A BIRD’S EYE VIEW OF THE POSTAL SERVICE OF THE UNITED STATES DURING THE PAST FISCAL YEAR
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It is difficult to appreciate the amount of work done by the United States Post-office Department by the perusal of a magazine article. The figures are so colossal and all statistics are on so large a scale. The machinery which renders effective the affixing of a two cent stamp to a letter in New York and its deposit in a box to convey news, good or bad, to a miner in the Klondyke or to a soldier in the Philippines keeps 120,000 persons in direct employment, and about 20,000 others who help to absorb the $102,000,000 which are annually expended by Uncle Sam for this service. And yet this machinery, the working of which is arranged in the department at Washington, is relatively simple; and the new and perplexing problems which, especially since the Spanish-American war, are continually arising are handled with but little friction or delay, at least delays which are apparent to the public, though often the lights in the department building burn till midnight and the position of the government clerk ceases to be a sinecure. Most of the chiefs and officials in Washington have risen from the ranks and have had practical experience of the work on which they are engaged.

There are two main branches, the post-office service, which receives the great bulk of the mails and makes the final distribution, the fixed branch; and the railway mail service with its various adjuncts (steamboat, star service, etc.) which transports the mails from one place to another.

The first branch is in charge of 75,000 postmasters at as many offices. The offices are classified as first, of which are 176, second, 789, third, 3,028 in number and fourth, 71,007. They are also divided into Presidential and Non-presidential. A Presidential office is where the postmaster’s salary amounts to not less than $250 per quarter for four consecutive quarters, and the gross receipts for the same time amount to $1,900. When any office has paid the above amount for four consecutive quarters and gross receipts amount to $1,900 or more, it is then advanced to the Presidential class.

Presidential offices cover three of the classes, first, second and third. A first class office is one in which the gross receipts are over $40,000 per annum, the salary of the postmaster of the same being from $3,000 to $6,000. A second class office is one where the gross receipts amount to $8,000 and not exceeding $40,000 per annum, the salary of postmasters of this class being from $2,000 to $2,900 per annum. The third class office is one where the gross receipts are $1,900 and not exceeding $800(0) per annum, the postmaster getting $1,000 to $1,900 per annum.

The non-presidential or fourth class office comprise all offices where the receipts are less than $1,900 per annum, or where the salary or where the salary of the postmaster does not amount to $250 per quarter for four consecutive quarters. The salaries in these offices may be anywhere from 10 cents per annum up to the maximum of under $1,000.
Presidential postmasters are appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. Fourth class postmasters are appointed by the Postmaster-General. The total salaries of all postmasters are about $17,000,000 per annum.

There are 14,845 clerks employed in first and second class offices and an allowance of $50,000 is made to provide necessary clerical help in offices of the third and fourth class, though in these offices the postmaster and assistant postmaster are often expected to do all the work without assistance, and are sometimes overworked in consequence.

In the 735 offices where the free delivery service is in operation there are 15,216 letter carriers, and the laborers, porters, 2000 special delivery messengers and miscellaneous employees make up a total of about 110,000 persons in the post-offices. All the carriers, and practically all the clerks in first and second class offices, are appointed through competitive examination under the provisions of the civil service act of 1883. The other great branch of the postal service, which provides for the carrying of mails between offices, is the railway mail service, with its adjuncts. This system has a total length of 177,747 miles and employs 8,460 clerks who receive and distribute mail in specially constructed cars as accurately in the flying train as in the post-office. And the accuracy is marvelous, only one error to every 10,000 pieces distributed, and there are 75,000 offices in the U.S. alone to which a piece of mail be addressed. This accuracy is only acquired by hard study, tested at frequent intervals by what are known as “case” examinations where the number of addressed cards are to be sorted in a given time, the correct distribution being afterwards checked and errors noted, and a clerk who frequently falls below 95% in his case examination is within hearing distance of serious trouble. The adjuncts of the railway mail service are the steamboat routes of which there are 178, covering 31,169 miles: towns and villages remote from lines of railroad or steamboats are supplied by what are known as “star routes” (from the fact that in all official statistics they are designated by a *). There are 22,482 of these routes covering 269,452; they are let to contractors, the lowest responsible bidder getting the route and the contractor often sub-lets them to others, so that the work is not done by a government employee in the strict sense of the word. Probably the longest of these star routes is the one from Valdez to Eagle and Circle City, Alaska, one round trip per month, $1,415 per trip one way for the first 100 pounds of mail and $200 for each additional 100 pounds. There are also mail messenger routes for temporary purposes, until regular services can be provided.

Uncle Sam’s share of the cost of transporting foreign mails was $1,653,000 for the last year. A number of contractors, temporary messengers and carriers on star routes make up the army of 140,000.

This is the machinery and it costs money to run it. $95,021,384.17 was received during the past year and $101,632,160.92 expended, leaving a deficit of $6,610,776.73 to be paid by direct deficit at all is due to the abuse of the privileges accorded to second class matter, which under the law is carried at 1c per pound, while costing 8c per pound to transport, causing an annual loss of over twelve millions of dollars, or twice the total deficit. This class was intended to include bona fide newspapers and periodicals only with paid subscription lists, but novels in serial form, advertising circulars (“house organs” they are called) and undue numbers of sample copies causes the disproportionate amount of this class of matter. There are bills before Congress to restrict the use of this rate of postage to legitimate publication, but the opposition to such bills on the part of publishers and merchants is naturally great.
Now if the reader has absorbed a slight idea of the stupendous character of this service, he will naturally enquire as to the result. And *they* are somewhat colossal. During the past year there were:

6,576,310,000 pieces of mail handled with the total weight of 664,286,868 pounds. And, remember, each piece is handled several times.

16,086,022 pieces of registered matter were handled, yielding a revenue of over one million dollars.

5,473,605 special delivery stamps were used, which brought a clear profit to the government of over $130,000.

4,917,269,025 postage stamps, stamped envelopes, postal cards, etc., were issued to postmasters, with a face value of over ninety millions of dollars.

And the appointment division wasn’t idle either, nor the detective and inspecting force. The former appointed about 15,000 persons, and the latter arrested 1,679. 1,350 of whom were not connected with the service: the rest being employees, only about 630 convictions were secured in U.S. courts and 58 before states’ courts out of these 1,679 arrests. And there are numberless other duties and things accomplished which it would be beyond the scope of this article to enumerate. Take the establishment of the postal service in our new colonies, many articles could be written on the shifts and hardships endured in supplanting the worthless and fraud-ridden methods of the Spanish with a far better, if not altogether pure system.