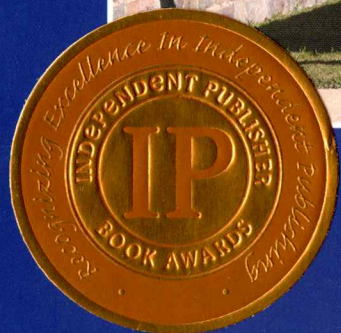


# The Prairie Post Office

Enlarging the Common Life in Rural North Dakota



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Ch. 1 - A History of the Postal Service in  
Northern Dakota Territory &  
State of N Dakota by Kevin Gavell.

WHEN JOHN HENRY TAYLOR WAS working the Missouri River in Dakota Territory in the last half of the 1800s, trapping up and down its tributaries, he and other lonely and isolated frontiersmen needed a place to exchange messages and get their mail. And so a hollowed-out hole in an oak tree in the Painted Woods along the river became their postal box.

The Painted Woods were, in fact, a bit of a focal point for early communication. They were along the east side of the Missouri, between what would eventually become the North Dakota towns of Wilton and Washburn. That stretch of the Missouri River bottoms had a history of being used as burial grounds of Native peoples, notably the case of star-crossed lovers, a Mandan woman and a Yanktonai Dakota man.<sup>15</sup> In lieu, however, of graves dug into the earth, their bodies were placed in the branches of cottonwood trees. When the sepulcher trees themselves died, their bark would fall off and the tree trunks, bleached by the sun and weather, would turn white. For Native peoples, these creamy trunks proved excellent canvas upon which to scratch, often in color,

messages and pictures. Thus, the region got its name: Painted Woods.

While Native peoples also communicated by a variety of other means—couriers, smoke signals, blankets waved from high points, pictographs, and shiny surfaces manipulated to catch the sun—mail delivery arrived with the Europeans. The earliest stirrings came courtesy of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company, whose trapping empires encompassed the western realm of the British territories. Prior to the treaty settling the War of 1812, the companies' domains also dipped down into what would become North Dakota. Even for years after the war and the treaty establishing the boundary, area citizens were uncertain of just where the division line, the 49th Parallel, ran.

In the Red River Valley, the most important southern trading outpost of the English fur traders was at Pembina. For years, it was a gateway for mail headed to and from the far-flung outposts of the British Empire's fur trade. Mail regularly traveled via canoe along the water route—an international network of lakes and rivers that stretched west from Lake Superior and Lake Michigan along the US-Canadian border to the Red River Country.

<sup>15</sup>Dakota Wind, "Painted Woods: A Tragic Love Story," *The First Scout*, Wednesday March 30, 2011, <http://thefirstscout.blogspot.com/2011/03/painted-woods-tragic-love-story.html>.

But well used too were routes from the fur trading settlement of Prairie du Chien in southern Wisconsin and, later, as US expansionism pressed west, from Fort Snelling at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers in Minnesota. From there, carriers went west up the Minnesota River and then north down the Red River to Pembina. Depending upon the season, the mail also took what was called the Woods Route, leaving the Mississippi to head northwest through the forests to what would eventually become Grand Forks and then up the Red River.

Most common in that fur trading era were two outgoing mail and two arriving mail pouches a year — one in the spring and one in the fall. More than one thousand letters and packages might arrive at lonely outposts on one of these eagerly awaited deliveries.

Service was, naturally, uncertain. Addressing a correspondent in 1819, the Catholic priest at Pembina, Father Severe Domoulin, said, "The Vicar General and I wrote you by two express canoes sent by Hudson's Bay Company and I will now take advantage of the North-West Company's express, thinking that perhaps it will arrive before the other even though they are ten to twenty days ahead of it."<sup>16</sup>

Three decades later, Fr. Domoulin's Pembina became the site of the first US Post Office in what is now North Dakota. Although the settlement on the US-Canadian border had existed since 1801, the post office did not begin operations until 1850-51. Its postmaster,

<sup>16</sup>Murray Campbell, "The Postal History of Red River, British North America," *Manitoba Historical Society*, 22 May 2010, <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/3/postalhistory.shtml>.

North Dakota's first, was Norman Kittson, an entrepreneurial fur trader.

Incessant flooding forced that post office to move out of the Red River Valley and up the Pembina River to the only other European settlement in all of North Dakota, a place called St. Joseph's, which we now know as Walhalla. Trader Charles Grant became the first postmaster there.

Pembina, however, soon got a post office re-established and one of its early postmasters was another famous name in North Dakota history, fur trader Joseph "Jolly Joe" Rolette. Because he so often had to be away on business (he served in the territorial legislature and also as a customs official), his Métis wife, Angelique Jerome, handled the mail during his absence. Because she could not read English, when postal customers came calling, she would simply direct them to the mound of correspondence and the patrons would be personally responsible for digging through it, looking for anything addressed to them.<sup>17</sup>

After those two pioneer trading post communities, the next locales to obtain post offices were military outposts: Fort Abercrombie in 1860, Fort Rice in 1866, Fort Buford in 1867, and Fort Totten in 1868. Then came postal facilities in pioneer villages—Grand Forks in 1870 and, in 1871, Fargo and Wahpeton, and a handful of now forgotten communities: two Traill County places known as Carlton and Goose River, Oswego near present-day Sheldon in Ransom County, and Rose Point in Walsh County.

<sup>17</sup>*ibid.*

Getting the mail to the military outposts was a dangerous process. Initially, a privately operated mail route established in 1867 linked Fort Abercrombie to Fort Ransom, Fort Totten, Fort Stevenson, and Fort Buford. Lonely stations manned by just two men were set up every fifty miles. Mail deliveries were scheduled three times a week. But the plan collapsed almost immediately when the employees abandoned their perilous posts or were killed.

The army took over the route, generally sending out two-man parties, usually civilians, once a week. The most hazardous stretch was between Fort Totten at Devils Lake and Fort Stevenson on the Missouri River. The commander at Fort Stevenson, General Philippe Regis de Trobriand, complained in 1867: "MacDonald and one of the half-breeds came back from Fort Totten today, bringing the mail. The trip was not without dangers. Dog Den [the area around today's town of Butte] is a bad place to travel across any time. There the terrain is broken by sharp hills and narrow ravines, very favorable to ambuscades."<sup>18</sup>

In the spring of 1868, two mail carriers, Joe Hamlin and Charlie MacDonald, were killed near Strawberry Lake south of present-day Velva.<sup>19</sup> Sitting Bull's Hunkpapa warriors were patrolling their territory against the early manifestations of white colonization. Ten days later, Hamlin and MacDonald's replacements, John Brown and Joe Martin, were captured and stripped naked in the

same locale by the same warriors, but both men managed to get away alive.<sup>20</sup>

A month later, still another mail carrier driving a wagon between Fort Totten and Fort Stevenson was attacked near what is now Maddock. Three of the soldiers escorting him were killed.<sup>21</sup> Slain were Sgt. James Devon and Privates Michael Haffin and Louis Martin. After hiding the mail, the survivors retreated to Fort Totten where a relief column was sent out to pick up the dead and salvage the mail.

The route that went south and east from Fort Totten to Fort Abercrombie was safer, but still dangerous, especially because of snow and bitter cold. So that travelers wouldn't get lost, four-foot-high mounds of dirt were heaped upon high points along the trail. If travelers stood atop one mound, they could spot the next off in the distance.

During a blizzard in the winter of 1869, several mail carriers accompanied by three discharged soldiers were caught by the storm between Forts Stevenson and Totten. Three died and the others were found half dead with their limbs frozen.

Many mail carriers were Native Americans, such as La Bombarde, George Koeplin, Blue Thunder, Cool Hand, Bloody Knife, Strikes Two, and Spotted Eagle. They were generally hired by the US Army and often did double duty as scouts.

In his diary, General de Trobriand wrote repeatedly about his concerns for the mail, showing how important that connection to the world was. In March of 1868, he

<sup>18</sup> Lucille Kane, ed., *Military Life in Dakota* (St. Paul, Alvord Memorial Commission, 1951), 138. The term "half-breed" reflects the attitudes and terminology of the day and does not represent the perspectives of the authors.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 287-89.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 328.

moaned, "How tired I am . . . of this isolation from the rest of the world to which we are bound only by irregular communications at twenty to forty-day intervals and which leaves us with no news of our relatives, with no correspondence with our friends."<sup>22</sup>

Five years later, in Bismarck, the first arrival of mail at the new post office—the home of Linda Slaughter—created a scene. Since there'd been no mail for weeks, Slaughter had gone for a horseback ride. On her return,

I saw that the house was surrounded by the entire population of Bismarck, men, women and children, all seemingly in a state of great excitement. I never thought of the mail but concluded that the house must be on fire, and galloped up as fast as my horse could come. In the door stood the mail carrier vigorously defending the mail sack against the attacks of several able-bodied citizens who were trying to take it away from him. I was greeted with a ringing cheer as I came up, and half a dozen pairs of long arms were outstretched to lift me from my horse, and I was carried bodily into the house, the whole crowd bursting in after us with a whoop and a hurrah.

Those who got letters snatched them up with exclamation of delight and some shed tears of joy. Those who got none were correspondingly depressed and a number came back afterward to be assured once more that there really was no letter for them.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 237–38.

<sup>23</sup>Linda W. Slaughter, *Fortress to Farm or Twenty-three Years on the Frontier* (New York: Exposition Press, 1972), 137–38.

In winter, the military used horse-drawn sleighs and dog sleds, and in the spring and summer steamboats carried the mail on both the Red and Missouri rivers. Beginning in 1859, a stagecoach line delivered the mail between Fort Abercrombie and Fort Garry in Canada. Horsemen and dog teams, including famed scout George Northrup, also carried the mail on that route.

It was not always Native warriors who were of concern. The Montana Vigilantes, led by blood-stained Flopping Bill Cantrell, were supposedly hunting rustlers through Dakota Territory and Montana in 1885, but may have lynched more innocent men than guilty. One victim on their murderous crusade was a blameless Métis mail carrier named Gardupie who was tied up, shot, and thrown in a lake near Dogden Butte.<sup>24</sup>

As the state moved out of its frontier era and into its period of European colonization and settlement, postal officials labored to get mail to a mushrooming population. From just a couple thousand white settlers in the 1870s, the state had more than three hundred thousand by 1900 and almost six hundred thousand by 1910. Mail service expanded in a frenetic, rough and tumble, but still surprisingly effective fashion.

Humble sod homes, homestead shanties, and isolated ranches doubled as prairie post offices. At Ranger, in the Badlands, an old shepherd's wagon served as the post office in the 1920s. And before Grassy Butte got its famous sod post office, bags that carried each owner's brand were filled with mail and hung on a post for settlers to collect. On occasion,

<sup>24</sup>Joseph Henry Taylor, *Frontier and Indian Life and Kaleidoscopic Lives* (Valley City: Washburn's Fiftieth Anniversary Committee, 1932), 176.

however, range cattle would disturb the bags and mail blew across the countryside.

At Rhame is Post Office Butte. Before the town began, outgoing mail was lodged under a rock ledge on the butte. When travelers headed north to Medora or Dickinson (fifty to seventy-five miles), they would gather up the accumulated letters for delivery to postal officials.

Since many of the remote post offices did little business, some postmasters could not be troubled to stay at their duty stations all day. When carrier Frank Bryant traveled his route between Napoleon and Ashley, he sometimes found the post office in a ranch house called Youngstown locked up. That did not discourage him—he would wiggle in through a window, make the mail exchange, swipe a can of tomatoes to eat, and be on his way.<sup>25</sup>

In Griggs County, the first postmaster was Frank Taper. He operated the Durham post office from the home of his sister and brother-in-law, the Andrew Durhams, who were hunters and trappers on the Sheyenne River. After an argument during which the brother-in-law brandished a pistol, Taper grabbed the mail and fled to a neighbor's. The next day, his sister and brother-in-law, both now armed, seized the mail back.<sup>26</sup> Postmaster Taper was not heard of again.

So important was mail service that anxious neighbors in the Badlands seventeen miles south of Medora agreed in 1908 that they would personally put an addi-

tion on Luroff and Maggie Holdren's log cabin at Hanly so it could house a post office. It did business until 1920.

Providing a post office out of one's home was more often altruistic than for monetary gain, recalled Harold Kildahl, whose family settled northwest of Devils Lake in 1883:

The post office proved to be a nuisance, more trouble and bother than it was worth. While we were proud to be on the map, even a very small map, when the post office was moved to Maza, it proved to be a relief. Somebody had to be on hand constantly to serve the occasional patron, but there was little if anything in it financially. To convey some idea of the small volume of post office business transacted, I received a fancy check from Washington in the amount of 18 cents for three months work.<sup>27</sup>

To cobble together a living, a postmaster had to do more than just handle the mail. In Fargo's first days, a sign over the door of Postmaster Gordon Keeney's tiny building (120 square feet) declared it to be the postal service while a marker on the door said it was the land office and a window banner indicated it was also the home of his law practice. In addition, it was Keeney's dwelling place and that of a friend, and on the roof, he grew lettuce. But before he had the building, he was a walking post office, carrying the mail around in his coat pockets until he met his postal patrons.<sup>28</sup>

Many early post offices were located inside a business, usually a general store, but sometimes a

<sup>25</sup>Nina Farley Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday* (Ashley, ND: *The Ashley Tribune*, 1941), 63.

<sup>26</sup>*Griggs County History* (Dallas, TX: Griggs County Heritage Book Committee, 1976), 6.

<sup>27</sup>Harold B. Kildahl, Sr., "Westward We Came," *North Dakota History* (Winter 1994): 17.

<sup>28</sup>Clarence A. Glasrud, ed., *Roy Johnson's Red River Valley* (Moorhead, MN: Red River Valley Historical Society, 1982), 331

hotel or other establishment. And although the mail business wasn't particularly lucrative, the store owner had a steady stream of postal customers coming through his doors who might also buy something from his retail stock.

Known as Litchville, Jacob Hanson's combined store and post office was in LaMoure County. But when in 1900 he learned that the railroad was laying track six miles north in Barnes County, he hoisted up his building in the middle of the night and moved it.<sup>29</sup> He kept the name Litchville, but forgot for a year to tell postal officials that he had transplanted their facility into another county.

Railroads were the natural way to get the mail transferred from point to point. But trains didn't stop regularly at the smallest prairie places. To get the mail aboard, the mailbag from the post office was hung on a pole that extended next to the tracks and was snatched as the train roared through.

But Si Jordan, the depot agent at Oriska, was napping when the Northern Pacific came through one day. And he was without his pants, having taken them off to prevent them from wrinkling while he slept. Hearing the train whistle, Jordan awoke with a start, grabbed his pants in one hand and the mailbag in the other, and sprinted out to the platform to see the train rumbling by. And, just in time, he tightly held onto the mail bag and threw his pants on board. (Two days later, when the train made its return trip, his pants were thrown off.)<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Litchville, North Dakota, 1900-2000 (Jamestown, ND: Litchville History Book Committee, 2000), 295-96.

<sup>30</sup>John A. Conway, ed., *Oriska 1881-1981* (Fargo, ND: Oriska History Committee, 1980), 137.

There were other hazards. Post offices suffered late night burglaries and daytime stickups. And, sometimes, fleas. At Williston, coyote pelts were being shipped out when one parcel broke open and thousands of fleas escaped.<sup>31</sup> To rid himself of the curse, postal employee Orville Springer had to take numerous baths in kerosene.

All told, North Dakota had almost two thousand post offices at one time or another. The peak year was 1900 when there were eight hundred seventy. As settlers from the final burst of homesteading almost immediately began to thin out and farms consolidated, prairie post offices started their decline.

Several other factors played critical roles. The advent of rural free delivery to the front yard of most farms and ranches diminished the necessity of a nearby post office. Those rural carriers picked up outgoing letters and packages and even sold postage for them. And the widespread use of automobiles dramatically extended the range of rural carriers and also the ability of prairie postal patrons to access a distant post office.

With the improvement of automobiles and, equally important, roads and highways, the rural population was no longer tied to the nearest village and its abbreviated retail services. Those wide spots in the road declined and their stores shuttered. Often, the last establishments left standing were the post office and a tavern. Patrons always fought the closing of their handy local post office, but they were almost inevitably unsuccessful.

In recent years, the postal service has been under enormous economic pressure to close even more post offices. Part of that comes from the tectonic shift in

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<sup>31</sup>William E. Shemorry, *Best of the Best Little Stories of the Twentieth Century* (Williston, ND: Shemorry Photo and Publications, 1999), 130-31.

package and correspondence delivery. Alternatives like FedEx and UPS, cheap long distance telephone rates, and the explosion of the internet slice into the post office's traditional business.

Part of the dilemma comes from the government itself. In 1971, following the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, when the Post Office became the quasi-independent US Postal Service, it was cut off from government support. Public service seemed no longer top priority. Instead, the paramount consideration was the need to maximize income. That led to increases in rates, declines in service, and a further shuttering of post offices. More recently, a conservative Congress hostile to public postal service operations created another enormous economic burden by ordering the agency to prepay all its pension obligations for fifty to seventy-five years into the future, a demand made on no other public entity or private corporation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>"Waiting for Deliverance," *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/node/21554221>.

Nonetheless, North Dakota still had four hundred fifty towns with post offices in 1985 and today, over thirty years later, almost three hundred. A recent attempt to padlock seventy-six of those was beaten back by an outcry from those communities, but the Postal Service, using a back-door approach, cut the business hours of many. Some locations were left operating as little as two hours a day.

Post offices have been an essential component of a vibrant community life, a critical player in stitching together the nation. Particularly in the wide spots along the prairie roads, the hamlets and small towns, the post office has been the heart and the core of the community. No other governmental function has so proven itself such a vital element in the construction and maintenance of democracy, serving every citizen equally, touching the life of every American.