

## 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

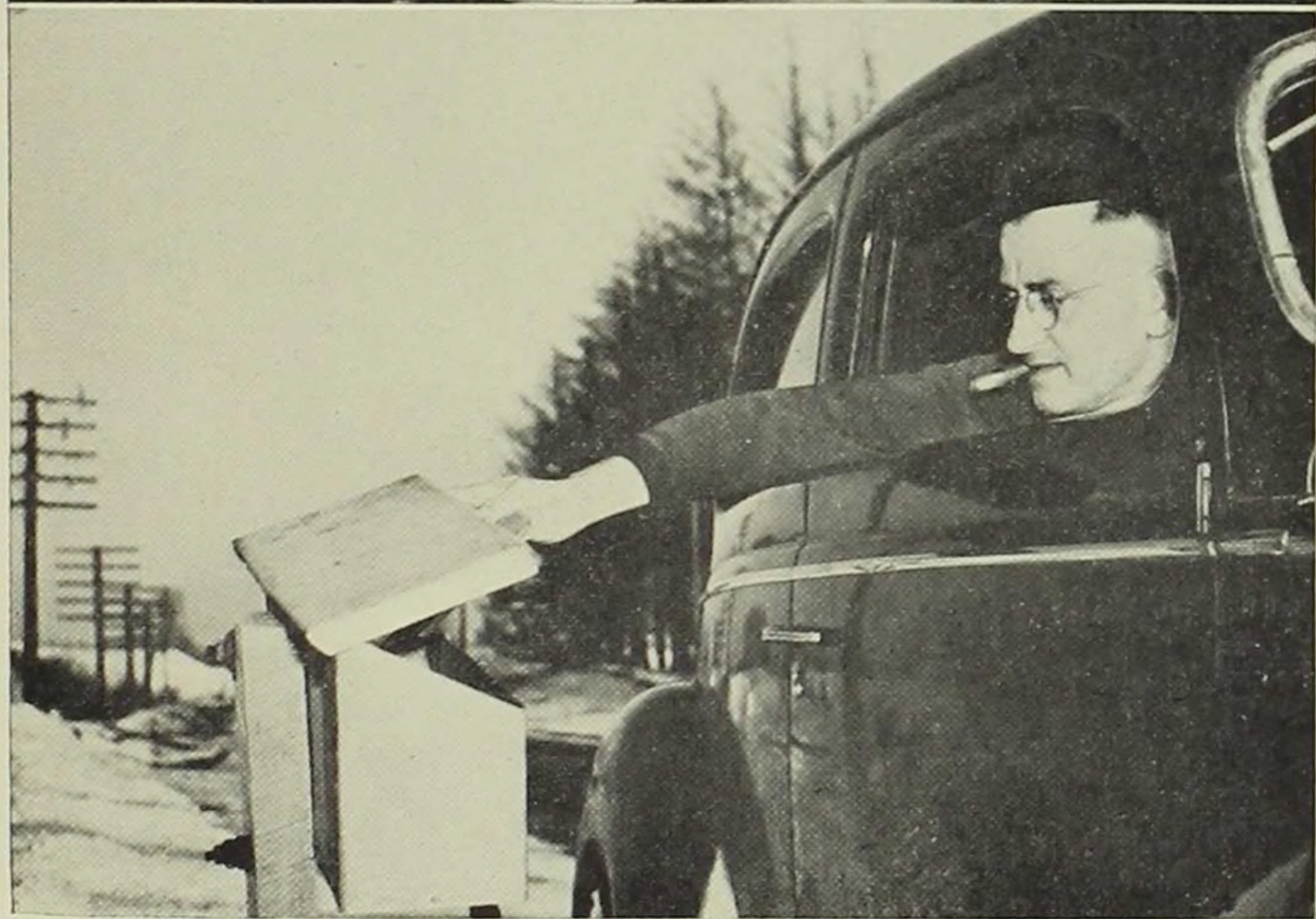
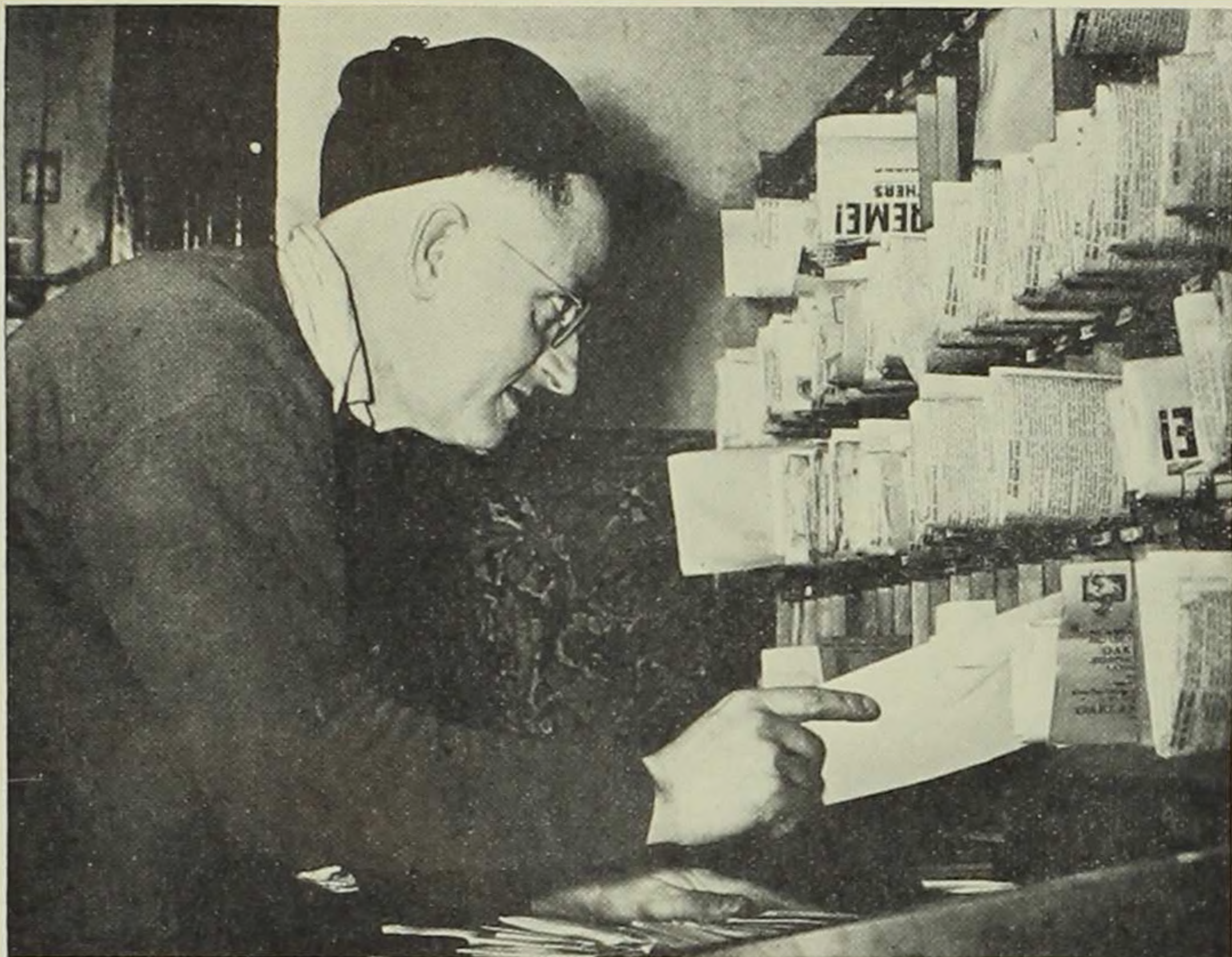
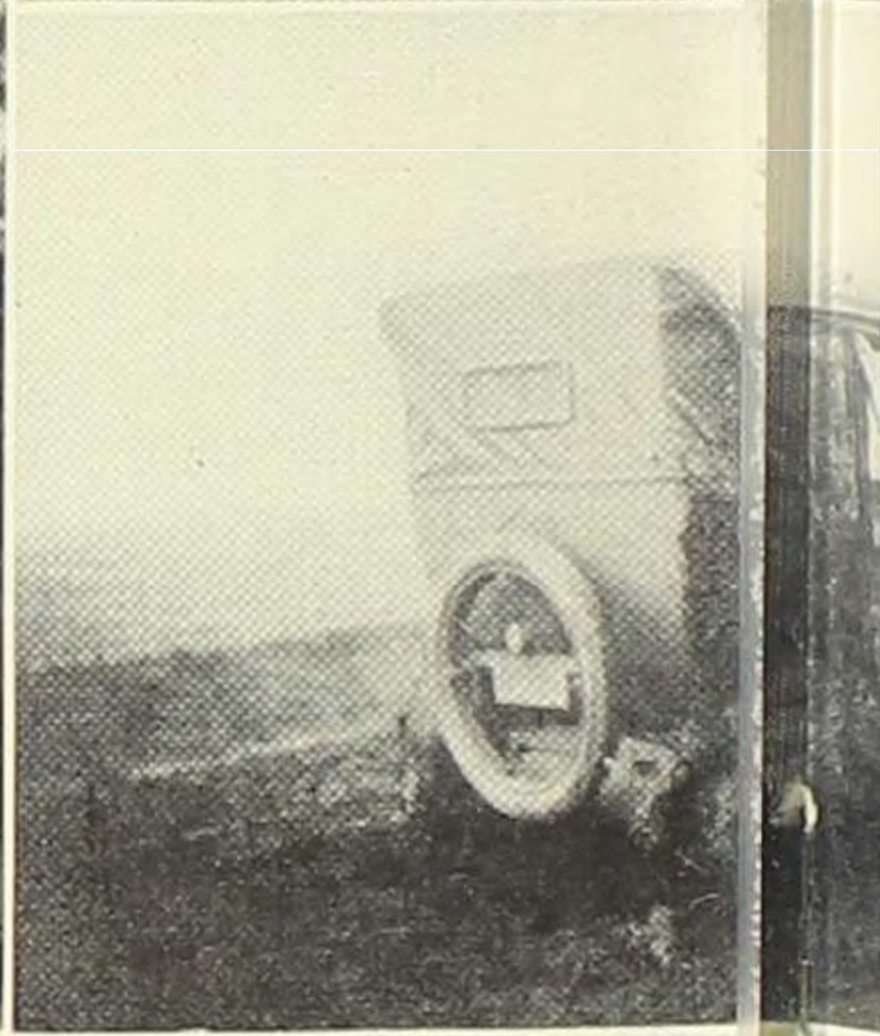


Photo courtesy *Des Moines Register*

C. C. PATTERSON OF MITCHELLVILLE

Sorting Mail in Post Office  
Clear Roads — Easy Delivery

*Horses, Wagons, Autos, and Jeeps Conze*



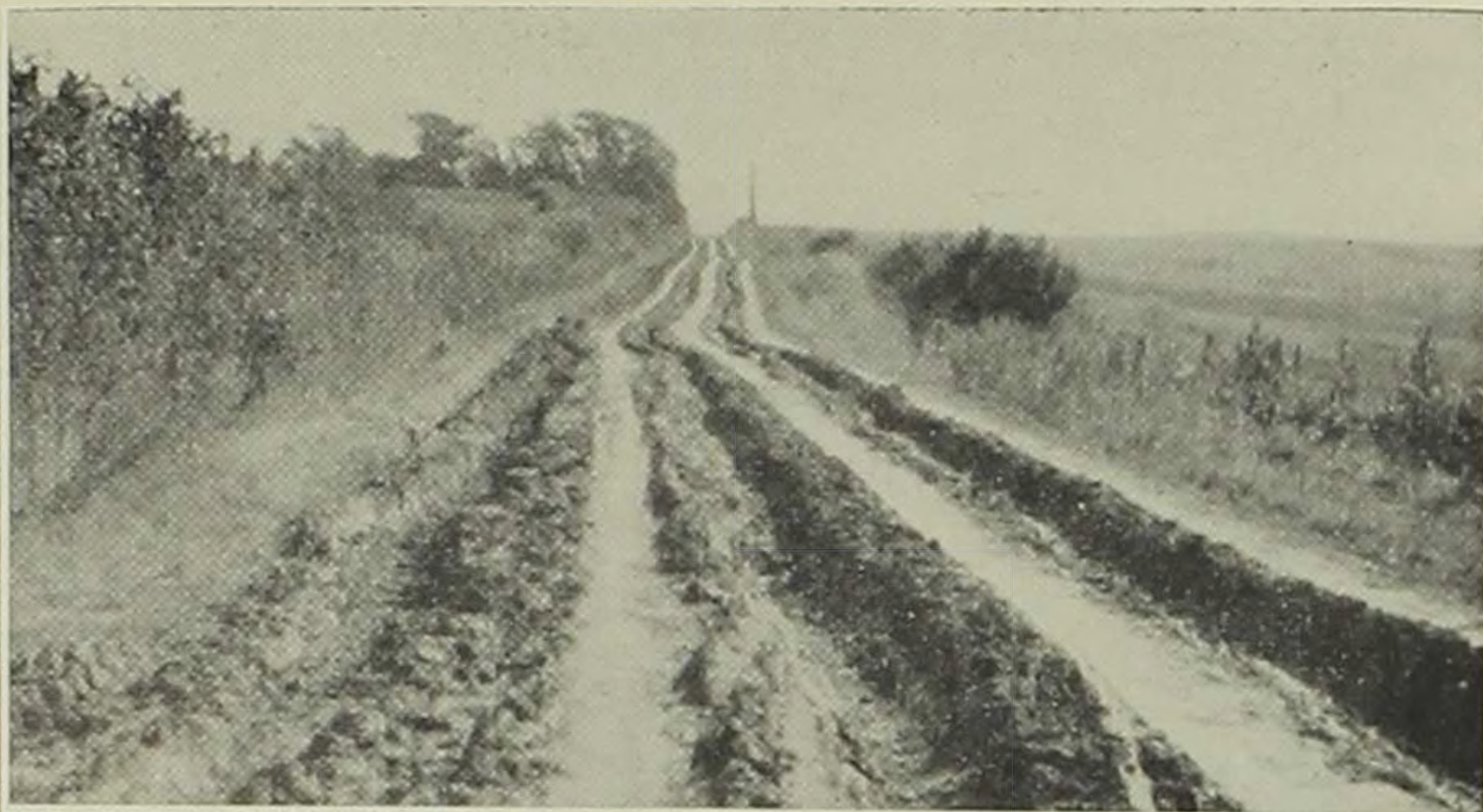
DEPENDABLE HORSE POWER

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

PAUL J. ANGER — W

Horse and Buggy, M  
 1928 Star, March 19  
 Jeep, March 1946

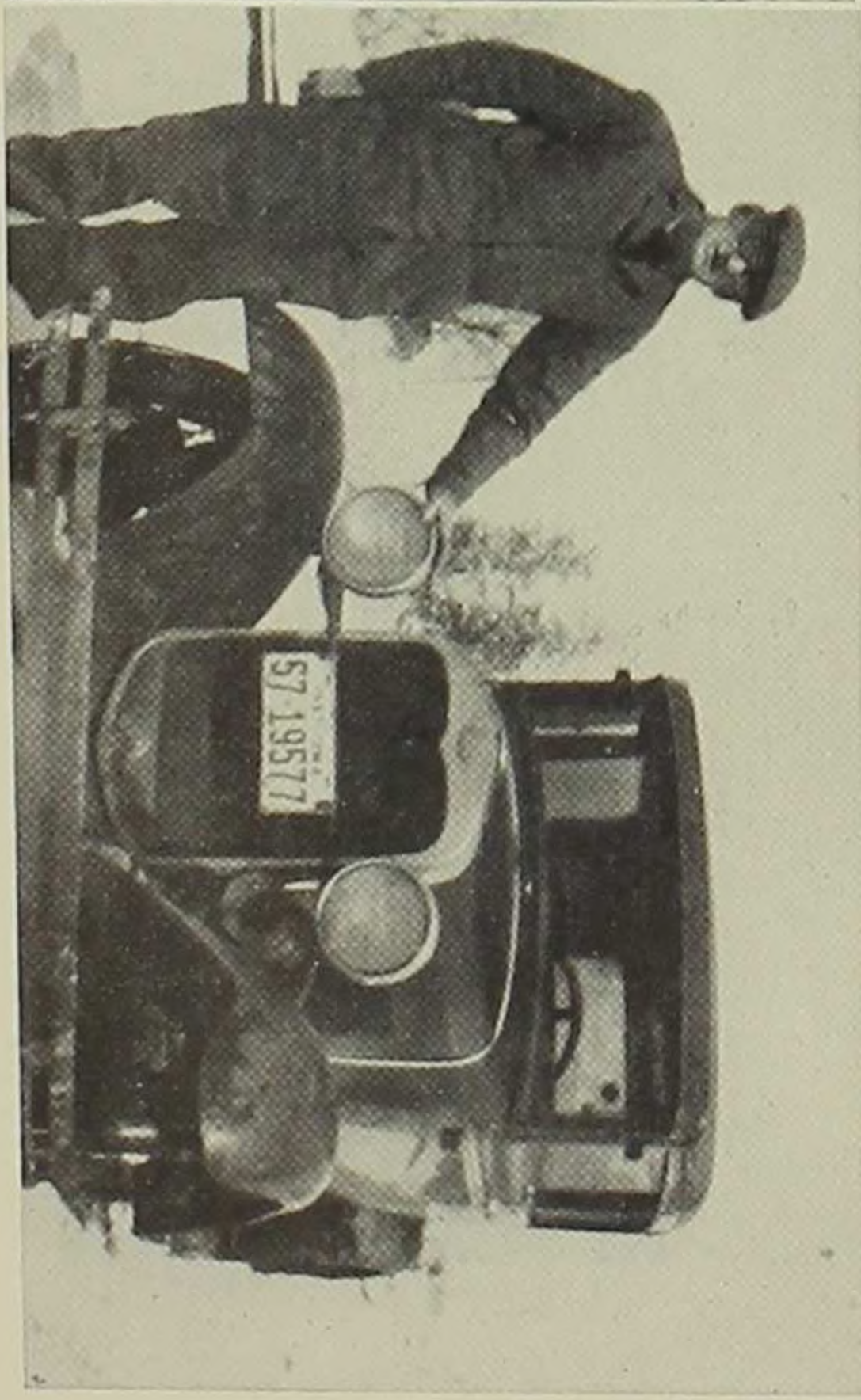
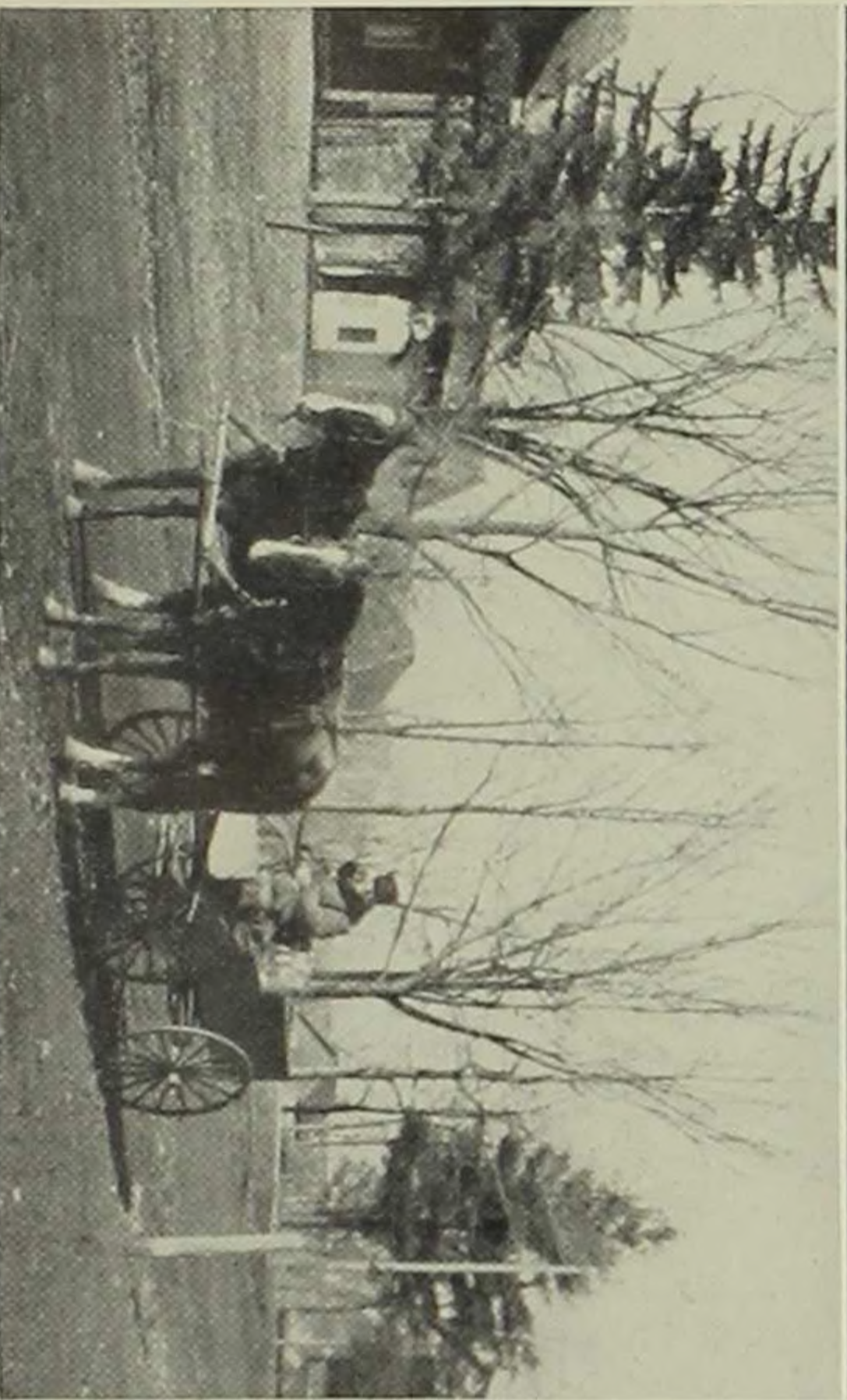
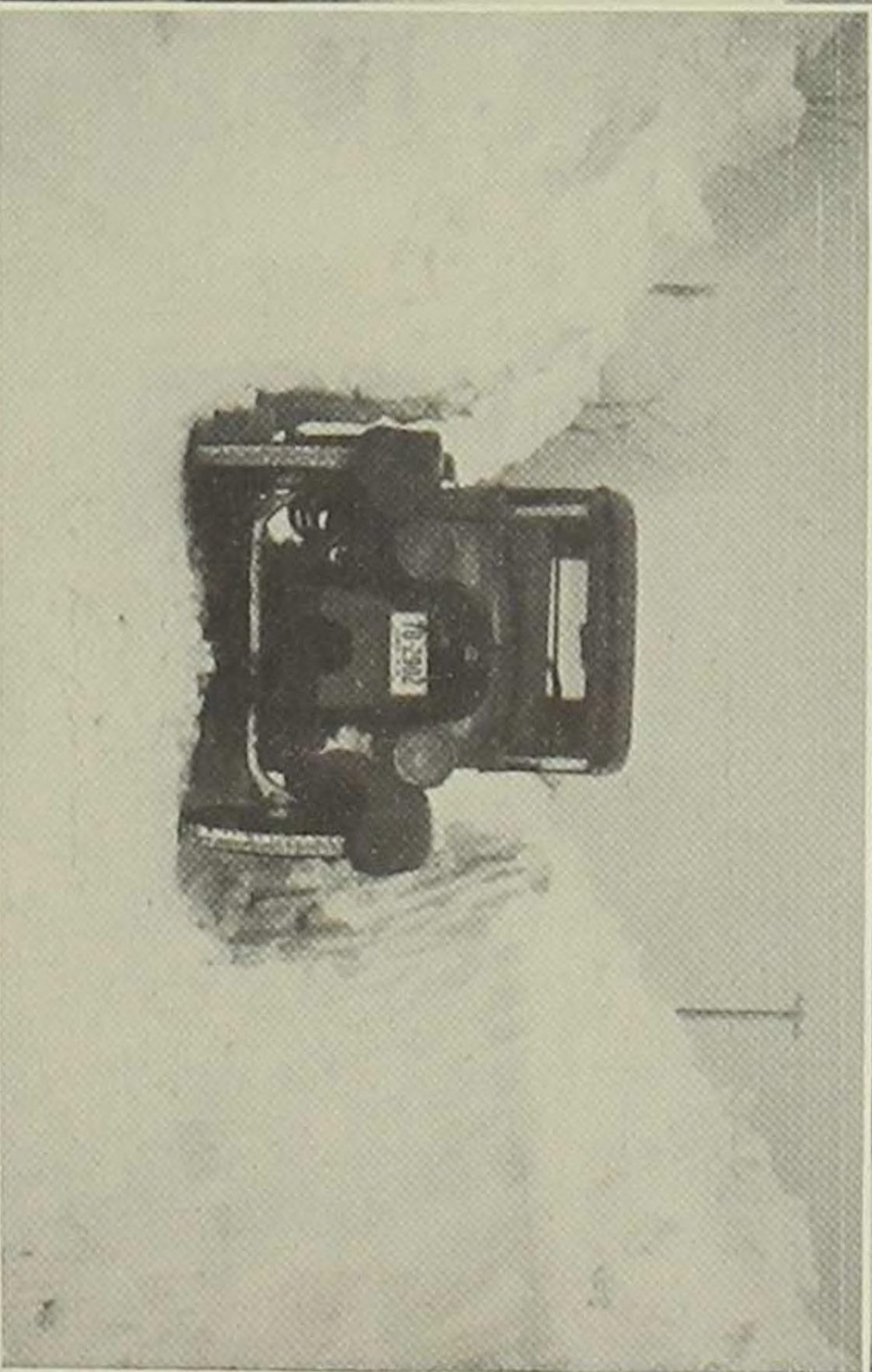
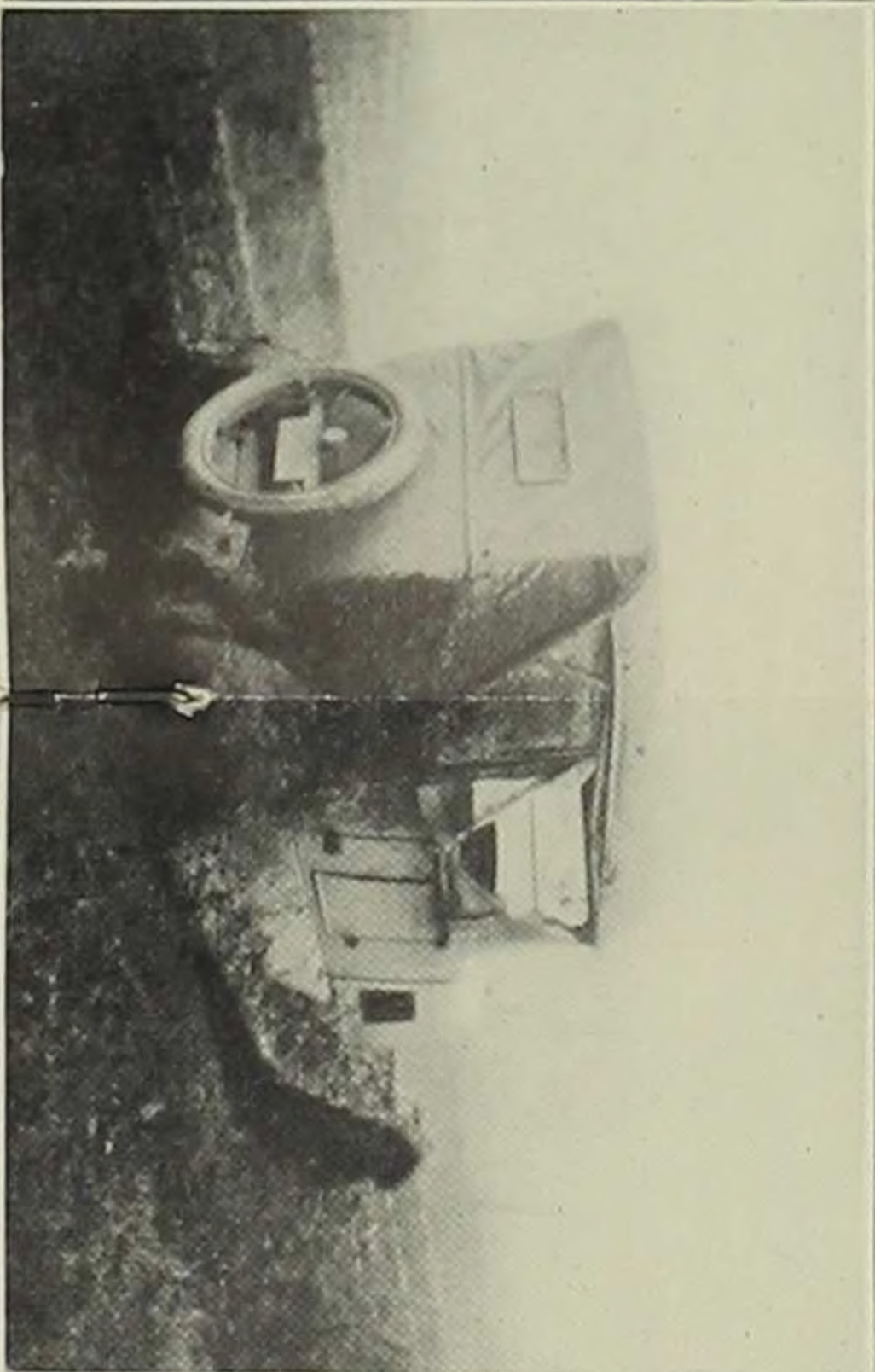
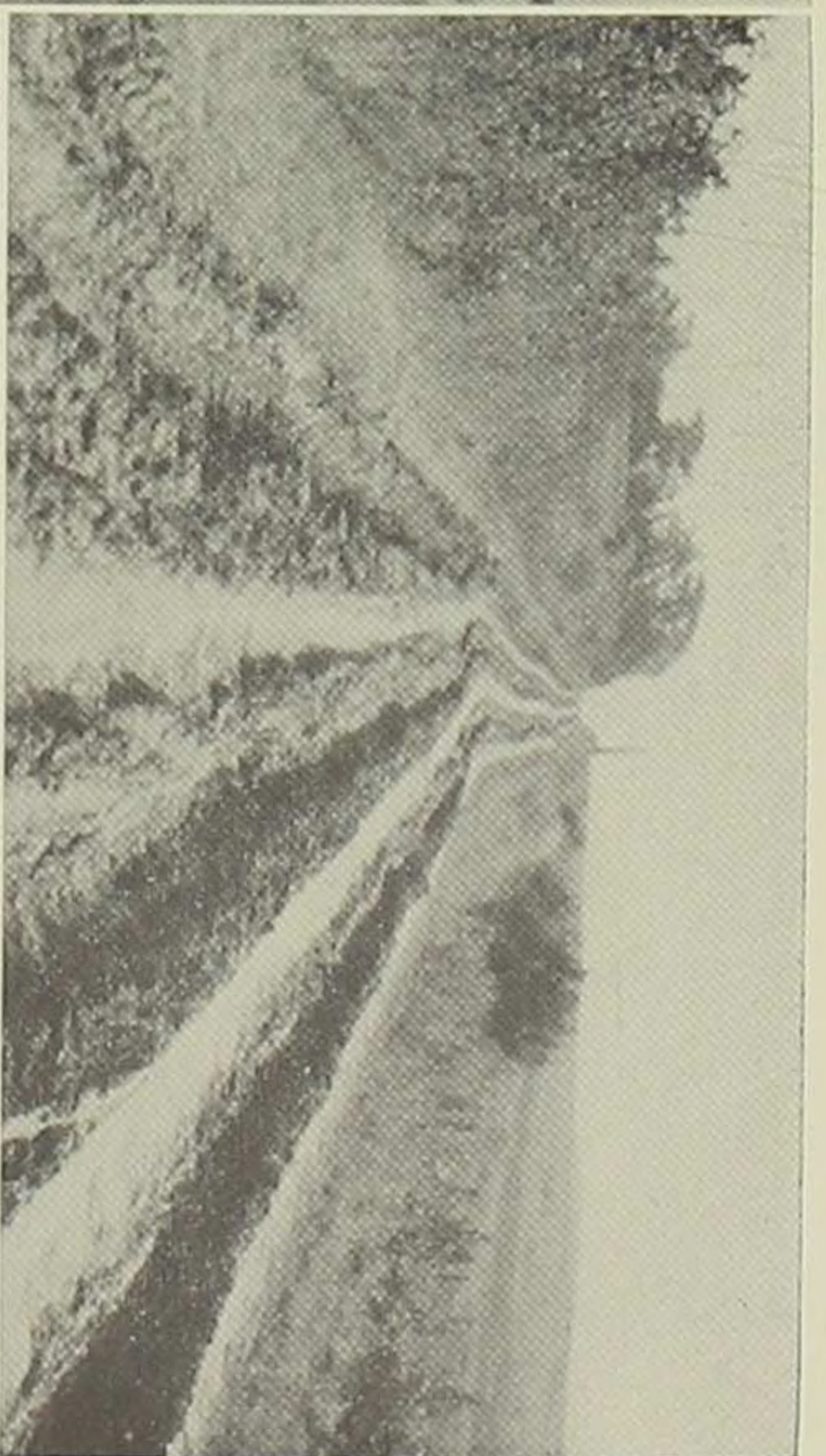
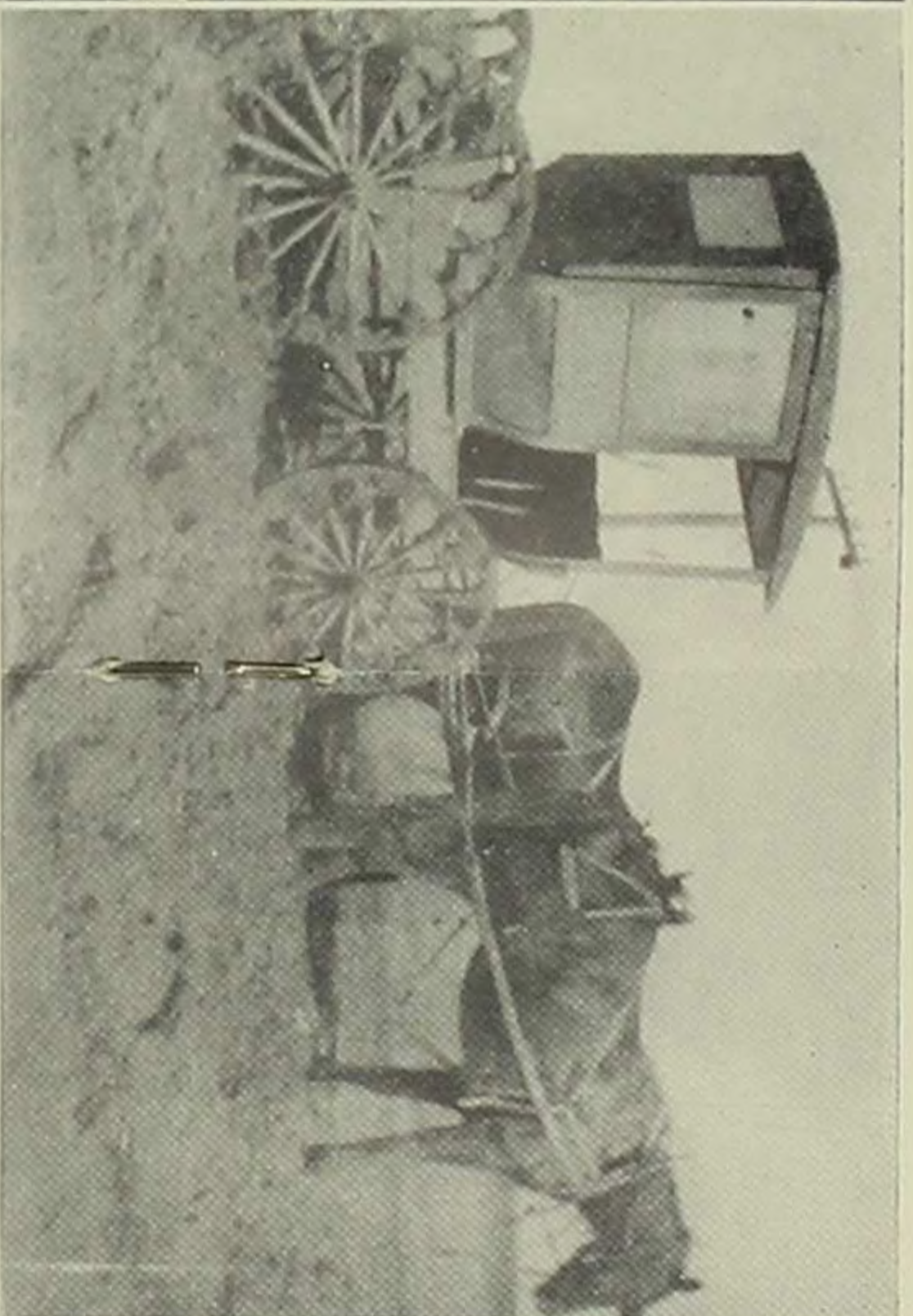
*onger Mud and Snow of Iowa Rural Routes*



ERE] — WEST LIBERTY  
l BuE March 1929  
Ma 1933  
ch 1

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 snow-bound 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 Chariton 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