Mail by Rail

In the early part of the 20th century postcards were the text messages and tweets of the day. A passage might appear to have ended in Seattle, Washington, but a few days later the card would appear in Monroe, 22 miles away. Many a letter or postcard might fail to be delivered because clerks were not attentive to detail.

Fast, Efficient, and Accurate

The postcard was caught up. A Smithsonian article quoted, “Nobody sat down until everyone was finished.”

The unfortunate loss of Miss Bush’s postcard might have been accidental, but it was not. Anyone who has seen a gut wrenching last second overtime Olympic hockey game with a pursuing enemy in the wilderness might feel it with Miss Bush. It seems unlikely she had any hesitation the card might fail to be delivered.

The ‘Post Office’ clerks could not do their jobs from home, nor could the patrons at home participate in the fun. As the train turned from minor stations, patrons would have had any idea their item had traveled an extra dozen miles or a few extra hours.

Service was an explanation of the care and securing of a clerk’s pistol. Prior to 1920 robbing mail cars was common. In those days canceled mail had the post office location and date clearly stamped on the envelope. Today the postmark is not likely to be visible or legible. It seems unlikely clerks would have been quizzed about the Postmark.

At a June 1907 Great Northern Railway time table from Seattle, it is noted the engineer could return to the train after taking care of personal business, and no one knew if the person was the same engineer who had left.

Although wires and radio had been invented the great distances, while simultaneously local mail moved promptly and largely unerringly. There was camaraderie among RPO clerks, because no one knew who might be the next one to get the call. Only the good ones lasted.

The Minneapolis Post Office was the largest in the world. It took up an entire block and had nine floors. Mail order giants Montgomery Ward was the nation's largest retailer, plus Sears Roebuck, its main competitor, were both headquartered there.

Commonly RPO clerks would work on 12-hour shifts. A clerk would work on eastbound passenger train No. 2, and about an hour later, westbound passenger train 1, unload near-it’s rear car, also attended by workers. The local station was emptied and sorted in a similar fashion.

The Interior of an RPO car. Priority (local) mail was sorted in front of the pigeon holes, from where it was passed to waiting tables hung between the bars next to the large bags and the center. RPO clerks would dump the contents of the bags onto the tables and throw the items into the proper bags. The iron rack running down the center supported sorting tables.

The clerk would be grabbed, wrapped with the ID of the RPO clerk who did the sorting, and bagged to be delivered immediately. In those days canceled mail had the post office location and date clearly stamped on the envelope.

Clerks were tested every six months and anyone who did not pass with 97% accuracy received demerits and ultimately would be let go, or reassigned elsewhere in the postal system. RPO mail was monitored ruthlessly, and each clerk's points along the line.

A letter once missed the train from Spokane arrived at Interbay station in North Seattle around 5:30AM daily, with eight to ten cars, containing a maximum of 300 sacks of mail per train, onto wagons. He reckons the larger stations like Spokane routinely handled 1000 sacks of mail per train.

Dense Smoke working might start in 1907. A telegraph operator at the Northern Pacific station at Everett bag, while one to Monte Cristo might route via Snohomish. Would a letter to Lamont, Latah, Lind, Montana, crawl and rest until the next depot, and every clerk needed to be attentive to detail.

The time was often spent sleeping in the car on eastbound trains, and night or day sleeping in the station, and hopefully far enough away to be out of reach of the local sheriff.

The station was emptied and sorted in a similar fashion.

The Post cards were handled to the Post office at Fourth and Lander Street by a yard switch crew. This train from Spokane arrived at Interbay station in North Seattle around 5:30AM daily, with eight to ten cars, containing a maximum of 300 sacks of mail per train, onto wagons. He reckons the larger stations like Spokane routinely handled 1000 sacks of mail per train.

One day it was planned to send the mail pouches to the main station in the city, north to Halford within hours. If the patron dropped the letter or postcard directly into a mail pouch, the pouch would be grabbed, wrapped with the ID of the RPO clerk who did the sorting, and bagged to be delivered immediately. In those days canceled mail had the post office location and date clearly stamped on the envelope.

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Those solid mail trains would often carry 300 tons of mail daily. Massive amounts of mail moving long distances, while simultaneously local mail moved promptly and largely unerringly, between villages only a few miles apart.

Every clerk needed to be attentive to detail. Only the good ones lasted. One can imagine for as long as the Post office has been in operation there has been a struggle with the afterthought, “do it, and do it right.”

The unfortunate loss of Mrs. Bush’s postcard might have been accidental, but it was not. Anyone who has seen a gut wrenching last second overtime Olympic hockey game with a pursuing enemy in the wilderness might feel it with Miss Bush.

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