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Mailing May: An Author-Artist Partnership

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Picture-book authors do not usually meet or even talk to the artist who illustrates their books. *Mailing May* was an exception to the rule. The book relates the journey of young May, who was “mailed” to her grandmother because her family could not afford a train-ticket to send her for a visit. Michael O. Tunnell’s research and photographs helped artist Ted Rand recreate a fascinating bit of history. The artist’s aesthetic expertise gave the visual images more interesting detail and greater dramatic impact. This is the story of their partnership, and the specific ideas and information they exchanged.

Tunnell’s research led him to experts on postal history. Ted Rand followed up on names given him by Tunnell. From Tim O’Donnell of the Smithsonian Postal Museum he received photos of railway cars; Tim O’Donnell in turn gave Rand the name of Dr. Frank Scheer of the Railway Mail Service Library, who sent him pictures of the fifty- and three-cent stamps on the cover and on the page where May is being weighed. These stamps were in use at the time May traveled to Lewiston. They set the stage for the story of May’s historic trip.

Both the title page and the dedicatory page show a train steaming its way across a railroad trestle. This trestle crosses Lawyer’s Canyon on the route between May’s home in Grangeville, Idaho, and her grandmother’s home in Lewiston, Idaho. Tunnell went to Idaho to retrace May’s route and took the slides, which were then sent to his illustrator, Ted Rand. The Lawyer’s Canyon Trestle, or number 31, is the longest on the route and makes a fitting and dramatic backdrop for the beginning of a story about an almost six-year-old girl’s unusual train ride. The illustration of the photo of May on the left side of the page was taken from an actual photograph of May obtained from May’s son. The resemblance is apparent when you compare the illustration to the reproduction of May’s photo on the inside of the book jacket.

One change suggested by Ted Rand involves the picture of May applying for a job in Mr. Alexander's department store. Tunnell did not have a photograph of the department store, because it had burned down, but in his text he had Mr. Alexander on a ladder arranging bolts of cloth. When Rand was doing his research on general stores, he found pictures showing bottles, cans, pans and so forth. He suggested that these would make a livelier scene than bolts of cloth, but would require a change in the text. Tunnell easily conceded. He simply put Mr. Alexander “atop a ladder,” which left the artist free to fill the shelves with an interesting assortment of bottles, tins and boxes.

Rand’s illustration of the waiting engine number 124 pictures another building taken from Tunnell’s slides. To the right of the train is a red-brown building with 1910 written on it. This structure (the Schmadeka Building) still stands in downtown Grangeville, but it is nowhere near the train station, which is no longer standing. The Schmadeka Building housed a well-remembered dance hall on its second floor. The 1910 date sets the time of May’s adventure and provides a helpful authenticity to its retelling.
For the inside of the mail car, Rand made use of information given him by Dr. Frank Scheer of the Railway Mail Service Library. Dr. Scheer sent Rand large amounts of information. Besides the stamps already mentioned, he sent photographs of the interiors of mail cars. Note the stripes on the mail bags. Accurate to the era, they help the reader to feel he is back in May's time.

The illustration showing the conductor who demanded May's ticket and laughed when he discovered she was a package not a passenger also has another trestle. There were actually sixty-one trestles on the route at the time of May's trip. This one is aptly named Horseshoe Trestle, adding evidence to Tunnell's statement that he could see (after traversing the rails between Grangeville and Lewiston) why May felt "dizzy and weak in the stomach." The pictures of the trestles obtained by the author and sent to the illustrator were taken by A. W. Stevens in 1914, two months after May's trip.
The Lewiston Station pictured in the book is not the actual one, but Rand combined many stations for the one shown in the book. Finally, the illustration of Grandma Mary’s place is taken from a photo the present owners had of the house before rooms were added on. The reader will probably find it satisfying to know that the house in Mailing May is Grandma Mary’s actual house in Grangeville.

When Mike Tunnell first read about May Pierstorff’s 1914 trip, he knew it had the possibility of making a good story. When he tried to verify the brief account found in Timelines: 1910, he didn’t find many librarians who believed the story, even the ones in Lewiston, Idaho. His search—which led him to the Idaho Census Records, the Smithsonian Institution, Parade Magazine, the Nez Pierce County Historical Society, and May’s relatives who still live in Idaho—confirmed that May’s story was true. (For more details, read Tunnell’s account, published in Idaho’s Yesterday, Summer 1996: Volume 40, Number 2).

But Tunnell wanted more than the facts; for the feel of the story he toured both Grangeville and Lewiston, and rode the rail route between them with Jim Morefield, supervisor of the Camas Prairie Railroad. As already mentioned, Tunnell found it far from prairielike. Grangeville is 3,390 feet in elevation and drops about 2,660 feet through peaks and cliffs to Lewiston’s elevation of 732 feet. Tunnell ended his trip feeling that the story “epitomizes America and the innovative spirit of her people.” That feeling is what makes Mailing May such a satisfying story. Because Tunnell not only researched the facts, but actually relived May’s journey, his text allows readers to go on the trip with May.

Tunnell helped his illustrator, Ted Rand, by providing him with photographs and contacts with experts in postal history. Rand used that information to add aesthetic power to a convincing text. Setting the stage with his suitcase-stamp cover, the ongoing theme of snapshots next to story scenes (many of them of real people and places), and accurate paintings of mail cars, trains, and clothes, Rand constantly reminds the reader that May was a real little girl and that this story really happened. Mailing May is a more powerful book because the author and artist were partners in making history come to life.