

THE VILLAGE POSTMASTER

Rural Ideas of the Way the Government Should Conduct Its Business

By HENRY A. CASTLE

Formerly Auditor for the Post-Office Department

EVERY Congressman, unless he hails from a purely metropolitan district, carries about him a large bundle of worries in the shape of applications for postmasterships in the fourth class. There are now about sixty-two thousand postmasters of this class in the United States; the number of applications filed in each administration is many times that number. It seems odd that the number should be so great when it is borne in mind that none of the fourth-class postmasters receives over one thousand dollars in annual compensation, that more than half the number serve for less than one hundred dollars a year, that fourteen thousand receive less than fifty dollars, and that hundreds of them are expected to be in constant service for only ten or twelve dollars a year. It has happened, too, that some have served for even less than ten dollars, for there is on file in the Department at Washington this facetious acceptance from a man in former-Congressman Vespasian Warner's district in Illinois:

But anyhow, this time I am unanimously through fiddling about it, and this here 'leventh and last resignation of mine has got to be accepted, let the chips fall where they may. Along about four o'clock this afternoon a passel of our best citizens informed me in no uncertain tones that if I wasn't up and gone by midnight they 'lowed to tar and feather and rail-ride me out of our law-abidin' little city, for a small matter that it ain't necessary for me to go into details at present; and a spell ago a friend let me know that they had reconsidered to the extent of decidin' to make it nine o'clock instead of midnight, and were already a-billin' of the tar.

So you can see for yourself that it is high time for me to step down and out. No more at present from,

Yours truly,

T. J. WACKERBACK.

P. S. It's eight-forty-two right now and I'm gone.

Oddly enough, it is sometimes more difficult to let go of an appointment than to procure it, as was evident in the case of a disgusted postmaster in Arkansas, who sent the following ultimatum to headquarters:

I feel honored, as in duty bound, by my appointment, and am glad to know the salary is to be the same as heretofore, namely, nothing a year; for I'd hate like thunder to pay anything.

But perhaps the most singular thing of all in connection with the oddities of fourth-class postmasters is the queer conception some of them take on as to their duties and their attitude toward the members of the community they are supposed to serve.

Keeping Uncle Sam Posted

A RURAL postmaster in New-York State assumed that it was his duty to notify his colleagues of the character of suspicious people removing from his bailiwick to theirs. A Southern ex-postmaster (presumably of color, or off color) makes this complaint to the department:

P. M. generall Sir, i have a complaint against the city of gilead the police crippled me. In 1901 commit no offence and the city fathers there humbugged me, and drove me out of town contrary to the laws of christ, moses and the profets, and all nations, tribes and clans.

So i pray you to lift your finger and do something about it, i want to get paid for my property, i was up in tenicee to beg the price of a suit of clows but i am back now and want them to settle that claim with me.

P. S. i tried to get before the last Congris and I got in the workhouse.

A letter from Georgia was addressed to the "Honorable T. Roosevelt, Protector and Guardian of the Colored Race." It was signed by a negro postmaster who was also "pastor emeryitis," says the man who claims to have seen the effusion. It stated that there was a shortage of thirty-two dollars to pay off a mortgage on the church. It was suggested that if the President would remit thirty dollars without delay the "pastor emeryitis" could raise the remaining two "bones" without a vast deal of trouble.

One of those unlucky postmasters whose jurisdiction was about to be invaded by a rural-delivery route running from another office thus painfully voiced his pardonable vexation:

Postmaster General, Sir as this Tock of Rheual free Delivery has Got up here and so many is Dissathisfide is the cause of the Patishron Being sent you and if you will Nodes, you will See that Several Names Appear on Boath Patishrons and About Nine out of Evrey Ten that Assign for Rheual Free Delivery Mail Surves is Dissathisfide and doant want hit and Ses they wars Fool and Lyde in to sign the Patishron for Rheual Free Delivery.

A Republican postmaster in Tennessee took his "pen in hand" to say that he thought the Postmaster-General should send him a small "present," just to rub vitriol on the wounds of the Democrats in the neighborhood. A "nice watch" was suggested as an appropriate token of esteem and, said the postmaster, "it would do me much good to tell wher i got the Present from."

Not all the freak epistles to the departmental chiefs with modest requests for donations are flagrantly illiterate. An instructive account of the peculiar letters which reach the Postmaster-General tells of a postmaster who wrote that he had just had an addition to his family. This enterprising citizen said that he was going to name the boy for the head of the department, and when he grew up was going to tell the young hopeful to be a politician. There was no false modesty about asking money on the part of the fond parent. He said he would take check, money-order or draft, or any other equivalent of real money recommended for mailing purposes. The Postmaster-General was expressly told not to send a Christmas cup, as cups "are foolish."

Post-Office Sanitation

A NEW postmaster in Pennsylvania seems to have inferred that it was a prerogative of the Department to look after the sanitation of his surroundings. He thus applied to headquarters for the aid of an inspector:

It is neer time that Your expacter looks Up der nooshans in roots Adishun. Laws said that No manure shud be put in de Alleway dem Folks hav pigs in de Barn and a Pil of Manure in de Alleway back of Nickels Barn it schmel lik a Slacter Hose.

Perhaps some postmasters lapse into illiteracy through that evil communication that corrupts good spelling, etc. They have much correspondence from unlearned patrons, as witness this request:

Please to send my male out by the Bore. My papers come D. T. Tucker and my letters come in my fool name Daniel Tucker.

Also the following addressed to a postmaster in a New-York village from a man who affixes the title "Justus of the Peace" to his otherwise unimpressive name:

I have received a complaint against you or family That You are Keeping Post Office for U. S. A. and that you have a Dog that is Cross and unsafe and I Hope if this is the Case you will See that your Dog is chained up for the Safety of the Publick—Should eny one be Harmed or Killed by your dog you will be Reliable after this Notice if the dog is Proven to be a cross dog liable to Bite Travelers.

Sometimes the insolence of patrons overshadows their presumptive ignorance and hides it from sight. A stranger came to the post-office and asked to have his mail forwarded to another town.

"What is your name?"
 "What difference does that make?"
 "Why, I want to write it down."
 "Well, its none of your blanked business! Just write that down."

Easy Nest for the Robbins

LAST year the receipts of a post-office in North Carolina had increased sufficiently to warrant an advance into the presidential class. Postmaster Robbin was notified that he would be continued in service, and was asked to send to the Department the names of four persons to be appointed to the newly created subordinate positions under him.

When his letter of recommendations was received it read as follows:

I, George Washington Robbin, postmaster at Rocky Mountain, N. C., recommend the following persons for appointment under me:
 As assistant postmaster, Stella Lincoln Robbin.
 As stamper, Alexander Achilles Robbin.
 As assistant stamper, George Washington Robbin, Jr.
 As clerk, John A. Logan Robbin.

The letter created no little astonishment at headquarters and was the cause of some facetious semi-official correspondence between divisions. The final result was that Robbin senior was notified that

only one member of his family could be appointed and the remaining Robbins would have to go elsewhere to "nest again."

This episode occurred when the great scandals of 1903 were still a living issue, and the Department was extremely careful. The remote post-offices were little affected by the revelations in Washington, but were not exempt from pointed insinuations. We quote an item from Bacon Ridge:

Postmaster: "Yes, sir, an' that married Mrs. Fresh was watching me with one eye an' flirting with Zeke Crossby's hired man with the other."

Farmer Ryetop: "Do tell! I swan, these post-office scandals are gettin' worse every day."

Ignorance and illiteracy are not always synonymous, and it must be confessed that there are some attributes of the former that a mere test of scholarship might not disclose. One of these attributes is inordinate curiosity and is often specially developed in the village postmaster and his female relatives.

A man had a son away at school. The son had the postal-card habit. He wrote even the little things of the most private nature on postals. His father went to the post-office for his mail. On one occasion a post-card that the daughter of the postmaster had seen she could not find. She searched in every nook and corner, but finally gave up the search in despair and said: "Well, well, where could I have put that card? But perhaps I had better tell you that John only said he needed a new suit of clothes."

Sometimes the aggrieved official resents insinuations and seeks revenge. For example:

Bill Axletree: "I can't understand why there ain't any mail for me. I never done anything to you."

Rural Postmaster: "You hain't, hey? Didn't you mail a postal-card last week saying you bet I'd read every word on it?"

Had to Read the Postals

ON the other hand, many officials affect to believe that the postal laws require them to scrutinize all cards passing through, lest something illegal be carried in the mails. A city visitor spent the summer in a little New-England village where the postmaster was an invalid and his wife usually attended to the distribution of the mails, except on Mondays, when she locked up the office and did her washing. A fine woman she was, and conscientious as they make them, even in New-England. He watched her distribute the mail once. They were alone in the office, and she was in a hurry to get home and wash windows. They are always washing something in New-England. She put all the letters into their proper boxes; but laid the postal-cards aside and finally carried them off with her.

"Why don't you put those in the boxes too?" asked the visitor.

"I've got to read them first," she said, "and I haven't got time now."

"Read them?" he said. "Why?"

"I have to," said she. "I've got to see that they are proper. It's a rule of the Post-Office Department."

With or without legal justification, this propensity of the officials and attachés of the smaller offices has become proverbial. It has even crept within the sacred pale of the nation's poetic literature:

In a village post-office Miss Peek
 Had a job at six dollars a week;
 But she near had a fit
 And threatened to quit
 When a postal came written in Greek.

These revelations of ignorance and incompetency among postmasters of the fourth class are not typical—they are exceptional. Doubtless ninety per cent. of these officials (aside from the ten- or fifteen-dollar a year men, now fast succumbing to rural delivery, who keep the post-office as an adjunct to a blacksmith-shop or other cross-road attraction) are intelligent, efficient and accommodating. Their pay is small and their duties are laborious. But it must also be borne in mind that much of the important mail that reaches our large cities comes from the fourth-class offices. If the service there is faulty, business suffers. If the commercial bodies of the cities had realized how directly they were interested, the village postmasters would long since have commanded that helpful attention the clerks and letter-carriers have received at their hands. All the people are concerned in securing a higher standard of qualification and a more definite official tenure for the rural postmaster.