Pan Handle Mail Train in 1891

From that time, in the first half of the 19th century, when a viable railroad network started to form until the 1960's, mail moved by train. Early on the post office decided that the time the mail was on a train would be the best time to sort the mail thus greatly speeding up its eventual delivery. That sorting was performed by postal clerks that were incredibly skilled in their job. First they had to memorize thousands of destinations, sometimes down to individual carrier routes and second be able to throw mail into those sorting bins rapidly with reliable accuracy. They did this while standing in a moving postal car for 10-16 hours at a time.

In 1891 a Columbus Dispatch reporter rode a Pan Handle (PRR) mail train from Columbus, Ohio to Richmond, Indiana. Here is his report written 116 years ago.

The Limited Mail

Scenes in a Train of Modern Postal Cars

Interesting Trip of a Dispatch Reporter and Artist Over the Pan Handle.

How the Merry Clerks Make the Mail Fly – The Route of a Letter – Tons and Tons of Matter – The Remuneration.

Among all the various kinds of vocations in this day there is not one of which the public knows as little concerning the work, both mental and physical, necessary in its pursuance as that of the railway mail service. In every other business, professional or trade, the citizen of average intelligence knows something of its requirements, if not all the features of the nature.

There may be several reasons given for this fact, chief among which, doubtless is that the mail service, because it belongs to and is operated by the Government, is jealously and most carefully guarded. The real work of those engaged in it is done away from the curious eyes of the public, and the latter has not the opportunity of learning the features of it, and therefore cannot appreciate what a wonderful business it is.

The mail service is complicated yet simple. It is complicated because it embraces thousands and thousands of post offices and hundreds and hundreds of railroads, besides a host of points called “dis,” where mail is distributed as it is done on the cars. It is simple because the work of supplying mail matter to all the post offices has been reduced to a plain, unencumbered and effective system.

The United States mail service has been progressive, and it is authoritatively said to be in better condition now than ever before.

The country is divided into eleven divisions, numbered from the east, for the purpose of operating the means of carrying the mails. This part of the business is the

railway mail service. All these divisions are under the general charge of a general superintendent, who at present is Hon. James E. White, whose headquarters are at Washington, D.C.

Columbus is in the fifth division, comprising Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee, the headquarters of which are at Cincinnati. Each division is in charge of a division superintendent, whose entire time is occupied in caring for, improving and correcting all the routes and distributions under him, besides determining the efficiency of his men.

Hon. A. Burt is the Superintendent of this division, one of the most efficient men in the service, and a perfect gentleman. It was through his kindness that on last Sunday a Dispatch reporter, with the paper's artist, took a trip over the Pan Handle Railroad on a limited mail train, for the purpose of seeing how "the thing is done."

One is not allowed to enter or ride in a mail car without a specially prepared permit issued by the Superintendent.

The day chosen was a beautiful one, and the reporter's spirits were in perfect harmony with the bright sunshine and bracing atmosphere, as he was eager to see and learn how his male friends would receive the precious missives that are always written on the Sabbath day.

In Columbus there is an official known as Chief Clerk, who has charge of the distribution here and the routes out of the city, together with the examinations of clerks in these routes. Mr. Thomas Bradford, better known as "Tommy," holds that position here. He has been in the service twenty-seven years and is one of the best-known and most popular individuals in the business. He took a deep interest in the proposed Dispatch trip, and though unable to act as chaperon himself, he delegated an excellent one in the person of Mr. C.C. Clarke, superintendent of mails in the Columbus post office.

It was decided that the trio take the No. 7 limited mail to Richmond, which passes through this city at 1:45 P.M. Accordingly at the appointed time, armed with the necessary permits, the two newspaper men, Mr. Clarke and Mr. James Blair, a veteran clerk, who was largely instrumental in giving the Dispatch the benefit of the excursion, were at the Union Depot waiting for the train to arrive.

It was announced that the train was late, and the next half hour was spent in smoking and enjoying the acquaintance of Mr. E. W. Poole, the transfer clerk in the depot.

The time passed rapidly and it seemed scarcely any time until the puff, puff, puff, puff of the limited mail announced its arrival. Several big trucks stacked high with mail were "hustled" out to the train. While the clerks merrily threw the sacks into the various cars, the trio of visitors boarded the forward car and announced to the startled inmates that they had come on to "bore" them as far as Richmond.

All right, we're glad to have you," cheerily rejoined the clerks, who, by-the-way, are as jolly a set of fellows as have the convenience of existing on the surface of the earth.

We were first presented to the clerk in charge of the cars, Mr. T.D. Armstrong, who was busy in the forward end of the first car. We presented our permits to him and then began to gaze about, and "sorter come to," for the purpose of determining our exact location in apparently a wilderness of sacks, bags, boxes, and bustling individuals.

The Train

This outfit had begun its journey at Pittsburgh, where it had received several tons of mail, which the men had been "working" ever since. The train, which consists of mail cars alone, when it left Pittsburgh, was made of up an engine and [missing text], a paper car, the third a storage car and the rear car a paper car.

Conductor W.C. Fitzpatrick had charge of the train, with D.J. Moore as brakeman, while engine No. 454 manned by James Stoltz, engineer and James O'Donnell fireman, fairly skimmed us over the ground.

The mail was in charge, as above stated of Mr. T.D. Armstrong, who had with him eight clerks as follows: Mr. J.E. Barrett, second clerk, who handles Texas and Illinois letters; Messrs. G.W. Christie and J.M. Robinson, local men; J.E. Tingle, Kansas and Arkansas letters; Messrs. E.P. Ratchelder, E.H. Adams and F.W. Wilson, Kansas and Arkansas papers; and Mr. H.R. Whitaker, Texas and Illinois papers. These men run from Pittsburgh to St. Louis, without resting making the run in little more than 17 hours, and this with work prior to starting, and after reaching their destination makes a day's work of 19 hours.

Jolly Clerks at Work

When the train pulled out from the union depot it was just 2:30 P.M., and we were exactly forty-five minutes behind time. Ordinarily Columbus gives the boys about three tons of mail, which must be properly distributed as quickly as possible. On this particular day, it being Sunday, the mail was not quite so heavy, and the crew was in unusually merry spirits. They shook hands cordially with the visitors, but lost no time in getting at their work. It was hurry and scurry and hustle; unlocking sacks and pouches, dumping out the mail on tables, and throwing it to routes, "dis" [distributions], and post offices with unerring precision, and with so great rapidity that it makes an ordinary sober and medium slow individual quite dizzy.

It was a sight wonderful and astonishing to watch those men making the mail fairly fly into the various pouches or sacks before them, singing or whistling the strains of a favorite tune between jumps. This is the physical part of the work, and one asks the question, how can these men stand such violent labor for nineteen consecutive hours? They seem to do it, though, and look well and strong.

They were apparently extricating themselves from a regular cave-in of a mail bank, and they were doing it right nobly. An examination of the sacks, and a steady watch of the letter, papers and parcels is sufficient to very soon overwhelm the spectator with the realization of the great mental strain the work must be. Every fellow must have on the tip of his tongue from 8,000 – 12,000 post offices, "dis" [distributions] and routes. The instant he sees the address of a letter or other matter

he must know what to do with it. There is no time to think. The clerk must act instantly, as well as accurately.

The Letter Car

As soon as we got well under way and were speeding over the steel at the rate of more than forty miles an hour, Messrs. Clarke and Armstrong began the task of explaining what we had begun to feast our eyes on with remarkable relish, the artist meanwhile transferring the scenes as far as possible to a pad it was convenient for him to have.

We were in the letter car, a splendid structure about sixty feet long and nine feet wide. It was comfortable heated by steam from the engine, which was conveyed through pipes along the side near the floor, and which were within a screen that protected the pouches and sacks. The car was furnished with all necessary conveniences, washstand, mirror, etc. Every inch of space is occupied and in use. The men of course stand at their work, and do not need chairs, which are not a part of the furniture. The only time the clerks have to sit down is after they are through with their work and then to stretch out on a few mail sacks is very much more comfortable than to sit in a chair.

In the front end of the letter car was a large semi-circular letter case, which extended across the car; that end of which possessed no exit. This case comprises a very large number of boxes, each one of which bears a label, indicating a post office, or route, or "dis." A post office that receives sufficient mail to make a separation for that office alone has a box into which all mail for that place is thrown, tied up in a package and thrown into a pouch, which will take it by the quickest route to its destination. A letter or any bit of mail takes the shortest cut from its starting point to its destination, and it very frequently happens that a person can send a letter to a certain place in good deal quicker time than he can go himself. A letter is kept moving, and the connections are so arranged and the routes so systematically laid out that it is wonderful how fast a letter can travel.

The pouches for the letters are hung in a rack along the side, the track accommodating thirty-six pouches at one time.

In this car was handled all mail bound for Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Indian Territory and California, besides all the local mail, i.e., mail for stations along the route from Pittsburgh to St. Louis. When a pouch or sack (papers for the states above named are handled in this car also) is taken on, or rather at Columbus a great number of sacks is taken on, they are examined to see where they are named to go. Several pouches may be labeled for Missouri; they are taken in charge by Mr. Armstrong, the clerk in charge, who handles the Missouri mail himself. After emptying it out on the table in front of the case he begins the work of separation. A city like St. Louis and even a number of smaller cities has a box of its own; other towns which do not get mail enough out of this train to justify boxes of their own, belong to certain routes, and the mail for them is tied in packages and labeled to the route to which it belongs. A "dis" is a distribution point, where the mail is turned into a large office, which takes it and properly routes it.

The reporter's attention was called to a bag in the car being opened. The one sack had been put off and the other caught and opened before we realized it, and without our knowing just how it was done. Asked whether they ever failed to make the catch the clerk replies; "Yes, we do, but not often; but when we do the bag's a goner." It would be sure to get under the wheels and be destroyed. A similar catch was made at New Paris, and we soon whistled for Richmond.

Then the farewells began to be taken. The newspapermen were loath to leave the merry mail clerks, for in that short time they had learned to like and admire them for their skill and intelligence.

When the train pulled into Richmond it was only fifteen minutes late; but it was discovered that one of the cars had a hot box. This delayed it somewhat longer. With a hearty handshake all around, and a "come and see us again," the newspapermen and their chaperon left the train.

It was the intention to return on No. 20, which came to Columbus by another route, passing through Dayton, Xenia and London, but that train had just left. Several hours remained until time for No.8 and the travelers proceeded to get a good supper. That over a pleasant chat with Mr. Thomas Vance, the transfer clerk at Richmond, and a veteran in the service, was enjoyed.

At 7:40 o'clock No. 8 arrived bound for Columbus. This was a passenger train with but one mail car. The wandering trio lost no time in getting into the latter. There they met and made themselves known to Mr. N.H. Tanner, the clerk, and Mr. J.N. McCune, his assistant, two most excellent gentlemen, who at once threw open the hospitality of their domain, and very soon we were scurrying back towards home nearly as fast as we left.

Sunday night is a very light run, and on this occasion seemed unusually so. Messrs. Tanner and McCune soon finished their work and they proceeded to entertain their guests royally.

The time was spent in telling stories and experiences, both amusing and sad, relating to life in a mail car.

Columbus was reached about midnight and the trio parted each to his own home to retire and reflect.

The Reflections

It was a wonderful trip. The railway mail service is a most remarkable system that can only be appreciated by seeing it in operation. How those clerks work! They crowd two or three days' work into one. No rest for them for nineteen hours, spent not in ordinary work, but violent exercise made still worse by the rapidly moving train, handling tons and tons of mail and keeping in memory thousands and thousands of post offices, routes and destinations.

This crew is on duty three days and off five. These five are not for rest but for study. The time is put in faithfully studying new routes and change, and keeping well up on the names and locations of the hosts of post offices in the various states worked. Every now and then the clerk is called before the chief clerk without

warning and subjected to an examination as to his knowledge of post offices, etc. Upon this he is graded and his efficiency and standing determined.

The salaries of railway mail clerks are from $800 to $1,300 per year. The clerk in charge receives $1,300 per year, the second clerk $1,100, and the others $800, $900 or $1000, according to time of service and proficiency. One cannot but think that these men are overworked; that the nature of their business makes it deserve more pay and less time on duty. It is generally conceded that they ought to be paid better, and not long ago the clerks, encouraged by those acquainted with their duties, began a concerted action for an increase in salary. The boys are organized and will make a very strong appeal to the present Congress. They feel that they have been dealt with unfairly. Their work is probably the hardest both mentally and physically of any under the Government, yet these men are now laboring for virtually the same salary that they were paid in 1872, nineteen years ago, while the amount of work, the mental portion at least, has increased. Moreover the salaries of those employed in other departments of the Government have been properly increased.

It is suggested that Congressmen seize the first opportunity and take a trip on a limited mail train, and learn thereby to appreciate the greatest system in the world, what it requires of those operating it, and it is thought the much-desired end will be reached.

- The Columbus Dispatch, Thursday, December 24, 1891