

Railroads and the U.S. Mail

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume III, No. 18. September 28, 2011

How the mighty have fallen! We never thought we would be feeling sorry for the Post Office -- but we are! The current Postmaster General paints a dire picture of the financial condition of the U. S. Postal Service. In a twist of irony, U. S. railroads, currently prospering, can afford to be rather ambivalent about the precipitous decline in demand for mail services and the apparent bankruptcy trajectory of U.S.P.S.

Mail contracts were coveted by stage-coach, steam-boat and railroad companies. We recently ran across an 1847 annual report of the former RF&P railroad, in which the company president was lamenting "difficulties with the Postmaster General". That was a constant, on-going, situation for about 135 years. The Post Office held a whip hand and used it liberally. Representatives of the Postal Service could be extremely difficult. At times they seemed arbitrary and capricious. Contracts were awarded and terminated, to make a point, or to drive a hard bargain. Service-standards were sacrosanct. Punitive "service-failure" fines were imposed upon railroads. An RPO clerk (railway post office) could "bad order" his RPO car for what often seemed to the railroad a petty complaint. Admittedly, railroads have their own arrogant reputations to live down!

On the other hand, the Post Office and the nation's railroads made a great team for about one-and one-third century of U. S. history. Arguably, first-class mail service, within most geographic regions, was as good or better than as it is now. For example, the long-running three-cent first-class stamp, of yesteryear, would carry a letter from Richmond's Broad Street Station to Manhattan, from a 9:00 p.m. drop into the public mail chute, and then to the RPO car on the overnight train to New York. RPO clerks sorted mail enroute, resulting in next-morning delivery within the City. This was not an unusual example. [Admittedly, coast-to-coast rail service could not compete with air-transport of first-class mail.]. Then there was the Parcel Post service offered by the Post Office - essentially the equivalent of UPS and FedEx of today -- which generated thousands of rail carloads of priority transportation each and every night across the nation. All of this helped financially support and sustain the once-vast rail network of passenger trains, many of which also carried Pullman sleeping cars.

The partnership began to unravel in the 1950's with "space-available" diversion of regular, first-class, mail to air, provided the airlines had capacity, otherwise, the rails were expected to be on standby to handle such mail. This was diversion of regular, 3-cent mail, not premium "Air Mail" for which the Post Office charged substantially more. Then, in the 1960's, the Post Office accelerated their diversion of mail from rail to truck. Finally, they took the Parcel Post, or what was left of it, after the emergence of U.P.S. and FedEx. This contributed significantly to the end of the nationwide private passenger train network that finally died with the coming of Amtrak. While some former "parcel post" still moves via rail (UPS), private railroads are clearly better

off financially, but the Post Office obviously isn't -- perhaps not even the nation, if the full cost of the Post Office's air and highway alternatives to rail were ever to be known?
