RETIRING PO WORKER RECALLS

OLDEN DAYS OF CATCHER POUCH

It is perhaps fitting that OLIVER P. KIRK, assistant postmaster at the Little Rock Post Office, chose to retire just two months after the last railway post office was removed from trains operating in Arkansas.

For 30 of his 39½ years with the Post Office Department, Kirk was either a clerk on a railway post office or supervised their operations in Arkansas. Kirk, 61, retired last week.

A railway post office is a railroad car with pouches and cubbyholes in which clerks sort mail while the train moves. RPOs on major runs occupied the full 60-foot length of the car and those on smaller runs occupied half the car. [***RPO = railway post office***]

Kirk, who got his start in the postal service as a substitute RPO clerk November 23, 1928, remembers when railway post offices were operating on 25 routes in Arkansas with as many as four RPOs traveling the same route in each direction.

There were the long routes like Little Rock, Arkansas, to Fort Worth, Texas; St. Louis, Missouri, to Little Rock, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee, to McAlester, Oklahoma; Kansas City, Kansas, to Memphis, Arkansas; and Monett, Missouri to Paris, Texas.

And the shorter ones, such as: Noble to Marianna; Helena to Clarendon; Newport to Brinkley; Gurdon to Natchez, Mississippi; Fayetteville to Pettigrew; McGehee to Ferriday, Louisiana; Hope to Ardmore, Oklahoma; Blytheville to Jonesboro; and Little Rock to Pine Bluff.

Kirk worked on various RPO-runs for six years as a substitute clerk, and then landed a regular clerk's job on the Little Rock to Claremore, Oklahoma, RPO, which traveled on the Missouri Pacific line north of the Arkansas River. He was on that run 14 years.

SOME TOWNS HAD CATCHERS

The train stopped in some towns—Conway, Morrilton, Russellville, Clarksville, Ozark, Fort Smith—but also picked up and dropped off mail at 21 "catcher stations" without stopping. The outgoing mail pouch would be suspended near the track and a clerk would catch it off a V-shaped metal arm as the train whizzed by. At the same time the clerk would throw off a pouch.

The first catcher station on that run was Levy in North Little Rock. The others were Marche, Mayflower, Menifee, Plumerville, Blackwell, Atkins, Pottsville, London, Knoxville, Lamar, Piney, Hartman, Mulberry, Dyer, Alma, and five points in Oklahoma. [***Editor's note: above photo added by Thomas Lancaster***.]

Kirk worked in a half-size RPO car staffed by two or three clerks. As they sorted letters they also kept track of landmarks and sounds so they would know when the train was approaching a catcher point.

"We knew every bend in the road, every farmhouse, every bridge," Kirk said, "The engineer also gave what we call a "catcher whistle"—one long and a two short blast but lots of times we couldn't hear it.

DEMERITS ASSESSED FOR MISSING POUCH

A clerk received five demerits in those days for missing a catcher pouch. Five demerits were given for putting off a pouch at the wrong station or misrouting a piece of registered mail. If a clerk accumulated 125 demerits in a year, he was a candidate for dismissal, Kirk said.

The railway post offices began disappearing after World War II as passenger trains were discontinued, although one or two short runs went out during the 1930s. Truck routes, called "Star routes," replaced the RPOs.

"We really started trucking mail when the Missouri and North Arkansas railroads ceased operations in 1946," Kirk said. That eliminated the railway post office from Kensett to Neosho, Missouri, through Clinton, Marshall, Harrison, Berryville, and Green Forest.

In the last two years the Post Office Department have been removing railway post offices even where passenger trains have continued to operate. Eight traveling through Little Rock were removed last October and the last in the state to go was an RPO car on the Kansas City Southern Route from Kansas City to Texarkana. Commercial airlines carry much of the mail that was transported on RPO cars.

After leaving the Little Rock-Claremore RPO in 1948, Kirk transferred to the District transportation manager's office at Little Rock where he supervised Railway post offices operating out of Little Rock. He become manager of the Little Rock mail terminal at the Missouri Pacific Depot in 1958 and was promoted to assistant Superintendent of the mails at the Post Office in 1961, superintendent of the mails in 1963, and assistant superintendent in December 1965.

SOME MAIL SERVICE FACTS

1639—Fairbanks Tavern named as repository for oversea mail

1775—Benjamin Franklin first Postmaster General under Continental Congress.

1823—Navigable waters designated as Post Roads by Congress

1825—Dead letter offices

1838—Railroads designated as "Post Routes" by Congress

1845—Star Routes

1847—Postage stamps authorized

1852—Stamped envelopes. Up to date the receivers of letter paid postage

1855—Registered mail

1855—Compulsory prepayment of postage

1860—The Pony Express

1863—Uniform letter rate regardless of distance

1864—Railroad Post Offices

1864—Domestic Money Orders

1872—Post Cards authorized

1885—Special Delivery

1893—First commemorative stamp

1896—Rural Free Delivery

1898—Picture Post Cards

1902—Rural Free Delivery—permanent

1911—First sanctioned mail by airplane

1913—Postal Post

1918—Airmail

1942—V-Mail

1953—Piggy-Back mail service by trailers or railroad flat cars

1955—Certified mail

1963—Zip Code program

1977—Railroad post offices final run on June 30

1979—New envelopes standards; letters smaller than 3½ high and 5" unacceptable

1983—Zip plus 4

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