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Jan 2000

# Historical Society

## Of Pottawattamie County

January 2000

### Member Newsletter

#### Quick Takes

##### Winterfest Brings Additional Visitors

The squirrel cage jail logged over sixty visitors as a part of the Winterfest celebration December 4th. Several group tours have also been booked for throughout this winter.

##### New Officers Take the Helm

Results of the annual election of officers and board members was announced at the annual meeting January 16 and the new officials installed. The elected officers are: Gale Foutch, president and Bob Hastings, secretary. Elected to the board of directors were Jim Knott, Ken Milford, Darlene Vergamini, and Ralph Wright. Those elected will serve two year terms.

##### Genealogy Committee Busy Behind-the-Scenes

Committee chairman Alice Bontz reports a brisk pace of requests for genealogy research this season, with as many as ten received via the internet in one week.

## Successful End to Celebration of 100 Years of Historic Rock Island Depot

Our 1999 holiday season at the RailsWest Museum and HO Model Railroad marked the end of our Centennial Year and our best overall season yet. Our attendance figures and admissions have steadily increased each year especially since 1995 with improved publicity and advertising.

A big hit again this holiday season with the little ones was a hands-on Thomas the Tank wooden railway display and the two "O" gauge trains that the kids could operate themselves. We had some families return several times.

A big thank you is in order for Society members and friends who volunteered to staff the depot: Gale Foutch, Ken Milford, Robert Howerton, Harold Nielsen, Marv Lausen, John Blake, John McLellan, Gary Larimore, Mark Hessel, Jack Okerberg, Chuck Sharys, Mike Thomas, Darlene Vergamini, and Bob Hastings.

We also sincerely appreciate the generous support of our media sponsors: The Daily Nonpareil, Omaha World Herald, Union Pacific Railroad, radio stations KOMJ, KOTD, and KFAB and television stations WOW, KMTV, KETV, and KPTM.

We were very fortunate to have decent weather for each of our six weekends.

Railroad coloring books and travel schedules were provided by Operation Lifesaver and Amtrak.

*(Contributed by Marcia Hastings)*



As one of this month's feature articles looks at the Railway Post Office system, we thought this month's trivia question should involve mail.

Certainly the mail has been an important part of everyone's daily life and as such has been a part of the subject of many songs over the years. Can you name five songs that mention mail in some way? We came up with ten, but admit we may be stretching a bit with a couple of them! See page 7 for our list.

# *Mail By Rail*

## *A Century of the Railway Post Office*

It seemed like a brainstorm of an idea to speed the mails... the mail had to be transported anyway, why not accomplish two tasks at the same time and sort it while it was being moved? Apparently the idea was solid, as it withstood the ultimate test of success, the test of time. For over one hundred years mail was sorted on the rails as it was whisked toward its ultimate destination.

As recently as the 1950's 93% of all non-local mail was processed aboard the RPO's, with a peak of over 200,000 miles of track and 600,000 miles covered by RPO's every day.

The system was more than just rails, cars, and mountains of mail; the most important feature were the men staffing the cars... a unique breed by many accounts. As one author described it, "The railway mail clerk is a fascinating study in human psychology. His steadfast attention to duty, superior intellect and memory, stamina, and sterling honesty are all proverbial."

Mails were first carried by railroad in England in 1830. In the United States, that same year, New Yorker Peter Cooper tried to accomplish the same. He attempted to win converts to steam locomotive power for the newly formed Baltimore and Ohio Railway by staging a thirteen mile race between his experimental locomotive, made using old musket barrels for boiler tubing and whatever other parts he could obtain. The "Tom Thumb" threw a pulley belt and lost the race to a gray horse, and the mail contract once more went to the horse-drawn stage. It is said there is nothing as powerful as an idea whose time has come and of course the iron horse replaced the gray one a short time after.

England also claims the record as the first to establish a rail route with mail sorted on board, the first such route being between Liverpool and Birmingham. Officially the first railway post office in this country was created in 1864 (Philadelphia to Lancaster, Pennsylvania), though two

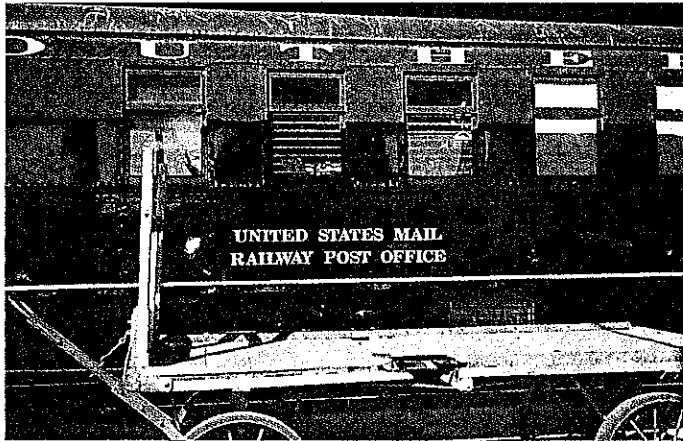
years earlier a Missouri postmaster experimented with sorting mail onboard the train between Hannibal and St. Joseph to shorten the amount of time it would take to get the mail ready to continue its westward journey on the Pony Express. The Pony Express rider could not leave until the mail from the train was readied. The first "catch" of mail on the fly came shortly after, in 1869.

The railway mail service found its niche, and has been heralded as one of the most valued postal innovations in the history of mail delivery. As one route proved successful another was quickly added until by the early part of the century day and night the mails were picked up, sorted, and dropped off while trains sped between thousands of towns. The effect was remarkable; in less than 30 years the amount of time it took a letter from the east coast to reach the west went from 20 days by stage to 10 days using the Pony Express for the western leg of the journey to 4 days (as early as 1889) using the RPO system.

## Mail by Rail, continued...

Given the speed of the trains and the fact that the RPO crew continued their duties all throughout the darkness of the night getting the mail off at exactly the right time was a great deal more involved than just seeing the station platform and tossing out a bag. As one RPO veteran commented after working an RPO that was part of a

to recognize their approach to each station platform and mail crane. In what probably could best be described as much art as science the veteran clerk developed a system by which he went by the sound or "feel" of the tracks as the train raced over switches, bridges, and grade crossings.



swift cross-country streamliner "I never really actually saw a station, just a bunch of blurs going by!" The clerks were given lists of landmarks by which

actually dates back to sorting mail aboard horse-drawn wagons in 1896, but the first major integration of HPOs didn't occur until 1941. (Continued next page)

## The Long Commute...

I thought "commuting" to work was a concept born out of the suburban sprawl of the 60's. I thought the folks in Southern California held the record, with reports of two and three hour drives and traffic snarls. In researching this article I discovered some RPO men dutifully made a trek far eclipsing the worst Los Angeles interstate backup just to get to work... all a part of the job, except instead of "commuting" they called it "deadheading".

I knew my father frequently worked on an RPO between Omaha and Chicago back in the days when he "ran on the road", but I just figured he

climbed aboard in Omaha or Council Bluffs (his home), worked the mail to Chicago, and after a break worked the mail back home again. It wasn't until recently I learned his "headout" was Chicago... meaning he had to "commute" or "deadhead" to Chicago just to get to work, which ironically, took him back to his home!

This fact doesn't make being stuck in a traffic jam on the way to work any more appealing, but somehow does perhaps put it in perspective; some folks have put forth a great deal more to earn a living.

(Dick Warner, editor)

## Subbing On the Road

The Railway Post Office was hardly a traditional workplace, and as such it's not surprising that many unusual situations arose, ranging from the humorous to the dangerous. Perhaps taking the worst share of the burden was the sub.

So imagine... here you are, the green sub; you've done this before, a couple of times on other lines, and you are ready today, holding your catcher arm out nice and straight, right on cue... as the mail pouch sails past *on the other side of the train*. Oops, nobody thought to tell you that on the C&NW line the stations are on the opposite side of the tracks!

You brought your lunch and found a nice place to put it... one of those local town bins. Never gave it much thought until you realized another clerk just tied out that basket... which he thought was mail... and just shot your lunch out the door.

Naturally the job of getting the coffee for the crew falls to the new man. My father tells of one coffee run in Corning, Iowa. All proceeded according to plan until another train pulled into town, blocking Dad's return path to his RPO. After the second train left Dad could see his train just starting to pull away, so he took off down the tracks chasing it, official RPO coffee bucket sloshing in his hands as he ran. He made it... thanks to some help from colleagues onboard who pulled the stop cord. Reportedly the conductor was not amused, apparently not considering a misadventure on a coffee run to be a bona fide enough emergency to stop the train!

(Continued next page)

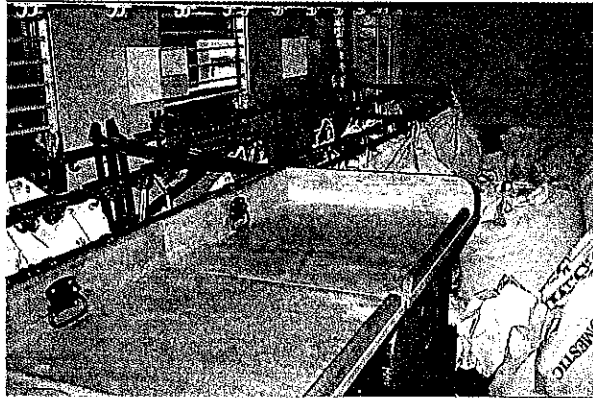
## Mail by Rail, continued...

The final unraveling of the RPO's can probably be linked to suburban sprawl; in the 1960's new post offices were being built for brand new communities... suburbs... that didn't have rail lines serving them. This meant less mail could be sorted in transit, leading to more mail having to be sorted in these new post offices, and the postal service found costs soaring. In response they embarked upon automation and mechanization to try and revolutionize mail distribution once again in the way

that the RPO's were able to do over a century earlier. In addition the sheer volume of mail that needed to be moved skyrocketed exponentially, severely tax-

system... the last "catch on the fly" was accomplished April 30, 1971.

It's interesting to note that while the RPO's aren't running on the rails



any longer, the concept of moving mail by rail initiated in the 19th century has made it quite handy all the way into the 21st century as well.

Though no longer sorted in transit mail is still very much being

***"With no officials to observe them at work, clerks handle billions of dollars on their honor - all are promptly delivered in safety."***

ing a system dependent upon sorting by hand.

The RPO's continued alongside the ZIP code and new machines for a time, but gradually yielded to the new

moved by rail; Amtrak, for example, dedicated a new \$3 million dollar mail and distribution facility just last month and reports the United States Postal Service as their largest commercial customer. *(Dick Warner, editor)*

*Information for "Mails by Rails" and associated side-bars was drawn from the following sources: the US Postal Service "Stamp Train" RPO exhibit (displayed at various places around the country; we caught up with it in Lincoln last fall), the excellent postal history exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry (Chicago), Pony Express Museum and Pattee House Museum (both St. Joseph), exhibit at California State Railroad Museum (Sacramento), American Academic Encyclopedia, Amtrak press release ([www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)), "The Story of the Postal Transportation Service" (Bryant Long & William Dennis), and most importantly from my father, Robert Warner, Sr. Bob Warner started his career in the postal service as an RPO sub, an assignment that sent him on many different routes and no doubt provided many interesting (or even hair raising) experiences! Due to his new family (the impending arrival of his first born, yours truly your editor) Dad transferred off the road to the Council Bluffs mail terminal, and later the Omaha Post Office. Dad is now enjoying his retirement after nearly four decades with the postal service. He and Mom (Clara) will be celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary this spring.*

## Subs, continued...

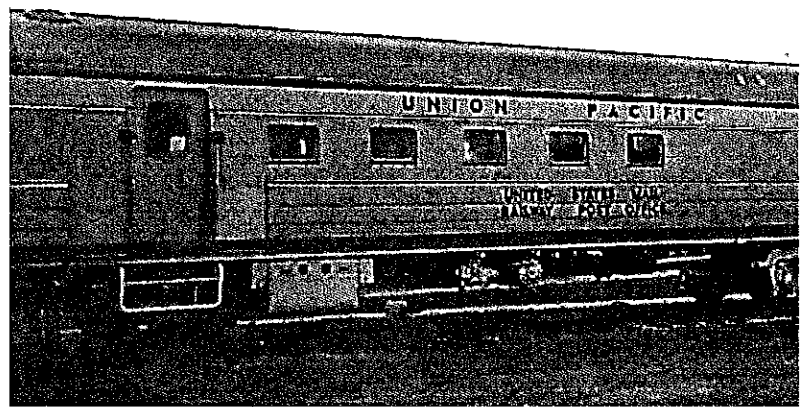
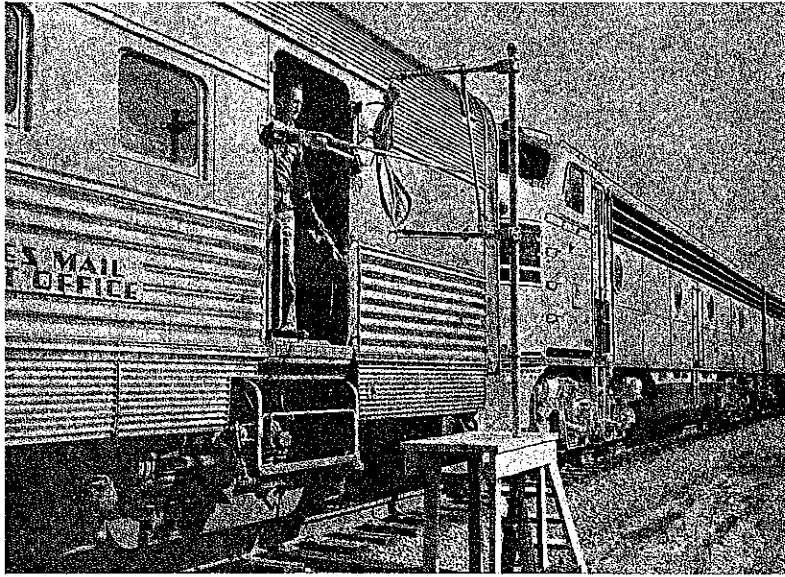
No matter how much one was ready, some things just require experience. They said hold that catcher arm out straight... you did... just as the train banked, going around a curve, leaving the catcher arm neatly flying over its intended target.

Some towns got more than just a sack or two of mail so the clerk would stack the bags up and kick them out the door at the proper moment. It was inevitable that an occasional shoe would be lost at the same time. A kind station master would have it in the outbound bag ready for the catch on your next pass through town.

Timing was everything; a little off and the bag misses the platform. What to do? Put a note in a bag to the next town to be sent back to the past town via the opposite train telling them where to find their mail. One clerk simply wrote to the station agent: "Go West". Of course there was the time the bag rolled into the lake...

Dad tells of the time in Omaha, as a sub, he climbed aboard "Burl 10" to Chicago expecting a full crew. The train pulled out of Omaha with him alone in the RPO and "mail stacked up everywhere!" No time to panic; he was alone and Pacific Junction was just a few minutes away, and he had to get a bag ready. He hurriedly made up a label from some scrap paper on the floor and furiously started sorting mail at a frenzied pace so Pacific Junction wouldn't be missed, all the while thinking this was going to be one long trip. Dad finally did get some help; the crew had been deadheading to Omaha and their train was delayed, so they got off in Corning and joined him there for the rest of the journey to Chicago.

*From the Archives*



# Feature Focus

Each and everyone of us from time to time have gotten disgusted with the condition of our streets and how timely we thought that services should be available to us. Read the following from an 1853 ordinance and compare it to today.

## [NO. 14] - - - AN ORDINANCE

Concerning Street Labor. Be it ordained by the Common Council of the City of Council Bluffs:

**Section 1-** Every male person between the age of 21 and 50 years, who shall have resided one month in said city, shall be, and are hereby required to perform two day's labor on the streets or alleys of said city, under the direction of the Street Supervisor, or to pay two dollars in money as an equivalent therefor, to the Supervisor, to be expended for the use of said city on said streets or alleys.

**Section 2-** The Street Supervisor is authorized and required to demand of every such person the performance of said labor, at any time within, commencing the first Monday in February, giving at least three days notice, verbally or in writing, as may suit his convenience, of the time when and place where the same is to be performed; and if such labor shall not be performed, or it's equivalent in money paid, within the time limited by such notice, the party shall be deemed to be in default, and liable to be proceeded against.

**Section 3-** It shall be the duty of every person owing street labor to provide himself such tools as may be required by the Supervisor, to perform faithful day's work, and to follow the directions of the Supervisor, as to the time when, the place where, and the manner how such work shall be performed.

**Section 4-** Any person who shall make it appear to the satisfaction of the City Council that he is unable to perform such work, or pay the two dollars in lieu thereof, may be excused; in which case the Recorder shall duly notify the Supervisor.

**Section 5-** The Supervisor shall, when directed by the Council, procure by him, or purchase the necessary tools, implements, carts, horses or oxen; shall make suitable provisions for the safe keeping of the same, while under his control and care; and at the expiration of his term of office, shall return to the Recorder an accurate descriptive list of the same, and also deliver the same to the Mayor of the city.

**Section 6-** Subject to the approval of the City Council, the Supervisor shall have power to make arrangements with private individuals for removing earth from private lots, cellar places, or alleys whenever such earth can be advantageously used in filling and grading the streets; and he shall faithfully account to the Council for any money which he may receive therefor.

**Section 7-** It shall be the duty of the Supervisor to repair, without delay, any street which shall have been rendered unsafe or impassable.

**Section 8-** If the Supervisor shall willfully neglect or refuse to perform any duty required of him, by this or any other ordinance, he shall be fined not less than \$5 nor more than \$50, and may moreover be removed from office by the Council. **Section 9** If any person, subject to perform street labor, shall neglect or refuse to perform such labor, or pay an equivalent therefor in money, after due notice, or performing such labor shall refuse to be controlled or directed by the Supervisor, as to the manner and place of doing such work, or shall fail to perform a faithful day's work, he shall be fined in any sum not exceeding \$5 or less than \$3, and shall moreover be imprisoned in the county jail until such fine and costs are paid for, a term of time discretionary with the Mayor or jury which may be impaneled to determine the question of guilt.

**Provided:** That if any person, failing to perform such labor, or to pay two dollars at the time required shall make a satisfactory excuse therefor to the Supervisor, he may be excused, and shall perform the labor, or pay the two dollars at any other time when required by the Supervisor.

Approved May 14th, 1853  
C. E. Stone, Mayor

C. W. Boyers, Recorder

(Contributed by Cathy Danielson; Source: Chronotype, March 28, 1855)

# Nostalgia...

We who are "over sixty" have been witness to more changes - good and bad - than any other generation from Adam and Eve on. Wow! What a time to have lived! Consider the changes ... we were born before television, before penicillin, before polio shots, frozen foods, Xerox, plastics, contact lenses, Frisbees, and the Pill. We were before radar, credit cards, split atoms, laser beams, and ball point pens, before pantyhose, dishwashers, clothes dryers, electric blankets, air conditioners, drip-dry clothes...and before man walked on the moon.

We got married first, and then lived together. How quaint can you be? We thought fast food was what you ate during Lent, and outer space was the back of the Strand Theater.

We were before house husbands, gay rights, computer dating, dual careers, and glass ceilings. We were before day-care centers, group therapy and retirement centers. We hadn't heard of tape decks, electric typewriters, artificial hearts, word processors, yogurt, and guys wearing earrings. For us, time-sharing meant togetherness ... not computers or condominiums. A "chip" meant a piece of wood, hardware meant hardware and software wasn't even a word.

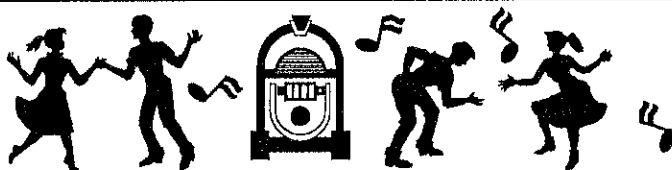
"Made in Japan" meant junk and "making out" referred to how you did on your exams. Pizzas, McDonalds, and instant coffee were unheard of.

We hit the scene when there were 5 and 10 cent stores where you bought things for 5 and 10 cents. Kelehers and Evans sold ice cream cones for a nickel or a dime. For a dime you could ride the streetcar, make a phone call, see a movie, buy a Pepsi or enough stamps to mail three letters and a post card.

In our day, cigarette smoking was fashionable, grass was mowed, coke was a cold drink, and pot was something you cooked in. Rock music was Grandma in a rocking chair, humming a lullaby, aids were helpers in the Principal's office, and mother was one word - not two!

We were certainly not before the difference between the sexes were discovered, but we were surely before the sex change — we made do with what we had. And we were the last generation that was so dumb as to think you needed a husband to have a baby. No wonder we were so confused and there is such a generation gap today! But we survived and what better reason to celebrate!

*(Contributed by Darlene Vergamini)*



## Mail Music...

*How well did you do recalling songs mentioning something to do with the mail? Here's what we came up with; you may well have done better... we're particularly weak in the area of country music and most anything newer than the past 20 years or so!*

Return to Sender- Elvis Presley

P.S. I Love You- Beatles

Love Letters in the Sand- Pat Boone

The Letter- Box Tops

Dear John- Pat Boone

Signed, Sealed, Delivered- Stevie Wonder

Please Mr. Postman- Marvelettes

Teardrops on Your Letter- Hank Ballard

Letter Full of Tears- Gladys Knight

Twistin' Postman- Marvelettes

Sealed With a Kiss- Brian Hyland

# Indian Creek in History...

Indian Creek, the paternal ancestor of Broadway, was not always known by that name to the people of Council Bluffs. With that aptitude of expression and fidelity to nature that is a national American trait the early pioneers gave it another name that finds full explanation in a statement in the "Council Bluffs Bugle" of Friday, June 9, 1854, that "between 50,000 and 75,000 emigrants have passed down Broadway and camped along the creek within the last eleven months." Perusal of the old newspapers discloses the fact that the stream was only referred to in print and in polite society as "The Creek" but in the rough, truthful vernacular of the street it was called "the Lousery" without a blush or a challenge to the correctness of the appellation. The washing of the garments of more than 50,000 emigrants in the stream in one season undoubtedly gave ample foundation for the selection of the name. The time when the name ceased to be deserved and was changed to the present classic cognomen is not revealed in the annals of the town now available for inspection,

but it must not have been until a new generation had arisen who had never seen the discoveries the emigrants had made on washdays on the creek bank.

Yet, the name of Indian Creek appears in the earliest literature of the town. Odd as it may now seem, it was the name applied to the larger stream now known as Mosquito Creek. The bugle of June, 1854, is ample authority for the statement, for it contains numerous references to "Indian Creek, a beautiful stream flowing nearly 100 miles through western Iowa," and in a lengthy advertisement luring settlers to "The Beautiful Village of Iranistan, situated forty-five miles east of Council Bluffs City, on either side of Indian Creek," the stream is described as furnishing certain water power "as ample as near Council Bluffs city." But the classic name for the Mosquito must have perished with the "beautiful village of Iranistan," and it earned its present name in the same way as did the little stream in town. With tens of thousands of emigrants following its course for miles, seeing no Indians but

attacked by millions of mosquitoes, no other name than "The Mosquito" could survive. Changed civilization has not changed the name creating conditions, and the mosquitoes will continue to perpetuate their ancestral fame in maintaining the justness of the name.

*(Contributed by Darlene Vergamini; taken from the Nonpareil, Sunday, May 23, 1909)*

## Photo Credits

*Most of the photos in this month's newsletter were taken by Barb Warner. The two exceptions are the upper left photo page 5 and the one directly beneath it; these were found by the editor in an antique store several years ago with no other information about them available; the clerks in this photo are unknown. The subjects in the photo in the right hand column of page 5 are (left to right) newsletter editor Richard Warner, former RPO clerk Robert Warner, Sr., and Mike Warner. Mike (age 11) is also a Society volunteer; he is the one who most months affixes the address label to your newsletter.*

**Historical  
Society**  
Of Pottawattamie County  
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