

THE MAIL

A Brief and General Look at Delivery

Mail delivery methods were in transition during the 1870s and 80s. In earlier American history, letters were simply handed to travelers with the hopes that they would eventually reach their intended destinations. Later, more organized methods were created, including horseback runners, steamboats, and stagecoaches. While stagecoaches continued to hold contracts to carry the mail for quite some time, towns along railroads were usually first to convert to the newer and speedier rail delivery.

According to a county history, an October 1868 issue of the *St. Peter Tribune* said, “the daily line which has done such efficient service, in stormy days and pleasant, during the last ten years was withdrawn yesterday, and the coaches transferred to St. Paul. Thus the old pioneers disappear before the more commodious and speedy vehicle which is demanded by enlarging population and trade. The daily stage has performed its mission and the champing steed, proud and tremulous with life, gives way before that inanimate power with harness of steel, lungs of iron and breath of fire. Time is shortened and space grows less under the new dispensation, as this charger thunders from point to point.”¹

The advent of the postal car, essentially a box car converted into a post office, allowed the mail to be picked up at each town, sorted aboard the train, and distributed to the towns along the track, and to points beyond, via a variety of methods. At that time, private contracts were still awarded for carrying the mail between post offices, but the trains made some of those segments significantly faster.

As of the winter of 1880–81, the Winona & St. Peter railroad had two “baggage/mail/express” cars operating along the line,² but it is unclear whether that meant they had a “rolling post office” postal car or that the cars were simply carrying sacks that were sorted at other locations. Additionally, railroad charters often included the requisite that mail be carried via trains at a cost set by Congress, not the railroad company.

As shown by the newspaper record for the winter, several methods of delivery were employed, from train, stagecoach, “private conveyance,” and on foot, often under extremely difficult conditions and with great effort.

The Victorian Affection for Letter Writing

A handful of factors coincided to increase the volume of mail in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the early part of the century, postal rates were high, making mail more likely to be used only for business and high-priority personal correspondence. When attempts to make U.S. postal service prices more affordable to the common citizen failed, “some correspondents economized with such tricks as writing messages both horizontally and vertically on a page or in the margins of newspapers. Many others simply turned to private carriers, whose advertised services might include convenient home delivery.” ⁱⁱⁱ

As immigrants came to this country, they wanted to correspond with family and friends in their countries of origin. As settlers moved westward across this continent, they wanted to correspond with family and friends in communities left behind. The Civil War, westward migration, and multiple gold rushes all contributed to the mass movement and desire to stay connected. Literacy was high and postage, by then, had become affordable. ^{iv}

Additionally, the era placed value on doing things properly. “Good penmanship, or a ‘fine hand,’ long a marketable skill for clerks, was now almost an indication of character.” ^v This also led to “their desire for multiple accouterments for every activity, ... and they were mad for stationery, pens, inks, wax, and sealing wafers. The correspondent’s ultimate accessory was a handsome wooden lap desk.” ^{vi}

That should bring several sparks of recognition for any *Little House* reader. When Pa told the family that Gilbert would be taking mail to Preston, they finished a letter to the family back in Wisconsin. Ma used “her little red pen that had a mother-of-pearl handle shaped like a feather. When her neat, clear writing filled the paper she turned it and filled it again crosswise. On the other side of the paper she did the same thing so that every inch of paper held all the words that it possibly could.” ^{vii}

Almanzo had made one of the coveted portable writing desks for Laura, which, along with Ma’s treasured pen, are still in the possession of and on display at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum in Mansfield, Missouri. In the introductory setting to *On the Way Home*, Rose described the writing desk as, “a fascinating wooden box which my father had made and polished so shiny-smooth that stroking it was rapture.” ^{viii}

Postmasters as Town Historians

While helping Lane ferret out details concerning the trip that Almanzo, Royal, and Eliza Jane took to Yankton to file homesteads, Wilder suggested that Rose contact someone locally. “If it is important to know for sure, you could likely find out by writing to someone at Yankton, perhaps the postmaster and asking when the first trains came.”^{ix} The postmaster usually knew all of the citizens, and served as the keepers of the town’s history, especially when they were also the local newspaper editor.

ⁱ Hon. William G. Gresham, Editor-in-Chief, *“History of Nicollet and Le Sueur County Volume 1,”* (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, Inc., 1916), p. 333.

ⁱⁱ Annual Report of the Chicago & North Western Railway Company, for Fiscal Year ending May 31, 1880, p. 41.

ⁱⁱⁱ Winifred Gallagher, *“How the Post Office Created America,”* (City: Penguin Press, 2016). p. 80.

^{iv} Winifred Gallagher, *“How the Post Office Created America,”* (City: Penguin Press, 2016). p. 92.

^v Winifred Gallagher, *“How the Post Office Created America,”* (City: Penguin Press, 2016). p. 94.

^{vi} Winifred Gallagher, *“How the Post Office Created America,”* (City: Penguin Press, 2016). P. 94.

^{vii} Laura Ingalls Wilder, *“The Long Winter,”* (New York: 1940, 2004), p. 158.

^{viii} Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Way Home,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 10.

^{ix} Hoover Presidential Library, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Correspondence, 31-rlw-liw-b13-f193. Letter Laura Ingalls Wilder to Rose Wilder Lane, dated March 23, 1937.