Greetings from Samoa

Early Twentieth Century Postcards
and a tribute to photographer

Alfred Tattersall

Hunt Family Collection

Compiled by Alice Hunt
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Samoan Family History in Manuia Books Website –

Reprinted with additions  2007, 2011

Florence, Elsie, Amelia and Olive - Sisters born in Samoa  2011

‘Pouniu’, Kingi’s House, Saleaula, Savai’i, Samoa  2015

Samoa. Dear Mr Best ~  Letters from J.B. Fleck to Elsdon Best, Samoa,
1917-19 and later notes about Lava Caves  2016
Greetings from Samoa

Early Twentieth Century Postcards

When my mother, Florence King, was a young woman in Samoa, professional photographers were the only people who owned cameras. They sold postcards of scenery, customary activities and any unusual events, which people bought and mailed to friends, or kept in a postcard album. Florence had an album which was filled with cards, Samoan at first and later, when living in New Zealand, holiday cards from places like Rotorua, Te Aroha and Hamilton.

The scenes in the early cards date from 1905, when Mount Matavanu erupted in Savai‘i, through to the World War One years. During this period Samoa was a German possession, and the words on the cards in this collection are mainly in German. This changed after 1914 when the New Zealand Army occupied the Islands and took over the administration.

With the current commemorations of WW1 these cards have found a place in New Zealand’s historic archives.

Alice Hunt
February 2016
In Memory of the King Family,
Samoa

Members of the King family who collected the postcards.
Back row: Elsie, Florence, Arthur
Front: Olive, Papa Arthur Aris King, Mama Susana nursing Edward, Amelia
Photo taken in Apia, November, 1912, probably at the studio of Alfred Tattersall.
The postcards from Samoa presented by Alice Hunt in this publication are a representative selection of scenes and subjects that were conveyed to all four corners of the globe in the postcard boom which originated in Germany in the 1890’s.

The more exotic the locale the more enthusiastic were visitors to scoop up cards at ports of call and post them to friends and family at home. Not just the scenes but the rare postage stamps provided ingredients of novelty to recipients in the more westernised world.

According to Don Mee, postal auctions show evidence of cards being sent from Samoa from the mid-1890’s. Printers in Luxembourg and Germany dominated the production of postcards for Samoa in the first few decades, and after 1903 these were often produced under contract for Alfred J. Tattersall, of Apia, the giant of Samoa photography in the colonial period. Even when his brand was missing from Samoan postcards issued in this period more often than not it was his photographs that featured on them, even if uncredited.

Alfred Tattersall’s images, taken from 1886 through to the 1940’s dominate the Samoan photographic record like those of no other individual. He deserves acclaim as a man who left to posterity countless priceless images, both on cards and in general photography, that are part of archival and family collections all over the world. His work included studio portraits - individual, family, cultural - news photography of important events and people, photographs of official and community groups, and general photography of outside scenes, including villages, house and building exteriors, vistas of Apia, families, plantations, agricultural processing and scenic studies.

Just about the only thing Mr Tattersall did not produce – and whose absence from the photographic record is all the more pronounced thereby – were atmospheric interiors of both settler and Samoan houses of the period, and accompanying domestic scenes. The photographic researcher hungers in vain for this missing element of Samoan history and only a small sample of such images have come...
down to us from people like Otto Tetens and Gustav Klinkmüller. These two men (one a visiting scientist and the other a long time Apia resident) were not driven by commercial considerations and could therefore afford – unlike Tattersall – the luxury of using expensive glass plate negatives to capture interior architecture and people in the privacy of their homes.

Nevertheless, we owe a profound debt to Alfred Tattersall for bringing Samoan history to life across its multifarious aspects for the better part of half a century until his studio began to fade away in the 1940’s when he became an octogenarian and his pace of activity understandably slackened.

The least we can do to honour the man is to ask, and answer, two questions: who was Alfred Tattersall and what happened to his valuable collection of negatives?

Alfred was born in Auckland in 1866* and after leaving school, was employed in the photography business of George Redfern and then later Tuttle & Co. In 1886 he travelled to Apia to take up employment with John Davis, Samoa’s first professional photographer. Davis, an Englishman, had arrived in Samoa in 1872-73 and within a year or two had set up a studio bringing the new craft of photography to the islands. With a small settler community and low tourist numbers Mr Davis had difficulty making a living from photography and took on other roles – being elected to the Municipal Board of Apia in December 1879, becoming supervisor of the board in February 1880, and Inspector of Police and Nuisances in April.

In 1885 Davis branched out into postal operations, becoming the postmaster of the Apia Municipality, and then from December 1886 Postmaster of Samoa, upon appointment by King Malietoa. The employment of Alfred Tattersall was no doubt made necessary by Davis’ concentration thereafter on his postal work. It is probable that the greater part of the photography that issued from the Davis Studio from then until Davis’ death in 1903 was taken by Alfred Tattersall.

Tattersall purchased the business from the Davis estate at the start of 1904, changed its name, and pushed it vigorously into the booming postcard trade. He appears to have arranged for production of his cards in
Dresden and Berlin, and they were often printed with German language advertisements and branding on them.

His postcard business was massively impacted by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. It cut him off from his European suppliers, and ironically, led to a boom in sales to the hundreds of New Zealand troops who occupied and garrisoned Samoa. His stock of printed cards was quickly depleted by the many soldiers using them to write home. Alfred then moved into local card production using a supply of sensitised photographic print paper of postcard size that he was able to buy from a source in the South Pacific, possibly in Australia or New Zealand. Then later he issued his ‘Real Photo’ cards, each printed from a negative on to standard photographic print paper cut to size. These cards were often studio photographs of the sitter with a rubber hand-stamped ‘Samoa Post Card’ inscription on the back.

In August 1891 Tattersall married Blanche ‘Saina’ Yandall Fa’ata’alili, a local woman of English and Samoan descent. Her mother was Tualagi Yandall and her father Fata Fa’ata’alili, of Afega. The Tattersalls lived on an expansive property at Moto’otua, in Apia, and raised three children, Herbert ‘Bert’, Winifred and Ralph. Ralph (full name Alfred Berry Lionel Ralph) worked in the Tattersall Studio as a photographer and retoucher for a number of years before moving on to employment in the Samoa Court System, where he rose to become Commissioner of the High Court. He and Bert married local women (Dora Siemsen and Therese ‘Terra’ Johnston respectively) but Winifred died as a teenager.

A number of people worked for Tattersalls over the years, including Sylvia Syddall (m. Stünzner) who worked as an assistant and photo retoucher in the early 1930’s, and Violet Elkins (m. Keil) who assisted Alfred in studio work in the final years before his death in 1951 at the age of 86. William Keil also worked there part-time, probably in a book-keeping role. Mrs Blanche Tattersall had died in 1937 and her husband rattled round in their large home, gradually becoming an historical figure in his own right, perhaps the last surviving witness of the famous 1889 hurricane which
littered the Apia foreshore with wrecked naval vessels.

New Zealand school teacher, George Irwin, befriended Tattersall in the 1940’s and wrote fondly of the man. “‘Old Tat’ we called him. He was in his eighties, tall, immaculate, and endearingly old-fashioned.” He and Blanche “built themselves a shuttered house, planted mango trees around it, and beyond made wide lawns, gardens and a grass tennis court,” Irwin wrote. “For over sixty years Tattersall lived the tropical island life people dream about, and then his wife died. When I met Old Tat he was living alone among family portraits in a house darkened by overgrowing mango trees.”

Tattersall reminisced to Irwin over Robert Louis Stevenson, (“always obliging and good humoured, even when he was sick”) who had often summoned the young photographer to Vailima to record special occasions. “But what Old Tat liked remembering most was the hurricane of 1889 – the ‘Calliope Hurricane’ he called it. He had crouched all that dark March day among rocks on the beach and watched five warships wrecked - the sixth, the German Eber with eighty men had disappeared under the foreshore reef before dawn.”

An examination of Tattersall photography shows indisputably that he was a skilled location photographer whose images were well composed and crisply detailed. His studio studies were, perhaps, of less distinction. The lighting was often rather flat and the clarity wanting, perhaps because of inferior lenses. For this reason, many Apia settlers preferred to visit Auckland photographer Herman J. Schmidt, whose moody, evocative and sharply detailed studies showed a shrewd understanding.

A Mau demonstration on Beach Rd outside the Apia Courthouse circa 1928-29 is watched by Alfred and Blanche Tattersall standing in the middle on the upstairs verandah of the Hellesoe Sasse Store on the opposite corner (Alfred has his hands on the balustrade). Mr Tattersall took arguably his most famous series of photos from near that spot in 1914 when he snapped images of the British flag being raised by the New Zealand occupiers (see image below).

Peter Rasmussen, who stored the Tattersall glass plates before they were irreparably damaged in a cyclone in 1966 (cropped).
of side illumination and oblique poses. The Schmidt collection, at Auckland Libraries, has numerous images of Samoan settler families who made appointments during visits to Auckland.

Older residents of Samoa still remember Mr Tattersall working industriously into his old age with his head, shoulders and camera-back shrouded under a dark blanket as his subjects took up their pose in the studio and he studied the focussing plate on the back of his large format camera (darkness was required to block out surrounding light for a clear view). It is not clear that Mr Tattersall ever worked much with film. He may have continued to use glass plate negatives until the end of his career.

Alfred Tattersall was the man on the spot and Samoa was fortunate to have him. His huge and versatile body of work lives on to bring our understanding of the Samoan colonial period vividly to life. The wide distribution of his images and the advent of high-resolution scanning means that his wonderful legacy has been secured for future generations. Digitisation has come to the rescue and filled the gap left by the accidental destruction of the Tattersall glass plate negatives in the tropical cyclone which struck Samoa in January 1966.

The facts surrounding this incident have been pieced together from a number of informants – John Dearing, Florence Rasmussen Funck and Hans Joachim ‘Joe’ Keil. When the Retzlaff family bought Tattersall’s old studio on Beach Rd in 1952 there was still a large collection of glass plate negatives in storage there. Whether they represented the full Tattersall and Davis collections of many decades is unclear. William Keil, the manager of Retzlaffs, knew that his friend Apia Coroner, Peter Rasmussen, was a photography enthusiast and the latter agreed to take the collection into storage. Florence Funck, Peter’s daughter, recalls a single large box, perhaps a half a metre in dimension, which contained hundreds of glass plates stacked vertically against each other in layers without protective interleaving. Their condition “was not the best anymore,” Florence recalls. This is understandable given the rigours of Samoa’s climate. In addition, she recalls that on a couple of occasions some men from a government department visited and extracted some plates that they said were relevant to research they were doing. “I don't know what happened to those ‘borrowed’ plates,” recalls Florence. New Zealander John Dearing, who worked in Apia for a few years for the Retzlaff family, quizzed Peter Rasmussen about the fate of the Tattersall plates. “In 1979, I asked Peter what had become of them and he took me out to his back garden/plantation in Moto’otua, near the hospital. He pointed put where he had stored them in his old copra shed, and then said that they were mostly destroyed in the 1966 hurricane. The shed had been demolished by that storm and, though there might have still been a few boxes of plates under his house, we were in no position to check on that occasion.”
As with so many settler families who were household names in the islands in colonial days, the Tattersalls have disappeared from Samoa. Herbert Tattersall emigrated to Australia while Ralph came to New Zealand. Regardless of this, the Tattersall name is indelibly etched in the photographic history of Samoa.

* The “Cyclopedia of Samoa”, 1907, gives Tattersall’s birth year as 1861 but his gravestone at Tufuiopa, in Apia, gives the date of 29 March, 1866.

References

“The Samoa Express: Journal of the Fellowship of Samoa Specialists,” Christchurch, articles as follows:


Internet article on Alfred Tattersall:
http://canterburyphotography.blogspot.co.nz/2015/11/tattersall.html

Discussions with Albrecht ‘Albi’ Stünzner and Momoe Malietoa von Reiche, in 2014, both of whom have recollections of the Tattersall plates in storage on the Rasmussen property and who alerted me to their temporary existence there years ago.

Discussions and/or email correspondence with Florence Rasmussen Funck, of Germany, H.J. ‘Joe’ Keil, of Apia, Don Mee, of Christchurch, and Marina Stünzner Harbrow, in November, 2015. Florence, in particular, was able to offer genealogical background on the Tattersall family.

Photography Credits: Ralph Tattersall and Peter Rasmussen photos per Spemann family collection, Auckland (cropped from group photos); Alfred Tattersall and Blanche Tattersall photos per McKay family collection, Auckland (also cropped). (The late George McKay reminisced fondly about Blanche, who he remembered as a warm and generous provider of baked cakes to groups of children – of which he was one – visiting the Tattersall home on social occasions in the 1930’s).
Greetings from Samoa. Lava running into the sea.

The Eruption of Matavanu,
Savai’i, Samoa, 1905

Postkarte  A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoan 164
Greetings from Samoa. Lava running into the sea.
Greetings from Samoa. Lava on the sea.

Greetings from Samoa. Lava running into the sea.
Greetings from Samoa. Lava running into the ocean.

Greetings from Samoa. Lavafield at Savaii.
Greetings from Samoa. Lavafield at Savai'i.

After the eruption of the crater in Savaii.
Greetings from Samoa. Samoan Talalo.

Traditional dress of the chiefs.

A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoan Customs and Scenery

Postkarte A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoan Customs and Scenery

A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoan Customs and Scenery

Apia, Hafen, Samoa.

Apia, Harbour, Samoa.
A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoa 11 3415
*Fischerboot, Samoa.*
Fishing boat, Samoa.

A. Tattersall, photo, Apia, Samoa
6461 *Grusse aus Samoa.*
Wrecks of USS Trenton, USS Uandalia, SMS Olga (Apia Harbour 1889).
A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoa  11 34180
S.M.S. Adler, Wrack, Samoa (Apia Harbour 1889).

A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoa  11 34180
H.M.S. Adler, Wreck, Samoa.
A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoa  13 39859
Grüsse von Samoa  Papaloloa Wasserfall
Papaloloa Waterfall
Greetings from Samoa.

The Courthouse and Administration building dating from 1902
A. Tattersall, photo, Apia Samoa
Grüsse von Samoa  Samoanisches Kriegsschiff
Samoan war canoe ‘alia — double hulled sailing canoe of Samoa.

A. Tattersall, photo, Apia-Samoa  13 39860
Grüsse von Samoa  Kopra-Verarbeitung durch Kontraktarbeiter
Copra processing by indentured labourers.
A. Tattersall, photo, Apia, Samoa
Gruss aus Samoa.

A. J. Tattersall, photo  Samoa.
SAMOAN HOUSES.
Samoa Post Card

Native Dance. Samoa. A.T. Photo, Apia. 4

Cards 22 - 26 have the rubber stamp heading on the back which was used when New Zealand troops were in Samoa.
Apia Harbour, West End, Samoa. A.J.T. Photo 54

Apia Harbour, East End, Samoa. A.J.T. Photo 55

A. Tattersall, photo, Apia Samoa
Samoa Post Card
Lake Lanutoo  A.T. Photo, Apia
Samoa Post Card

*Panyas Tree. 41  A.J.T. Photo, Apia*

Breadfruit tree.
Gruss aus Samoa.

A. Tattersall, phot., Apia. 2388

Gruss aus Samoa.
Samoan Portraits

Postkarte A. Tattersall, photo,
Apia-Samoa 8718
Grüße aus Samoa.
Samoanischer Hauptling.
Samoan Chief.

James Baxter Fleck wrote the notes on cards 28, 29 and 30. He was with the N.Z. occupation force in Samoa 1917-19. He met Florence King, from Samoa, in Auckland about 1924, they married and settled in Palmerston North.
Grüße von Samoa

Samoan Taupo.

A. Tattersall, photo,
Apia-Samoa 13 34868
Grüße von Samoa
Samoan Taupo.
Greetings from Samoa.

Samoan Taupo.
Other Photographers’ Cards

POST CARD  T. Andrew, Apia (Samoa) 1910

POST CARD  T. Andrew, Apia (Samoa) 1910
POST CARD  T. Andrew, Apia (Samoa) 1910

POST CARD  T. Andrew, Apia (Samoa) 1910
Post Card  T. Andrew, Apia (Samoa) 1910

Postkarte - Weltpostverein
Gruss aus Apia (Deutsch-Samoa)
Deutsche Samoa-Gedellschaft, Berlin-Apia
(German-Samoan Society, Berlin-Apia)
Photo depicts cocoa plant propagation.
Postkarte - Weltpostverein

Gruss aus Apia (Deutsch-Samoa)
Deutsche Samoa-Gedellschaft, Berlin-Apia
(German-Samoa Society, Berlin-Apia)
Greetings from Apia, Samoa.

After a hurrican (handwritten on face)
Th. E. L. Series 1009
SAMOAN GIRLS.

41a
Greetings from Samoa.

Postkarte

Area around the new crater at Savai’i, Samoa.

Greetings from Samoa.
S.M.S. Scharnhorst in Fahrt.
S.M.S. Scharnhorst underway.

Postkarte  137467  Verlag von Arthur Renard, Photogr., Kiel
S.M.S. Scharnhorst in Fahrt.
S.M.S. Scharnhorst underway.

Verlag Hermann Edlefsen (Sp?),  Kiel.
S.M.S. Scharnhorst
Carte postale   Edit. Kingshill No. 11   Samoa
Samoan King
These two cards were posted from Olive King in Apia to her sisters Florence and Amelia who were in Auckland at the time of the influenza epidemic of 1918. Olive was thirteen years of age. The family survived the flu, and Olive lived for 100 years.

Dear Florrie. I am writing to tell you that Mamma and I got sick first, and then Edward and George. And so Elsie has been doing all the work by herself. Mamma and I was very ill and we thought we were not going to live any more but we got better at last. Tofa Florrie from Olive.

Dear Amelia, Just a few lines to tell you that Edward and George were very good boys. When we were sick they got up at five o’clock in the morning and cooked our breakfast. They cook us each an egg. I was very ill and thought I was gone. I was very fasa and sing God Save the King. I was talking when I was asleep. So tofa Amelia from Olive King.
Two Cards from the Wollerman Family

Lt Herman Wollerman served in Samoa 1914-19, where he met James Baxter Fleck. The two settled in Palmerston North and the families have been close friends since then.

A. Tattersall, Photo, Apia-Samoa 11 34163
Samoanische Mahlzeit, Samoa.
Samoan feast

Passed by Censor ‘H.F.A.W.’
(the writer, Herman Wollerman)
A. Tattersall, Photo, Apia-Samoa.  84722
Apia-Samoa Hospital

Date on postmark 31 July or August 1917?
Samoan History - some significant events

Around 1500 BC: Earliest human settlement of the Samoa Archipelago.

Samoans sailed around the Pacific Ocean, conquered and ruled other Islands, suffered defeats, traded and found marriage partners for royalty with neighbouring Pacific people, mainly Fijians and Tongans.

1722: Dutchman, Jacob Roggeveen sighted the islands.

1768: French explorer, Louis Antoine de Bougainville called Samoa’s islands ‘the Navigator Islands’.

There was some European contact in the first half of the 18th century, and settlement by refugees and beachcombers until the early 19th century.

1830: Rev John Williams landed in Savai’i. Most of the population converted to Christianity.

1889: Tension between trading nations grew. Seven warships: three American, three German and one British, were in Apia harbour when a violent hurricane struck, resulting in the sinking or disabling of six ships and the loss of over 200 lives. Britain’s H.M.S.Calliope was the only ship to clear the harbour and survive the storm. The wrecks lay in the water for many years, gradually disintegrating. The reason given for the escape of the Calliope was her superior and more modern engine power and the quality of the coal from West Coast mines in New Zealand.

1899: Possession of Samoa was divided between Germany (Western Samoa), and the United States (Eastern Samoa).

1905: Matavanu erupted on Savai’i Island.

1914: World War One. New Zealand occupied Western Samoa and administered the islands until 1962.

1918: The trading ship Tahune docked in Apia with some passengers infected with Spanish Flu, which resulted in the death of about 8000 Samoans.

Samoans resisted New Zealand’s rule, with non-violent action (1926–36), culminating in the Mau uprisings.

1962: Samoa became the first Pacific nation to regain independence. A Treaty of Friendship was signed with New Zealand.
After putting these postcards into a medium which can be reached by others who are interested in Samoan history, many memories have come back to me that give a personal touch to the collection. When I was four years of age my mother took me to Samoa for six months. I have some memories of that visit. In 1967 we went, as a family group, on SS Matua on its monthly Banana Boat round-trip, which gave us one day in Apia. It was not until 2003 that the series of visits to Samoa began, which resulted in several accounts being recorded about our family and the wider Stowers’ family history.

Cards 1-7, 36, 42 Matavanu erupts.
The memories of my mother, Florence King, born in Saleaula 1892 —
When I was ten I was sent to a Mormon school at Tuasivi, an English language school. I was very homesick. The only thing I was good at was handwriting.
I came back home, then the volcano erupted. (1905)
The volcano had been active before then. We saw it from our house where we watched the display at night. It went on for about ten years. The steamers used to sail past there to show the passengers the sights.
We were on the eastern side of the island. The lava came right round the island until it covered up all the land.
We had to evacuate our home, the lava came very slowly, taking a few weeks which allowed everyone to get out of the place. We went as far as we could up the mountain to see it. Father got smoke in his eyes, and lost the sight of one eye.
We saw the lava come down like a big hill as if a bulldozer was pushing it along. You could see the trees fall over and burn. Father used to shovel out the lava into a little heap and then put shillings into it. When it cooled he sold these as souvenirs. A lot of people did that.
We went away to stay with our relations at Tuasivi after a few months. We had lost everything, the house was burnt (first and second houses), but we saved the furniture. Everyone had a chance to get away.

Article in the Samoa newspaper —
Mr King would be grateful to anyone who would take his eldest daughter to help in household work, and would give her a little schooling (German). He is also prepared to accept any billet offering for himself. He would like to have mentioned in these columns that the natives were very kind to him and rendered him every assistance they could to save his property.

Florence was taken in by the Haaben family, who owned the ice factory in Apia. She helped with the children, and went to a German school, where she learned her second language. She stayed there for several years.

Extract from Pouniu, King’s house, Saleaula Savai’i 2015
Cards 12, 13, 18 The wrecks in Apia Harbour
These wrecks following the hurricane in 1889 were often referred to by my mother and aunts. The ships were gradually breaking up by this time. I was told that the Samoans collected timber and other useful items from the wrecks. The picture frame in the photo (right) was made by Joseph Key (brother of Susana) from wood taken from the Adler.

Card 14 The Papalolola waterfall
This popular swimming hole, known as the ‘Sliding Rock’, has been visited by many generations. My mother said that she slid down it, went deep into the water, and thought she was never going to surface. She did not try it again.

Card 16 The Administration Building, Apia
When visiting Samoa in recent years, we were surprised that this building was still standing, but so much in need of restoration. The huge cost of this is prohibitive for the Samoan government.

Card 17 Double hulled canoe
In 1917 my father wrote to Elsdon Best (Dominion Museum ethnologist) about a large war canoe (‘alea) at that time lying under an iron shed and fast rotting away. “All wood perishes here, the hot moist atmosphere destroying everything.”

“The planks the boat is composed of are lashed together in the same way as the Fiji boats. And such things as planking for the decks is dovetailed together and lashed.

“Suagole, the long oar was the steering paddle. Oars were not used and even now when the natives feel like it they will paddle their long narrow rowing boats, called Fautasi.”

Cards 26-28 My father’s comments.
My father was always willing to show the family ‘curios’ to visitors, and would explain the different type of adzes, shells, coral, and weaving. It is hard to know when he wrote these short descriptions. He was very respectful of Samoan culture and traditions, and the Polynesian influence in his metalwork (silver teaspoons and utensils) is obvious.

Cards 47, 48 Flu Epidemic in Samoa
In 1918 when the Flu Epidemic struck in Samoa with a disastrous death rate, the New Zealand troops were very critical of the Army Administration that had not complied with shipping quarantine requirements. This was one of many aspects of New Zealand governance which caused concern. As a child, I remember much talk about the mau movement, the banishment to New Zealand of activists, the Police shooting of the non-violent mau demonstration in Apia, and the questioning of the capability of the Samoan people to be self-governing.
Florence and Amelia King in Auckland in the 1920s. Collecting postcards was a popular hobby at that time.