

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."

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