



News from the American Philatelic Center
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For Immediate Release

7/18/2008/1599

Vintage RFD Mail Wagon at STAMPSHOW 2008



Sturdy, practical, and reliable, one-horse Mail Wagons including the rare survivor shown above — which will be on display at StampShow 2008 in Hartford — extended home mail delivery for the first time to the rural households of 30 million Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century. The wagon is much like the one pictured in the period photo used on the 32-cent Rural Free Delivery Centennial stamp, released in 1996.



Those who enjoy the history of U.S. postal operations will have a rare opportunity to visit with a veteran at APS STAMPSHOW 2008 in Hartford — a late 19th-century U.S. Mail wagon from the dawn of Rural Free Delivery service in America. The wagon will be on display throughout the August 14-17 show at the Connecticut Convention Center.

Shown nearby, the U.S. Mail wagon dates from approximately 1896, and was acquired from a Pennsylvania auction house and professionally restored, an outstanding example of its kind. It is the same design of one-horse wagon that was pictured in the period photo reproduced in 1996 on a 32-cent stamp commemorating the centennial of Rural Free Delivery service in the United States.

The mail wagon appears courtesy David H. Wordell, a former nuclear submarine test engineer turned algebra teacher who was a Connecticut state finalist in NASA's "Teacher in Space" program.

Now retired, Wordell and his wife Lois operate the Olde Ransom Farm, a colonial-style horse and sheep farm in Salem, Connecticut, where he also maintains an active interest in antique carriages and sleighs. An ardent lifelong conservationist and local historian, Wordell has created three multi-image documentaries, one of which — "Bronco

Charlie: Rider of the Pony Express" — is being presented at APS STAMPSHOW 2008.

As Wordell observes, "Not many of these wagons have survived and it is difficult to determine their route usage," though its sale in Pennsylvania makes it likely that is where it was used. Indeed, its clean design and somber simplicity are reminiscent of the Amish wagons that ply the rural roads of the state to this day. Wordell also notes that the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission placed a "Rural Free Delivery" marker in the town of New Stanton, just southeast of Pittsburgh. The marker reads, "On November 24, 1896, the U.S. Post Office Department established Pennsylvania's first two rural routes here in Westmoreland County. One operated from the post office here in New Stanton; the other operated out of nearby Ruffsdale. The nation's first five rural carriers had started out the month before on routes in West Virginia, and by 1905 the U.S. had 32,000 routes. They proved instrumental in breaking down rural isolation."

Rural Free Delivery service began in 1896 as an experiment in West Virginia, extending the home mail delivery that had become common in cities and towns for the first time to farmers and others living in the countryside. Prior to RFD, those living in rural areas would travel, perhaps once a week and often several miles over abysmal roads, to their local post office to send and receive their mail.

Postmaster General John Wanamaker first suggested Rural Free Delivery in 1889. Wanamaker's interest in rural America and his large department store mail service business may have been a contributing factor in his suggesting an RFD service. Congress had been reluctant to institute free rural delivery, seeing the nation as too large for such a service and predicting financial disaster. RFD became an official part of the U.S. Postal Service in 1902.

Rep. Thomas E. Watson of Georgia, a friend of the Farmers' Alliance, was the author of the first free rural delivery legislation, enacted in 1893 and providing \$10,000 for the RFD experiment. Petitions in favor of such a service poured in to Washington from local and state organizations of the National Grange and from other farmers' organizations. In 1896, Congress added another \$10,000, and Postmaster General

William L. Wilson decided to test five rural routes in his home state of West Virginia. Between the autumn of 1896 and the spring of 1897, mail flowed along 82 pioneer routes in both sparse and populous areas, scattered through 28 states and the territory of Arizona. Wilson is credited with launching RFD "experiment," which grew in popularity as Congress provided more funding.

In 1902, there were not more than 8,000 RFD routes in the nation. Three years later, there were 32,000. By 1915, the number of rural mail carriers was 43,718, as against 33,062 city mail carriers. Routes continued to be organized until the mid-1920s, and, in 1925, the number of rural mail carriers reached 45,315. Afterward, consolidation of routes based on the use of automobiles brought sharp declines. In 1970, there were 31,346 rural routes extending 2,044,335 miles, an average of about 65 miles per route.

James H. Bruns, former curator and deputy executive director of the National Philatelic Collection, and the founding director of the National Postal Museum, has an abiding interest in the history of the technology used to carry the U.S. mail, and some perceptive observations on RFD service in his 1996 book, *Horse Drawn Mail Vehicles*.

He notes that when RFD service first appeared, some rural residents didn't know quite what to make of it: "One asked the carrier to 'please feed their chickens and water the cows and the mule in the stable and if the bees have swarmed put them in a new hive. We have gone visiting.'" Others initially worried that mail might be stolen from their roadside mailboxes.

Quite aside from the convenience of mail delivery, Bruns reminds us, "One of the most important side effects of Rural Free Delivery was the increased attention that was given to the nation's miserable roads. ... In order to obtain...a rural mail route, a local road had to be maintained in good condition... When a road being used for RFD service fell into disrepair, the local postmaster was ordered to have the local patrons fix it or cut off their mail service." The improved roads that resulted from this effort not only made it easier for those who lived on them to travel and bring their goods to market, but also quite literally paved the way for one of the next great innovations of the 20th century — the automobile.



Owner David H. Wordell, who acquired the U.S. Mail wagon in a Pennsylvania auction, thoughtfully photographed two of the user-friendly features in its otherwise austere design. At left is a removable oblong tray subdivided into boxed sections into which mail could be conveniently presorted by the carrier before he set out on his rural route. At right is the seat of the wagon — its thick cushions a must on the heavily rutted, muddy, bumpy rural roads of the day — with a back rest that folds down for secure storage of small parcels or packages safely pinned in place and out of sight.

To find out more about STAMPSHOW 2008 August 14-17 in Hartford, visit www.stamps.org/Stampshow/intro.htm