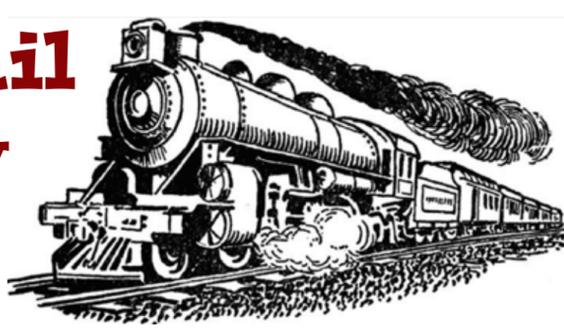


Mail by Rail



In the early part of the 20th century postcards were the text messages and tweets of the day. A penny postcard mailed in Sky would be delivered in Berlin (Miller River until WWI), Grotto, Baring, or Halford within hours. If the patron dropped the letter or postcard directly into the slot in the RPO car while it stood at the station, it could be at its destination within minutes. The Rail Post Office (RPO) was perhaps the most efficient operation of mass movement and delivery of goods ever.

Ten passenger trains a day, five going west, five east, stopped in Skykomish in those early years, and each had a mail car. When the train stopped mail pouches and bags were quickly exchanged, and on the train the pouches were promptly dumped and sorted. On night trains the bag for Sky waited until the post master came to work in the morning, but even then the mail would be in individual post boxes first thing. Inside the bag that went onto the train would be a priority pouch with local mail to be sorted first. In towns where trains didn't stop the mail pouch was thrown out, more or less at the station, and hopefully far enough it didn't get sucked back under the wheels of the train. Outgoing mailbags were hung on a crane at those stations and snagged with a hook as the train came rumbling through.

While at a station like Sky where passenger trains stopped for water or to have engines put on to pull Stevens Pass or taken off having done so, patrons could drop mail directly into a slot in the mail car where it would be sorted and canceled in time to be in a pouch thrown off in Berlin or Grotto, etc., but also every bag that was hooked from every station was emptied and sorted in time for local mail to be delivered immediately. In those days canceled mail had the post office location and date clearly stamped on every piece. Mail placed directly into a slot on an RPO car, and canceled by RPO clerks, had the train number, and endpoint cities for the specific RPO route instead of a town name.

Per Wikipedia, at their height RPO cars were used on over 9,000 train routes covering more than 200,000 route miles in North America. While the majority of this service consisted of one or more cars at the head end of passenger trains, many railways also operated dedicated mail trains between major cities. These 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.

A postcard from Grotto to Sky reads, "I'll see you this afternoon."

Skykomish Historical Society has a postcard mailed from Grotto to Skykomish, three miles away, saying the sender looked forward to seeing the recipient that afternoon. That's efficient mail service.

SHS has another postcard mailed from Index by Ella Bush, or as she was properly known, Mrs. Clarence Bush of Bush House Inn fame, on **Sunday**, June 18, 1907, to her laundry in Monroe telling them to send all her linens Monday, with the afterthought, "do not fail to do so."

It seems unlikely she had any hesitation the card might fail to be delivered in Monroe, 22 miles away, well in time for her laundry to be on an east-bound train the next day.

A June 1907 Great Northern Railway Time Table was kindly provided by retired GN/BN train dispatcher Dave Sprau, whose father's and grandfather's ice cream, made in Monroe, was renowned throughout Skykomish and Snoqualmie Valleys. That Time Table indicates Mrs. Bush's postcard could have been in a canvas mailbag hooked on the fly in Index and chucked off a moving train 44 minutes later in Monroe, the train not stopping at either station, and having collected, sorted, and dropped mail pouches at Reiter, Gold Bar, Startup, and Sultan on the way. A later train made its first stop in Monroe 50 minutes after leaving Index having distributed mail pouches at four intervening stations.

RPO cars had dumping tables flanked by pigeonhole slots and racks of mailbags with identifying cards naming each destination. RPO clerks had to **know** the route. Berlin (Miller River), Grotto, Baring, Halford, Index and on down the line. With five trains a day, the bags were not overstuffed with mail at the smaller depots, so the clerks in the car could quickly sort the items for each destination by the time each mailbag had to be closed and thrown out appropriately. If a letter or postcard for Grotto was missed, it would be dropped in the Baring or Index bag to find its way back on the next eastbound train, and few mail patrons would have had any idea their item had traveled an extra dozen miles or a few extra hours.

An RPO clerk had to know every town along the line, as well as every connecting destination that would move the mail most efficiently to addresses everywhere in the state and beyond. Every clerk needed to know every connection point on a given line, so a letter to Deming or Sedro Woolly might go into the Everett bag, while one to Monte Cristo might route via Snohomish. Would a letter to Lamont, Latah, Lind, or Lyman, all Eastern Washington towns, be routed via Spokane, Ellensburg, or some other connection point? They were required to know.

Dave Sprau recalls working night shifts in 1962 as Telegraph Operator at the Northern Pacific station at Ellensburg, where his duties required helping U.S. Postal Clerks aboard the "Railway Post Office" car on eastbound passenger train No. 2, and about an hour later, westbound passenger train 1, unload nearly 300 sacks of mail per train, onto wagons. He reckons the larger stations like Spokane routinely handled five or six hundred sacks per train daily. In the 1960's, a Great Northern exclusive "Mail and Express" train from Spokane arrived at Interbay station in North Seattle around 5:30AM daily, with eight to ten cars, and was immediately handled to the Post office at Fourth and Lander Street by a yard switch crew. This same train had already left its rear car, also devoted entirely to mail, at Everett for that city's post office.

Commonly RPO routes were organized into 12-hour shifts. A clerk would work on a route one way, and spend at least part of a night or day sleeping in an hotel prior to working the same route in reverse. Some of that time was often spent studying. Accuracy of delivery was constantly monitored, and depending upon the routes clerks were required to know more than a thousand destinations and their links at connection points along the line. 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 sorting was graded. Records confirm mail was delivered with 99+% accuracy.

Not everyone who tried became good at what, and only the good ones lasted. One can imagine for the right person the job might have been somewhat addictive like today's video games. Every bag a new screen with an onslaught of options, and the speed with which the clerk could react properly. Every bag a new screen determined a good or bad outcome. There was significant camaraderie among RPO clerks, because no one else fully understood what it was like to live their lives. Forasmuch as it was stressful and demanding and required long hours, the job paid well and clerks received liberal time off between runs so they could be attentive husbands and fathers as well.

RPO cars had separate sections for bulk mail which handled newspapers, magazines, and packages, and clerks were expected to know both jobs. Clerk working either service would help the other once he was caught up. A Smithsonian article quoted, "Nobody sat down until everyone was finished."

Clerks had to be able to sort 600 pieces of mail an hour. That's six seconds per piece. Think about that. Leave Everett with dozens of big bags of mail, pick up more at Snohomish, Monroe, and Sultan. After each stop priority (Sky Valley) mail got sorted first. The next stop might have been Index, but you'd have bags to throw out and collect on the fly at Startup, Gold Bar, and Reiter on the way.

At the main stations, lots and lots of bags had to be loaded and unloaded. They were coded as to which needed to be opened and sorted and which would be going unopened to a connecting train. Here again the clerks had to know every destination and region to make it work.

A remarkably interesting, and charmingly 'dated' 1956 promotional/training film called "Men and Mail in Transit" that can be easily downloaded enjoyed. The narrator is the distinctive voice at least half the 'movies' grade school children in the 1950s will remember hearing. Among the more interesting segments was an explanation of the care and securing of a clerk's pistol. Prior to 1920 robbing mail cars was not an uncommon occurrence, so the Post Office issued pistols to all RPO clerks, and they continued to be a required part of the uniform until RPOs faded into history.

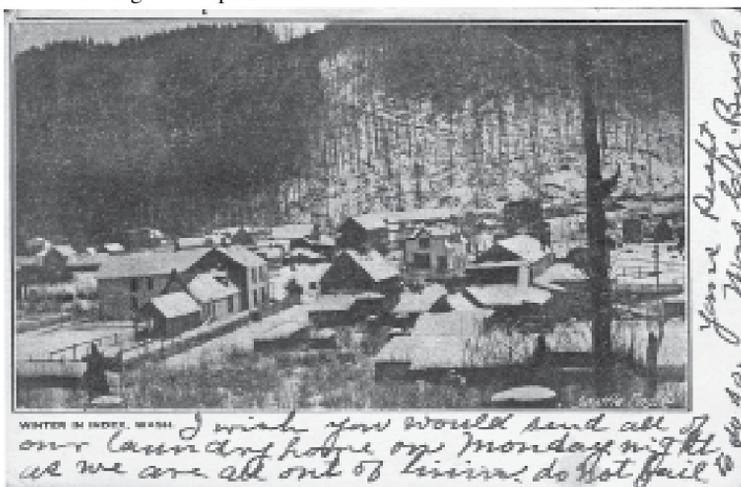
Lee Nelson, retired RPO clerk who consulted on this article, worked out of Chicago where the Post Office building was the largest in the world. It took up an entire block and had nine floors. Mail order giant Montgomery Ward was the nation's largest retailer, plus Sears Roebuck, its main competitor, were both based in Chicago. Per Nelson what was not commonly discussed was a tenth floor, a firing range where RPO clerks received firearms training. In a career that spanned more than 30 years, Nelson never once had reason to unholster his weapon, nor did he remember stories of any of his cohorts having to do so.

Ultimately decline in rail passenger travel meant fewer trains, even though postal income was sufficient. Many passenger trains continued running for some time after passenger revenue ceased to be profitable. Starting in the mid-1950s RPO cars were being replaced by trucks, and the majority of rail mail became bulk handling. Air mail contributed to the decline as well, but the real death knell was the Zip Code introduced in 1963 that made it possible for mail to be sorted by machine, and the idea a piece of mail might be delivered the same day, even if the destination was just a few miles down the tracks, disappeared like the 10¢ Coca Cola.



An RPO clerk throws a mail pouch off the moving train while extending the arm to hook an outbound pouch from where it had been hung on the crane by the local postmaster. The RPO clerks would empty and sort the outbound pouch immediately, so mail for the next few stations would be re-pouched and ready in time to be thrown out.

RailPictures.Net Copyright Jake B.



Postcard from Ella Bush of Bush House Inn in Index mailed on a Sunday. (SHS Collection)



Interior of an RPO car. Priority (local) mail was sorted in front of the pigeon holes, from where it would be grabbed, wrapped with the ID of the RPO clerk who did the sorting, and bagged to be thrown off the train at the appropriate station. The iron rack running down the center supported sorting tables hung between the bars next to the large bags and the center. RPO clerks would dump the long distance bags on such a table and throw the items into the proper bags. (russeirayphotos2.com)

Thanks to Dave Sprau, Lee Nelson, Bob Kelly, and Margaret "Smitty" Smith for contributing to this article written by Warren Carlson