

Article from Issue 7 of the Postcard Pillar September 1993

JOSEPH ZACHARIA (ZAK)

by WILLIAM MAIN

Despite it's humble function, the postcard offered all sorts of incentives to photographers in New Zealand, some of whom developed it according to the needs of their own particular community. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in Wellington, where circumstances saw it evolve into a vital comment on the times through the camera(s) of Joseph Zacharia.

Born in 1867 in Hokitika and educated at Christchurch, he began his working life apprenticed to a jeweller. Later he went back to the West Coast where his parents were involved in a furniture manufacturing business, establishing a pawn brokers business in Greymouth. Moving to Wellington in the mid 1890s, he continued his money lending practice until 1905 when he added a photographic agency to his range of business interests.

It was about this period that he discovered he could sell more cameras if he displayed a photograph it had taken alongside it in his shop window. From Willis Street he moved to Manners Street where he set up a regular photographers studio catering for low cost portraits as well as selling cameras. It is thought his close proximity to Wellington Fire Station led him to being on hand when Parliament Buildings were burnt down in December, 1907. His ability to be on the spot just as events were happening gives credence to the fact that he slept with a loaded camera by his bedside.

As well as maintaining a retail outlet, he did practice low cost portrait sessions and purely commercial commissions, like photographing furniture for a company catalogue. What he enjoyed most was getting out and photographing groups of people in a whole variety of activities. Ships arriving at port with people lining the wharf, school sports, outings at seaside resorts, elegantly dressed women at the races, footballers, bands and funeral processions came under his scrutiny. In short anything that attracted a crowd became a magnet for his camera.

In this respect he was very unusual from the average professional photographer who took pride in supplying standard street scenes for the postcard trade. Zacharia's objectives were different for a start because his postcards were only meant to be sold in small editions for local consumption. This may explain why he focused on crowd scenes, getting as many people into the picture as possible. Commercially there were more sales to be made from this sort of R.P. because if people could identify themselves in the picture then they became potential customers. This is borne out by the number of 'X' marks one can see on Zacharia's postcards which turn up frequently from my experience, indicating the sender has bought it specially to show a friend he/she was at the function being portrayed.

This in turn poses the question of how much Zacharia charged for his postcards. If we interpret his 'Zak' trademark as a possible clue, we might be led to believe he charged sixpence for his cards (Zak was a slang expression for a six-penny piece) two or three times the cost for a standard view. If this was the case they would have been amongst the dearest on the market. No matter what he charged, I don't think his sales would have paid him enough to live off his proceeds from R.P.

Besides R.P. he did produce editions of lithographically produced cards. These feature beaches and streets around the capital and more or less prove that he took himself seriously in this particular area of photography.

By studying the numbering system he used on his postcards, it seems he started sometime in 1907 with his last R.P. appearing about the 13th November, 1915. Using this information we can get a rough idea of how many postcards he took during his career as a photographer. Over a nine year period he must have produced somewhere in the region of 20,000 images. If there were only four or five images made from each card, we could well ask the question, "why don't more Zacharia cards turn up on the market"? At this stage it is not known if the

serial numbers which appear on his cards are there solely for his R.P. or are interwoven with his other works, which included portrait sittings. Assuming 20,000 images is correct, we can only marvel at his industry and bemoan the fact that so few of his real R.P. have survived.

About 1920 Zacharia sold his photographic and pawnbroking interests with the intention of immigrating to New York. While he waited for a visa, he took up a temporary job with an Assurance Company. This lasted for 25 years! Eventually he did make it to America in 1947, but after a couple of years, he returned to Wellington where he died in 1965 at the age of 98.

In his obituary in the Evening Post it is reported he treasured his albums of photographs as a reminder of the past. Unfortunately these were not to be seen when a curator from the museum arrived on the scene a week or so after his death. Enquiries concerning their whereabouts failed to reveal where they had gone.

Article from Issue 16 July 1994

JOS. ZACHARIAH ("ZAK")

AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHERS 

CALL IN AT

ZAK'S PHOTO DEPOT

WELLINGTON

(Opposite the GRAND HOTEL and adjoining the EMPIRE),

Where you can obtain the very Latest Importations in

Cameras, Accessories, Plates, Papers & Films

Besides the most varied Stock of NEW ZEALAND SCENERY PICTURES
in the Dominion to select from.

DEVELOPING, PRINTING, AND ENLARGING CARRIED ON BY EXPERT OPERATORS.
DARK ROOMS FREE TO TOURISTS AND VISITORS.

J. ZACHARIAH = Proprietor
24 Willis Street, WELLINGTON.

This display advertisement appeared in the 1908 edition of Wise's New Zealand Alphabetical Index (which was published in late December 1907). Although entries listing him appeared annually for many years in the Index, this was the only time that a display advertisement appeared.

As the text of the advertisement indicates, Zak's main business was as a photographer. He was, however, for a time also a postcard publisher of some note. From about mid-1906 on, he produced a considerable series of 'real photo' postcards. What distinguishes Zak's postcards from the general run of New Zealand postcards of the period is that they are all real photographic snapshots of contemporary events in the Wellington area (often sporting events) and they

are invariably of high quality. New Zealand - produced 'event' cards of this type are unusual, and it is not surprising, therefore, that 'Zak' cards are highly prized by collectors today. A further characteristic is that the photographic images on his cards appear to have been always well 'fixed', - I have yet to see one on which the image has faded. His cards also bear a distinctive hand-drawn caption style and invariably bear his 'ZAK' imprint. It is highly likely that he designed and produced his postcards himself in his own laboratory.

He appears to have started off in business as a pawnbroker. He is listed thus in Wise's till 1903 at 10 Willis Street, Wellington. In the 1904 - 1907 editions, the address changed to 32 Manners Street.

His PHOTO DEPOT at 24 Willis Street appears to have opened about the start of 1907 (though Hardwicke Knight lists him as active as a photographer from 1896). An advertisement in "The New Zealand Free Lance" on 5 January 1907 makes the following announcement: "KODAKERIE! Zak's Photo Depot, 24 Willis Street, near the Empire Hotel, is now open with a complete stock of photographic material".

Zak's first entry in Wise's as a professional photographer appeared in the 1908 edition. Apart from his display advertisement, he is also listed in the alphabetical index as: "Jos. Zachariah, photographic stock dealer, trading as Zak's Photo Depot, 24 Willis Street, Wellington". He was also listed, as a photographic dealer in the very first Wellington Telephone Directory (an ultra-thin volume published about 1908).

In the 1909 and 1910 editions of Wise's, his address is altered to "25 Willis Street" and he appears in two different trade directory categories: Photographer and Photographic importer and dealer.

Around 1910, his business seems to have expanded to new premises. From the 1911 edition of Wise's, his address as photographer is given as "59 Manners Street (private residence: 32 Thompson Street)", but his address as photo stock dealer and importer continues as "25 Willis Street".

From the 1913 edition of Wise's, he is not listed as "photo stock dealer and importer" at all, only as photographer at the 59 Manners Street address. Perhaps he had retrenched, and disposed of the Willis Street premises? His listing as a photographer at 59 Manners Street continued until the 1921 edition of Wise's, but there is no listing from the 1922 edition onwards. Had he retired? Interestingly, he seems to have meanwhile continued in business as a pawnbroker at a separate address: in the 1915 edition of Wise's, he is listed as a pawnbroker at 53 Manners Street.

Zak was a well-known (and well-liked) identity in Wellington for many years. An indication of his personality is his offer, in the Wise's display advertisement, to make his darkroom facilities available free to photographer tourists. Not many other photographers are likely to have provided this facility. Can any reader supply further details about his life or the postcards he produced? Does anyone know the full spelling of his first name? Josiah?

A full listing of Zak's postcard titles should not prove to be too lengthy. Perhaps we should attempt one? To this end, I would welcome clear photocopies of any Zak cards that readers have in their collections. Please write to me care of the Editor.

- Alan Jackson