

An Unusual 1915 Cover from Owen Sound to Russia, forwarded to Belgium

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The philatelic community is truly special, particularly when it comes to the exchange of information. My acquisition of this letter (Fig. 1) is a testament to that philatelic bond. It all started when John Sheffield sent me a link to a French auction house's website.



Figure 1: Belgian letter, Front [Ed.: Cover is reduced to 50%]

Fig. 1 illustrates the letter dispatched to the Belgian Military Attaché in Petrograd, Russia. The slogan "cancel" was the standout feature that made this auction appealing. It leads us to ponder who sent a letter to Russia from Owen Sound during 1915.

Another aspect of the letter is that it was redirected to the embassy in Le Havre, France. This was done by affixing a Russian stamp to the cover and re-entering it into

the mail service. During its passage through the Russian postal system, it received a cancellation from Petrograd dated July 2, 1915, along with a time stamp of 5-7. Interestingly, the Petrograd cancellation is also placed over the 2-cent Admiral stamp, which adds to its historical intrigue.

The name Petrograd is familiar, but a Google search yielded the following Wikipedia explanation of the name's origins. "In the 1830s,

Alexander Pushkin translated the "foreign" city name of "Saint Petersburg" to the more Russian Petrograd in one of his poems. However, only on 31 August 1914, after the war with Germany had begun, Tsar Nicholas II renamed the city Petrograd to expunge the German words Sankt and Burg. Since the prefix "Saint" was omitted, this act also changed the eponym and the "patron" of the city from Saint Peter to Peter the Great, its founder."¹

The excitement of winning the auction was still fresh when the new item was introduced during a Zoom coffee break meeting. Editor Tom Malicki explained that the Cyrillic lettering beneath "France" in the upper-left corner of the cover translates to "France" in Russian. This was likely a thoughtful addition to help mail clerks in Petrograd ensure proper delivery.

In Fig. 2, we obtain a detailed view of the envelope's upper-right corner. Here, the Owen Sound slogan cancel is prominently displayed, applied by a Universal Machine cancelling device. The PHSC website highlights that this was the very first slogan cancel used in Owen Sound. The Universal machine continued to function until 1930².

The Belgian Embassy readdressed the letter to Captain H. Semet. Note the difference in spelling between the sender's typewritten name and the handwritten readdressed name. Le Havre is a few hundred kilometres away from the Belgian border, well removed from the only part of Belgium held by Belgian forces throughout the war.

By analyzing the cancellation dates, it's clear that this letter had a remarkably quick journey. It took just eleven days to travel from

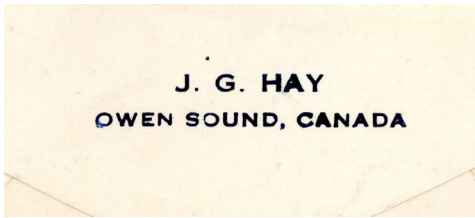


Figure 2: Details of the Coutts O-0565 slogan cancel with Owen Sound CDS and two Russian CDSs.

Owen Sound to Petrograd. The letter would have first been transported by train to Toronto, then redirected by train to either Quebec City or Halifax. The next phase of its journey would have involved several days at sea, likely stopping in England before continuing to Petrograd.

Figs. 3 and 4 present details from the back of the cover, which might not catch your eye immediately if not enlarged. However, they contain two significant features. The first is the identification of the sender (Fig. 3), Mr. J.G. Hay from Owen Sound, and the second (Fig. 4) is a Russian cancellation that adds a layer of intrigue.

The philatelic community rallied to assist. Jerry Piotrowski asked for a scan of the cancellation and then passed it along to some Russian-speaking philatelists for translation. Heartfelt thanks to Greg Minsky and Peter Petrenko for their translations: it read "Department of Delivery for Royal Correspondence." Greg points out, "while the postmark is recognized, it's not frequently



Figures 3 and 4: Enlarged details from the back of the cover. The detailed close-up of the Russian cancellation shows that the letter arrived in Petrograd on July 1, 1915. However, the writing at the bottom of the cancellation is somewhat tricky.

seen, and it has been documented with both the St. Petersburg and Petrograd names." Peter elaborates that this department dealt with "special imperial correspondence to various courts and offices." This means the Belgian Embassy is a diplomatic mission, one of Russia's allies in World War I.

History lovers will identify that this letter was written during World War I. It's a lovely cover, but a military expert would observe that it avoided the scrutiny of the censorship bureau. Being part of diplomatic mail, it is not subject to censorship.

Fig. 5 shows a photograph of Mr. John G. Hay. This picture is from the 1912 book, *Owen Sound on the Georgian Bay*.³ The publication aimed to promote the area as a prime location for business opportunities and residential living, reaching recipients across Canada, Great Britain, and many other parts of the world. The photo is found on page 18 of the book; Mr. Hay is listed as representing the wooden wares industry. This was when the lumber sector was quite vibrant, featuring a large sawmill, the North American Bent Chair Company, the North American Furniture Company, and the National Table Company. As the industry contact, Mr. Hay was likely

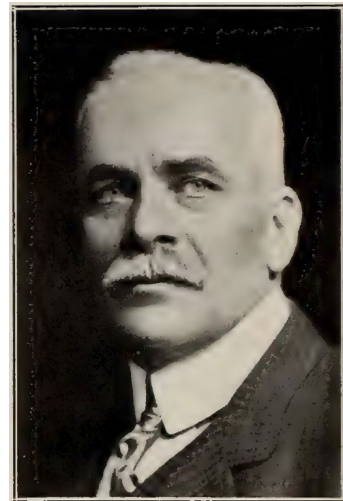


Figure 5: Mr. John G. Hay.

involved in promoting the various products available.

The Grey Roots Museum offers a comprehensive account of Mr. Hay's life in Owen Sound⁴. It highlights his role as a co-owner of a North American Bent Chair company. As a key figure in the wooden wares industry, he likely communicated how this sector could support the Belgians in their defence efforts. By 1915, news of trench

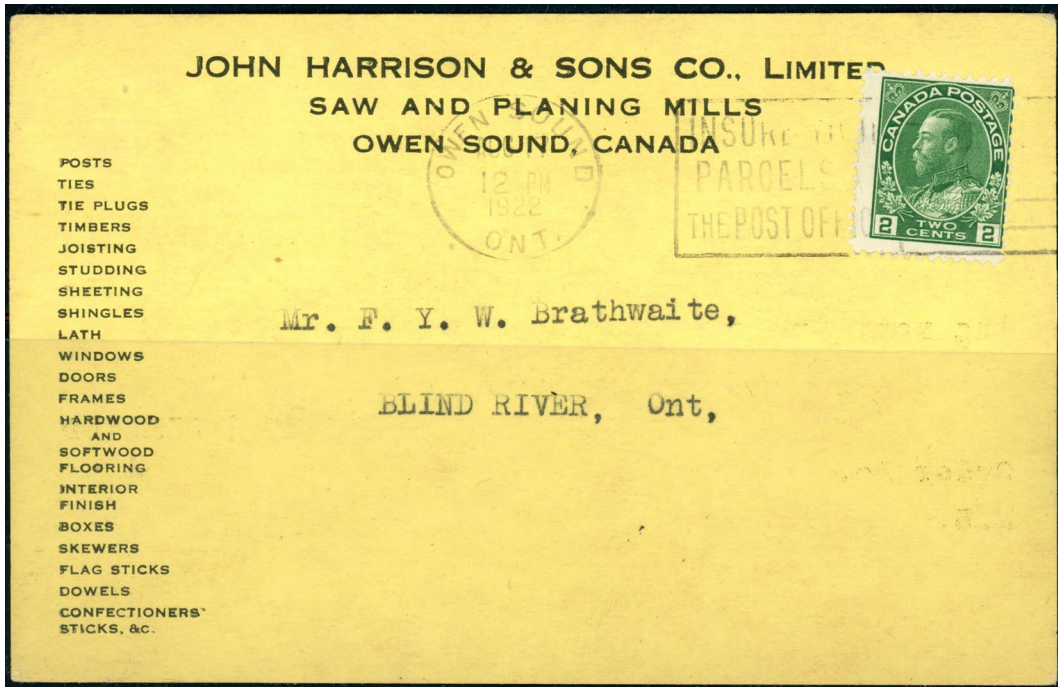


Figure 6: Harrison Postcard

warfare would have reached Canada, detailing the necessities for constructing and surviving in the trenches.

The letter itself measures 6¼ by 9¼ inches. It likely contained a folded sheet or sheets that described the products manufactured by John Harrison & Sons Limited. In wartime, the focus often shifts to weapons and ammunition, but the everyday essentials are also vital for meeting war aims. Fig. 6 illustrates a business postcard detailing the products available from the mill.

A hundred and ten years later, the letter has returned to its point of origin. It now holds a special place in my collection, which is dedicated to local postal history. The search for other fascinating pieces still “out there” continues.

References:

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