

RURAL FREE DELIVERY MAIL SERVICE IN COLUMBIA COUNTY

INTRODUCTION: *In the nineteenth century farmers lived in isolation without access to daily newspapers and the absence of modern communication of telephones and radios. For farm families to get their mail or send a letter or package they had to travel to the nearest post office either in a town or at a country general store. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, farm organizations such as the Grange and the National Farmers' Alliance strongly advocated the expansion of postal service to rural areas. Farmers wanted free mail delivery service as city and town residents enjoyed.*

Due to years of lobbying efforts of farm organizations along with the active support of Postmaster John Wanamaker, Congress decided in 1893 to fund a pilot program to determine the feasibility of establishing a rural free delivery service. After a number of delays, Charles Town, West Virginia, in 1896 became the first place in the country to start rural free delivery of mail. With this new postal service, mail order businesses such as Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward became strong supporters since it created the potential for increased sales.

However, there was opposition to establishing RFD. It came from privately owned express companies that saw the federal government as a competitor and thousands of general store owners who feared a loss of business. If a general store had a post office, it helped to create an advantage by attracting more customers over its competitors that did not have one. Clearly, owners of general stores understood that over time this advantage would disappear as RFD became widespread. Often local governments were not particularly enthusiastic about RFD routes in their areas. Postal authorities required that RFD routes had to have good roads which could mean new expenses and increased taxes to upgrade country roads and bridges. Despite the dissenting voices of critics who opposed this new service, Congress in 1902 made it a permanent program of the Post Office Department.

The Morning Press on March 2, 1903, published an article about RFD service in Columbia County. In the opening paragraph it declared without any reservations that "Rural Free Delivery has brought to the farmer the conveniences of the town, while he has at his hand the luxuries of the country." This is somewhat overstated when you think of town "conveniences" such as public water, electricity, sewer lines, and available stores. However, it is still worth noting that it helped to erode the farmer's isolation, contributed to getting better country roads, increased opportunities to purchase items from mail order firms, and as Nathan Nicholson, a farmer near Newcastle, Indiana, stated: "I am taking two daily papers now and took none before. I send and get more letters since this has started. We can keep better posted on the war, markets, weather, politics, etc. It has got me spoiled."

The account is mainly a report by Robert S. Bowman, Berwick postmaster, who was responsible for establishing RFD routes in the Berwick area. It was also his leadership that gave Berwick the distinction of being the first community in the area to have free general delivery. When he died on January 10, 1930, he had been Berwick's postmaster on three different occasions for a total of twenty-five years. His first appointment was in 1885, and he served until 1892; the second time was from 1900 to 1909, and his last time was from 1922 until he died. It was during this time that the appointment of postmasters was often a matter of political patronage. Before his postal career, Bowman had been the owner and editor of the Independent, a Berwick newspaper. The title of his article, "Development of Rural Delivery," follows:



The advent of the Rural Free Delivery service into Columbia County will eventually result in the revolutionizing of the life of the Columbia County farmer. Instead of being in touch with the news of the week, he is now in touch with the news of the day. And what a difference! The Rural Free Delivery has brought to the farmer the conveniences of the town, while he has at his hand the luxuries of the county.

All questions of its success have passed. The farmer wants it and will have it. In Columbia County there already are ten rural delivery routes and it is only a question of a

comparatively short time until at least four more will be placed in operation. Soon the entire north side will be webbed with this, the greatest agent in the development of the farmer of today. Then, too, it is only a matter of comparatively short time until the Free Delivery service is extended to the South side, the importance of which cannot be estimated by those who do not now enjoy its privileges.

To R. S. Bowman the Berwick postmaster belongs the honor of having first taken up the Free Delivery movement in this county, and through his arduous efforts, four routes were established. In point of experience with the service he is probably the best informed in this section and the following interesting article will therefore be of more than passing interest and will carry more than ordinary weight:

"It may be stated as a pretty sure proposition that Rural Free Delivery has come to stay. The experimental stage has passed and it is now a feature of the Government that is destined to grow and expand until daily mail will be the rule, instead of the exception, throughout the entire United States. While it is true that in a few communities there have been critics that have opposed the inauguration of the service and given their best efforts toward bringing it into ill favor, yet I have no knowledge of the patrons petitioning for the discontinuance of any Rural Free Delivery route after it had gotten into good working order. The troubles and inconveniences that beset the carriers and postmaster at the beginning of the service are innumerable and can be appreciated only by those who have gone through the work of getting a couple of routes into effective condition. If you add to these natural annoyances the hindrances that are thrown around the work by the objectors found in some communities, it will be seen that the virtue of patience is one of the necessary equipments in starting a rural route. We make claim for the Berwick service that it is a positive success. We have been fortunate in having in our three carriers men who are thoroughly capable of the work they have assumed and enough interested in the service to give it their best attention. It is but just to them that it should be recorded here that in the seventeen months of our service we have not had a single complaint of carelessness or inefficient work. Take three men in almost any other avocation and such a record would be considered phenomenal. Honor, then, to who honor is due. It should be borne in mind that the Rural Free Delivery business is not a fair weather job. Whether the mercury is hovering near zero, or a ninety in the shade; whether the dust is six inches deep, or the mud then – the rural carrier gets there just the same. He is expected by his patrons, and he never disappoints.

"Since the first of October, 1901, our three rural carriers have traveled 25,415 miles – enough to have encircled the globe. In weight they have carried just about four tons of mail – matter; or, by actual count, 225,044 pieces. The tiller of the soil may now be as thoroughly in touch with the affairs of the world as his brother in the town, for his daily newspaper is brought to this door by the rural carrier. Just think of it: the farmers ten miles back from Berwick may read during the dinner hour *The Morning Press* printed at five o'clock in the morning. Money order and registry business are conducted by the rural carriers, and as these features become better understood the patrons of the routes will more and more avail themselves of these special privileges.

"Our three routes thoroughly cover the territory between the Knob mountain and the river, from a point about three miles east of Berwick westerly almost to Light Street. It should not be many years before new routes, in connection with ours and those of Benton and Millville, ought to cover the entire rural territory of Columbia county.

"If persons predisposed against the service will honestly make inquiry among the patrons of the routes already established, they will become convinced that Rural Free Delivery is one of the greatest services ever inaugurated by the Post Office Department, bringing to the suburban population many of the benefits so long enjoyed by the cities and larger towns."

Berwick, Pa. R. S. Bowman, P.M.

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