

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## 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. Pfozter. 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."

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