

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, pigeon-holes, 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.

MARY C. LUDWIG