In the early 1900s, Henry M. Beach earned a living roaming New York’s Adirondack region as a postcard photographer. He snapped pictures at train stations, hunting and lumber camps, paper mills, mines, hotels, and schools, made them into postcards, and sold them. "He just fired away," says Robert C. Bogdan G’64, G’71, who holds a dual appointment with the Maxwell School and the School of Education as a professor of sociology and cultural foundations of education. "He did a lot of quirky things, but he also produced absolutely striking pictures."

Bogdan explores Beach’s life and work in a new book, Adirondack Vernacular: The Photography of H.M. Beach (Syracuse University Press, 2003). It’s a follow-up to Bogdan’s Exposing the Wilderness: Early 20th Century Adirondack Postcard Photographers (SU Press, 1999), which featured Beach and five contemporaries. "This guy is really authentic," Bogdan says. "He is truly a person who’s from the region and of the region. Many photographers try to emulate a vernacular style, but Beach is vernacular."

Bogdan first crossed Beach’s trail when he found some photographic postcards of the Lowville, New York, area, where Beach had lived most his life. Curious about who took the pictures, Bogdan met with Lowville town historian George Davis G’48, who collected postcards and was knowledgeable about Adirondack photographers. Davis took Bogdan to Beach’s grave and around the area, introducing him to local folks familiar with the photographer. After that, Bogdan hunted high and low for information on Beach and his postcards. He traveled throughout the Adirondacks, attended postcard shows, scoured eBay, contacted numerous postcard collectors and dealers, and combed phone directories for Beach’s relatives. He even met Beach’s granddaughter, who shared the family album with him.

Bogdan estimates he looked at 15,000 of Beach’s pictures and chose more than 250 for Adirondack Vernacular. As a sociologist, he says photos must be examined in context to truly learn about a particular region and era. "In some ways the pictures represent what’s meaningful to the people there, how they framed their world, and what they wanted to show," Bogdan says. "You get a real glimpse of what life was like and what changes were taking place in this region and, for that matter, across the country." One Beach postcard, for instance, highlights a tourist cabin sink with running water, a luxury at that time. Another features a general store with both a horse-drawn buggy and an automobile parked outside. "The growth of the postcard industry was very much connected to the mass production of the auto," Bogdan says. "As the roads were developed, the Adirondacks became more accessible, and more people traveled and started buying postcards."

Beach, who died in the early ’40s at age 79, was by all accounts quite a character. An elderly woman, who had lived next door to the Beach family as a child, told Bogdan how Beach liked to feed pancakes to her family’s dog. Beach also blew pipe smoke into the dog’s ear to relieve its itching from ticks. Bogdan laughs when he recalls a postcard of Beach holding a fish. In another version of the card, the fish is much larger—thanks to Beach, who had cut out the original and replaced it. "I really appreciate him as a person, a crafts-person, and a creative person," Bogdan says. "He has provided a vehicle for me to understand the social and cultural history of the area."

—Jay Cox