

## **My Dad, in the Early Days of Rural Mail Delivery in Dane County, Wisconsin**

by Glen W. Wheeler

---

*This reminiscence was written in 1984, by Glen W. Wheeler, longtime Dane County resident. The original typescript copy is located in the Dane County Historical Society, Otto Schroeder Records Center.*

*Note: for this reprinting, some punctuation and capitalization has been altered to facilitate the flow of reading, but all of the words are exactly as written in Mr. Wheeler's original text.*

*An excerpt from the reminiscence was published in the Dane County Historical Society Newsletter (Spring 2007)*

My father, Leslie C. Wheeler, and Leonard Veerhusen were the first R.F.D. (Rural Free Delivery) mail carriers from the post office in Windsor, Dane County, Wisconsin. Deliveries made 6 days a week, 2 holidays a year allowed, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Deliveries were made on Memorial Day and July 4<sup>th</sup> and New Years.

Dad's routes covered 27 miles, the morning route east of Windsor, afternoon route south and west of the village. On morning route he usually used 1 horse and buggy or cutter, afternoon he usually used a team, finishing between 4:30 and 7:00 P.M. depending on the weather and how much snow to break through in the winter. In those days, the mailman had to cut the fences when the snow was deep in the road. The mail must be delivered, unlike the rules today. This required Dad to have 5 to 7 horses at all times, account of horse throwing a shoe, a split hoof, shoulder sore or going lame.

In 1913-14-15 I was a youngster and went with Dad almost every day in the summers and many days in the winter, unless storming real bad. I bundled up in a big fur coat of mother's with warm soap-stones under my feet, a scarf and blankets, with nothing showing but my eyes. The morning run in winter, if real cold, Mrs. Casey, mother of John, the undertaker in De Forest, and Willy, would see us approaching from the south and Mrs. Casey would have Willy come out and invite us in. Willy would take the horse and blanket it and get it out of the wind while Mrs. Casey made cocoa for me and tea for Dad and set out some goodies she had made. After a short break Willy would bring the rig up and we would be on our way again.

People in those days relied on the mailman for help in various ways. He would have to make out money orders and have change along to handle and carry stamps. This was necessary as there was a lot of catalog buying then, Sears, Montgomery-Ward or Butler Brothers and others. This is a problem when the weather is below zero with a brisk wind, or in a rainstorm, to look over the order, make out the money order, make change, seal envelope, put on stamp, leave change in the mailbox along with their mail.

I mention people appreciated the rural mailman in those days. It showed up especially at Christmas time. They would tell Dad to plan on bringing his sleigh and team for the pick-ups. At Steve Lampman's it was 10 bags of oats, Casey's 5 bags oats and 5 of ear corn, Dan Vincent 5 bags oats, a ham at Hauge's and Schweb's, and fresh meat at butchering time at Helmke's. It was same on the afternoon route. People would bring out a jar of fresh home churned butter, pail of honey or sorghum, or some home cured meats. August Roeske gave Dad a goose almost every fall. We then had good home rendered goose-grease for rubbing our chests when we caught colds in the winter. One that was very special was Johnny Fisher from Westport route. Every fall he would deliver two triple wagon-box loads of wood to our home in Windsor. One load of fire wood for kitchen stove and the other chunk wood for the furnace. He would always say, "That's for bringing our mail regularly, no matter what the weather."

The morning route went east from Windsor 1 mile past Robinsons, Gefkes, Bray Ellis and Haswell farm occupied by Miller family. Then north on road later called Hy #10, now named Hy #51, past Jim Grays, Gest's, Meilke place, on to Grandma Wood, then to Horace Wood and Louis Gray farm. We turn back for ½ mile to now called Gray road, go east to Gulvick and Nordness farms to Portage Road and south to Schiltz and Altenbergs. Turn back north 1-¾ miles to Lindsey brothers, Altenbergs and Steve Lampman to now named Vinburn Road. Go east past Caseys, Dan Vincent, Crabtrees, McCallens, Hagues and then south on C.T.H. "C" 1-¾ miles past Lindes, Chas. Schwes, Brums, Helmkes and to the Maple Grove School. Then back ¼ mile to Windsor Road, head west past the Egre farms, Anhalts, Olsons and by the John Dohr corner to Jacob Leonard, the Col. Warner farm, Tom Eroen, Chas. Bewick and Earnest Schwes to George Haswell farm. This finished the morning route and then the last mile to home and dinner.

The afternoon Dad usually used team and different buggy. We headed south past Louis Zeisch farm and John Karows, Woodburns and Earnest Blanchar to now Hy #19, then east past Joe Beld, Williamson School, Chas. Williamson, the Bjelde place, Henry Blanchar farm and to Henry Gefke farm, that is almost to Hy #51. We then back-track 1 mile and continue west past August Roeskes, Tom Loomis, the Hegges, cross the Whiskey Creek bridge to Gary farm occupied by the Swanstroms. This is corner of Hy #19 & River Road.

Then south on River Road to John Tveit, the Kosters, August Beck, Johnny Fisher, Pat Mooney and over the hill to Vinney O'Malley and on to Hagues and Mickelson, past the Catfish School, then into Westport past Hansons to the Walkers, (who later operated the greenhouse) and turn back past Hansons to the Shillinglaw Saloon. This was on east side of now Hy #113 where C.T.H. "M" ends. This was big brick building with a watering trough under many big maple trees. Dad would stop to water the horses. If weather was real hot, the horses would sometimes put their nose down to drink and just blow bubbles, as the water tasted and would smell from the maple roots that had grown into the well. The buildings are gone now, as are most of the maples. Dad would then stop at Tom Gilligan's or Chas. Busby's to water the horses.

We then proceeded north on now Hy #113 to farm owned by man that used two names. He was a Norwegian named Elif Agerjord, but also used the name John Thompson. Mail came addressed both ways. I took great interest in a Norwegian paper printed in Decorah, Iowa, called the Decorah Posten. I would look at the words and try to figure out what they meant, as they were put together different than words in English. Mr. Agerjord was the only Norwegian in an area that was mostly Westport Irish.

Then north to Tom Gilligan, Mrs. McGuire, Orde O'Malley farm, on to the big O'Malley estate with the big mansion later used by the State of Wisconsin, and north to Busby School corner, where Hy #113 & Hy #19 join. We turn east to Chas. Busby farm, Filburns, Woodburns and Riddles and to 4-X corner and north ½ mile past Tom Swerin farm to Easy Street and head

west past Ella Wheeler Wilcox School to the Watlands and Danny Fisher. Deadhead back 1/2 mile where we turn north by the old Sabin farm, now occupied by Noltner family. The house on this farm was where Ellen Sabin was born, and the school 1/2 mile west is where she got her early education. She was well known educator and head of Milwaukee Downer College. North 1/2 mile and east past Mells, Bert Chamberlain farm, the Dorman farms, Merle and Archie, and cross Windsor Creek to Julius Schimming farm and the Chas. Sickles, and then home.

This has made a long day. It meant getting up early to care for the horses, feeding, watering, clean the barn, fix the bedding, curry and brush the horses used that day, having breakfast, sort the mail for the route, then hitch-up, load the buggy and take off on the morning route. After a quick dinner it was hitch-up again, load the buggy and head out. At the end of the route it was watering, feeding, bedding again and exercise the horses not being used that day. Mother was substitute carrier in case Dad was sick or had to have horses shod, or make necessary repairs on buggies or harnesses.

Just think about this and realize what it was like back in 1913-14-15, for the rural mail carriers. The high wages paid at that time was \$75.00 per month and furnish your own horses and equipment. After several years riding in buggies, cutters and sleighs to make the route, Dad had to give up the job on account of developing a bad back that bothered him until he passed away in 1954.

\*\*\*\*\*

Food For Thought

\*\*\*\*\*

With the 311 working days the job required on this schedule, 27 miles per day totals 8,397 miles. Wages of \$75.00 per month for 12 months is \$900.00. This figures out to a fraction over 10¢ per mile, or \$2.89-7/10 per day total for carrier, horses and equipment. Very different wages and rules of today.

\*\*\*\*\*

DATED 1-27-1984

Glen W. Wheeler

\*\*\*\*\*

Less than 10% of the farm family names mentioned in this story are to be found on these farms today, 70 years later.