

## Easter Bunnies and Organ Grinders

by  
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Easter is among the most cherished of holidays for millions of Americans, especially those of European extraction. Yet, for all of the religious importance of this most holy of holidays, it is curious beyond words to attempt to describe the symbols used for Easter. Take for example, Easter bunnies and Easter eggs. What in the world do such animals have to do with the Risen Christ? Fortunately, for organ grinder aficionados, such symbols offer a humorous and entertaining glimpse into such artifacts of a time long ago.

As collectors of such items know, the image of the organ grinder was inculcated into the American scene and psyche for decades. This character was so pervasive he could be expected to show up virtually anywhere and everywhere. There is, as near as I can tell, nothing that escaped the powerful allure of this caricature, regardless of what the medium might have been.

So in this season of Eastertide, let's enjoy some of the ways that bunnies and chicks and organ grinders were called together to celebrate the joy of Easter.



Figure 1

Easter has always offered the chance to participate in an age-old American custom: gift-giving. It is not a surprise to see toys among the items that give cause to recognize Easter. In Figure 1 we see an example of what was a tremendously popular toy of the 1950s: a hand-cranked rubber-band music box in the shape of a "hurdy-gurdy" or crank organ. The infamous and ever-found Mattel Creations music box is seen in a model created exclusively for Easter.

On the bottom is imprinted "Music Maker Toys, Stock No. 437, 8436 Warner Dr., Culver City, Calif. U.S. Patent No. 2,504,666." This model does not have the ordinary credit to Boyd Duncan, the music arranger. Also missing is the year of manufacture, which typically is 1950-1953. This piece measures 6" high x 5" wide x 2" deep and the bunny, which bobs up and down as the music plays, adds another four inches to the height. To further confuse the matter of Easter symbolism, the tune played is "London Bridge is Falling Down." This would possibly suggest that the piece was made early in the 1950s and was a short-run production. In other production pieces, where larger production runs were made, more customary tunes such as "Easter Parade" and "Peter Cottontail" were featured. Of significance is the rope strap, which allowed a child to hand the toy around the neck and parade outside with what could be considered a very primitive "Walkman." Neat image, huh?

While there were scores of other hand-cranked toys made to celebrate Easter, they are more tuned to music boxes than organs.



Figure 2

Figure 2 is of a street organ with a music box movement. It stands 4" tall x 4" wide by 5" deep and is painted in pastel colors. There are no marks to indicate maker, etc. What's special is that it incorporated both typical images: the bunny and the chick! The tune played is "Easter Parade." I have never seen another of this model.

When collecting organ grinder artifacts, probably the most popular source of such items would be the postcards of years gone by. There is no better record of American correspondence than the post card. Before the advent of the telephone, and because of their meager cost, the penny postcard was the most common means of communicating. The postcard commenced in 1907 in America but it was forbidden to write on the address (reverse) side of the card until Congress changed the law in 1911; hence, we see many cards with handwritten notes scribbled over the front of the card. Because of the popularity of postcards, it's no surprise that Easter post cards were made and sent. Imagine the organ grinder theme being so popular at the turn of the century that the grinder was not only featured in postcards, but the Easter theme allowed for the grinder to be portrayed as bunnies and chicks! The following cards are from my collection which include organ grinders featured for all of the major holidays.

Figure 3 is of an unmailed card and is highly unusual because it features both a chick and a young maiden. Almost always animals were used exclusively, and humans were left out. The card is gold embossed and is in full color. The verse reads: While the



Figure 3

maiden hops about Mr. Chick the tune grinds out.” Doesn’t make much sense, but then it doesn’t have to.



Figure 4

Figure 4 shows a rather solemn looking, and nattily dressed, rabbit grinder with an organ that doesn’t appear to be modeled after a real organ. This is another gold-embossed and full-color card. Interestingly, the crank is “C” shaped, which suggests that the artist actually saw such a crank at some time. However, “C” cranks typically were not used after about 1870. Note the dancing chick with a string about its neck to prevent it from flying away. The card was mailed March 29, 1907 to Miss Hazel Palmer Blooming Prairie Minnesota. No street address was needed. What a simple time it was!

Figure 5 is also in full color and gold embossed. It was mailed March 25, 1910 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The organ here has the crank on the right side, as do most of the organs. The only logical reason for the crank to be shown on the side is that it makes it visible to the reader. Few crank organs actually had the crank on the side because it would be extremely difficult to connect the cranking mechanism to the barrel..



Figure 5



Figure 6

The bunny in Figure 6 has the good fortune of playing a tune that inspired the two chicks to begin singing. The card is hand painted in soft hues. Printed on the front is the following information: Huld’s Easter Series 21-30. Copyrighted 1905 by Franz Huld, Publisher, New York. There apparently was a series of Easter cards, perhaps even more featuring organ grinders. It was mailed April 22, 1905 to Miss Catherine Armanu, Plant Ave. Webster Grove MO.

*Women are rarely featured as organ grinders*



Figure 7

Women are rarely featured as organ grinders, and more difficult to find is a female bunny grinder. Such is the case in Figure 7. This card was mailed to Mssr. Arthur van Deth, Jr. Brussels, Belgium, April 3, 1903.

The egg and gathering of babies in Figure 8 probably has some significance, but it would be tough to figure out what it is. They appear to be a happy lot, as do the bunnies dancing to the bunny grinder.



Figure 8



Figure 9 is of another gold-embossed card in full color. Of note is that only the bunny on the right, who is ringing the bell, is clothed. Curious. The card was mailed to Mrs. Lewis Selzer, Dunkeetin, Iowa, on March 19, 1912.

Figure 9

A flock of chicks is seen in Figure 10, with the chick grinder holding out a hat for passers-by to drop a tip. It was mailed in Ottumwa, Iowa, March 13 at 6 PM but no year is stamped.



Figure 10

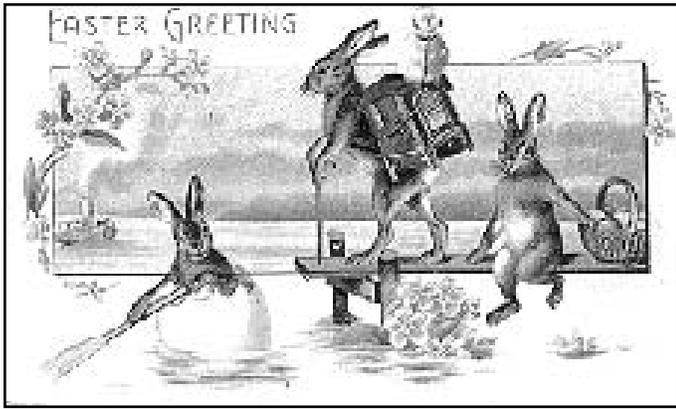


Figure 10

A very accurate-looking organ is featured in Figure 10. Once again the chick is leashed to the organ. The whimsy continues with the bunny on the left rowing an egg. Once again we see this curious combination of bunnies and chicks and eggs all commemorating Easter. The card was mailed to Master Arthur Elliot, Box 22 No 4, Tampa, Fla, on April 10, 1909.

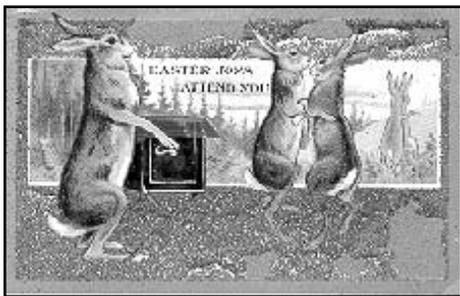


Figure 11

The card in Figure 11 is special because the glitter effect is layered onto the card. Again we see the happy, dancing bunnies and the undressed grinder. The verse is unique: "Easter Joys Attend You." This probably

makes sense to the bunnies. It was mailed April 17, 1911 to Master Charles Rosenbaum, 2224 Wash. St., San Francisco, Cal.



Figure 12

We conclude with two foreign cards: Figure 12 celebrates Easter with the German proclamation Frohliche Ostern and shows a chick grinder serenading three chicks. The card is gold-embossed and in full color.

The last postcard, in Figure 13, is in full pastel colors and appears to be of a circus theme with a tight rope walker overhead while the bunny in the foreground is collecting tips from the chicks. It was mailed on March 29 and appears to have been mailed in 1932, which would be quite late for such a theme.



Figure 13



Lastly, a business card featuring a one-legged, singing chick cranking a left-handed egg (Figure 14)! It's obviously time to close this article. And what could be more fitting than such a grinder?

Figure 14

I hope you've enjoyed this brief look into organ grinding and Easter. There is little doubt this beloved character has made his mark on history.

Angelo Rulli serves as the Assistant Editor of the Carousel Organ and his expertise in editing and publications is invaluable to this journal. Angelo, besides enjoying playing his crank organ, collects organ grinder memorabilia and has one of the largest of that type in the United States.

### Johnson Reopens Band Organ Department

Fargo, ND, September 16, 1999 - The Johnson Organ Company, Inc. of Fargo, North Dakota, now in its 45th year in the manufacture of pipe organs, has announced that they are again building band organs (mechanical pipe organs that play music rolls) for merry-go-rounds. They have been contacted by ride owners who have discovered that band organ music greatly enhances their merry-go-round ridership. The new organs have reliable brushless motors instead of perishable leather bellows and weight about 100 pounds less than the traditional band organ.