

# *The Mail is Coming!*

100 Years of the Railway Post Office  
in Minnesota

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DAVID A. THOMPSON

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**I**'VE ALWAYS LOVED fast passenger trains. I can remember the excitement of 60 years ago, as an eight-year-old boy, standing on the Omaha station platform in Duluth as the morning train from Chicago pulled in amidst swirling locomotive smoke and steam. In the doorway of the *Duluth & Altoona Railway Post Office* railway mail car was my dad, waving at me. He wore a railroader's cap and overalls and a gun at his hip, to guard the mail. I remember looking at the clerks in that car and thinking: "These guys really know how to live a life of adventure on the rails."

Several generations of Minnesotans know nothing of the excitement of seeing a train, with its railway mail car, coming over the horizon, bearing passengers and the morning mail. Few today remember the sights and sounds of a steam engine, belching smoke and steam, screeching to a halt in the center of town. It was the high point of the day for many Minnesotans as the mail train came to town, bringing news and letters from far-away places.

Configured like a post office to receive, sort, and dispatch mail, railway mail cars ran as part of passenger trains on specific routes that were the responsibility of the Railway Post Office (RPO). Named for the route from point of origin to destination (for example, Duluth to Altoona, Wisconsin), they served all towns and post offices on the railroad right-of-way in between.<sup>1</sup>

Little did I realize how important the Railway Post Office was in connecting Minnesotans to the rest of the world. For 100 years (1871–1971), before the internet and social media,

Railway Post Offices were the primary way that Americans communicated via letters, learned what was going on in the country via newspapers and magazines, ordered and received goods, received money, and paid bills. RPOs also supported commerce, carrying cash to banks and businesses across the nation.

Railway Post Office history started with the desire to speed mail delivery. On July 7, 1838, Congress declared all railroads to be post roads and enabled the railways to make contracts as long as sending mail by rail cost no more than 25 percent above transporting it by stagecoach.<sup>2</sup> Before that, the mails had traveled designated post routes on horse-drawn wagons, stages, and riverboats.

proposed a more comprehensive system of en-route mail distribution, "putting the Post Office on wheels." He approached officials of the Chicago & North Western Railroad who, according to an ad published years later, "saw its possibilities . . . on August 28th, a rebuilt baggage car made the initial 'post office' run between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa."<sup>4</sup> This was the birth of the RPO, which not only carried mail from point to point along a route, as the DPO and its route agents did, but soon sorted and bagged letters going in different directions, to be forwarded on connecting trains to its final destination. Railway Post Offices were just like regular U.S. post offices, and RPO clerks were federal employees of the Railway

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Trains soon began carrying mail and, by 1840, U.S. postal clerks were assigned by Distributing Post Offices (DPOs, part of the U.S. mail service) to be route agents. They rode the trains as post office employees, in a mail-carriage car or a designated section of a baggage car, dropping off and picking up pouches of mail from local post offices at each stop. Route agents opened those pouches, sorted and put into pouches the mail for other points on the line, and sent the rest to Distributing Post Offices for further sorting.<sup>3</sup>

In 1864 George B. Armstrong, an assistant DPO postmaster, formally

Mail Service (in 1949 renamed the Postal Transportation Service).

In *Mail by Rail*, historians Bryant Long and William Dennis described the initial RPO: "Letter cases [banks of pigeonholes, often for an entire state] with seventy-seven boxes were borrowed from the Chicago Distributing Post Office and installed at angles. The car was about forty feet long, with two windows, upper deck lights, oil lamps, and no end doors. . . . Mail was worked with surprising ease and efficiency," though the trip was "rather rough."<sup>5</sup> Evolving from this beginning was a well-coordinated

*FACING: Soo Line train #5, steaming out of Minneapolis and bound for Chicago, October 1952. The Railway Post Office car, right behind the engine and coal tender, is an old 1916 steel model; the route is the Owen (WI) & Minneapolis.*

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system of trains that intersected with other trains to bring the mail to almost every city, town, village, and rural community in the country.

After the Civil War, railroads expanded westward. By the 1880s the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad (Milwaukee Road), the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railroad, and the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad had all reached the Twin Cities. Three others emerged in Minnesota in the last half of the nineteenth century: the Northern Pacific, the Minneapolis, Sault Ste. Marie and Atlantic (Soo Line), and the Great Northern. The NP and GN completed transcontinental connections to the Pacific Northwest in 1888 and 1893, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

As these mainline railroads developed, branch lines sprang up, first reaching north from the Twin Cities to Duluth to link up with the Northern Pacific and its westbound trains. Duluth's first railroad, the Lake Superior & Mississippi, was completed in 1871; by 1926, there were eight more.<sup>7</sup> Soon, trains were stretching south toward Kansas City and Omaha and west toward Fargo and Grand Forks. They passed through almost every settlement in Minnesota, providing an excellent vehicle for delivering the mail.

Minnesota's first Railway Post Office was the Milwaukee Road's *Milwaukee & St. Paul* RPO (November 1871). Next came the Chicago & North Western's *Elroy & Winona* RPO (August 1882) and the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy's *Chicago & Minneapolis* RPO (August 1883).<sup>8</sup> Originating in the Twin Cities and traveling westward, the Minneapolis & Pacific Railroad's mail service to Fairmont, Minnesota, began in March 1887.<sup>9</sup> The state's first international RPO, the *St. Vincent & Winnipeg*, initiated service

from that Kittson County town to Canada in August 1881.<sup>10</sup> DPO route agents staffed these early routes.

In little over a decade, the volume of RPO business in Minnesota increased dramatically. For example, North Dakota's *Ransom County Independent* reported in 1898

Mail messenger W. R. Hennessey is the oldest postal clerk on the Soo Line. He informs . . . [us] that eleven years ago . . . he took the first mail car out of St. Paul on the Soo Line west and on that occasion he had one package of about twenty letters on the car. Last Friday morning he left St. Paul on the same trip with 86 sacks of papers and 225 packages of letters. This is a remarkable increase in the postal business and is an evidence of the rapid development of this great northwest country.<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, there were 3,200 RPO clerks running on 90,000 route miles in 1,900 mail

cars, nationwide. In 1915 some 20,000 RPO clerks covered 216,000 route miles in 4,000 mail cars.<sup>12</sup>

By 1920, according to geographer John Borchert, "91 percent of all business and personal communication moved by railway mail, while telegraph and telephone accounted for less than 10 percent." Minnesota had become a critical transcontinental hub, and Railway Mail Service Division 10 (Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North and South Dakota), headquartered in St. Paul, "was the leader in both the number of RPOs in the U.S. (11.5 percent) and miles of RPOs (11 percent). Furthermore, Borchert stated, Minnesota's 76 RPO routes (27 mainline ones radiating out of the Twin Cities and 49 branch lines connecting to them in-state) linked "the upper Midwest with the rest of the country and Canada [and] moved the mail among 1,200 post offices within the state."<sup>13</sup>

The Milwaukee Road, Great Northern, Northern Pacific, Chicago & North Western, and Soo Line were,



Duluth's first Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad depot, 1872





Busy rail yards at St. Paul's Union Depot, 1920s

in that order, the largest mail carriers in Minnesota in 1920. In 1926, at the height of RPO service in the state, St. Paul's Union Depot was the center of much activity: 149 trains moved in and out daily.<sup>14</sup> Most of these passenger trains had railway mail cars.

**I**N THE EARLY DAYS, working in the Railway Mail Service cars was both dangerous and difficult. Since civil-service employees could not form unions to address grievances in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, little could be done to correct dangerous working conditions. On November 18, 1874, RPO clerks formed the Railway Mail Mutual Benefit Association (after 1904, the Railway Mail Association or RMA) to offer life insurance to workers and raise money for widows of those killed in the line of duty, as standard companies found the occu-

pation too risky to insure. Between 1875 and 1916, 316 clerks were killed and nearly 11,000 injured, according to historian Bill Bursack. The Postmaster General in 1884 received a 14-page report of RPO accidents, including: "Mail car was completely destroyed"; "was fatally injured and died the next morning"; "was badly injured and died on December 2"; "neck was broken, killing instantly"; "was caught in wreck and burned to death"; "so badly crushed as to be unrecognizable."<sup>15</sup> The National Postal

Museum's website outlines some of the dangers.

Items within the mail car itself could rip loose in a wreck, striking or trapping a clerk inside the car. Gallons of scalding water could pour into the railway post office car from a jolted steam-driven engine. Inside the mail car itself, oil-burning lamps and wood-burning stoves proved to be extremely hazardous.

Wooden cars were commonly used in railway service during this period. These cars were especially susceptible to destruction by fire and impact.<sup>16</sup>

Bitter protests emerged over filthy or unsafe mail cars. For example, clerks reported in 1910 that one wooden car's catcher arm, used to grab a mail sack from a crane as the train sped past, was partially torn out of the rotten wall. A serious hazard to anyone using it, the arm remained unfixed for three years despite multiple protests from RPO crews and foremen. Clerks reporting such conditions were told to "quit being so fussy," according to Long and Dennis.

*Wrecked wooden RPO car, Wheeling & Lake Erie Railroad, Zoar, Ohio, 1913; X marks the spot where a clerk's body was found. The accompanying 1914 report notes that the car "while in very good condition . . . was not built to withstand the shock of the wreck," especially given its position between the engine and much heavier cars.*





RPO lines were terribly understaffed; some crews were unable to complete sorting the mail (“going stuck”) due to lack of manpower or neophytes just learning their jobs. Morale was lowest in the winter of 1910–11, when labor shortages meant Christmas mail was unworked for days and a crash killed four clerks in a car that had been inspected and found to be “safe.”<sup>17</sup>

Twelve RPO clerks on the Chicago & North Western’s Tracy (MN) & Pierre (SD) RPO got the attention of Congress. In 1911 these men of RMS Division 10 went on an unauthorized strike for better working conditions. During the strike, as Bursack noted, “Unsorted mail rode up and down the line for days and amassed on depot platforms.” Wide press coverage in the Upper Midwest and pressure from the public and the Minnesota and South Dakota legislatures finally motivated Congress to act. On March 4, 1911, it moved to make mail cars safer, mandating railroads to build all-steel RPO cars and retire the wooden ones by July 1, 1916. The strike ended the day the law was passed.<sup>18</sup>

Congress went on to pass the Lloyd-La Follette Act of 1912, which nullified President Theodore Roosevelt’s executive order of 1900: the infamous gag rule that forbade federal civil-service employees from seeking redress from their employer through their congressmen. The 1911 strike by clerks in Minnesota—and its results—

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**By the mid-1950s the famed  
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spurred the RMS to unionize and join the American Federation of Labor in 1917 to fight for improved safety and working conditions as well as better pay and benefits. This was the nation’s first federal civil-service union.<sup>19</sup>

**I**N THE LATTER PART of the nineteenth century and early into the twentieth, unique trains consisting mainly of RPO cars and express-mail storage cars, with only a few passenger cars in their consists, raced across North America from coast to coast at full throttle with all green lights. Railway mail cars on regular passenger trains were one thing, but these trains were the greyhounds of the system. The Milwaukee Road and Great Northern ran this service in Minnesota; their special trains were called the fast mail.

The Milwaukee Road initiated fast-mail service in Minnesota as part of its *Chicago & Minneapolis* RPO in March 1884. From the first day of operation, train #55 (by 1889, trains #56 and #57) between those two cities car-

ried five cars loaded with mail bound for the Pacific Northwest and also handled the majority of first-class mail for Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis. After 1889 these trains made the Chicago-to-Twin Cities run in 9 hours and 15 minutes with many 20-to-30-minute stops in between. William Stauss, a Milwaukee Road historian, commented that business grew so much that “consists averaged 15 to 24 cars and often swelled to as many as 32.”<sup>20</sup>

The Great Northern’s fast-mail train, #27, began service in October 1909. It quickly became the principal westbound mail train on the northern plains, capable of running from St. Paul to Seattle in 47.25 hours. This train had priority over all passenger and freight traffic on the tracks. But before it could leave St. Paul on schedule at 8:45 A.M., it had to receive the mail from the Milwaukee Road’s train from Chicago, which

*Fast mail: Great Northern train #27, leaving St. Paul with 16 mail/express cars and 1 coach, early 1950s.*





first had to connect with New York Central's fast mail from New York and Boston. Waiting for the Milwaukee Road frequently delayed GN #27's departure; in 1931 it was late out of the station on 355 days but, because it was an express, rarely arrived late in Seattle. As Stuart Holmquist of the Great Northern Railway Historical Society pointed out: "When you consider these trains crossed two mountain ranges and carried eight and frequently ten or eleven cars, filled with mail and express, and in the winter months operated at times under the worst kind of weather conditions, its record for on-time performance on a fast schedule is most remarkable."<sup>21</sup>

Holmquist noted that in 1953 GN #27 contributed 44 percent of the railway's total mail income; in December alone it carried "221 sixty-foot carloads of mail out of St. Paul . . . 26 percent of all mail shipped out of St. Paul on all carriers." At the same time, passenger traffic on the Great Northern, as elsewhere, was decreasing. By the mid-1950s the famed *Western Star* and *Empire Builder* passenger trains frequently carried mail-storage cars, too. In early 1960, the GN's fast mail and *Western Star* were merged, retaining the numbers 27 (westbound) and 28 (eastbound) but now called the *Western Star*.

**M**OST RPOs in Minnesota did not run fast-mail trains. Instead, they usually had one mail car at the front of a passenger train, either mainline or branch line. Depending on volume, railway mail required different amounts of space and crews of varying size. Full-sized, 60-foot mail cars had a six-to-ten-man crew; combination rail cars devoted 30 feet to the mail compartment and its three-to-five-man crew, while the Railway Express Agency occupied the other 30 feet. For smaller

## TIME TRAVEL

The last American RPO, the *New York and Washington*, ceased operating almost 40 years ago, but museums recapture some of the thrill of seeing the mail train roll into town. Local, regional, and national organizations offer exhibits and even a chance to ride the rails.

Weekends from May to October, the Minnesota Transportation Museum runs an excursion train, including an RPO mail car, on the Osceola & St. Croix Valley Railway. The train departs Osceola, Wisconsin; see <http://mtmuseum.org/?div=oscv>. The museum itself, open year round, is housed in the Great Northern Railway's historic Jackson Street Roundhouse in St. Paul.

RPO exhibits and mail cars are on view at:

### LAKE SUPERIOR RAILROAD MUSEUM

in Duluth's historic Union Depot; [www.lsrmmuseum.org/Home/express.html](http://www.lsrmmuseum.org/Home/express.html).

### NATIONAL RAILROAD MUSEUM

Green Bay, Wisconsin; [www.nationalrrmuseum.org/](http://www.nationalrrmuseum.org/).

### ILLINOIS RAILWAY MUSEUM

Union; [www.irm.org/](http://www.irm.org/).

### GALESBURG RAILROAD MUSEUM

Illinois; [www.galesburgrailroadmuseum.org/The%20RPO.html](http://www.galesburgrailroadmuseum.org/The%20RPO.html).

### CALIFORNIA STATE RAILROAD MUSEUM

Sacramento; [www.csrmmf.org/events-exhibits/railroad-car-favorites/great-northern-railway-post-office-car-no-42](http://www.csrmmf.org/events-exhibits/railroad-car-favorites/great-northern-railway-post-office-car-no-42).

### ORANGE EMPIRE RAILROAD MUSEUM

Perris, California; [www.oerm.org/collection/santa-fe/atsf-60](http://www.oerm.org/collection/santa-fe/atsf-60).

### SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL POSTAL MUSEUM

Washington, D.C.; [postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/current/moving-the-mail/index.html](http://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/current/moving-the-mail/index.html).



New York & Chicago RPO  
(New York Central Railroad),  
1950s-'60s vintage car





runs, a 15-foot compartment and one or two men sufficed; baggage and Railway Express occupied the remaining three-quarters of the car. Some RPOs used several mail cars, however, depending on the number of trains or the number of mail cars attached to express-mail trains on the route. For example, the Milwaukee Road by 1949 had expanded its fleet of postal cars to accommodate 12 RPO routes with 72 mail cars, 60 mail-and-express cars, and 375 storage cars. Regardless, all railway mail cars were configured to function like a post office: receiving, sorting, and dispatching mail to post offices on the route or passing ongoing mail to an intersecting RPO that would carry it in a different direction.<sup>22</sup>

Minnesotans saw at least one railway-mail car on almost every passenger route in the state, either a local that stopped in every town along the way or a streamlined train that made few stops. In the latter case, the dispatching clerk tossed a pouch with the town's incoming mail from the moving car onto the station platform and then snagged the outgoing-mail pouch from the mail crane beside

the tracks, using the catcher arm extended from the train car's door.

Most mail from the east came to Minnesota via Chicago on two large RPOs. The largest mail hauler into the state from the 1920s to 1971 was the Milwaukee Road's *Chicago & Minneapolis RPO* (nicknamed the *Chic & Min* or *Minnie*). It included two 60-foot working mail cars and strings of mail-storage cars full of presorted mail from eastern cities like New York and Washington, D.C., heading to the West Coast. It also carried second-class mail, such as magazines and catalogs, from eastern publishing and advertising firms. "In that corridor," Borchert stated, "the Minnie was 'the leader,' the fifth heaviest run in the U.S." As early as 1911, 167 clerks worked on that route.<sup>23</sup>

The second major RPO route from Chicago to Minnesota was the *Chicago & St. Paul RPO* that ran on the Chicago & North Western to Elroy, Wisconsin. There, the train split; one-half, including the *Chicago & St. Paul RPO* with its 60-foot mail car and crew, went north to St. Paul on the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railroad. The remainder, with a 30-foot mail com-

*Loading the contents of a U.S. Mail truck onto a pre-1916 RPO car (probably Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania), about 1915*

partment, took on a new crew and became the *Elroy & Rapid City RPO*, traveling west through Winona and Mankato to South Dakota.<sup>24</sup>

Mail between Canada and the U.S. traveled through Minnesota, too. The Great Northern's *International* carried mail to western Canada on the *St. Paul & Noyes RPO*, while the Soo Line had the *St. Paul & Portal RPO*. Canadian mail was routed from Winnipeg to Warroad, Minnesota, where it connected with the *Warroad & Duluth RPO*. At that destination, the *Duluth & Minneapolis RPO* took appropriate mail to the Twin Cities and the *Duluth & Altoona RPO* carried the other mail onward, connecting with the eastbound *Chicago & St. Paul RPO* in Altoona, Wisconsin, for the trip to Chicago and points beyond. Duluth also was a major RPO hub for mail to northern Minnesota, with six RPOs.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, regional RPOs out of the Twin Cities connected with transcontinental trains to the south and southwest: the *Minneapolis &*





LEFT: Demonstration of how a clerk on a moving train retrieves a mail bag from a trackside mail crane, 1949. This Great Northern mail car is parked at St. Paul Union Depot. RIGHT: Four armed men, a typical crew for a branch line, working the mail; Chicago & Council Bluffs RPO on the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, somewhere in Minnesota, 1948.

Sioux City RPO on the Chicago & North Western and the Minneapolis & Omaha RPO on the Chicago & Great Western routed mail down to the Union Pacific's and Southern Pacific's westbound RPOs in Nebraska. These took domestic mail onward to Denver and California and international mail to San Francisco for its Pacific Ocean crossing. The Minneapolis & Des Moines RPO on the Rock Island Railroad carried mail bound for southern states and Mexico as far south as Kansas City.

**T**HE WORK OF AN RPO CLERK was challenging. Men had to be physically fit to handle loading and unloading heavy mail sacks and pouches and to stand for a ten-hour trip in a moving, swaying car. The trains traveled in all

kinds of weather, making the mail car sometimes very hot or bitterly cold because the door was open for loading or catching mail on the fly. Engine smoke and dust, kicked up by the moving cars, were things to be endured. A good work ethic and teamwork were expected of the crew, with no one finishing until everyone was done.

Workers also had to be intelligent and diligent to do this job efficiently and correctly. In order to determine the best connections for ongoing mail, RPO clerks had to memorize several routings for each of various destinations. They had to know all post offices in multiple states and the trains that serviced each one. For example, clerks traveling west out of St. Paul on the GN's St. Paul & Williston RPO had to know all of the towns and RPOs in North and South Dakota,

Montana, Washington, and the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, and western Ontario. Frank Scheer, curator of the Railway Mail Service Library, commented, "The general statement I've heard . . . is that a good clerk was expected to know the distribution for about 10,000 post offices." Midwestern routes with 60-foot mail cars also required knowledge of distant states. According to Scheer, "For a major route such as the CHI & MPLS RPO, one clerk was working New York State mail . . . going East, and California mail on westbound runs."<sup>26</sup>

After 1887, clerks had to pass an annual timed test, called a case exam, that evaluated their skill at routing mail in a timely, accurate fashion. The test entailed arranging cards, averaging 16 per minute; the passing grade was 97 percent correctly routed.





*RPO practice and examination kit for Minnesota, about 1946*

According to Long and Dennis, most clerks were “two or three times that fast,” scoring “at least 99 percent.”<sup>27</sup>

**A**SIDE FROM FIRST-CLASS mail, two major functions made the RPO an important part of Minnesota history for 100 years. First: Money and the RPO went together. Few Minnesotans were aware of all the money and securities that RPOs regularly carried through their towns, requiring the clerks to be armed. Long before the days of automatic deposits and credit cards, people were paid with cash in an envelope; there was no such thing as transferring money electronically from employer to employee. RPOs served for many years as the sole means for banks—including the Federal Reserve—to transfer money, checks, stocks, and bonds, helping companies and the U.S. government pay their workers promptly, regardless of where they lived. According to Scheer:

Currency and coin were handled as registered mail in Railway Post Offices. Some were transfers between Federal Reserve Banks while others were government, military, or civilian payrolls.

The federal agency and military pouches—which also included diplomatic documents or classified information—were secured with registered mail locks that had keyings restricted to the agency employees. Post Office Department clerks could not open those pouches but recorded them just as they did for all other registered mail. Large quantities of currency, coin, postage stamps, or negotiable bearer instruments such as bonds and stock certificates were in locked pouches.<sup>28</sup>

No wonder the clerks carried guns to protect the mail from robbers like Jesse James and those that followed.

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The greatest train robbery in the U.S. happened in 1924 on a Minneapolis-bound train, the *Chicago & Minneapolis RPO*, at Rondout, Illinois, north of Chicago. Robbers stopped the Milwaukee Road train and stole approximately \$3 million in cash and securities (about \$36 million today).

All the thieves were apprehended and most of the money was recovered, but an estimated \$100,000 is still unaccounted for.<sup>29</sup>

The other vital RPO role involved mass communication and mail-order commerce. Before TV, many people read several newspapers and a variety of periodicals for news and entertainment. The Railway Mail Service delivered big-city newspapers and magazines to these readers. Second-class mail sacks were loaded with periodicals and day-old newspapers from larger cities. Clerks regularly handled *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Look Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Good Housekeeping*, and many more magazines, which made up an increasingly larger percentage of the mail. The U.S. Post Office website reports: “Between 1885 and 1915, to the dismay of postal officials, second-class mail volume increased by a factor of twelve, while first-class mail volume grew only six- to seven-fold. . . . Second-class mail volume continued to rise, from 1.2 billion pounds in 1918, to 1.6 billion pounds in 1928, to 1.4 billion pounds [sic] in 1938, to 2.1 billion pounds in 1948.”<sup>30</sup>

In rural America in the 1940s and '50s there was no Macy's close

by, no Target or Wal-Mart. Almost everything purchased—clothes, appliances, toys, sporting goods, household items, seeds, farm implements, hardware, and firearms (sent by parcel post or freight)—was selected from catalogs that arrived in the mail. From 1908 to 1940 people could even





*Clerks loading mail bags onto a Milwaukee Road RPO car, St. Paul Union Depot, 1949*

order prefabricated homes from Sears Roebuck & Company; the building materials were shipped to them by freight car.<sup>31</sup>

Every spring, many branch-line RPOs, which stopped at all small towns on the right-of-way, delivered baby chickens to the many country folk who raised a few birds for meat and eggs. Seed companies sent free chicks, packed in big, flat boxes with air holes, to potential seed customers, knowing they could sell chicken feed to the same people later on.<sup>32</sup>

I remember my RPO-clerk dad commenting on the sheer number of second-class-mail sacks full of Christmas catalogs from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, stacked to the roof of his mail car around September of each year. As orders were placed, RPO clerks first saw a steady increase in mail-order letters and then, as Christmas approached and orders

were filled, parcels. The majority of Christmas presents each year did not come by Santa's sleigh but by an RPO or the fast mail passing through town.

**T**ECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE, which had given birth to the Railway Post Office system, also rang its death knell. Railroads wanted to get out of the uneconomical passenger-train business as ridership dwindled in the 1950s due to automobile travel on the new interstate highways. By the 1960s the Post Office Department could move mail more efficiently and effectively after the invention of the zip code (1963) and automated machines that sorted faster than any human. The post began to be handled in large mail-distribution centers and sent to its destination by air or truck in presorted pouches or containers, with

no need for RPO clerks. Mail could go long distances by air faster than by train and shorter distances by truck to places trains no longer traveled.

In 1930 more than 10,000 trains had moved the mail into every city, town, and village in the nation. The Transportation Act of 1958, which granted the Interstate Commerce Commission money to bolster the nation's ailing railroad passenger service, failed to achieve that goal, and mail-carrying passenger trains declined rapidly. By 1965 only 190 trains carried mail, and five years later the railroads hauled almost no first-class mail. On April 30, 1971, the Post Office Department eliminated seven of the surviving RPOs, including Minnesota's last two: the Great Northern's *St. Paul & Williston*, and the Northern Pacific's *St. Paul & Miles City*. When the last American RPO, the *New York & Washington* on the Penn Central/



Conrail Railroad, was terminated on June 30, 1977, 113 years of Railway Mail Service operations came to a close.<sup>33</sup>

Now the RPOs are but a fading memory. The network was America's first information highway, facilitating commerce, finance, and communication. It bound Minnesotans together for 100 years, as it did the nation for a slightly longer time. And everywhere, it was a sight to see and a welcome sound to hear the mail coming to town. □

## Notes

1. Cancellations on stamped letters received and processed by an RPO would include the route name, the train number, a date stamp, and a note specifying which mail car (there could be several) had processed the letter.

2. Bryant A. Long and William J. Dennis, *Mail by Rail: The Story of the Postal Transportation Service* (New York: Simmons-Boardman, 1951), 98.

3. U.S. Post Office Department, *History of the Railway Mail Service; A Chapter in the History of Postal Affairs in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885), 41.

4. Advertisement, *North Western Lines* 16 (Winter 1989): 35.

5. Long and Dennis, *Mail by Rail*, 112 (quote), 370. Letter cases, usually for an entire state, were 10 to 11 pigeonholes high and 4 to 12 wide; holes were 3 to 4 inches by 4.5 inches wide. The case headers (cards) that labeled each hole were arranged in the order of locations along the route. When a pigeonhole was full, the sorted mail was wrapped, tied with twine, and tossed in a mail pouch for that town/post office or connecting train—and the process resumed.

6. On the railroads, see: Milwaukee Road Historical Assn., "The Milwaukee Road: Four Generations," <http://oldmilwaukee.com/content/fourgen/page08.html>; Chicago & North Western Historical Society, "Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha—A Capsule History," [www.cnwhs.org/ch\\_spmo.htm](http://www.cnwhs.org/ch_spmo.htm); Burlington Route Historical Society, "Information about the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad," <http://burlingtonroute.com/cbq.html>; Northern Pacific Railway, "First of the Northern Continentals—Chronology," <http://pw2.netcom.com/~whstlpnk/first.html>; "Northern Pacific Railway: Main Street of the Northwest," [www.american-rails.com/northern-pacific-railway.html](http://www.american-rails.com/northern-pacific-railway.html); "A 100-Year Timeline History of the Soo Line Railroad and its Predecessors," *Soo Liner Magazine*, May–June 1976, [www.kohlin.com/soo/soo-hist.htm](http://www.kohlin.com/soo/soo-hist.htm); "What was the Great Northern

Railway?" [http://gnrhs.org/gn\\_history.htm](http://gnrhs.org/gn_history.htm).

Though the NP was granted a charter in 1864, the first miles of track opened years later.

7. "Duluth's Major Railroads," <http://zenithcity.com/zenith-city-history-archives/duluth-parks-landmarks/duluths-major-railroads/>.

8. John L. Kay, *Directory of Railway Post Offices, 1964 to 1977* (Contoo Creek, NH: Mobile Post Office Society, 1985); data from this source emailed to author by Dr. Frank Scheer, curator of the Railway Mail Service Library, Boyce, VA, May 12, 2014.

9. "Report of the Minneapolis & Pacific Railway to the Board of Railroad and Warehouse Commissioners of Minnesota for the Year Ending June 30, 1887," emailed to author by Alton B. Chermak, Soo Line Historical & Technical Society, Apr. 16, 2013. The Minneapolis & Pacific was the predecessor of the Soo Line west of Minneapolis.

10. *Catalogue of Canadian Cancellations & Related Railway Postmarks Including Selected Waterway Postmarks* (Halifax, Canada: British North American Philatelic Society, 2009), 236.

11. *Ransom County Independent*, Mar. 17, 1898, quoted in Chermak email.

12. Bill Bursack, "Remembering the RPO," *The Mainstreeter: The Northern Pacific Railway Historical Association* 16 (Winter 1997): 6.

13. John R. Borchert, "The Heyday of the Railway Post Office in Minnesota," *Minnesota Transportation Museum Minnegazette*, Winter 1997, 19, 21, 24–27.

14. Borchert, "Heyday of the RPO," 19; St. Paul Pioneer Press, May 8, 2014, 7A.

15. Long and Dennis, *Mail by Rail*, 138–40, 143; Bursack, "Remembering the RPO," 8. The Railway Mail Association evolved from three nineteenth-century benefit associations, two of them crushed in labor conflict. In 1949 the RMA changed its name to the National Postal Transportation Association when the Railway Mail Service became the Postal Transportation Service.

16. National Postal Museum, "Wrecks," [www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2c1c\\_wrecks.html](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2c1c_wrecks.html).

17. Long and Dennis, *Mail by Rail*, 145, 147.

18. Bursack, "Remembering the RPO," 6 (quote); Long and Dennis, *Mail by Rail*, 149.

19. Long and Dennis, *Mail by Rail*, 151–52; for more on unionization, see 140–68. The gag rule threatened reduction in rank and compensation or dismissal without a hearing if federal employees complained to their congressmen about working conditions or benefits.

20. William F. Stauss, "The Fast Mail," *The Milwaukee Railroader*, June 1989, 5–6.

21. Here and below, Stuart Holmquist, "Great Northern Railway Mail Services," Great Northern Railway Historical Society, Reference Sheet 177, June 1991, 10–12 (available to GNHS members or for sale on the GNHS website). From the 1920s into the 1960s, the GN's fast mail carried the largest volume to the Pacific Northwest on the St. Paul & Williston RPO. Through the 1950s, this RPO used one 60-foot mail car, 11 to 15 mail storage/express cars, and two passenger coaches.

22. Stauss, "Fast Mail," 5.

23. Borchert, "Heyday of the RPO," 22.

24. Ron Albers and Joe Follmar, "Railway Post Office Service on North Western Lines," *North Western Lines* 16 (Winter 1989): 36.

25. Here and below, Borchert, "Heyday of the RPO," 25–28.

26. Holmquist, "Great Northern Railway Mail Services," 15; Frank Scheer, email to author, May 5, 2014. To learn how a letter traveling across the country was handled in 1947, see David A. Thompson, "Boston—Seattle for 3¢," *Classic Trains*, Fall 2006, 70–72.

27. Long and Dennis, *Mail by Rail*, 58. Scheer email, May 5, 2014: "My understanding is that exams started after the Railway Mail Service began publishing state general schemes during the 1880s. Prior to 1877, Railway Mail Clerks had to compile their own information about schedules and mail distribution. That may seem disorganized to us now, but in the early years there were fewer routes and not as many post offices."

28. Frank Scheer, email to author, Mar. 10, 2014.

29. Kathleen Stone, "The Rondout Train Robbery," *Chicago Historic Living Examiner*, [www.examiner.com/article/the-rondout-train-robbery](http://www.examiner.com/article/the-rondout-train-robbery).

30. "Postage Rates for Periodicals: A Narrative History," <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/periodicals-postage-history.htm>.

31. Mark R. Wilson, "Mail Order," [www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/779.html](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/779.html); Sears Archives, "What is a Sears Modern Home?" [www.searsarchives.com/homes/index.htm](http://www.searsarchives.com/homes/index.htm). The company's mail-order Modern Homes program sold some 70,000–75,000 houses in 447 different styles, ranging from the elaborate multistory Ivanhoe, with its elegant French doors and art-glass windows, to the simpler Goldenrod, a three-room, no-bath vacation cottage. (An out-house could be purchased separately.)

32. To read or hear an RPO clerk's testimony on shipping chicks, see Smithsonian National Postal Museum, "Railway Mail Service: Expansion and Turmoil, 1876–1920," [http://postalmuseum.si.edu/RMS/history/expansion.html#\\_edn4](http://postalmuseum.si.edu/RMS/history/expansion.html#_edn4). A 1956 post office training video, *Men and Mail in Motion* (youtube.com), includes 16 seconds on handling this "fragile cargo."

33. "The Post Office Role in U.S. Development: The Railway Mail Service," <http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blmailus2c.htm>.

The photo on p. 206 is courtesy Stuart J. Nelson; p. 209, bottom, Railway Mail Service files, National Postal Museum Library, Smithsonian Institution; p. 210, *Classic Trains Magazine*, Fall 2006; p. 211 and 212, Railway Mail Service Library, Boyce, VA; and p. 213, right, BNSF Railway. All other images are in MNHS collections.





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