

THE COST OF RURAL DELIVERY EXAGGERATED

The Eleventh of a Series of Articles Written by an Editorial Representative of this Paper, who Recently Visited the United States, with the Object of Studying the Free Rural Mail Delivery System.

THE great cry of those who oppose the introduction of free rural delivery in Canada has been that the service costs too much. The words "enormous," "tremendous," "ruinous" and others similar have been used so often in reference to the cost of the service, that our people have become like children who have been told that a bear will eat them if they go out alone in the dark; they have taken other people's word for it and are afraid to investigate for themselves.

Who knows what the service does cost? Nobody. Figures can be quoted which will show that the service is more than self-sustaining. Others can be produced which will prove that free rural delivery is a piece of great extravagance. It can be shown that rural delivery has so increased the United States postal revenues that it has reduced the deficit of the United States post office department by several million dollars a year. It can be shown, also, that were it not for free rural delivery the post office department, instead of having a deficit of several million dollars a year, would have a large surplus. It all depends upon which set of figures you use.

THE VIEW POINT IMPORTANT

Which set is right? Neither. The service costs millions of dollars a year less than some people have told us, and it costs more than some others have endeavored to show. It depends altogether upon how you look at it. A post office official from Canada, looking at it purely from a revenue producing standpoint, and comparing the cost of rural delivery with the cost of our present post office system, would be likely to condemn rural delivery vigorously. A deputation of farmers, who know what it costs them now in loss of time going for their mail, and who know what it means to go for days at a time without a letter or a daily paper, would, we believe, after investigating the rural delivery service, declare that the benefits of the service far outweigh its cost.

COST NOT KNOWN

What does it cost? Nobody knows; not even the United States post office officials. The rural delivery service is so interwoven with the whole post office system that it is impossible to separate it. For instance, since the introduction of

rural delivery there has been a great, we might almost say tremendous, increase in the mail handled in the city post offices. Large department stores and other business concerns, have fairly flooded country districts with circulars and "follow-up" letters. This has increased the revenues of the city post offices but, as these increased receipts are shown in the returns of only the city post offices, the rural delivery service does not receive credit for them. There has been, also, a great increase in the mail sent out by farmers. It is impossible to tell just how great this increase has been. As a result of rural delivery thousands upon thousands of the smaller country post offices have been discontinued. The number can be estimated only approximately. The savings thus effected are considerable, and should not be overlooked.

Under our system our farmers, for the most part, have to go for their mail, or do without. They thus are taxed indirectly. The rural delivery system removes this tax. This is a consideration that the average post office official would not be likely to count.

OUR REPORTS COLORED

A few years ago our government sent two post office officials to Washington to investigate the rural delivery service. At that time the service was still growing rapidly. Many of its early defects had not then been overcome. These officials, in their report, a copy of which is before me, say, "In the course of our communications with the several officers of the post office department, it was obvious that the service was very popular. In the matter of obtaining positive information as to the eventual scope and cost of the service * * * our visit was not specially successful."

These officials, however, as a result of their investigation, drew conclusions that indicated that, were rural free delivery to be introduced in Canada, the cost would be enormous and altogether out of proportion to the benefits that would be derived therefrom. To a considerable extent their conclusions, at that time, were justified. It is evident, however, from a perusal of their report, that they looked at the question almost entirely from the standpoint of the post office department. They wanted to find if rural delivery was, or ever would be, self-sustaining. They concluded that it was not paying its way,

that it was not likely to *and, therefore, that it should not be introduced into Canada. Had these officials been accompanied by a couple of Canadian farmers their report, probably, would have been considerably different than it was. They acted by themselves, however, and their report has been used by the Dominion Government as a justification for refusing to give the benefits of rural delivery to our Canadian farmers. It is time, now, that our farmers had all the essential facts before them. The subject is a big one, too big to be more than touched on in this article. One point, however, may be referred to.*

THE COST EXAGGERATED

Almost the first thing one finds, when investigating this side of the question, is that the figures purporting to show the cost of the service, that have been given to us by our leading government officials, have been, in some cases at least, very misleading. They have over stated the cost of the service.

Postmaster General Lemieux, speaking in the House of Commons on February 15, 1907, is shown by Hansard to have said:

"In the United States it (rural delivery) has not been a great success. It has involved the post office department in a succession of annual deficits ranging from \$15,000,000 to \$16,000,000."

Speaking again on this question in April, 1907, Hon. Mr. Lemieux, said: "In the United States the rural delivery system has caused a deficit in the post office department of something like \$17,000,000 or \$18,000,000 a year."

THE REAL DEFICITS

What are the facts? These:—The greatest deficit the United States post office has had in any year since rural delivery has been established, was \$14,572,584. This was in the year 1905. In 1905 the deficit was \$10,516,995, and in 1907, or last year, only \$6,692,000. It is only fair to state that these facts have been brought out in the House of Commons by Mr. J. E. Armstrong, the member for East Lambton, who has studied the rural delivery service in the United States thoroughly, and who is by far the best informed member in the House, on this question.

It is unfortunate that misleading figures of this kind have been quoted and given such wide publicity. It will be some time before their influence can be counteracted. This is unfair to those of our farmers who are in favor of rural delivery. Further information bearing on the cost of the service will be given in the next few articles of this series.—H. B. C.



RURAL DELIVERY RIGS AT OWATONNA, MINNESOTA, READY TO START OUT ON THEIR ROUNDS.

In portions of Minnesota the rural delivery service is so complete that practically every farmer has his mail delivered daily at his door. Great interest is taken in the service, not many sections, anywhere in the United States, having any better vehicles than the ones here shown. The rural delivery service is considered to have increased the value of the farms all through the state.