



These mail trucks sound a note of progress. But they are not helping to develop the rural mails. When photographed, they were on their way to Porto Rico, where they are now in use. The inset is of James I. Blakslee, Fourth Assistant Postmaster-General, who has much of pertinence to say.

## Our "Pork-Laden" Rural Mail System

By AARON HARDY ULM

"REVISE the R. F. D. mail system in my district!" exclaimed a Congressman to a Post Office Department official recently. "It's impossible, sir, impossible. Why, the system as it now operates brings to my district \$210,000 a year and it all stays there. A revision might reduce the sum as well as the number of persons it now provides with jobs. If made, I'd probably lose my job, so nothing in the way of revision is going to be done so far as I can help it."

"But suppose the patrons of the rural mails in your district were given better service as the result of an intelligent readjustment of the system?" the official asked.

"That wouldn't get me a half dozen votes," the Congressman replied. "But the resentment that would be aroused among those whose personal interests would suffer because of the changes made would be sufficient to prevent my re-election. Hence I am opposed to any disturbance of the status quo."

The status quo with regard to the rural free delivery branch of the United States postal system is not such as to fill anyone who analyzes it with enthusiasm, despite the fact that our vast network of R. F. D. routes represents one of the most creditable national achievements.

Operation of the system as now constituted entails, according to Post Office Department officials, an utterly useless waste of from ten to twenty millions of taxpayers' dollars a year. But that is an insignificant item in the system's total of shortcomings. For example—

Considerably less mail is handled by the average R. F. D. carrier than by the average city mail carrier, though the first must use a vehicle while the last must lug his load on his back.

So far as the Post Office Department knows not a single automobile truck is used in carrying mail on an R. F. D. route in the United States.

In late years there has been virtually no improvement in the types of vehicles used by R. F. D. carriers in handling mail.

Instead of encouraging the use of motor cars, and all that they could mean by way of dispatch and volume of mail handled, on R. F. D. routes, motorization is actually discouraged.

Hence instead of the R. F. D. mail system being an incentive to the building of first-class highways, in the truly modern sense, it tends if anything to discourage the building of really up-to-date roadways.

Instead of a premium being put on the true development and growth of the rural mails and their full adaptation to the needs of rural residents, growth, substantially, is penalized.

Therefore, the mails, which should be a medium of incalculable benefit to farmers, are utilized by farmers to less than ten per cent of existing capacity.

All of which finds illustration in the following startling fact:

Although the parcel post was established at the behest and for the benefit of the rural population, it is used almost exclusively by and for the benefit of town and city people. Slightly less than five per cent

of all parcel post matter passing through the mails is distributed on or originates from rural free delivery territory. And four-fifths of that constitutes business going from town or city into the country, which means that the producers of foodstuffs make scarce use at all of the fine advantages which the parcel facilities afford them, presumably, for distributing their products. While it is entirely practicable for the average R. F. D. carrier to handle from 1,800 to 2,000 pounds of mail a day—provided his route lies along roads that make the use of first-class equipment possible—the average carrier handles less than 75 pounds a day. And only 24 pounds of that is fourth-class or parcel post mail.

This means that the operation of the rural mails,

### Did You Know—

That the parcel post, created for the benefit of and at the behest of the rural population, is used almost wholly for urban business?

That instead of the rural mail system that on the whole prevails encouraging the use of the parcel post by farmers, its growth as a facility for distributing food is virtually penalized?

That the R. F. D. carrier who handles the most mail usually nets the least money from his job?

That the incentive therefore is for R. F. D. carriers to hold down and discourage the development of mail business?

That, as far as the Post Office Department knows, there isn't a single automobile truck used for hauling mail on a single R. F. D. route in the United States?

That on only 840 out of 43,410 R. F. D. routes is the use of any kind of motor vehicle required?

That the operation of the R. F. D. mails involves a subsidy of about \$70,000,000, of which \$10,000,000 to \$20,000,000, according to postal experts, is utterly wasted, and could be saved by an intelligent revision that would greatly improve the service rendered?

as at present constituted, involves a tremendous waste of man power, vehicle power, and opportunities for economic distribution of the necessities of life.

"There are 60,000 employees of the postal service who traverse 1,400,000 miles of highways, through producing territory, every day," says James I. Blakslee, who, as Fourth Assistant Postmaster-General, has devoted most of his energies during the last four years toward efforts to adapt the mails to the needs of producers and consumers. "If each individual carrier would transport 2,000 pounds, or one ton, the total transported would amount to 120,000,000 pounds a month. As the average consumption per man, woman and child, is about two pounds a day, this quantity would feed approximately 60,000,000 people, or two-thirds of our entire population."

Three main obstacles are in the way of that achievement, says Mr. Blakslee: the highways, the vehicles and the postage rates.

Excepting a small percentage of cases it is now impossible for the average carrier to transport a ton of freight on the roadways he must use, except in fair weather and then generally with difficulty.

That obstacle is being overcome more rapidly than heretofore but not so rapidly as should be the case. The Federal Government, under its authority to develop post roads, is now contributing about \$100,000,000 a year to the construction of highways.

"Under the present system of compensation," adds Mr. Blakslee, "it would be impossible for 43,000 of the 60,000 carriers to purchase and maintain the character of equipment necessary to convey two thousand pounds of food daily even for a portion of the year."

And the postage rates, he says, in some cases are too high in proportion to the selling value of articles of food.

But those obstacles, however they may count against the fullest development of the rural mails, don't explain the wide margin—something like 95 per cent—between what is and what, under the best conditions, might be done.

In fact, with the obstacles as they are, only a small portion of immediately possible business is now carried on via the rural mails.

This declaration is proved by what is now actually done on many individual routes and in many sections of the country, which, however, are glaring exceptions to the general rule.

On the average R. F. D. route there are now handled about 7,500 pieces of mail, all kinds, a month. There lies before the writer a résumé of business done on 54 select routes in 14 different states, on each of which there are handled more than 10,000 pieces of mail a month. The list begins with the record of a route out of Phoenix, Arizona. It has a length of 25.5 miles, which the carrier manages to traverse in three hours and nine minutes' time. But he has to spend nearly six and a half hours in the post office, routing his mail, which means that he gives a total of nine hours and 35 minutes each day to his job. He receives \$1,830 a year salary, out of which he must provide and