Coney Island reflected the changing ethnic character of the New York area. Led by people from Italy and Eastern Europe, immigration increased to unprecedented numbers during this period. Soon Irish, Germans, Italians, Eastern European Jews, and other groups were joining Americans in the pursuit of pleasure. The resort brought many different people together. Coney Island let immigrants and their children participate in mainstream American culture.

At this time, many families had very strict rules on courting (dating), especially with girls. Parents made sure there was always someone else around their daughters when male visitors came to the house. In such circumstances, for young people, “privacy could only be found in public”. Sidewalks, public parks, dance halls, and amusement parks offered opportunities to meet and enjoy the company of the opposite sex away from prying family members. The freedom of anonymity, together with the holiday atmosphere of the resort, encouraged intimacy, an easing of inhibitions, and permitted couples to display their affections in public.

A visible shift in sexual values was visible at Coney Island. Postcards, like the one of a couple hugging each other on the beach, celebrated the sexual freedom that existed. Various amusements provided opportunities for close physical contact. Slow rides through tunnels and caves offered many occasions for hugging, kissing, and touching one another. Other rides worked less subtly, throwing couples into each other’s arms.

Even though Coney Island had a beautiful beach, one could spend a day at the resort and never see the water. When visitors entered the amusement area, they encountered a dream world, with characteristics of a beer garden, county fair, Chicago Midway, theater, and circus. We can try to imagine the smells of circus animals, the taste of hot dogs, beer, and seafood, the crowds of people everywhere, the speed of amusement rides, and the noise of showmen, brass bands, roller coasters, carousels, shooting galleries, and hundreds of other attractions—above all, the shouts and laughter of the crowd itself. All of these combined to create the holiday atmosphere of Coney Island.

Coney Island’s popularity as a summer resort coincided with the post office making it easier and cheaper to mail picture postcards. Many visitors bought black-and-white or color views of Coney Island scenes. Some people collected them as souvenirs, while others sent them to friends and relatives back home. These postcards allowed people to celebrate their trip “outside of the everyday world”. Messages like “Margaret and I are having a lot of fun,” and “Greetings from Coney Island,” which are common now, were very unusual at the time. These postcards were a way of saying that the writer was enjoying himself but also thinking of others. One card that the sender only needed to sign said, “I AM HAVING A HELL OF A GOOD TIME AT CONEY ISLAND!”

Adapted from: