UNCLE SAM, CARRIER

BY A. S. BURLESON
Postmaster General

"If the people act as partners in the parcel post system, they will find that it will work like a fine watch."

"It is for us, the people, and it plays no favorites!"

THE popularity of the parcel post cannot be doubted. My profound interest in it comes from my conviction that it stands out as the greatest and most useful enterprise of the people for the people. It reaches everywhere all the time. Twenty millions of rural residents now have house-to-house delivery and collection of parcels, a service formerly to be had only in cities and towns. The benefits of parcel post applied to the rural delivery service work both ways. Manufactured articles and the means of culture and education are brought to the farm; while the smaller agricultural products are sent from the farm to the city, swelling the supply of the necessaries of life and reducing the cost of living.

It will be gradually developed in accordance with the demands and requirements of the people, keeping in mind the necessary economies of administration. Its growth will continue at an increasing rate as all the people for whose benefit it was established accustom themselves to its use; while it will correspondingly increase revenues, so that from time to time further reduction of rates may be had and additional increases of the limit of parcels authorized. The weight limit has no terrors for me, because the main purpose of the parcel post is to afford a cheaper means of transportation for mailable merchandise, and it was clearly the intention of Congress that this function should be limited in performance only by the considerations of cost and conservative postal administration.

It is important, however, that the people should aid the Postoffice Department in making the service efficient. While the partnership, so to speak, exists between the government and the people in that which concerns the welfare of the nation, it exists in its widest scope in the postal business, and primarily in the parcel post. Postmasters and clerks were recently informed, as a result of complaints, that, whenever it was shown that the loss or damage to a parcel or its contents was clearly the result of improper packing or wrapping at the time of its receipt at the office of origin, the person responsible for its acceptance in that condition would be held accountable for that damage.

Postmasters must refuse to receive for mailing parcels not properly indorsed or packed for safe shipment. This is done for the benefit of the public, and no blame should attach either to the department or to the individual employee carrying out instructions if the latter refuses to accept inadequately addressed or protected packages. The public must remember that the proper handling of packages is the great essential; but this educational campaign must continue. The response is not yet unanimous. Not all patrons of the postoffice seem to realize that if goods are to arrive undamaged at their destination they must start on their trip carefully packed, wrapped, and addressed. A few precautions on the part of the public will result in greater satisfaction all round.

THE question of packing and wrapping, of course, leads to the probability of a new phase of commerce,—the manufacture of special containers for all kinds of goods mailable by parcel post. Officials of the department are constantly receiving for inspection samples of packing equipment, especially for eggs and liquids. Egg containers are of many sizes and forms, and quite likely other forms will be devised. Furthermore, all have their merits, particularly when one considers that eggs have been shipped in a flimsy box without regard to their original shape on delivery. Sending fish in porous, absorbent paper is also an evidence of carelessness, and not conducive to the patience of the postman if the wrapper should give way in transit. Sending liquids in containers not meeting the requirements of the postal regulations is bound to cause trouble, not only to the department, but to either or both shipper and consignee.

Recently I received an inquiry as to whether milk could be sent by parcel post. The regulations exempt certain liquids, like dangerous acids or alcohol in any form; but beyond the specified prohibited items any liquid may be sent if metal containers be sealed against leakage and then inclosed in a strong box and securely wrapped. Glass containers, of course, must be likewise protected; but the use of glass is discountenanced, and it is hoped that eventually containers made of strong, light metal—aluminum, for instance—will be used for the purpose. It would seem, therefore, that the department is not yet ready to handle milk in ordinary cans; although there is no doubt that this will be done just as soon as the service can be adapted to this class of dairy or farm products.

Perishable articles, particularly berries and ripe fruits, also paints, oils, and the like, contact with which would be destructive to the contents of other parcels, must be denied admission to the mails unless the regulations with reference to packing are strictly complied with. Before this order was enforced there were often instances where carelessness in this regard had caused damage to other mail. Umbrellas, canes, golf sticks, and articles of like character must be securely strapped to strips of wood of the same length and made sufficiently strong to withstand the impact from heavier packages coming against them in the process of handling in their various stages in transit, and at the same time to protect other parcels from being damaged by such pointed objects.

Sending perishable edible products by parcel post was attempted from the very first day the system was put in operation, either as a test or a joke. But during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays people availed themselves of the facility at their disposal to obtain fresh and cheap poultry from nearby produce farms. The postmaster at Omaha, for instance, reported that more than five hundred turkeys and chickens were received on Thanksgiving morning, and all had been delivered by eleven o'clock. The packages containing this poultry were of local origin—that is to say, from points adjacent to and surrounding Omaha—and shipped to persons who had either arranged to obtain the birds directly from up-to-date producers or had received them from friends or relatives.

The question of poultry, though, has been somewhat complicated by game laws, and this point deserves to be made clear. The Illinois Game & Fish Conservation Commission wrote asking if game could be shipped by parcel post in violation of the law in that State prohibiting such shipments. Several States have brought this matter before the department; but as Congress has not placed in the parcel post or any other postal law any provision making unmailable such articles shipped in violation of the laws of a State or Territory, postmasters must accept game for shipments under certain regulations. This does not, however, operate against the right of any State official to proceed under his laws against parties violating them, except that employees of the postoffice in the discharge of their duties as required by law and the regulations are not to be interfered with.

The exclusion of books from the benefits of the parcel post was a source of keen disappointment. A large number of circulating libraries, schools, colleges, and publishers requested the department to admit books to the benefits of the system, so that the high-weight limit and the zone rates of postage might apply. The parcel post rates are lower, at present, in many instances than the corresponding rates on third-class mail, which embraces among other things books and matter wholly in print but not included in the second class.

The postage on a parcel containing merchandise weighing four pounds, when addressed to a patron residing on a rural route emanating from the office of mailing, is seven cents, and when addressed to the first and second zones, eight cents; while on a parcel containing books it is thirty-two cents. The parcel post rates are graduated by pounds and zones; while the rate for third-class mail is one cent for each two ounces and fraction thereof, regardless of distance. If the proposed parcel post rates were applied to the latter, there would be some instances in which the rate would be higher than at present. These are necessary to the proper equalization of rates on the basis of cost, as the present third-class rate for distant shipments does not cover the cost of the service, and nearby shipments are taxed to pay the cost of transportation and handling of the distant shipments.

I am glad to say, however, that, although any action toward consolidating the third and fourth classes of mail will be taken gradually, the first change went into effect in March toward classifying books to preferential rates; but it must be remembered that in admitting third-class mail matter to parcel post the present (third-class) rates will be retained on parcels weighing eight ounces or less. In other words, the present third-class rates will apply indefinitely on all third-class matter weighing half a pound or less but matter weighing more than eight ounces and—except for first and second zones, where the limit is twenty pounds—less than eleven pounds. The effect of this partial and tentative change of classification will be carefully observed, and additional changes made only as it appears clear that they will promote the service to the public.

That the parcel post met a long-felt need is evident, because it serves and will serve American ingenuity, and because it showed at once that it stimulated business; it surpassed expectations after six months of actual operations. As a result it was determined to give to the people the benefit of this earning power in the form of reduced rates. The successful operation was also held to justify an increase in the weight limit, and last August the rates for the first and second zones were reduced and the weight limit increased to twenty pounds. It was thought proper that this reduction be applied on the first and second zones, because thirty per cent. of the entire number of shipments was addressed to these zones, and by affording relief on this business the public would secure the benefits on approximately one-third their shipments, with an immediate substantial increase in the volume of business.

THREE HUNDRED MILLION parcels were handled from the inauguration of the service on January 1, until July 1, 1913, and it is estimated that the total until January 1, 1914, reached 600,000,000. The postmaster at Emmons, West Virginia, reported the smallest amount of business in any month,—one parcel in March. The Dayton, Ohio, postoffice reported a total of 10,000 packages on December 22, or at the rate of seven a minute for twenty-four hours, exclusive of 200,000 outgoing and 250,000 incoming pieces of mail of first, second, and third classes.

Chicago, of course, handles the greatest number of parcel post packages, because it is the hub of the mail order business. One firm alone sent 8,200,000 packages during the year. Its high one-day record was 40,186 (or, at this rate, 12,377,288 packages during a year of