

Rural Free Delivery

by Mary Clark

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds”.

Today, most of us take for granted the dependable daily delivery of the U.S. mail to our doorsteps. It was not always so, and it was especially not the case for the hard-working families who lived on the farms and in other rural areas around the turn of the last century.

By the mid 1800s, the United States had already established an intricate system of postal delivery. Post offices were established in every state. Both city dwellers and farmers traveled to the post office in town, often housed in the general country store, barber shop, or in the front room of someone’s house, to collect their mail. The post office became a social focal point of most towns. However, delivery of the mail out to individual homes was not included in that service until later. In 1863, Congress provided that free city delivery service be established in larger communities of over 10,000 residents; and with that exciting new service came new requirements. All of a sudden, people were required to put street addresses on their letters for the first time. The establishment of mail delivery in a city was not just a convenience; it had an additional effect on the growth and improvement of an area. In order to have their city or town considered for mail delivery service, a municipality had to provide sidewalks and crosswalks; had to ensure that the streets were named and adequately lit; and had to assign numbers to the houses.



Mail wagon, circa, 1889. Image ID: 34276 Wis Historical Society

Even with the town improvements and the convenient city mail delivery service, rural families were still not served by the post office. They still had to travel into town to pick up or to post their letters and packages. Trips into town were rarely made more than once a week. After several false starts, Congress appropriated \$40,000 in 1895 to experiment with rural free delivery.

Among the very first experimental rural delivery routes were the routes that began in Sun Prairie in Dane County. That first Sun Prairie experiment in 1896 began with four carriers on four different routes. Each carrier rode 20 to 30 miles daily, delivering mail to an area of 58 square miles, for a salary of \$25 a month. The experiment succeeded, and the Post Office Department initiated another route out of Marshall on September 5, 1899. In 1900, it began circuits from Belleville, Cambridge, Deerfield, DeForest, Middleton, Morrisonville, Mount Horeb and Verona, as well as Madison and Stoughton.

The National Grange had lobbied strongly for the establishment of free rural mail delivery, but the proponents of rural delivery were often met with opposition from those who felt that beginning such a service would surely bankrupt the country. Often times, the town merchants were opposed to expanding mail delivery out into rural areas as well. They depended on the farm families' regular trips into town for supplies and trade. With regular mail delivery out to the countryside, trips into town for those folks would be fewer and farther between. There were others who were also not so happy to see the expansion of rural mail delivery, because where the rural delivery expanded, the importance and the influence of the fourth-class postmasters declined. This resulted in the elimination of many small rural post offices.

The new system led to the closing of scores of rural post offices throughout the county, thereby eroding a long-time source of political patronage in the form of postmaster appointments handed out by Elisha Keyes, the postmaster at Madison and the county's Republican Party boss.

Forward! A History of Dane, the Capital County,
Allen Ruff and Tracy Will. 2000.

The country roads were often little more than dirt paths when rural service began. That meant that much of the year they were mud. Spring and winter months often made the roads impassable. Early rural letter carriers made their rounds on horseback, in buggies, and during the winter months, in sleds. Unlike city mail carriers, the rural carriers were responsible for purchasing their own vehicles; and were also responsible for supplying, feeding and stabling their own horses. Pay was small and conditions were often harsh.

The rural carriers are under the supervision of the second, third and fourth-class postmaster, from whose office they start daily. The pay of the rural carrier is by no means large. He receives \$100 per annum and is required to furnish himself out of this with a horse and a vehicle as well, if one is required. While the remuneration for this hard and sometimes dangerous work is not great, no difficulty has been experienced on the part of the postoffice department in obtaining efficient and faithful carriers. In two instances girls have qualified for this arduous position, and it is stated that they are as faithful and unflagging in the performance of their duties and as devoted to the service as the men.

Daily Northwestern (Oshkosh, WI), Dec. 15, 1899

The RFD experiment turned out to be a raging success. It was extremely popular with the rural constituents. As farmers across the country learned that all they needed were 100 signatures on a petition requesting the service, petitions began to flood the Post Office Department. Postmasters

had the right to refuse service to any route with poorly-kept roads; so in order to coax delivery routes to their areas, citizens were motivated to build, maintain and repair local roads and bridges.

Rural carriers carried more than the mail. They could provide the latest local news or the current price of goods in town. Patrons expected a lot from their carriers. In addition to collecting and delivering mail, they also sold stamps and money orders out of their buggies or wagons. The carriers essentially operated traveling post offices out of their vehicles. They might also be asked to run errands or to read or write letters for those who could not read or write themselves.

Rural Free Delivery service was a welcome improvement for the isolated rural farms. Finally, farmers could get timely livestock quotations and produce price information, which allowed them to sell their stock and goods at the best time. Weather forecasts were delivered directly to farmers, along with newspapers, magazines and mail-order catalogs from Sears and Montgomery Wards. In 1897, one year after the start of the rural free delivery, Sears boasted that it was selling four suits and a watch every minute, a revolver every two minutes and a buggy every ten minutes. And within five years, Sears had tripled its revenues.

In 1898, when the postal service asked for citizen evaluation of the experimental phase of Rural Free Delivery, Nathan Nicholson of Newcastle, Indiana noted that, "I am taking two daily papers now and took none before. I send and get more letters since this has started. We can keep better posted on the war, markets, weather, politics, etc. It has got me spoiled".



Wisconsin State Journal, January 30, 1902.

By 1902, Rural Free Delivery had been established throughout United States, and soon the word "free" was dropped from common usage as it was implied. In the Department's 1902 annual report, postal officials noted that "the people are demanding the service with impatient earnestness." That year, it became an official government service; and the rural face of America was changed forever.

DID YOU KNOW? "Neither snow nor rain" Contrary to popular belief, the quote at the beginning of this article is not the official motto of the U.S. Postal Service. According to the Postal Service, this inscription was supplied by William Mitchell Kendall of the firm McKim, Mead & White, the architects who designed the New York General Post Office building in 1912. Kendall explained that the sentence

appears in the works of Herodotus and describes the expedition of the Greeks against the Persians under Cyrus, about 500 B.C. The Persians operated a system of mounted postal couriers, and the sentence describes the fidelity with which their work was done.