relived by visiting one of Illinois' wonderful parks or forest preserves.

Rich Wagoner, an avid outdoorsman who enjoys backpacking and other outdoor sports, resides at Ghost Hollow Ranch adjacent to Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area near Chandlerville.

William Smith is the author of *Greetings from Illinois Parks: A Postcard History of Parks and Forest Preserves*, published by the Illinois Association of Park Districts. The book features 98 postcard views. Credit card purchases can be made at www.ilparks.org/secure/iapd_store.asp. Credit card or invoice orders can be made by downloading the order information from the website or requesting an order form by calling (217) 523-4554.

Old postcards document changes in landscapes (The Field Museum at Chicago) and historic events (Chautauquas held each summer from 1901 to 1921 at what is now Weldon Springs State Park).