

The Postage Stamp Centennial

The first pioneers to enter the Black Hawk Purchase found the postal service little different from that existing when Washington was president. Mail was carried on horseback, by stagecoach, by steamboat, and after 1838 in some places by railroad. Since no railroad reached Iowa until 1854, it required an average of from a month to six weeks for letters and papers to travel from the Atlantic seaboard to Iowaland. Frequently the mail was actually lost, or it was damaged by water to such an extent that it became illegible.

The failure to reduce rates for fully half a century was a serious factor in curtailing the use of the mails. The act of 1792 had fixed the rates for single letters at prices ranging from six cents for under thirty miles on a graduated scale up to twenty-five cents for any distance over four hundred miles. Since the settlers in the Black Hawk Purchase were generally far from relatives and friends the twenty-five cent fee usually prevailed, and that was no trifling sum for the average pioneer. Their inability to pay was probably reflected in the decrease in per capita postage expenditures from 26 cents in 1837 to 22 cents in 1845, despite the fact that hundreds of new postal routes had

been established each year in the United States during this same period.

The high postage rate was only one of the problems involved in early mail delivery. For over half a century the Post Office Department of the United States permitted letters to be mailed either prepaid or "collect on delivery." If the sender paid the postage, the postmaster noted on the space reserved for the address the amount of the postage and indicated that it had been "paid." These notations were usually made with pen and ink but some resourceful postmasters provided special stamps or designs to indicate that the postage had been received. In 1845, for example, the New York Postmaster provided a five-cent stamp. These came to be known as "Postmasters' Provisionals." Most postmasters used only a design stamped on the space reserved for the address. A letter to Thomas McKnight at Dubuque, dated December 29, 1840, for example, has "25" written in the upper right hand corner. In the upper left hand corner is an oval stamp bearing the printed words "St. Genevieve" and "Missouri." Between these names someone wrote "5 Jany."

Prepaid mail was easy to deliver. Any pioneer would take a prepaid letter to a neighbor. But if the postage was to be collected, the story was usually much longer. First the addressee had to be notified that a letter for him had been received at the post office. Then he had to collect the post-

age charges in coin. Many are the frontier tales of long journeys made to find some friend who had twenty-five cents in good hard cash. With coins in hand, or in pocket, the addressee had to make the trip to the post office to get his letter. Fortunate indeed was the man who, after all this trouble, received good news in his letter.

But a new day was dawning for the United States postal service and the young State of Iowa was destined to benefit by it. On March 3, 1845, the very day John Tyler signed the bill admitting Iowa into the Union under the Constitution of 1844, the President signed a bill limiting the franking privilege, authorizing "star route" contracts, and reducing postage rates. The latter was particularly important to a frontier State for it meant that henceforth Iowans would pay five cents for distances less than 300 miles, and ten cents for letters destined to go over 300 miles. This meant single one-sheet coverless letters weighing under one-half ounce. The effect of this reduction in rates in 1845 was quickly reflected in the tremendous increase in letter writing. In 1844 a total of 38,135,592 letters had been sent; by 1851 this number had increased to 83,252,735.

The second great innovation occurred when Congress authorized on March 3, 1847, the issuance of adhesive postage stamps. The famous 1847 series consisted of the Benjamin Franklin five-cent stamp in brown and the George Wash-

ington ten-cent stamp in black. During a period of four years about 3,700,000 five-cent stamps were issued and unredeemed. Only about 900,000 ten-cent stamps were issued during this same period.

The figures concerning the number of early stamps pale beside the 125,000,000 Iowa Statehood Centennial stamps issued in 1946 and the latter figure is dwarfed by the total of 656 billion stamps sold from the more than seven hundred varieties issued since 1847. The early stamps were usually printed in sheets of one hundred and had to be scissored apart. The first perforated stamps appeared in February 1857.

In all probability few 1847 stamps were used in Iowa. One authority declares that fragmentary records in Washington indicate that a few such stamps were sent to some Iowa post offices. An equally competent authority asserts that no 1847 stamps were sold in Iowa and that any used here were probably brought in by travelers from the East. Horace Poole of Dubuque, whose Iowa cover collection won first prize at the Trans-Mississippi Philatelic Society meeting at Des Moines in 1946, knew of only one man who had an Iowa cover with an 1847 stamp. It was sent from Farmington to Keosauqua. Since the five-cent and ten-cent stamps issued in 1847 were discontinued on July 1, 1851, when postage was reduced, few Iowans probably used them.

What is the reason for the scarcity of these early stamps? The position of Iowa on the frontier with its relatively scattered population is one factor. Few personal letters were written in those early years; it is said that ninety-eight letters out of one hundred concerned business affairs. Furthermore, many people still preferred to send their letters collect because they felt more confident of their delivery. Since the use of these early stamps was not compulsory and the number printed was relatively small, it is not surprising that the eminent authority, Carroll Chase, should estimate that "only about one letter in fifty bore a stamp."

It thus appears that conditions in Iowa remained much the same during the period 1847-1851 as in the stampless cover period. The issue of the stamps in the series of 1851 brought into use a three-cent stamp for single letters going not more than three thousand miles, and six cents over that distance. The series included the first one-cent stamp and a one-cent carrier's stamp. The provision for stamps did not, however, end the stampless period, for the prepayment of postage by postage stamps was not compulsory until January 1, 1856. Even then, post offices sometimes ran out of stamps and postmasters resorted to the "paid" rubber stamp that had been in vogue in the stampless era. Postage stamps, however, were here to stay. They were convenient and their use gave a simple and effective check on postal income.

During the last half century stamps came to be used to commemorate historic events and to honor countries, States, and persons.

Thus, the birth of the State of Iowa is intimately associated with some of the most far-reaching reforms in postal history; for the introduction of cheap postage meant a sharp break with the old idea of postage for "revenue" and the emphasis of "service" as the motto of the post office. The wisdom of the "service" policy of the United States Post Office is attested by the marvelous growth of postal service. Between 1845 and 1945 the nation underwent a seven-fold increase in population. During the same century the number of pieces of mail increased not seven-fold, but a thousand-fold!

Between 1789 and 1851 the total postal expenditures were \$111,790,393 compared with receipts totaling \$113,748,998. During the fiscal year ending June 30, 1945, the postal revenue totaled \$1,314,000,000, or almost twelve times the total revenue from 1789 to 1851. Happily for those who urged cheap postal rates — and many Iowa editors joined this chorus — the year's surplus in 1945 was \$162,642,089, a sum greater than the total postal revenue from Washington's inauguration to the issue of three-cent stamps in 1851. The growth of Iowa might be linked up in no small measure with the inauguration of cheap postage and convenient postage stamps a century ago.