



EPISODE 3 2004-MAIL ORDER BRIDES, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.

Tukufu: Our last story could reveal an unexpectedly seamy side to late 19th century society. It's the 1890s, a supposedly straight-laced time... when modesty and self-control are prized qualities... when young women dedicate themselves to home and family...and romantic couples engage in strict courting rituals before marriage. Or do they? We've heard about four small photographs suggesting some Victorians saw marriage as a cheap commodity rather than a sacred institution. The photographs belong to Dan and Patti Richmond. On the back of one are scribbled details of one woman's wealth and inheritance, leading Dan and Patti to believe they may own rare evidence of Victorian mail-order brides. They found the photos in an Arizona antique shop.

Dan: We both like the Victorian era, and photography. Patti just started collecting the photographs.

Patti: They're little photographs, and... they were different from anything I'd ever seen before.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I've come to Los Angeles, California to meet Dan and Patti, and take a closer look at their photographs. So what do you got for me?

Dan: We have some, uh, picture cards.

Tukufu: These photos are really intriguing. I've never seen anything like them before.

Patti: I would really like to find out what these photographs are. And... I'd like to maybe know what happened to these women.

Tukufu: So what do you know about the picture cards?

Dan: Uh, the antique dealer we purchased them from, told us specifically that they were mail-order brides, uh, but he couldn't tell us anything other than that.

Patti: I actually haven't found hardly anything. Um... I've looked through the internet, I've searched on different websites... there's nothing in that time period.

Dan: And I've contacted several photography museums, and cultural anthropology departments at various universities, and they all show interest in the photographs but they have no information whatsoever.

Tukufu: As a sociologist, I've studied the American family and marriage patterns for the last fifteen years.

Tukufu VO: My first thought, is that if these women are Victorian, they wouldn't be called mail-order brides. It's a modern term, meaning foreign women who market themselves to Western men. So my first impression was that these were probably advertisements for domestic help, until I took a closer look at the details on the back.

Tukufu: Quite distinctly on the back of one of the cards: "Detroit, Michigan, Age 24, Height 5'4 1/2"...has means and will inherit some."

Tukufu: If this woman was applying to be a maid, why mention her inheritance? I need to find out more. On the front of the card is written "Colombian Agency, Lock- or P.O.- Box 1051, and "Chicago, Illinois".

Tukufu: And that's where I'm going to start my investigation. First, I want to confirm these cards really are Victorian. So I've come to Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Photography, to meet its Director, Rod Slemmons.

Tukufu: ... style of dress, uh... I want to find an accurate date for these picture cards. We believe they come from the Victorian era. What do you think?

Rod: Uh, well they're quite small, I didn't expect them to be so small. ... And the Victorian era is quite- quite big so [chuckles]... so we have to narrow it down within that. One of them appears to be made from an albumin print.

Get more on History Detectives at: www.pbs.org/historydetectives



EPISODE 3 2004-MAIL ORDER BRIDES, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.

Tukufu: Albumin was an early chemical process using egg whites that made photography available to the masses.

Rod: There was a technical shift, and the albumin prints stopped being used, maybe in the mid- mid-90s.

But these are gelatin printing out-prints, which dates them pretty tightly from 1890 to about 1920.

Tukufu: The overlap of these two technologies suggest the photographs come from the early 1890s. Which puts us in the right period. Then Rod spots something about the women's clothing.

Rod: ... bobbed hair and, you know, bangs and... The majority of them are black dresses with kinda puffy shoulders. That style of wearing black dresses, uh, comes from Queen Victoria's mourning dresses. Queen Victoria wore black the rest of her life after Prince Albert died.

Tukufu: Prince Albert died in 1861, which places us in the latter half of the Victorian era.

Rod: The other thing to note here, there's an interesting little clue here in-in their facial expressions. You notice that they're all quite glum-looking, they're, you know- none of them are smiling. And, uh... that's actually... th-there are two things going on there. One: um, it was a convention to sit very, very seriously having your picture taken because previously the time period took longer, you know... whereas, when these were taken, it didn't take so long but people still froze up in front of the camera. The other thing is- the brute fact is that people had really bad teeth at this time, you know, and if you smile a lot with bad teeth, it doesn't look great.

Tukufu: Ha-ha-ha! That's right... {Rod: So...} that's right.

Tukufu: The clearest clue to their date comes from the name of the agency itself.

Rod: ... the United States is the fact that it's the Columbian Agency and they're pretty clearly in reference to the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

There was a giant's, uh, World's Fair thing built in Chicago, and-and it seems that they're riding on the coattails of all the publicity hype that was built up around that exposition.

Tukufu: So here's the Columbian Exposition is in 1893...

Rod: Is in 1893. And then that would be pretty much the date of these pictures, judging from the process.

Tukufu: But there's something about our pictures, that's different from other late Victorian photographs in Rod's collection.

Rod: The photographic image itself is quite different style- this person is, you know, three-quarter view, this one person is straight on, looking to the left, this person is looking straight into the camera, this person's looking off to the right. Then also, there's a vignette around them, uh, that-that would be individual style of a local town photographer. And then that would lead me to the conclusion that, perhaps, these girls were providing the pictures themselves, from their local photographer.

Tukufu: Someone seems to have taken the original images, and re-photographed them, adding the Columbian Agency logo.

Rod: You notice that they cover up the, the local, uh, town photographer's logo... [Tukufu: Ahh...] so like on this- you can see on this one the local [Tukufu: Right...] photographer's logo is across the bottom. [Tukufu: Yes.] Well they've put their logo across the bottom.

Tukufu: And there's something else.



EPISODE 3 2004-MAIL ORDER BRIDES, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.

Rod: It appears to me that they shot a bunch of 'em at once and then made a single print with a lot of different images on it, and then cut 'em up. You can see the way the edges are uneven here.

Tukufu: So the Columbian Agency was mass-producing these photographs! They seem to be marketing the women. Was it for marriage? To find out if a marriage business could have existed in Chicago around 1893, I've come to meet local history expert, Professor Perry Juis. First I ask him about general attitudes towards marriage back then.

Perry: For women it was important because, uh, the opportunities for, um [swallows], living on their own were limited. Uh... for, uh, men it was kind of a social necessity. And, uh, people were not only expected to wed but also to stay wed. Uh, the divorce rate was very low, one in 2000 is perhaps an eighth of today's rate, and so, uh... it-it was very important for women and men to, eh, be together.

Tukufu: So have you come across any evidence of mail-order brides in your research?

Perry: I've not come across through anything like that, but uh, Chicago was growing very rapidly. In 1871 a third of Chicago was ruined in the Great Fire of that year, and as a consequence, tens of thousands of young workers came to the city to work in the reconstruction of-of Chicago. Uh-and for a time after the fire the population, uh, was in imbalance because there were more men than women.

Tukufu: More men meant a greater demand for single women.

Perry: This was a city of strangers. Tens of thousands of people knew no one else. They lived very often in rooming houses, took meals in cheap restaurants, had little money to spend for spare time, and their existence was not at all... particularly happy or , uh, uh-uh, pleasant.

Tukufu: This transient environment sounds like the perfect climate for a marriage broker to thrive.

Perry: Oh, most certainly, because lacking other opportunities, these services were quite essential.

Tukufu: So did the Columbian Agency arrange marriages between lonely Chicagoans? To find out, I've come to the Chicago Public Library. Here, they have city and business directories dating back to 1893.

Tukufu: Let me find "The Columbian". Oh!

Tukufu: Okay, just as we thought. There are several businesses called Columbian. But there's no reference to a Columbian Agency. So let's try a different approach. The Centre for Research Libraries has microfilm of the main Chicago newspapers of the day. I'm hoping there will be a reference to the Columbian Agency here. Now this is interesting. This is the "National Police Gazette", the most popular men's publication of the time. It's full of salacious stories, ads for clairvoyants, and even cures for syphilis. And look at this! Listings of marriage bureaus, offering to arrange marriages for men and women alike.

Tukufu: What about the Columbian? Not the Columbian Agency. Okay, maybe they omitted or changed the name of the agency. But even if they did that, the P.O. Box, or the lock box number, would still be the same, and that's 1051, so let me see if I can find it. Alright! Here it is! It reads, "Get married. List of ladies with photos and residences. Many very pretty and rich who want to marry. Mailed free. Lock box 1051."

Tukufu: So the Columbian Agency was a marriage bureau. And the pictures of our ladies must be some of the photos they sent out. These ads suggest that after you picked a partner, you paid the agency to introduce you, just like modern-day matchmaking. But what about our women? Is there any more evidence here to help me track them down? Suddenly, I discover an article that could turn this investigation on its head. "Catching Suckers Nowadays is a Real Cinch. There are men who make it a business to fatten on the purses of other men, and in many cases, gullible women looking for husbands". This article claims that not all marriage brokers were genuine. Some simply pocketed the cash, without making the introductions... duping not just men, but also women, who hoped their photos would land them a husband. According to this article, this scam wasn't limited to Chicago. It was a national phenomenon. Was the Columbian



EPISODE 3 2004-MAIL ORDER BRIDES, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.

Agency part of it?

Tukufu: To find out, I've arranged to meet an expert on crime in Chicago, historian Tim Samuelson. He's asked me to meet him downtown, which puzzles me.

Tukufu: Now Tim, why have you brought me here?

Tim: Well, we're in the alley behind South State Street. If you were in South State Street in the late 1800s, early 1900s, this was the heart of what they called "Satan's Mile". It was an area that was like a virtual shopping centre of sin. You could get anything you wanted: gambling houses, houses of prostitution, mayhem.

Tukufu: According to Tim, 1890s Chicago had a reputation for organized vice – and this was one of the isolated areas set up to contain it.

Tukufu: Now that's fascinating, but what does it have to do with marriage bureau scams?

Tim: They were scams and this-well that area was the centre of scams. And also, this was the centre of their undoing because State Street was also the beat of one of the most famous Chicago policemen of them all, Detective Clifton Wooldridge, Chicago's Sherlock Holmes. He was a one-man crime-busting machine, and he reveled in the ideas of breaking up all kinds of illegal gambling casinos, illicit saloons, prostitution... And, one of the things that he was very proud of, and-you know- was fierce about, was breaking up the evil of the marriage racket. He broke up 125 marriage agencies. He talked about seizing wagon loads of photographs and destroying them, papers, and then seeing that the people who ran them were prosecuted into fullest extent of the law.

Tukufu: If this guy Wooldridge was destroying photographs, it would explain why pictures like ours are so rare.

Tukufu: Have you heard of Columbian Agency? And was it one of those that Detective Wooldridge shut down?

Tim: Well actually, we don't know, because there's no definitive list of all of Detective Wooldridge's busts and he didn't write about all hundred-and-twenty-five that he said that he shut down.

Tukufu: Okay. Here's my million dollar question for you. Given what you now know about the Columbian Agency, and our four photos, were they part of a marriage bureau scam?

Tukufu: Armed with that answer, I'm returning to California to tell Dan and Patti what I've discovered.

Tukufu: The Columbian Agency was a marriage bureau.

Dan: Wow. That's coo--

Patti: Well, the mystery's been solved. [laughs]

Dan: Yeah.

Tukufu: I couldn't quite figure out the nature of this marriage bureau. That is, until I met Tim Samuelson.

[Flashback]

Tim: Well, if you looked at the evidence, you have these mass-produced photographs. You have the hazy kind-of Post Office Box for the address, that doesn't make it sound too legitimate. And most importantly, on the back of one of those photos, it's got little clues about the financial circumstances of the person pictured, and that's one of the key parts of one of these marriage scams. So, if you put all those together, I would say, yes, it follows the classic pattern of the marriage bureau scam as outlined by Detective Wooldridge.

Get more on History Detectives at: www.pbs.org/historydetectives



**EPISODE 3 2004-MAIL ORDER BRIDES,
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.**

Dan: Oh!

Patti: Oh! [laughs] I'm in shock. I-you know-I just... I never figured anything like that.

Tukufu: Unfortunately, as hard as we tried, we couldn't discover anything else about our ladies. They may have been women hoping to find husbands. Or just anonymous faces used to scam unsuspecting men. We'll never know. But to thank Dan and Patti for their question, I have another surprise for them.

Tukufu: The Columbian Agency advertised in "The National Police Gazette"... and I have, as a gift for you, an anthology of "The National Police Gazette".

Patti: Oh, [Tukufu: I wanna give that...] thank you so much. [Dan: Thank you very much] Oh, that's great.

Patti: And here we are: [Dan and Patti simultaneously] "scandals!" [Everyone laughs]

Dan: Oh jeez.

Patti: This is wonderful. We'll have those framed and then have the book to go with it

ENDS