

## Moving the Mail by Rail

By Bob Lamb

US mail first showed up on trains in 1832 – but growth was slow until after the Civil War.

In 1869, the Railway Mail Service was officially inaugurated, headed by George B. Armstrong, to handle the transportation and sorting of mail aboard trains. Use of full-service Railway Post Office (RPO) cars became widespread by the 1880s, when RPO routes were operating on most passenger trains in the United States.



Passenger trains did not stop at every station along the route. To pick up the mail pouch from a smaller town non-stop station, a Ward mail-bag catcher, which used a steel catcher arm affixed to the door of railway post office cars, was used by clerks to extend the catcher arm as the train approached a non-stop station along the route and pick up mail from a fixed crane on the fly. The mail pouch for that station would be tossed out where the station agent or a postal worker would promptly retrieve it.

A fast and exclusive mail train was introduced in September 1875, consisting of five cars, designed to expedite the movement of mail from the east to the west between New York and Chicago. Traveling on the New York Central and the Pennsylvania railroads, the first train carried more than 33 tons of mail in about 24 hours.

While the majority of RPO service consisted of one or more cars at the head end of passenger trains, many railroads operated solid mail trains between major cities; these solid mail trains would often carry 300 tons of mail daily. The fast mail train would have precedence over all other scheduled trains on the line. The first transcontinental Fast Mail to the Pacific ran in 1889.

Railway Mail Clerks were subjected to stringent training and ongoing testing of details regarding their handling of the mail. On a given RPO route, each clerk was expected to know not only the post offices and rail

junctions along the route, but also specific local delivery details within each of the larger cities served by the route. On busier routes several railway mail clerks would work as a team in each car.

The Postmaster General's 1896 annual report for the Railway Mail Service indicates that the mails were carried on 172,794 miles of railroad, and 6,779 postal clerks were employed on 152,825 miles of traveling post offices that included railroads, steamboats, and electric cars. Casualty figures for the years 1877 to 1896 showed that 94 clerks were killed in the line of duty, and 821 were seriously injured on the job through derailments, falls, drownings, fires, other work-related accidents, and train robberies.



In 1912 the Post Office Department's established standards for the construction of railway postal cars. Three basic car or compartment lengths were agreed upon, 15-foot and 30-foot compartments, and full length 60-foot cars: with standard features including letter cases, pouch and paper racks, and overhead boxes. The pouch and paper racks were in five-foot sections; each section could be folded up against the side of the car when not in use. Standardization made cars interchangeable so they might be used on any trip assignment. All 60-foot RPO cars built after 1912 were of all-steel construction.

The inside of RPO cars included letter cases for sorting first class mail, pouch and paper racks for sorting magazines and newspapers, and storage space at each end. Mail was sorted for distribution to cities along the route, was cancelled when necessary, and dispatched to post offices in towns along the route. Registered mail was also handled, and the foreman in charge was required to carry a regulation pistol while on duty to discourage theft of the mail.

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On most railroads, RPO cars had a mail slot on the side of the car, so that mail could be deposited in the car, much like using the corner mailbox, while the train was stopped at a station. The mail handled in this manner received a cancellation just as if it had been mailed at a local post office, with the cancel giving the train number, endpoint cities of the RPO route and the date, and offered the fastest delivery as overnight delivery would be virtually assured.

In 1930, more than 10,000 trains were used to move the mail into every city, town, and village in the United States. Shortly after W.W.II, there were 1500 RPO routes crisscrossing the United States with 30,000 workers in more than 4,000 cars.



The decline in passenger travel during the 1930's and 1940's led the railroads to reduce the number of trains, which also affected the number of RPO routes. In February 1941, the first Highway Post Office began service between Washington & Harrisonburg, Va. in a large bus that was equipped somewhat like a RPO car. In 1949, the Post Office Department renamed the Railway Mail Service to the Postal Transportation Service, or PTS. In 1951 there were 700 RPO routes in service, less than half the number of routes than at the end of W.W.II. More than 130 HPO routes were established by 1955.

In 1963, the Sectional Center concept of transit mail service was announced, along with ZIP coding of mail. With this new system the first three digits of the ZIP code describe the central mail processing Sectional Center Facility, or SCF. The SCF sorts mail to all post offices with those first 3 digits in their ZIP codes. Mail is then sorted according to the final 2 digits of the ZIP code and the sorted mail is sent to these post offices in the early morning. As centralized processing of mail was implemented, there was little need for the RPO Cars and

HPO bus. Long distance truck transportation was replacing RPO routes and first-class mail began to be transported in airplanes. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail.

When the Parcel Post Act became effective January 1, 1913, the Railway Mail Service initiated a new class of service that handled and transported packages. The act increased the weight limit for a single package, reduced postage rates, and adapted a zone system with charges based on the length of the haul. The growth and increase sparked by parcel post business forced the Railway Mail Service to initiate Terminal Post Offices, which were essentially large rooms located in railroad stations in which mail, particularly parcel post and heavy bulk matter was distributed. Eventually, the service moved parcel post mail between large commercial cities in carloads via passenger trains.

The years between 1920 and 1946 for the Railway Mail Service were characterized by steady measured growth that manifested itself in increases in the number of employees, growth of infrastructure, and slow but sustained efforts to improve working conditions. From July 1, 1920, to June 30, 1946, the number of railway mail clerks rose from 20,407 to 22,546, and their salaries increased from \$2,067 a year to \$3,550.

For the postmaster general and management, these years were a period of transition in which autocratic approaches toward supervising and working with people slowly changed. Confronted with adjusting to the aftermath of World War I, the Great Depression, the onset of unionism, and the tremendous demands of World War II, postal management eventually realized that their greatest strength was embodied in the average postal employee, who wanted a more involved and participatory role in improving the workplace and the lot of the employee.

During the 1920–1946 period, the Railway Mail Service adapted to increasing demands upon it by implementing several improvements. The service added RPO trains to handle the distribution of letter mail to cities, resulting in earlier delivery to customers. The placement of star route service (mail delivery routes between postal stations, given on contract to a private carrier) under the supervision of the Railway Mail Service resulted in saving money and improving service.

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/fall/fast-mail-2.html>

<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/fall/fast-mail-1.html>

<http://www.railswest.com/rpo.html>