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A Century of Mail Delivery

The Iowa pioneer was probably more interested in maintaining his connections with friends and relatives "back home" than in almost anything else except food and shelter. He depended upon the United States mail service to bring him his letters, his newspapers, and his magazines. At the same time his local editor served as an intermediary in dispensing news to the frontiersman — news which he gleaned from the score of newspaper exchanges which came to his desk through the United States postal service. Although these papers were sometimes two months old before they reached the Black Hawk Purchase, the Iowa pioneer avidly read and discussed each crumb of news that filtered westward.

Previous to the appointment of Colonel George Davenport as postmaster at Rock Island in 1824, the mails came up the Mississippi River at intervals which were regulated by the movement of troops and supplies. When Moses Meeker as-

cended the Upper Mississippi in the keelboat *Colonel Bomford* in 1823, he was detained by the commander at Fort Edwards who wished to make sure he was not engaging in the whisky trade with the Indians.

The next morning, as they were proceeding upstream, Meeker saw a boat approaching from the fort. "On their arrival a letter was handed me, containing a very polite apology for detaining me the day previous, with the mail for the upper forts, requesting that I should forward it as far as Prairie du Chien. At that day, and up to the fall of 1828, there was no regular mail above Fort Edwards; each military post was a post-office, and the commandant a postmaster. While the river was open, the mails traveled at the speed of a keel-boat, and as often as opportunities offered. After the closing of the river in the fall . . . there was an express sent through from one post to another, once a month."

Civilian mail delivery began in Iowa immediately following the advent of the first settlers in 1833. In the fall of that year George Ord Karrick was delivering a weekly mail from Galena to Dubuque. Milo H. Prentice was the first postmaster at Dubuque and the mail was delivered from a candle box in the store kept by a Mr. Pfozter.

In those early days it appears that the initiative of the pioneers supplemented the government in this matter just as it did in courts and land titles, and it is sometimes difficult to say whether an enterprise was a private or government activity. The first delivery of mail within the original limits of Burlington in 1834 was through the private enterprise of William R. Ross who became postmaster in 1835. In the spring of 1834 Ross had written Postmaster General William T. Barry asking for the establishment of a post office at Flint Hills. He was granted a route between Flint Hills (Burlington) and Shokokon, seven miles to the east across the Mississippi.

According to a local historian, Antoine LeClaire received a commission as the first postmaster at Davenport on April 19, 1836. He picked up the mail at Stephenson (now Rock Island), Illinois, and brought the letters to Davenport in his coattails. About this time, at New Salem, Abraham Lincoln was carrying mail in his hat. LeClaire, it is said, received an income of seventy-five cents for his first quarter's work.

This mail was usually carried on horseback and the compensation consisted of the proceeds of the office. At that time envelopes were a luxury, for the charge was twenty-five cents for each sheet of paper and an envelope was considered a separate

sheet. To avoid this extra charge, most persons folded a letter, sealed it, and then wrote the address on a blank space left on the outside.

Letters were sent "collect on delivery" and many Iowans found it extremely difficult to produce a quarter with which to pay for a letter. A Keokuk County pioneer recalled the trouble he had getting his first letter out of the Sigourney post office in 1845. "I heard that there was a letter in the postoffice for me, and knowing that it would require twenty-five cents to pay the postage, the problem of getting that sum of money taxed my energy and financial ability to the utmost for many days. None of my neighbors were in such affluent circumstances as to be able to 'do my paper' for that sum . . . and I was about despairing of being able to pay the postage, when I heard of a kind-hearted man (since dead, peace to his ashes), living in the western part of the county, some miles from where I did, who was reported to have received twenty-five dollars some time before from the East. . . . This news gave me new hope and courage. I started early one morning to find the capitalist, and negotiate with him for the loan of 'a quarter,' which, with some difficulty, I accomplished; and then, with hastening steps and palpitating heart, walked to Sigourney and procured the letter, and returned home the

same day, after a walk of something over twenty miles."

The rapid spread of postal service in Iowa is attested by the *Dubuque Iowa News* of September 30, 1837, which listed 24 post offices in the Black Hawk Purchase after only four years of settlement. Half of these post offices were located in old Dubuque County — Du Buque, Peru, Weyman's, Higginsport, Pleasant Valley, Davenport, Belleview, Durango, Salisbury, Parkhurst, Wabesapinecon, and Carl Port. The remainder were located in the five counties of southern Iowa before they had achieved their present-day boundaries — Rockingham, Iowa, Clark's Ferry, Bloomington, Burlington, Gibson's Ferry, Montrose, Richland, Fort Madison, Keokuk, Wapello, and Black Hawk.

The Dubuque editor also observed that the people of the Iowa District had "much to complain of with regard to the irregular transportation of the mails from Du Buque to Belleview, Fort Madison, etc., the contractor having neglected to perform his duty".

Other editors were likewise irritated by the slow delivery of mails. On January 20, 1838, a Burlington editor complained: "The truth is, and we are compelled to say it, our mail establishment is a mere mockery; calculated rather to tantalize

than to accommodate the public. We would almost as soon have a lodge, at once, in some vast wilderness, where a mail never reached or was heard of, than to be subjected to the annoyance, disappointment and chagrin, incident to the mails of this flourishing, beautiful and populous country."

The following week this same editor stormed because a letter he had received from George Wallace Jones was seven weeks old. No newspapers had been received from the east for a similar period and hence there was nothing on hand to print for his readers. "No weather or climate seems to suit the mail-carriers. Summers too hot; Winters too cold.— When it rains its too wet, and when it don't its too dry. Presently, we shall get three bushels of papers from the east, and the latest will probably be up to the 20th or 25th of December." Before his newspaper went to press he was able to announce the arrival of three bushels of mail, with no papers later than December 23rd, and hence nothing "quite new" to report.

The demand of the Iowa pioneers for more post offices continued after the Territory of Iowa was created on July 4, 1838. More than one hundred post offices were established in the seven years before January 1, 1846. An additional thirty

were established during 1846. At that time Iowa had more post offices than there were in the whole United States at the time Washington became President.

Fort Atkinson was the northernmost post office established that year. The westernmost was Raccoon River, established on March 2, 1846, with Thomas K. Brooks as the first postmaster. It became Fort Des Moines on December 31, 1846, three days after Iowa achieved statehood, and was renamed Des Moines on January 30, 1857. The frontier of the post office was following close on the heels of the pioneer in 1846.

Between the opening of settlement in 1833 and the achievement of statehood in 1846 few changes occurred in the postal service. During this period the steamboat was the swiftest means of bringing the mails to the Upper Mississippi. By 1834 the Galena-Dubuque area chronicled 127 steamboat arrivals. Upper Mississippi steamboats quickly won mail contracts, one of the most famous "Mail Lines" being the St. Louis and Keokuk Packet Company. The magnitude of the mail carried on steamboats is demonstrated by the *War Eagle*, which left Dubuque in May of 1857 for points above with two and one-half tons of mail aboard.

But steamboats were long-haul carriers and

the average Iowan a century ago thought in terms of post offices and post roads because he was more intimately acquainted with them. The time of arrival and departure of the mails was usually carried in the local press. So also was the request of the United States government for bids to carry mail over the various post roads that streaked across the Iowa prairies. On May 25, 1846, Augustus Caesar Dodge sent to Iowa newspapers for publication a list of thirty-eight mail contracts on which Iowans had bid. C. T. Patterson agreed to carry the mail from Dubuque to Davenport by way of Belleview and Charleston for \$892. In contrast, N. Atkins got only \$332 for carrying the mail between Iowa City and Dubuque. Stagecoach drivers often competed for these contracts.

The half century between 1846 and 1896 was marked by numerous postal innovations. The first postage stamps were authorized on March 3, 1847. The interest of Iowans in reduced postage was expressed by the editor of the *Davenport Gazette*, on January 16, 1845. While many cities were calling for "Two cents and no Franking" the editor felt that this was too extreme a reduction, and favored rather a rate of ten and five cents. This was the rate finally adopted in 1847 and the government promptly printed 3,650,000 five cent stamps and 875,000 ten cent stamps —

a small number when compared with the 125,000,000 Iowa centennial commemorative stamps printed in 1946.

Other postal reforms followed quickly. The system of registered letters was introduced in 1855. Free delivery service, inaugurated in large cities in 1863, was extended in 1887 to include towns of 10,000 population. Money order service began in 1864. One cent post cards were first placed on sale in May of 1873. Six years later double, or reply, postal cards were authorized. In 1885 Congress increased the weight of letter-mail from half an ounce for two cents to one ounce for two cents, and at the same time authorized a special delivery service. Rural free delivery service began experimentally in 1896.

During the half century between 1846 and 1896, Iowa's population soared from 102,000 to over two millions. The frontier line disappeared. The arrival of the telegraph in 1848 was a tremendous force in linking the Atlantic seaboard with Iowa. The arrival of the railroad on the banks of the Mississippi in 1854 and 1855 was another momentous force in uniting the East and the West. A dozen years were to slip by before the iron horse was to cross Iowa to the banks of the Missouri and it was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that railroads penetrated

every county in the State and Iowans were freed from at least partial dependence on the wagon and stagecoach for mail delivery.

According to Daniel C. Roper, mail was first forwarded by railroad as early as 1834. England had a railroad mail coach as early as 1838, the same year that Congress declared all railroads to be post roads. In that year the *Iowa News* of April 21st contained a description of a traveling post office car used on the Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad. This car was "divided into two commodious apartments, one of which is a complete post office, furnished with a desk, pigeon holes, cases, and a letter box, and everything needful for a post office. This apartment is occupied by a clerk or agent of the post office department — who receives the letters which are put into the box at different towns on the route, stamps them, charges them, arranges them into parcels, and delivers them at the places of their destination. . . . The apartment in the rear of the travelling post office contains the great mail." Citizens, it was said, frequently availed themselves of the "locomotive post office" when their letters were too late for the regular establishment.

Railroads, however, were still in their infancy and apparently did not accept this system, which

required the service of a route agent, or agents, such as those who at that time traveled with the mails aboard steamboats and received and distributed all letters posted by boat. At any rate the honor of having the first railway post office in the United States seems to be claimed by two western railroads, both associated with Iowa — the Hannibal & St. Joe of the Burlington system, which in 1862 used a mail car to sort mail which was to be carried on west by the Pony Express, and the North Western, which ran its first railway mail car between Chicago and Clinton in 1864. Regular railway mail service was established in 1865 and today forms the very backbone of the postal distribution system.

Iowa towns were among the earliest in which free delivery service was inaugurated in 1863. The same is true for rural free delivery. On November 16, 1897, a preliminary rural free delivery route (one of forty-four in twenty-nine States) was started from Morning Sun, a town of about 1,000 in Louisa County. Four carriers were employed who averaged 23 miles per day in five or six hours. It was necessary to enlist the aid of farmers in erecting boxes by the roadside, but this was readily done and farmers expressed themselves as greatly pleased with the service. An additional route was established at New Prov-

idence in Hardin County in 1897. These deliveries were, of course, horse-powered.

On one occasion an Iowa city appears to have served as the sole proving ground for a post office innovation. On April 6, 1897, the Des Moines postmaster was authorized to enter into arrangements with the Des Moines traction company to equip street cars with letter boxes for mail-collection service in the suburban districts remote from substations. The collections began with 215 pieces of mail the first day, increased to 500 daily during the first month, and exceeded 1,000 daily in July of 1897, but the plan seems to have been dropped.

A half century after Iowa became a State the President was appointing postmasters for 214 post offices in Iowa and the State ranked 12th in population and 4th in number of presidential post offices, being eclipsed only by New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. In 1896 presidential offices were divided into three classes. First-class offices, including eight in Iowa, were those in which the gross receipts were over \$40,000 per annum, and the salary of the postmaster was from \$3,000 to \$6,000. There were 26 second-class post offices in Iowa, with gross receipts ranging from \$8,000 to \$40,000 per annum. The salary of second-class postmasters ranged from \$2,000 to \$2,900

per annum. Third-class post offices (180 in Iowa) were those in which the gross receipts ranged from \$1,900 to \$8,000, and the salaries of the postmasters were between \$1,000 and \$1,900 per annum.

In addition to these there were 1,672 fourth-class post offices, those in which receipts were less than \$1,900, or the salary of the postmaster, who was appointed by the Postmaster General, did not amount to \$250 per quarter for four consecutive quarters. Fourth-class offices were divided into three groups — those which could sell money orders up to \$100, those which could sell money orders up to \$5, and those which could sell no money orders at all. In 1897 Iowa had 674 money order post offices, 60 limited money order offices, and 918 non-money order post offices.

In 1897 Iowa ranked 15th in the number of post offices of all kinds, with a total of 1,866, or three times as many as existed in the United States in 1797 when George Washington ended his second term as President. The gross receipts at these post offices was \$2,214,200.01, \$1.04 per capita for Iowans, which placed the State 24th in per capita receipts.

In the half century since 1896 there have been many additional postal reforms. A postal savings system, inaugurated in 1911, was especially pop-

ular with Iowans during the collapse of the banking system. A parcel post service was established in 1913 which became very popular with Iowa farmers although it was opposed by the express companies and small town merchants.

Air mail was inaugurated in 1918 between Washington and New York and a transcontinental system was started in 1920, crossing Iowa from Davenport to Omaha, by way of Iowa City. Foreign air mail routes were gradually added to the domestic system and after Pearl Harbor the wisdom of a well-developed air mail service was demonstrated to many Iowans with sons and daughters in the service.

The United States postal service today stands in sharp contrast with that offered citizens of yesteryears. In 1789, when Samuel Osgood was appointed Postmaster General, there were 75 post offices sprinkled along the Atlantic seaboard. Today the United States Post Office Department is the largest business in the world, employing 370,000 workers at an annual payroll in excess of \$800,000,000. During the year ending June 30, 1945, the 41,790 post offices in the United States handled more than 16 billion dollars annually and the gross receipts totalled \$1,243,673,689.86.

The growth of postal service in Iowa has been equally startling. The 1,110 Iowa post offices in

1946, though less than there were in 1897, represent a tenfold increase over 1846. The decrease in the number of post offices was largely due to rural free delivery. In 1940 there were approximately 64,359 miles of R. F. D. routes in Iowa compared with a total of 155,739 miles of post routes in the United States in 1840.

There are several reasons for this tremendous change. At the time settlers first poured into the Black Hawk Purchase a scant two letters per person a year were sent through United States mails. By 1946 an average of about 150 letters or cards per person were sent through the mails. The introduction of the postage stamp and the adoption of such innovations as registered mail, city, rural, and village delivery service, money orders, special delivery, postal savings, parcel post, and air mail, all have played a vital rôle in the expansion of the postal service in Iowa and the nation. In spite of the radio, the post office still plays as important a part in the lives of Iowans in 1946 as it did one hundred years ago.

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