



A Natural History of
“December Greetings from Skinner, B. F.”

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Author’s Note

This natural history supplements Morris (2019) in which Skinner’s “December Greetings” are reproduced and described. I purchased them from a private party on an eBay auction on July 1, 2017. I thank Derek Reed for alerting me to the auction, Barry Fitzgerald for consulting with me about the postcard’s construction, and Bryan Midgley for commenting on an earlier draft of the manuscript. I also thank Julie and Ernie Vargas for commenting on and answering questions raised by an earlier draft of the manuscript. Correspondence may be sent to the Department of Applied Behavioral Science, 4017 Dole Human Development Center, University of Kansas, 1000 Sunnyside Avenue, Lawrence, KS 66045. Email: ekm@ku.edu.

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“December Greetings from Skinner, B. F.”

At 3:00 p.m. on December 23, 1940, a United States Post Office (USPO) in “Minneapolis, Minn” time stamped a postcard for delivery.¹ The postcard’s front included a figure “From Skinner, B. F.” Its back included an address: “Drs. Shakow and Rosenzweig, Worcester State Hospital, Worcester, Mass” (see Fig. 2).² Given the postcard’s front and back, its provenance appears to be B. F. Skinner (1904-1990), the eminent 20th century psychologist and public intellectual (Bjork, 1993; Haagbloom et al., 2003), but the provenance is not entirely unambiguous. This article describes a natural history of uncovering its provenance, beginning with supporting evidence for it in Skinner.

Supporting Evidence

Minnesota. Skinner was living at 2297 Folwell Street in St. Paul, Minnesota when the postcard was time stamped. He had previously lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he earned his doctorate from the Department of Psychology at Harvard University in 1931 and was, eventually, a member of the Harvard Society of Fellows. In 1936, he took his first academic position as an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Minnesota. He left in 1945 to chair the Department of Psychology at Indiana University. J. R. Kantor (1888-1984) hired him.

Inventor and artist. Skinner was a skilled inventor and participant in the fine and mechanical arts thorough his lifetime (see Skinner, 1967, 1977b, 1981, 1983). He made practical, labor-saving devices; he played musical instruments; he printed signs and painted pictures; he worked on his craft of writing; he built wooden models of ships; and he constructed research apparatus. He also drew most the figures in his article, “A Case History in Scientific

Method” (Skinner, 1956; see Skinner, 1982, p. 97). He was skilled enough to draw the figure in postcard.

The postcard was apparently hand-pressed or machine-printed from a wood block.

According to Wikipedia’s entry for “wood block printing”:

The wood block is carefully prepared as a relief pattern, which means the areas to show “white” are cut away with a knife, chisel, or sandpaper leaving the characters or image to show in “black” at the original surface level. The block was cut along the grain of the wood. It is necessary only to ink the block and bring it into firm and even contact with the paper or cloth to achieve an acceptable print. The content would of course print "in reverse" or mirror-image, a further complication when text was involved). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodblock_printing).

Wikipedia’s entry for “relief printing” is:

Relief printing is a family of printing methods where a printing block, plate or matrix that has had ink applied to its surface, but not to any recessed areas, is brought into contact with paper. The areas of the printing plate with ink will leave ink on the paper, whereas the recessed areas of the printing plate will leave the paper ink-free. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Relief_printing)

Skinner was not only skilled enough to draw the graph, but also to carve its wood block and then hand-press or machine-print the figure in blue ink on a light cream-colored sheet of paper 5-1/2 inches wide by 3-3/4 inches high (or have it carved or printed on the paper). This would have been consistent with his skills and sensibilities.

From B. F. Skinner. “From Skinner, B. F.” is written inside the boundary of the postcard’s figure. No other name appears, but identity theft takes no holidays. “B. F.” stands for

“Burrhus Frederic,” which were Skinner’s given and middle names (Skinner, 1977b, p. 12). “B. F.” does not stand for “Best Friend,” even though Skinner was best friends with many people. However, t-shirts printed with “B. F. Skinner Is My B. F. F.” on the front may be purchased online (see, e.g., <https://www.amazon.com/BF-Skinner-BFF-pigeon-t-shirt/dp/B071R6BN3M>).

Operationalism. The title inside the postcard’s figure -- “An Operational Definition of Christmas” – is consistent with Skinner’s interest in operationalism and logical positivism in the philosophy of science while he was at Harvard and then a faculty member at Minnesota. Among his colleagues at these universities were, respectively, the physicist-philosopher Percy W. Bridgman (1882-1961) and the philosopher Herbert Feigl (1902-1988) (Skinner, 1981).

Empiricism. The figure on the postcard brings data to bear on the December holiday season, which is consistent with Skinner’s empiricism and operationalism. It depicts the frequency of “Greetings” spoken or heard between December 5 and 26. These were virtual greetings, in part, because the USPO time stamped the postcard on December 23, three days before December 26 and the year the postcard was hand-pressed or machine-printed is unknown.

The greetings were likely multiply controlled by a confluence of variables that predicted the December holidays while Skinner was in Minnesota. Among them were decreases in the mean high and low daily temperatures in Minneapolis. Today, the highs decrease from 34 to 25 degrees F; the lows decrease from 21 to 11 degrees F. Other variables included increases in the snowfall during the month (the December mean snowfall is 11.5 inches; in January, it is 12.1 inches)⁴; in commercial decorations, music, food, drink and seasonal sales; in secular and religious public decorations, celebrations, music, food, and drink; in secular and religious private decorations, celebrations, music, and drink; in heard and spoken “Greetings”; and December’s omnipresent calendar.

Skinner (1945). The postcard's title presages the title of Skinner's (1945) canonical article five years later, "The Operational Analysis of Psychological Terms." In it, he broke with operationalism and logical positivism and the latter's successor -- logical empiricism (Moore, 1975, 1985). In their place, he advanced a descriptive positivism (Smith, 1986, pp. 259-297); he proposed that the meaning of terms lie in the variables that control their use (Schlinger, 2013); he included private events in his system of behavior (Moore, 1980); and he named the philosophy of his science *radical behaviorism* (Schneider & Morris, 1987).

Shakow and Rosenzweig. The postcard was addressed to "Drs. Shakow and Rosenzweig, Worcester State Hospital." David Shakow (1901-1981) and Saul Rosenzweig (1907-2004) were Skinner's colleagues at Harvard in graduate school and afterward, albeit in clinical psychology. By 1940, they were developing an auditory apperception test -- an auditory Rorschach test -- based on Skinner's 1936 article, "The Verbal Summator and a Method for the Study of Latent Speech" (Shakow, 1938; Shakow & Rosenzweig, 1940; Shakow, Rosenzweig, & Hollander, 1966; see Rutherford, 2003). Skinner addressed latent speech again in what he believed would be his most important book -- *Verbal Behavior* (1957; see Skinner, 1977a, 1998).

Handwritten script. The small diagonal handwritten script "Skinner" in the upper left-hand corner of the postcard was presumably made by a librarian, archivist, or collector who identified the postcard's provenance in Skinner (or the postcard's subject matter as "Skinner").

Nonsupporting Evidence

Although these lines of evidence support the postcard's provenance in Skinner, two lines of evidence do not.

The line graph. The first is the graph in the figure. It is a line graph, not a cumulative record. Skinner's renown as a psychologist was based, in part, on his experimental analysis of

operant behavior. He graphed its rate with cumulative recorders that produced cumulative records (Lattal, 2004). When asked later about his most significant contributions to psychology, he answered: “two important things were the use of rate of response as a basic datum and the so-called cumulative record which makes changes in rate conspicuous” (Evans, 1968, p. 103). In foregoing cumulative records on the postcard, he may have had two reasons. The first was his audience -- Shakow and Rosenzweig and others. Although the former were collaborating with him on the auditory apperception test, no cumulative records were published in their project and, thus, may not have been familiar with them and others. A second reason is that the line graph showed the decrease in greetings on December 26 more clearly than a cumulative record would have. The latter would have only begun to flatten out.

Internet searches. The second reason that counts against the postcard’s provenance in Skinner is that multiple Google and Bing searches of “B F Skinner Christmas Card” and “B F Skinner Christmas” in November 2019 yielded no links to the postcard, nor did multiple searches that November of Amazon and eBay. No postcards were mentioned or found.

However, Google and Bing searches for “B F Skinner Christmas” did yield two links. One was a December 18, 2013 Prezi presentation by Courtney Gwinn, titled “B. F. Skinner” (<https://prezi.com/madut5rmvkmr/bf-skinner/>). In it, Gwinn likened a mouse in an operant chamber to the Grinch in “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas.” Her conclusion:

Just like when the mouse saw that the dispenser gave him food he continued to press the button just like when the Grinch saw that celebrating Christmas made him happy so he continued to celebrate it instead of getting bitter.

The other link was an October 27, 2018 YouTube performance by Eamonn Loughman, titled “Merry Christmas BF Skinner by me” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xM-morTd78E>). Sitting casually with a guitar, Loughnan begins:

Merry Christmas everybody. There’s a notable American psychiatrist called B. F. Skinner... He developed concepts in operational conditioning and behavior based on reward, response, and punishment. Every time I hear a bell, I always think of Christmas. This song is called “Ring Them Bells.”

Perhaps Loughman confused Skinner with Ivan P. Pavlov (1849-1936). Perhaps he was full of good cheer. In any event, the American pop culture, singer-songwriter, Bob Dylan (nee Robert Allen Zimmerman; 1941-present), wrote the music and lyrics for “Ring Them Bells.” It was released on his 1989 comeback album, “Oh Mercy.”

In 1930, Duke Ellington (1899-1974) and Irving Mills 1894-1985) -- jazz musicians, orchestra leaders, and promoters -- wrote a jazz standard that better associated bells with Christmas. It was “Ring Dem Bells.” Ellington wrote the music; Mills wrote the lyrics (see YouTube for RING DEM BELLS by Duke Ellington 1930). One notable performance was on a December 1947 AFRS Christmas *Jubilee* Show that featured “Duke Ellington and His Fabulous Orchestra.” AFRS stood for Air Force Recruiting Service. As described by John Dunning (1998):

Jubilee is an AFRS radio program that featured African-American musicians and singers. It was broadcast to servicemen via AFRS from 1942 to 1953. *Jubilee* was conceived at least in part as a morale -building service for African-American troops overseas... Most of the shows were recorded before live audiences in Los Angeles. The series emerged as an important piece of black heritage. Its War Department status exempted the performing

artists from the union-mandated recording bans of 1942-43 and 1947-48 and many of the shows contains unique performances. (pp. 376-377; see also Wikipedia).

The Wikipedia entry for “1942-44 musicals strike” includes this:

On August 1, 1942, the American Federation of Musicians...began a strike against the major American recording companies because of disagreements over royalty payments... [N]o union musician could make a commercial recording for any commercial record company. That meant that a union musician was allowed to participate on radio programs and other kinds of musical entertainment...” Among the exemptions were entertainment in the U.S. military efforts during and after World War Two (e.g., the *Jubilee* radio shows).

The 1947 Duke Ellington broadcast is included on the Vintage Jazz Classic CD, *Christmas Jubilee* (VJC 1016-2, 1999). For a better, more varied, Christmas classic jazz CD, but without “Ring Dem Bells,” see JASS Records’ *Santa Claus Blues* (JCD-2, 1988). For access to over 130 of the 380 AFRS *Jubilee* shows, see otrlibrary.org.

Conclusion

In this natural history of the postcard’s provenance, the preponderance of the evidence favors Skinner, but the exercise ultimately proved fruitless, even if engaging as a process. On November 12, 2019, I sent an email to Julie S. Vargas (B. F. Skinner Foundation) asking about the postcard’s provenance, as follows:

Greetings. I hope you and Ernie are well. Some quick questions? I bought the attached 1940 postcard about a year ago on an eBay auction. I am presuming your father made it. Have you ever seen it before? Do you know anything about it? Do you have any stories about it? I cannot tell if it is unique or if others were also printed...

She wrote back on November 14, 2019:

My father sent these out as Christmas cards. I'm not sure how many he sent, but there were more than one. The Foundation received another request about one of them some time ago. If you find out others to whom they went, I'd be interested. (Julie S. Vargas, personal communication).

Provenance uncovered.

Footnotes

1. The United States Post Office Department was established on 1772. Authorized by the U.S. Constitution, it became the United States Post Office (USPO) in 1775. Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was its first Postmaster General. In 1872, it became a U.S. government cabinet department. In 1970, it was abolished in the U.S. Postal Reorganization Act. Its functions were assigned to today's independent agency -- the United States Postal Service.
2. The address included no zip code. Zip codes were not introduced by the USPO until 1963. "Zip" is an acronym for Zone Improvement Plan. The plan was (and is) for efficient and effective mail delivery.
3. These are recent summaries of the weather in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which is St. Paul's twin city (see <https://weatherspark.com/m/10405/12/Average-Weather-in-December-in-Minneapolis-Minnesota-United-States>; https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/climate/twin_cities/snowfall.html; and <https://www.currentresults.com/Weather/Minnesota/snowfall-december.php>).



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