Homer Lee Bank Note Company Advertising Card Simulates Currency

By BARBARA R. MUELLER, NLG

A MOST attractive syngraphic sideline consists of the specimen and advertising cards of bank note printers. Quite well known are the large, almost broadside sheets put out by the pioneer firms which eventually comprised the American Bank Note Company. These sheets bear impressions of a wide variety of engraved vignettes from which prospective customers made selections for their notes and other security paper. Coming along later in the 19th century was an elaborate advertising card in the similitude of a piece of paper money of the period put out by the Homer Lee Bank Note Company of New York.

The Homer Lee never was one of the top concerns in the field, so not much is known about it and its work. Perhaps the best source of information is a biography of a well-known bank note designer and one-time Chief of the Engraving Division of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing: *The Life and Work of Thomas F. Morris 1852-1898* written by his son, T.F. Morris II, was serialized in *The Essay-Proof Journal* during 1966, 1967 and 1968, and privately printed in book form in 1968.

According to the younger Morris, his father left American Bank Note Company in 1887 after 19 years of service as a designer and joined Homer Lee as Superintendent of Design and Engraving, where he received an extra $600 a year salary. The Homer Lee plant was located on the first floor of the Tribune Building in downtown Manhattan. Morris worked there from 1888 to 1893. Evidently Homer Lee himself was a businessmen with diversified interests, of which the bank note company was but a minor one. However, one J.D. Messner of Short Hills, New Jersey, an aggressive young college graduate, managed the firm for him and was responsible for inducing Morris to join it. The grand plans of these two men were shattered by Messner's untimely death on February 21, 1888, just 49 days after Morris joined the team. Although Lee decided to carry on and even installed a litho steam press in 1889 to compete in the lower-priced field, the firm never fulfilled Morris' expectations.

In September 1893, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing first approached Morris about possible employment, and on November 1st he was sworn into service there. Shortly thereafter Homer Lee merged with the Franklin Bank Note Company and the subsequent Franklin Lee Bank Note Company was absorbed into the second "consolidation" of the American Bank Note Company in 1897.

THE HOMER LEE BANK NOTE COMPANY,

CITY HALL SQUARE, NEW YORK.

Engravers and Printers

Of Bonds, Share Certificates, Etc., for Railroads, Water, Gas and Electric Companies.

Securities engraved by this Company are accepted by the New York Stock Exchange.

Attention of Corporations not wishing to list their Securities is invited to our new **Steelograph** Securities. Designs and estimates furnished without cost.

THE HOMER LEE BANK NOTE COMPANY,
NEW YORK.

Inscription on back of card.

The aforementioned biography of Thomas F. Morris contains "a contemporary view of the Homer Lee Bank Note Company" from the October 1888 issue of a trade journal called *Paper and Press.* From it one learns that Homer Lee was a native of Mansfield, Ohio who was taught engraving by his father. After unsuccessfully seeking employment at the Cincinnati office of American Bank Note, he went to New York to work for a minor card engraver. When the latter failed, he went into business for himself.

Indicative of the variety and type of work produced by Homer Lee are the items listed in Morris' diary for the first two months of his employment there:

Stock certificates:—Colorado Central Consolidated Mining Co.; Seaboard National Bank; Cato Coal & Coke Co.; Fourteenth St. National Bank; Wheeling & Lake Erie.

Bonds and coupons—Clearing House Association; Everett Coal & Iron Co.; Aetna Iron Works; "Chinese" bond; South Pennsylvania Rail Road; East Pennsylvania Rail Road; Interstate Rapid Transit.

Fraternity certificate—Phi Delta Theta.

Menu—Lincoln's birthday dinner.

Letterhead—Crane Elevator Co.

During his tenure, it is known that Morris designed notes for El Banco Mercantil de Yucatan, and he probably was responsible for the considerable Homer Lee output for other Latin countries at the time—such as Colombia (Pick 385-388B, 404, 406-410); Honduras (Pick A1-8); Nicaragua (Pick 1-7); and Venezuela (Pick 3-6).

In view of his artistic style, it may well be that he also designed the advertising card illustrated here. It was produced by a combination of intaglio (steel line) engraving and color lithography. The litho portions are printed in red and green tints. These include the words SPECIMEN at upper left and lower right, the circular device at lower right on which the counter 50 is superimposed, the underprinting beneath Homer Lee, and the lathework surrounding the female figure.

On the back of the 4½ x•8 inch card is the following inscription as illustrated herein: "The Homer Lee Bank Note Company, City Hall Square, New York. Engravers and Printers of Bonds, Share Certificates, Etc., for Railroads, Water, Gas and Electric Companies. Securities engraved by this Company are accepted by the New York Stock Exchange. Attention of Corporations not wishing to list their Securities is invited to our new Steelograph Securities. Designs and estimates furnished without cost. The Homer Lee Bank Note Company, New York." It raises the questions: Was "steelograph" the Homer Lee name for the combination of intaglio and lithography as seen on the front of the card? How many other printers, if any, used this process? Were patents involved? (An interesting line of investigation would be the study of Homer Lee security paper possibly printed by this method.) After ABNCo. acquired Franklin Lee, did it also use the process?

Finally, Homer Lee printed U.S. postal notes of the first, second and third issues, as described in Nicholas Bruyer's study in PAPER MONEY in 1973-74, as listed below. The contract lasted from September 3, 1883 to September 3, 1887. Oddly enough, Morris redesigned the notes for American's bid to acquire the contract for the fourth issue just before he joined Homer Lee. The latter did not bid on that contract, which ABNCo. won.

Collectors seeking a challenging field which combines both U.S. and foreign paper money and other types of security paper would do well to track down the output of Homer Lee. The result of their labors could be a winning exhibit at Memphis or ANA.

References:

The Essay-Proof Journal, Spring 1967, Vol. 24, No. 2, whole no. 94, pp. 67-76 (that section of the Morris biography dealing with Homer Lee Bank Note Co.).

Paper Money, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1973, whole no. 48; Vol. 13, nos. 1-3, 1974, whole nos. 49-51 (pp. 171-178, no. 48, and pp. 20-29, no. 49 deal specifically with the Homer Lee printings).