The Palimpsest

MAY 1949

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PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

PRICE — 10 cents per copy: $1 per year: free to Members
ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXX ISSUED IN MAY 1949 NO. 5

Backgrounds of RFD

> Not sun, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night
> stays these couriers from the swift completion
> of their appointed rounds.
>
> *Herodotus*

This famous quotation, which appears over the entrance of the Main Post Office in New York City, refers to the Persian post-riders but it has been adopted as the motto of the United States Post Office Department. And well does it represent the work of post office employees for, despite their seemingly humdrum activity, the history of this branch of our government service is replete with human interest stories and dramatic episodes. This was especially true each time the nation saw inaugurated such colorful new mail services as the Pony Express, the Overland Mail, Rural Free Delivery, and the Air Mail Service.

Most Americans might consider the Rural Free Delivery service as utterly devoid of interest and drama. During its half-century of service, however, the Rural Free Delivery has revolutionized

the social life of the farmer. This fact is all the more true in such a rural state as Iowa.

When Postmaster General Samuel Osgood made his first report to President Washington, there were but sixty post offices and less than two thousand miles of post roads in the entire country. On June 30, 1948, there were 32,412 rural routes in the United States covering 1,465,198 miles and serving 30,120,663 people. The figures on Iowa (as compared with the thirteen original states) are even more graphic. The same report showed there were 1,100 post offices in Iowa and 1,440 rural routes covering 65,098 miles and delivering mail to almost half the total population.

The phenomenal westward expansion of the nation is illustrated by the fact that a half century after Postmaster General Osgood made his first report, the Territory of Iowa had almost as many post offices as had been established in the original thirteen states from the founding of Jamestown to the inauguration of Washington. In 1840, seven years after permanent settlement had begun, there were 43,112 people in the Territory of Iowa. The next half century saw the stagecoach, the steamboat, and the railroad make their contributions to mail service beyond the Mississippi.

The delivery of the first mail in Iowa seems to have been made in the fall of 1833, when George Ord Karrick brought the mail weekly from Ga-

lena to Dubuque. This was delivered from a candle box in the store kept by Mr. Pfotzer. According to a local historian, Antoine Le Claire was commissioned first postmaster at Davenport on April 19, 1836. Le Claire received his mail from Stephenson (Rock Island), Illinois, and brought the letters to Davenport in his coat-tails. It is said Le Claire received an actual income of seventy-five cents for his first quarter's work.

A number of notable Iowans served as postmasters in Territorial days. George Davenport was postmaster at Rock Island as early as 1824. The names of John King at Dubuque, Antoine Le Claire at Davenport, William R. Ross and Enos Lowe at Burlington, and John Gilbert at Napoleon (Iowa City) illustrate the caliber of men who were appointed postmasters in pioneer days.

The difficulties encountered in the distribution of mail in the vast wilderness west of the Mississippi seem almost insuperable today. The inauguration of a steamboat mail line between Saint Louis and Dubuque in 1838 had met with general rejoicing, for twenty-eight steamboats plied along the eastern border of Iowa that year. The roads in the Black Hawk Purchase were mere trails. Not many stagecoaches were in operation before 1846, for example, and the entire region had no more inhabitants than Woodbury County a century later. Mails were carried either on horse-

back or in wagons that jolted over the ruts and bogged down when the snows melted and the rains fell. Complaints were numerous. "The truth is, and we are compelled to admit it," a Burlington editor declared in 1838, "our mail establishment is a mere mockery, calculated rather to tantalize than to accommodate the public."

Despite such complaints, many hazards prevailed. Mails were lost when carriers attempted to cross swollen streams. Horses were drowned and sometimes even the carriers lost their lives in raging streams or in blizzards that swept the bleak Iowa prairies. Pioneer conditions continued in Iowa for almost a half-century — the frontier line still lingered in northwestern Iowa in the 1870's. A post office had been established in Sioux City in 1855; Rock Rapids did not receive its first post office until 1871. Ten years earlier, in 1861, Council Bluffs had rejoiced because the outbreak of the Civil War had caused the Post Office Department to change the point of departure for the Overland Mail from St. Joseph to Council Bluffs.

Iowa was still in the stagecoach period in 1861, as only some 500 miles of railroad track had been laid in the Hawkeye State by that time. The Western Stage Company, declared the Sioux City *Register* on July 5, 1862, "will continue to carry the Sioux City and Council Bluffs mail as heretofore. This announcement we are certain

will give universal satisfaction. Next in importance to having any mail at all is having it regularly and on time. 'Certainty, safety and celerity' in carrying mails is what the government, and the public require, and this requirement the Western Stage Company never fails to meet. This Company has become an institution in the State, and next to the Press and our schools, has diffused more knowledge, carried more comforts to and conferred more blessings upon the frontier settlements than any other agency. It has capital and has employed it to our advantage, it has energy, and has used it for the benefit of the country. Long live and flourish such an institution."

Although five railroads had reached the Missouri by 1870, many small Iowa towns continued to be served by stagecoach and Star Route carriers. The beginnings of Rural Free Delivery in 1896 ushered in a new era for the Iowa farmer. Today he would readily agree with the following inscription above the entrances of the Post Office in Washington: "Carrier of news and knowledge. Instrument of trade and industry. Promoter of mutual acquaintance, of peace and good-will among men and nations. Messenger of sympathy and love. Servant of parted friends. Consoler of the lonely. Bond of the scattered family. Enlarger of the common life."

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

Beginnings at Morning Sun

The idea of Rural Free Delivery started in 1890 when Postmaster General John Wanamaker recommended an extension of city delivery service to towns with a population of less than 10,000. Using this suggestion as a basis for a broader program of mail delivery, Mortimer Whitehead, a farmer, introduced the subject of Rural Free Delivery to the National Grange in 1891. Whitehead presented arguments in favor of such an expanded mail service to farmers before a Congressional committee in the winter of 1891-1892.

A bill providing for an experimental rural mail delivery was introduced in 1892 by Representative James O'Donnell of Michigan but it was not approved by Congress. The following year, Congress reconsidered and appropriated $10,000 for the purpose. Postmaster General William S. Bissell declined to use the appropriation, however, stating that "the proposed plan of Rural Free Delivery, if adopted, would result in an additional cost of about $20,000,000 for the first year."

Although Congress increased the appropriation to $20,000 in 1895, Postmaster General William L. Wilson agreed with his predecessor that the experiment was not feasible at that time. After an

additional $20,000 was made available in 1896, however, Wilson decided the time was ripe to test the idea of Rural Free Delivery.

Not everyone was as anxious for the new experiment as was the farmer. Fourth class postmasters, who stood to lose money from their little stores, fought the plan. Star Route contractors (men whose routes were let by formal contract and indicated as such in the Postal Guide by an asterisk), were fearful of losing their jobs, and tried unsuccessfully to discourage the move toward Rural Free Delivery. But with the enlarged appropriation, the experiment could no longer be delayed, and the proponents of Rural Free Delivery finally won out.

The first experimental delivery was organized in West Virginia. On October 1, 1896, five carriers started out on horseback or bicycle to deliver the mail to farmers living near Charlestown, Uvilla, and Halltown. When this proved successful, the experimental service was extended to nine additional states that same month. Iowa was one of nine more states to test Rural Free Delivery in November, 1896.

Upon the recommendation of Senator John H. Gear, Morning Sun in Louisa County was chosen as the first experimental town in Iowa. A post office had been established at Morning Sun as early as June 19, 1851, with William P. Brown as first

postmaster. The town had been incorporated in 1867, and by 1896 was a thriving little community with good railroad connections. Senator Gear, who had served as Governor of Iowa, considered the town admirably situated for the experiment. "Morning Sun," the junior Senator from Iowa argued, "is the place for the experiment because it is the most 'reading' community I know of."

Inspector Bird of the United States Post Office was sent to Morning Sun and mapped out three routes averaging thirty-five miles each. Since Civil Service examinations were not required at that time, Albert L. Roberts, Bert McKinley, and William Blair were granted the contracts without delay. Each was paid twenty-two dollars a month and each furnished his own transportation. A two week trial revealed that a thirty-five mile route was too long to be covered on horseback. Another carrier, Fred Shipman, was accordingly added, and the routes were reduced to an average of about twenty-four miles.

A new day began for Iowa farmers when these first carriers started out from Morning Sun on that raw November day in 1896. Their territory extended five miles north of Morning Sun, three and one-half miles east and south, and four miles west — all over bad roads. The mail consisted of first class letters, postcards, newspapers, and agricultural journals. The three carriers served a pop-

ulation of 850; from the start on November 10, 1896, to July 1, 1897, they carried 46,043 pieces of mail, at a cost of $624.96.

The first rural carriers preferred wagons as transportation, but because of the small amount of mail and the lack of good roads most of them delivered the mail on horseback. The *Morning Sun News-Herald* reported, "When the trails became too bad for horseback travel, the men were forced to tramp it on foot. And many times it was necessary to digress a half or three quarters of a mile up some side lane to a farm house."

Since there were no mailboxes provided by the farmers, Bert McKinley recalls that the carrier, after opening numerous gates in the lanes, blew his whistle as he approached the farmhouse and "the kids came running out to get the mail." One farm family finally fastened an old leather boot on a post to serve as a mailbox. McKinley, the sole survivor of the original trio of mail carriers out of Morning Sun, worked as a carrier until 1901 and has since served as postmaster at Morning Sun for two different periods before retiring in September, 1947.

Iowa farmers were quick to write enthusiastic letters requesting rural service in their area. Praise for the system poured into the Post Office Department at Washington from all over the State. In a letter dated October 17, 1898, R. G. Robb of

Morning Sun wrote, "We have no words to express our appreciation of daily mail delivered at our door, and without hesitation I say, in my judgment it ought to be not only continued where it is, but be extended until it will be universal over the whole country. . . . We do most sincerely hope it will be continued here, and I may add, our appreciation of the service is such that we would cheerfully contribute something yearly to the cause rather than it should be discontinued."

Not all Iowa farmers were so appreciative or cooperative. Since there were no regulations concerning mailboxes, farmers nailed old boot legs, tin cigar boxes, or shoe boxes on fence corners. Sometimes they even placed milk cans to receive their mail on the back porch or other out of the way places.

In 1900 the Post Office Department ordered that all mailboxes must be placed on the main road. This regulation did not end the troubles of rural carriers. According to the *Morning Sun News-Herald*: "A new menace came along at this time in the character of some of the 'township toughs' that made sport by shooting the mailboxes along the road full of buckshot. Repeated complaints of this resulted in several of the offenders being gathered in by the U. S. Marshal and fined in the Federal Court. This put a stop to any molestation of the mailboxes."

Despite such problems, Iowa farmers were delighted with Rural Free Delivery. In a special report to the Postmaster General, Postal Inspector W. F. Conger declared, "In the inspection of the routes which I have personally traversed with the mail carriers I find a universal satisfaction with the service and have met with frequent expressions such as these: 'I would not have the route changed so as not to pass my farm for $500.' 'I consider my land worth $5 per acre more since the establishment of our rural free-delivery route.'" Such statements were made to Inspector Conger by patrons of the routes over which he traveled.

Mr. T. J. Ochiltree, postmaster at Morning Sun soon after the experiment was begun, later commented on the significance of Rural Free Delivery: "The telephone followed the rural delivery, and the radio the telephone. These are the three greatest things the farmer has working for him today." Most Morning Sun residents agreed with their postmaster on the benefits of Rural Free Delivery, particularly publishers who reported subscriptions increasing "fourfold since the rural delivery."

In September, 1897, a second Iowa experimental route was begun at New Providence in Hardin County. One of the rural carriers on this route was Alonzo Hall, a lifelong resident of New Providence. Although Hall had previously carried mail from Lawn Hill to New Providence on a

contract basis, this was the first time he had actually delivered mail from farm to farm.

In his record book, Mr. Hall kept an account of "letters taken in," "letters distributed," and "cards collected." For December, 1897, the total pieces of mail he collected and distributed in the New Providence area amounted to 3,286. He also noted in his account that grateful farm wives left cake, cookies, and fruit in their mailboxes.

By 1897 many pioneer rural letter carriers such as Bert McKinley and Alonzo Hall were serving as the only daily link between the rural population and the rest of the world. And this they did for the sum of about $300 a year.

The popularity of Rural Free Delivery assured its continuance. One year after the first experiment, eighty-two routes had been established in twenty-nine different states. The Postmaster General summarized the success of the experiment in 1896 as follows: "The general results obtained have been so satisfactory as to suggest the feasibility of making rural free delivery a permanent feature of postal administration in the United States."

MARY C. LUDWIG

From Horseback to Jeep

Within three years after the Morning Sun experiment, twenty-one rural routes serving 11,791 farmers had been established in Iowa. Up to this time all the work had been experimental and final authorization did not come until June 13, 1898, when the Fifty-fifth Congress approved Rural Free Delivery. The Post Office Department promptly increased its allocation for Rural Free Delivery by $100,000, thus assuring an expanded and improved service.

Special Agent Thomas Howard, in his report to First Assistant Postmaster General Perry Heath in 1899, claimed that the establishment of Rural Free Delivery not only gave impetus to better education by the more rapid dissemination of news in daily papers and letters but even affected the morals of the recipients by helping keep the younger generation at home on the farm.

Special Agent Howard thought he "noticed a distinct improvement in the habits and general moral tone" of communities supplied with the benefits of Rural Free Delivery. "In one town visited by me," Mr. Howard reported, "a pronounced tendency to indulge in intoxicants was displayed by the people residing in the vicinity on the occa-

sion of their coming to town. After the establishment of the free-delivery service at that particular place, more than a year ago, there was a marked improvement in this regard. Farmers, who apparently regarded their arrival in town not only as an opportunity to secure their mail, but also as a favorable chance to part with some of their hard-earned cash for intoxicating liquors, now receive their mail at their homes, and are therefore in position to save not only time but money."

The beginning of the twentieth century found Rural Free Delivery assuming an ever-increasing significance. In his annual message to Congress in 1900, President McKinley said: "This service ameliorates the isolation of farm life, conduces to good roads, and quickens and extends the dissemination of general information." On February 1, 1902, rural carriers were put under Civil Service by Executive Order. Previously each carrier had been bonded, and selected on the basis of character, personality, and "temperate habits."

Prior to 1902 any Congressman could request a rural route for his district. Thereafter, a petition was necessary bearing the names of 150 of the people to be served, together with a sketch showing the surrounding terrain. This petition was sent by the farmers to their Congressman and he in turn delivered it to the Postmaster General. Upon receiving such a request, the Post Office

Department sent an agent to inspect the area, map a route, and arrange for a carrier. Such requests were numerous, attesting to the popularity of Rural Free Delivery.

During these formative years the chief problem was that of getting the farmer to supply a suitable mailbox, properly erected and accessible to the carrier. Since there were no post office regulations, it is not surprising that in 1899 the government report on mailboxes should read as follows: "Tomato cans, cigar boxes, drainage pipes up-ended, soap boxes, and even sections of discarded stove pipe were used as mailboxes, and were frequently placed in hedgerows or other inconvenient spots out of reach of the carrier."

Although rural mailboxes did improve, the Post Office Department was still dissatisfied, and in 1906 issued an "important" rural mail delivery order stating that "patrons of the rural delivery service will be required to display signals on their boxes when they leave mail in them for our carriers to collect. . . . Those patrons whose boxes are not provided with signals must attach thereto some device which will plainly show passing carriers there is mail to be collected."

Another disquieting factor was the choice of personnel both for postmasters and carriers. An early report from a government agent inspecting the rural system states: "Wherever it can be

avoided, rural free delivery should not start from an office over which a female postmaster presides. There is always laxity in supervision and disinclination to report delinquencies. Often sons, brothers, or cousins act as carriers, and they are invariably shielded. Family considerations take precedence of the public interest."

Perhaps the most discouraging obstacle to the Post Office Department's early attempts to get daily mail to farmers was the lack of good roads. As early as October 6, 1899, a "Good Roads Convention" at Des Moines passed a resolution urging the General Assembly to recognize that well-constructed roads were vital to the continuance of rural mail service.

The good roads movement was slow to materialize, however, as many a rural carrier will attest. Ernest Gray of Osceola, remembers that there were no surfaced roads on his route as late as 1918. Carriers used Model T Fords in dry weather but had to resort to teams and buggies on stormy days. On one occasion, in 1920, W. H. Ryno, of Fort Dodge, made his twenty-eight mile route entirely in low gear, even then getting stuck at least every other mile.

Back in 1911 a route of twenty-four miles took Otho F. England of Belle Plaine an entire day by horse and buggy. There were times when the roads were so bad that he abandoned the buggy

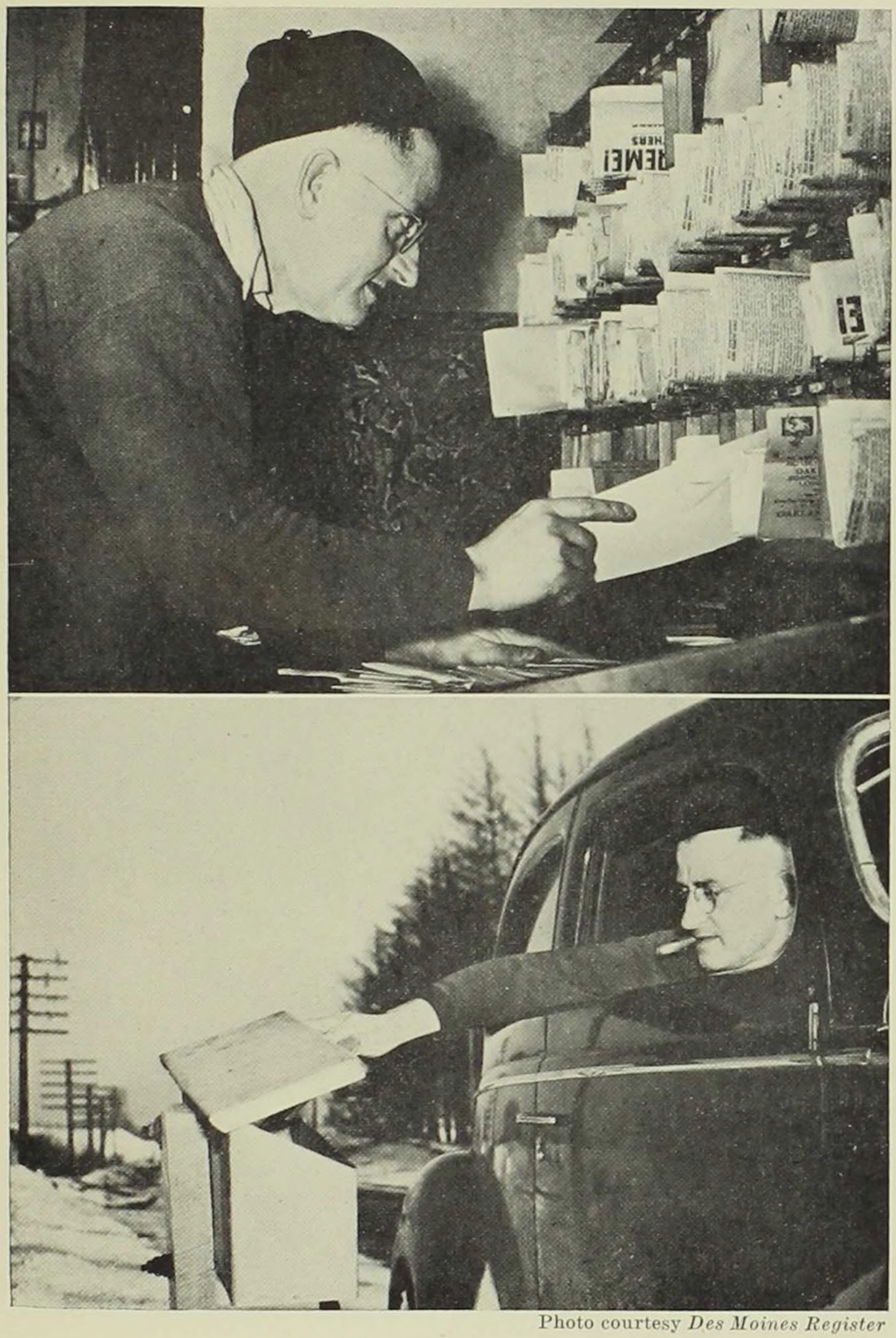
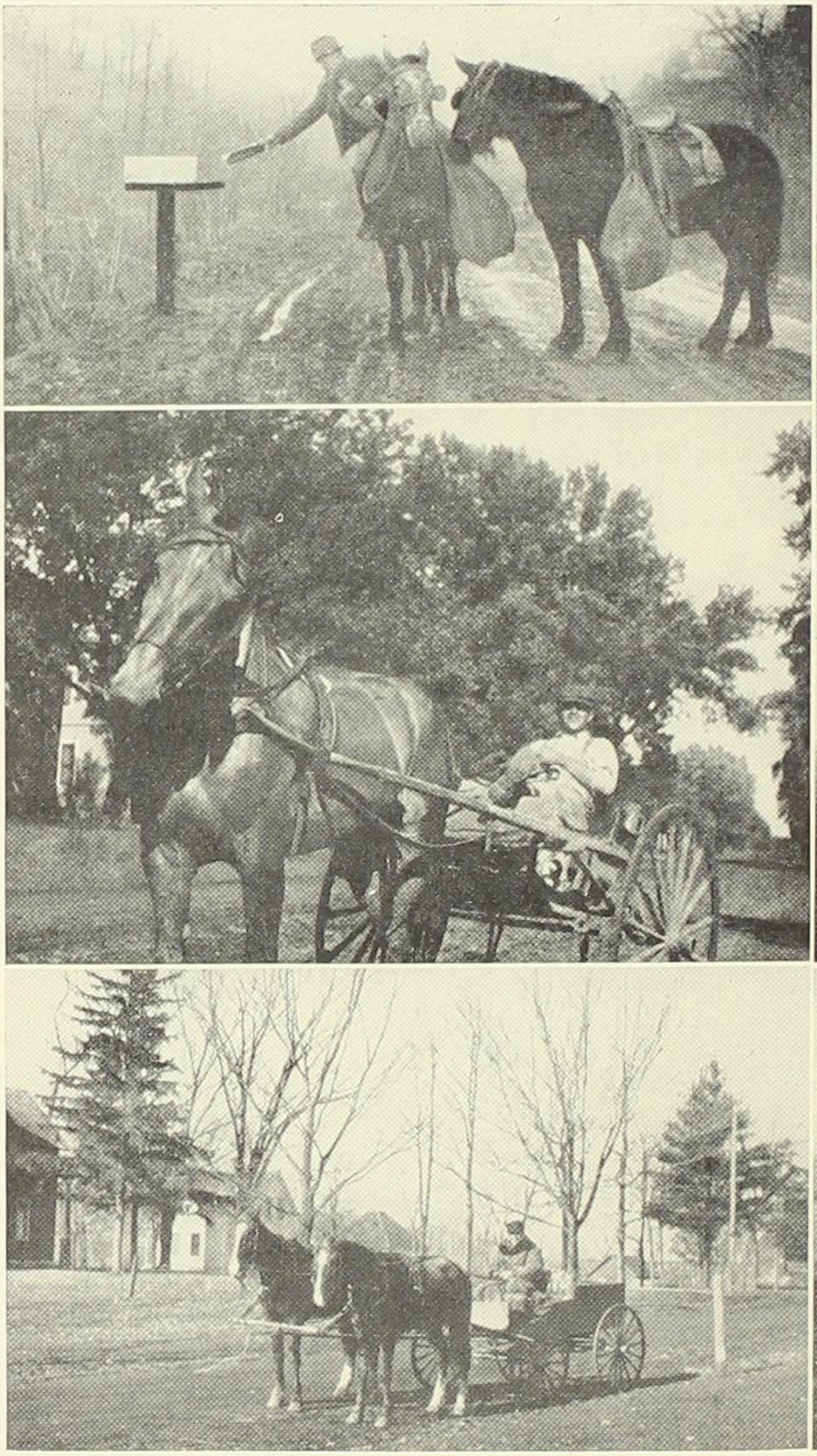


Photo courtesy *Des Moines Register*

C. C. PATTERSON OF MITCHELLVILLE

Sorting Mail in Post Office
Clear Roads — Easy Delivery

Horses, Wagons, Autos, and Jeeps Con



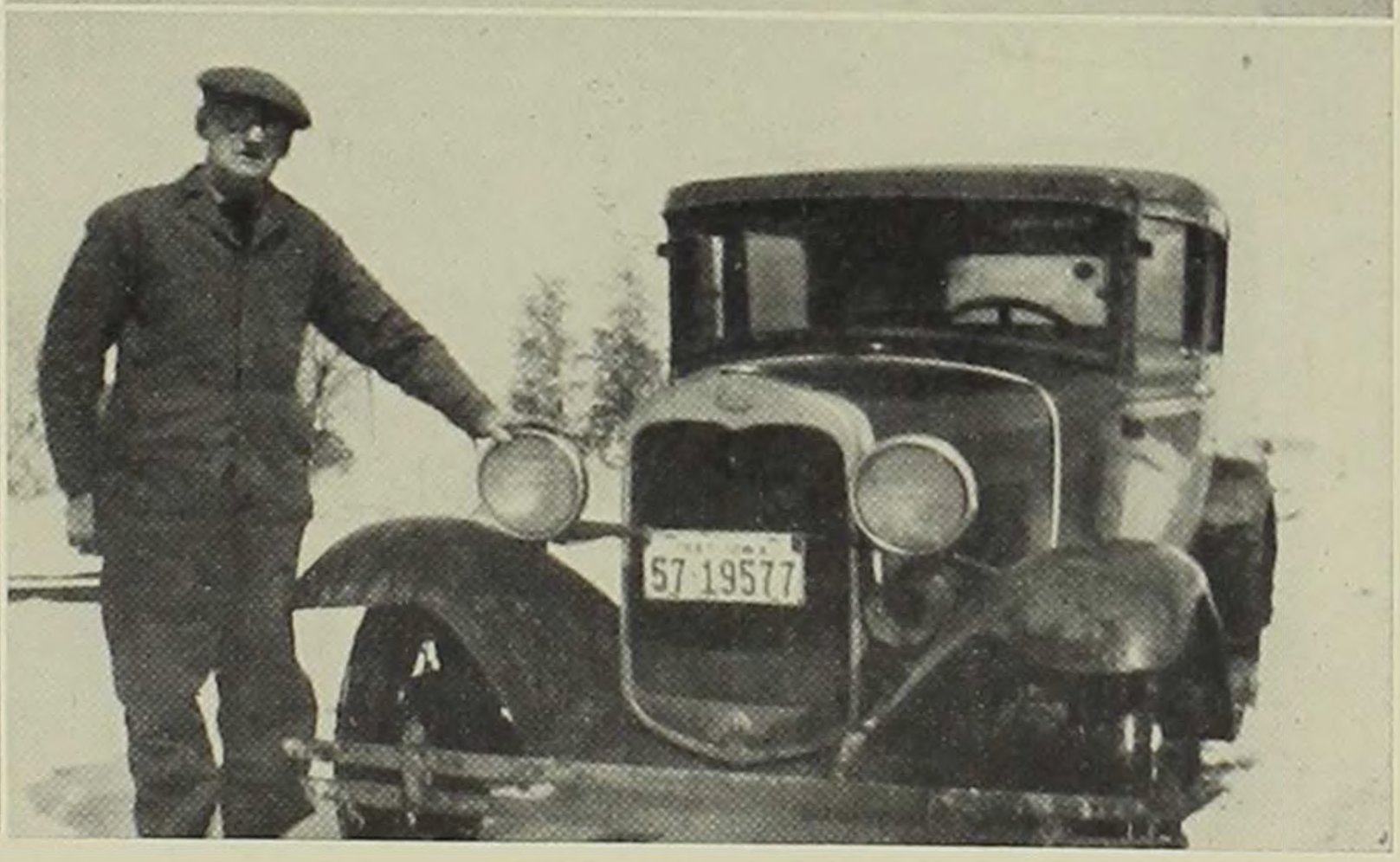
DEPENDABLE HORSE POWER

Top: Ira Moody — McGregor
Middle: John L. Brown — State Center
Bottom: W. L. Gater — Coggon

PAUL J. ANGER — W

Horse and B gy, M
1928 Star, M ch 19
Jeep, March 46

...nger Mud and Snow of Iowa Rural Routes



– WEST LIBERTY

March 1929
1933

MUD AND SNOW

RR No. 1 out of Decorah
C. E. Preiss — Iowa City: 1936
Earl Warner — Lisbon

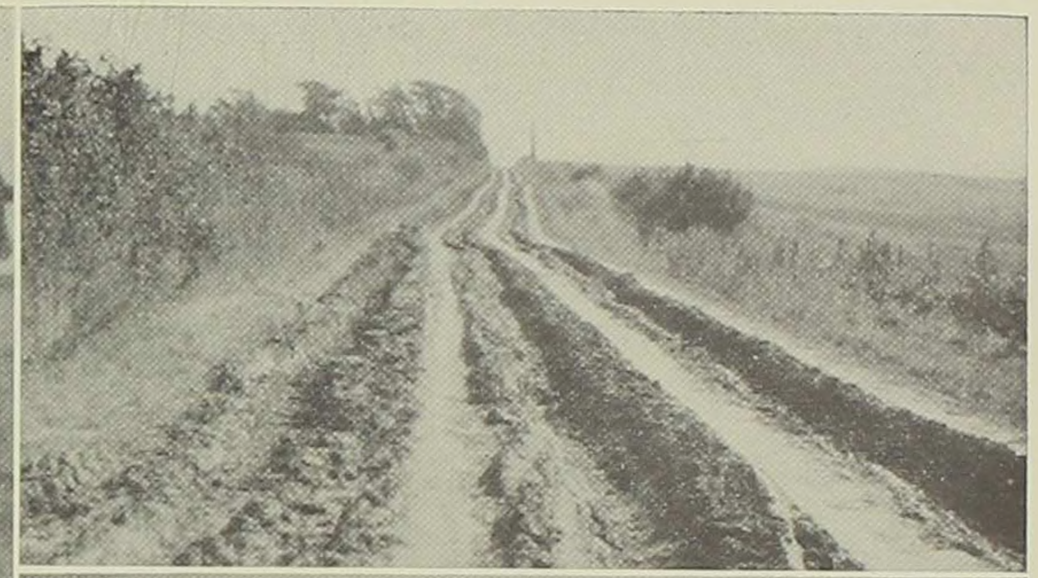
Horses, Wagons, Autos, and Jeeps Conquer Mud and Snow of Iowa Rural Routes

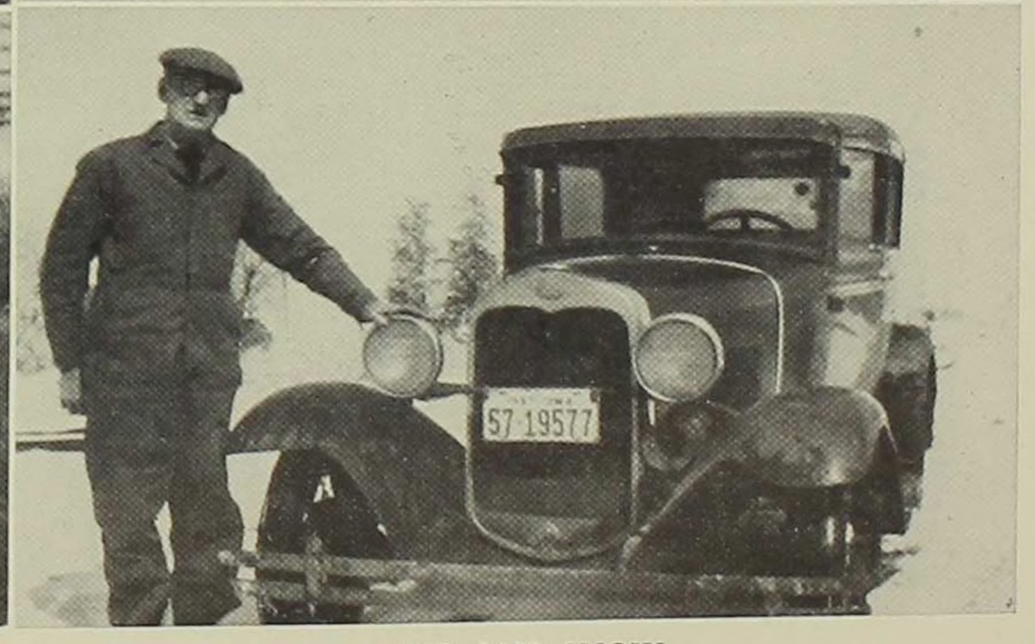
DEPENDABLE HORSE POWER

Top: Ira Moody — McGregor
Middle: John L. Brown — State Center
Bottom: W. L. Gater — Coggon

PAUL J. ANGERER — WEST LIBERTY

Horse and Buggy, March 1929
1928 Star, March 1933
Jeep, March 1946





MUD AND SNOW

RR No. 1 out of Decorah
C. E. Preiss — Iowa City: 1936
Earl Warner — Lisbon

Photo courtesy *Des Moines Register*

PATTERSON OVERCOMES WINTER SNOWS

Snow Drifted Road — Box Inaccessible
Snow Blocked Road — Delivery on Foot

and rode horseback or walked to make his deliveries. A veteran with forty years' service, England has used fourteen automobiles since he bought his first car in 1915.

Another Iowa carrier, Gregory G. Bisanz, relates his impressions as follows: "During the past forty years of service as a rural letter carrier out of the Dubuque post office, I have observed a complete change in the method of service from the horse and buggy to the motor vehicle." During this time the veteran Bisanz saw dirt and clay roads which were impassable in wet weather gradually change to "all weather" roads, good the year around.

Spring thaws were probably the most continuous problem for the early carriers. A West Liberty carrier remembers how he used to solve the mud problem. It was his custom to report for work at two A.M. during the spring weeks when the roads froze hard at night. Starting out at four A.M. he made his entire route over the frozen ruts by the aid of his headlights and returned to town before the sun began to thaw out the roads.

Not all carriers were as successful in solving the mud problem. A Red Oak man was crossing a bridge over Walnut Creek in 1920, and in attempting to make a run for the muddy hill just beyond, he skidded and went through the railing of the bridge but caught one rear wheel so that his

car dangled crazily over the edge, spilling the mail down into the cowl around the pedals. Fortunately the carrier was able to escape without disturbing the car's precarious balance.

O. J. Peterson who began carrying mail on May 15, 1900, witnessed his share of hazardous road conditions on Rural Route No. 2 out of Alta. Peterson is said to be the first man in Buena Vista County to use an automobile on a rural route. When interviewed by a Storm Lake *Tribune* reporter in 1925, Peterson recalled that on one occasion he had started out at eight o'clock in the morning in a blinding snow storm and did not return home until eleven that night with only two-thirds of his route finished. According to Peterson: "There is a ruling that snow must be shoveled away from in front of a mail box and the boxes kept in good repair, each with a flag and a lid. How many people observe this ruling? Another thing, after a snow storm, the patrons wait until the mail comes before they start to town so that the mail carrier in most cases is the champion road breaker."

Snow, of course, was the other great hazard for the early carriers, and there were others who did not fare so well as Mr. Peterson. During the winter of 1909 two rural mail carriers working out of Muscatine did not return from their routes and were presumed temporarily "marooned in the

country." And well might they be marooned for newspaper headlines read: "BLIZZARD SWEEPS THE WHOLE STATE."

Often carriers riding horseback over the impassable roads had to get off and walk ahead of the horse through the worst drifts. Harold R. Dinger of Decorah, who started as a rural mail carrier in 1909, remembers a bad blizzard when his horses' eyes and ears filled with snow and he had to go ahead to guide the reluctant team along his route. It took him all day and well after dark to make his rounds.

Sometimes carriers used mule teams to get through the snow. H. L. Rumme of Fort Dodge remembers one winter when even by using a mule team his 30-mile route took until 8:30 every evening — most of the time with the thermometer at twenty degrees or more below zero.

There were times when the heavy blankets of snow caused roads to disappear. On one of these occasions (in 1913) Robert Chesterman of Dubuque finally had to cut wire fences and guide his team and bobsled back across the fields. About three miles from the post office, he was forced to abandon the bobsled and continue on horseback, arriving finally after 9 P.M. He found after his return that the narrow gauge train which customarily brought the mail to his post office was snowbound for a full week.

F. A. McBride, who became a rural carrier on a thirty-one-mile all-dirt road out of Marengo in 1927, graphically recalls his experiences with snow storms. "The first year was pretty good weather and I got along fine. But the second winter it was different. Early in January it started to snow and it seemed as though it could not stop. I made fifty-five trips that winter and spring with the team, most of the time in a bobsled. At that time the roads were not opened with snow plows and if the road was blocked with snow we usually went in the field, cut the fence where necessary and came back to the main road when possible.

"When I think of the many trips through bad weather and poor roads it really has been quite an experience. In cold weather when I used the team I always took my dog along. He liked to ride with me and would lay on my feet under the fur robe and was nearly as good as a stove to keep my feet warm. It has been several years since I used a team. Now I make my whole route by car."

To the problems of snow and mud was added the additional hazard of spring thaws, swollen streams, and even flooded roads. In 1924, for example, Don B. Shannon of Osceola had to detour many miles to cross the West Nodaway River northwest of Fontanelle. One afternoon Shannon decided to drive his Model T across the river instead of going the eight or ten miles out of his

way. When he got out into the current, the car began to float, drifting into a clump of box elder trees. From this predicament he was presently rescued by a man on horseback who threw him a rope. Unfortunately the saddle girth broke when the horse began to pull and his benefactor was left sitting in the saddle in about three feet of cold water. The car was eventually extricated by another team, but there was still the problem of drying the spark plugs and wiping out the timer before Shannon could continue on his route.

Considering the obstacles, the success of Rural Free Delivery in Iowa has been overwhelming. Some of the credit can be given to the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association which was organized in 1903. County, state, and national groups have been formed since that date and there are now 30,000 active members in the United States.

Members of the Association in Iowa hold an annual state convention. At the 1948 meeting in Waterloo, H. L. Van Voorhis of West Des Moines was re-elected president. A rural carrier working in Polk County, Van Voorhis as president also edits the monthly newspaper called the *Iowa Rural Letter Carrier*. The paper is sent to each member of the state organization.

Van Voorhis was unusually well-qualified to serve as president. He was a rural carrier while

attending high school and Drake University, and he left his job only long enough for graduate work at George Washington University and the University of Southern California.

The wives of the Iowa rural carriers organized an Auxiliary at the state convention held in Charlton in 1925. It is formally known as the Ladies Auxiliary of the Iowa Rural Letter Carriers' Association and its main function is to aid the men's association in every way possible.

The NRLCA cites as some of its major accomplishments: legislation for increased pay, retirement and disability compensations, widows' annuities, and increases in equipment allowances. The motto — "Service with a Smile" — was adopted by the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association in 1921.

Meanwhile, in 1910, the Postmaster General had established the Division of Rural Mails by consolidating the work of Rural Free Delivery with that of Star service. In 1917, routes were combined, the number of routes reduced, and the total miles for carriers increased. The figures for 1916 showed that the average length of a rural route was 24.96 miles and the average annual pay was $1,162.50, which sum included motor vehicle service. For horse-drawn routes the pay was less.

After January 1, 1913, when the parcel post law went into effect, business for the rural postman

increased immeasurably. Mail order houses took advantage of the fact that Rural Free Delivery brought their merchandise right to the farmer's door. As a result, the carrier had an ever-increasing number of packages to deliver, as well as hundreds of bulky mail order catalogs.

During its first half-century Rural Free Delivery expanded tremendously. In 1906 there were 35,766 rural routes in the country; in 1926 this number had increased to 44,730, while in 1946 rural routes had declined to 32,161. During these same years the number of miles traveled increased from 820,318 to 1,270,746, to 1,441,538.

The pattern of development in Iowa was slightly different because the population has remained more constant since the turn of the century and the exodus from farm to town was probably greater in the nation as a whole. At any rate the number of rural routes in Iowa declined from 2,266 in 1906 to 2,199 in 1926 to 1,443 in 1946. Meanwhile, the number of miles traveled in Iowa increased from 61,905 to 64,708 between 1926 and 1946. The automobile and the paved and surfaced roads were twin factors in increasing the mileage of the average Iowa rural route with its accompanying heavier load at the same time that they decreased the number of Iowa rural routes.

Rural routes in Iowa range from 18 to 70 miles but the average length is 44 miles compared with

44.8 miles for the United States. Of the 77 rural carriers who were contacted in 20 Iowa post offices, Jerrold D. Wheeler of Algona travels 64 miles daily and serves 1,019 persons. This appears to be the longest distance for this group although a half dozen travel 60 miles or more daily on their routes. The five rural carriers out of Mount Pleasant average 58 miles daily. Bedford's three rural carriers average exactly the same distance.

The rural carrier in Iowa is more than a public servant: he has become a rural institution. Bringer of good tidings and sad; conveyor of news for all members of the family from all corners of the nation and the world, the rural carrier plays a role far more intimate to his patrons than that of the city letter carrier. If a patron is ill, the rural carrier will bring medicine; if hungry or if a needle and thread are needed, the carrier will respond to a reasonably urgent request, even though he is not obligated to do so. Nobody appreciates the rural carrier more than the farmer, for in him is invested all the services rendered by the city post office itself. As Thomas P. Knobbs of Montrose has said: "Any service that you can get at a first class postoffice you can get from a rural letter carrier."

MARY C. LUDWIG

Service With A Smile—1949

Each day Iowa farmers take it for granted that the postman will drive up to their box, leave the mail and newspapers, take their letters and packages to be mailed, and perhaps give their stalled car a shove. On Friday, when the mail is heaviest, it is claimed 350,000 boxholders of all kinds receive mail. This figure seems large when compared with the 204,208 farms listed by the Iowa Department of Agriculture in 1948, but the additional boxes are due to an increase in suburban homes and extra boxes for sons and hired men.

From the time the first carriers started from Morning Sun, Rural Free Delivery in Iowa has kept pace with the rest of the nation. In 1949 there were 1,379 rural carriers (including three women) delivering mail out of 828 Iowa post offices to 232,101 rural boxes. The remaining 275 out of Iowa's 1,103 post offices did not have rural carriers or city delivery. They did, however, have a total of 110,274 post office boxes available for village and rural patrons. In addition to these, 310 boxes were served by Star Routes.

A survey of twenty Iowa post offices shows that the average age of seventy-seven rural carriers was fifty years and their average length of

service 19.8 years. The oldest man of those surveyed was 66-year old Otho F. England of Belle Plaine who had served 40 years; ten other rural carriers were over sixty and 36 were in their fifties. Four men besides England had served 40 years: Gregory G. Bisanz and Robert Chesterman of Dubuque, George Bartlow of Oskaloosa, and Harold Dinger of Decorah. Good pay, interesting out-of-doors work, and a liberal retirement policy attracts and holds most men.

With increased service to the patrons has come additional pay for the carrier. From the $264 paid to the first carriers, the annual salaries have increased to a starting sum of $2,470, plus twenty dollars for each mile beyond the basic thirty mile route. This salary automatically increases after each full year of service until it reaches, after twenty-six years, a maximum of $3,562 for the basic route. Carriers have always furnished their own transportation but are now paid seven cents per mile maintenance.

A. A. Lilly, of Westfield, Iowa, has carried rural mail in Iowa longer than any other carrier. It all began in 1906 when Lilly drove to LeMars, Iowa, starting at three A.M. in order to take the rural carrier examination at seven A.M. He was the sole applicant for the job.

Lilly's first trip was on July 2, 1906, although his official appointment did not come until August

1st. Beginning September 1, 1907, he carried the newly-established Rural Route No. 2 out of Westfield. In his forty-three years of service on the same route, Lilly has used thirteen horses and seventeen cars, and has served under eight postmasters. Below-zero weather and blizzards with winds up to thirty-five miles an hour have been part of the job for this veteran. Lilly remembers the time his team ran away in just such weather. He was forced to stay at a farmhouse over night while the farmer caught his runaway team. Before the advent of the parcel post law, fresh meat, express packages, and other freight were part of his daily load, but Lilly says the patrons remunerated him with a little cash, a chicken, meat, or a bag of oats.

Another rural mail carrier, Paul J. Angerer, Rural Route No. 1, West Liberty, recalls that the record-breaking cold wave that began on January 18, 1936, was the worst in his twenty-one years as a rural carrier. For six weeks during January and February the snow drifted in places to depths of ten and twelve feet, making it impossible for him to deliver mail even on foot or horseback. Angerer remembers that "one patron who had been thus isolated for several days ordered a huge box of groceries from a local store by telephone and had the grocer mail them to him because, he insisted, 'The mail man has to go.'" They were

finally delivered, although the bread was stale.

It was just thirteen years after the Morning Sun experiment in 1896 that Earl Warner carried Rural Route No. 2 out of Lisbon. Warner, now seventy years old and retiring from the service in 1949, is one of Iowa's oldest rural carriers. There were times, says Warner, when his sixteen-mile route was too much for his pony so he walked the route. Warner's starting salary in 1909 was $52.50 per month.

Hub-deep mud and drifting snows still slow up the mail, but road conditions are much improved. County roads are gradually being graveled and some are now paved. Cars and jeeps have replaced the horse and wagon, but even now carriers sometimes run into trouble. Charles M. La Favre, of Newton, says his hardest day's work in twenty-three years as a carrier was the winter day when the steering rod broke on his jeep and "rammed" it into a snow drift. He had to continue on foot and was still delivering mail with the aid of a flashlight at seven P.M. La Favre laughingly recalls a warmer day when the mail was slowed down for a somewhat different reason. He found it necessary to maintain a respectful distance behind a black and white striped "kitty" in order to avoid delivering "scented" mail.

Fifty years ago it would have been unheard of for a woman to carry rural mail. But today a fifty-

mile route out of Newton is all in the day's work for forty-nine-year-old Elizabeth Rucker. One morning Mrs. Rucker received a small but heavy package for delivery to the caretaker of the cemetery on her route. "The package contained the cremated remains of a corpse," Mrs. Rucker recalls, "and I did not know where to place it in the car, as I thought it should be shown a little more respect than ordinary parcel post so I placed it on the seat beside me." After some hesitation, she decided to deliver the package to the caretaker personally rather than place it in his mailbox. Mrs. Rucker was very glad that the cemetery was one of her first stops.

Rural carriers find strange things in the boxes stationed along their routes. Russell L. Conrad of Council Bluffs laughs about the day a frightened wren flew out of a mailbox and up his sleeve. Surprised, Conrad lost control of his car and went into the ditch. Frequently bees and wasps get into mailboxes, and carriers are severely stung. Isaiah P. Yoder, an Amish Mennonite who carries mail out of Kalona, once found in a box a live possum placed there by pranksters. Fortunately for Yoder the possum did not bite him.

Rural mail carriers take more than a passing interest in their patrons. An Osceola man, King T. Cole, carries bubble gum for all the children who come after the mail on his route. W. S.

Hustvedt, of Decorah, has made it a point to see that letters addressed to "Santa Claus" reach their destination and are answered. One of Ottumwa's rural carriers, Maurice J. Rump, worries less about the mud and snow than he does about the checks for old people who depend on pensions the first of each month. Naturally the carriers are interested in their patrons. G. C. Seitz, Rural Route No. 3, Fort Dodge, was not at all insulted by a note on a postcard which read, "Well, I suppose the mail man has read this by now so will say goodbye to him too."

Tragedy and comedy often go hand-in-hand. A small house fire once caused a substitute mail carrier more than a little trouble. Robert Chesterman, who carries Rural Route No. 4 out of Dubuque, invited a substitute clerk to accompany him in order to get some first-hand information of the route. "It was a beautiful June day in 1946," Chesterman recalls, "and we were coasting down the lower Massey Road, which is a long hill from which one can view what is often referred to as 'Peaceful Valley.' Upon arriving at the Charles Hilken farm home we heard the cry of 'fire.'

"We dashed into the house and found a gasoline stove on fire. There flashed through my mind the memory of having read an article on using milk, not water, in extinguishing such a fire. Knowing there was a supply of milk in the spring

house, I called for a bucket full and in no time at all the fire was out. The humorous part of the incident came about when my friend, the substitute clerk, desirous of offering his assistance, grasped a bundle of burlap sacks which were lying near the house, intending to wet the sacks and smother the fire. The sacks contained bumble bees which promptly put the substitute out of service."

Perhaps C. E. Preiss, Rural Route No. 3, Iowa City, does the best job of explaining why, despite hardships, these rural carriers stay on the job year after year. He says, "any number of incidents make you want to take the whole works and shove it off in the deepest hole in the ocean and forget it all. Then at Christmas time, so darn many good people hand you a chicken, or some candy, or any one of the hundred odd things the folks on your route would have — apples, fruits of most every kind, eggs, or meats — and of course all of them with a hearty greeting from the folks at home. Farmers' wives now and then will call to you to stop and sample the first apple pie of the year, or share a cup of hot coffee on a cold morning. A fellow in the field waves, or greets you in town, and talks about crop prospects even though he must realize you don't know a single thing about it. Farmers ask you how the political battle is going, or how are all the kids. Even though each of these incidents isn't too much in itself, all of them put

together make you glad you stayed on the job and didn't chuck the whole works years ago."

In the years since 1896 the rural carriers have seen many changes. Almost every kind of conveyance has been used — saddle horses, bobsleds, cutters, light buggies, heavy wagons, and of course the Model T Ford. As early as 1899 a Hedrick mail carrier even had a "handsome delivery wagon specially built with side doors, pigeonholes, and other appliances. . . ." In recent years and with better roads, all makes of cars have been used, with the jeep recently replacing the Model T in popularity. During a bad snow storm in 1947, E. E. Larew of Iowa City even delivered mail to snowbound farms along his route by plane. The small, ski-equipped plane made the thirty-mile trip southwest of Iowa City in fifteen minutes, which is quite a contrast to the time of pioneer carriers under similar weather conditions.

To these carriers and others like them goes the credit for the excellence of Iowa's Rural Free Delivery. They have taken great pride in their ability to get the mail through. Since that first day in 1896 when the three Rural Free Delivery pioneers started from Morning Sun, the rural mail carrier, always aware of his motto, "Service With a Smile," has become an integral part of every Iowa farmer's life.

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