

# Uncle Sam, Expressman

The Parcel Post after Eighteen Months of trial—How it has altered the relations of the Cities to the Country and what it has

Done for People that Live in more Remote Districts

By JAMES MIDDLETON, in *World's Work*

Well, the thing has finally been done, after more than thirty years of unceasing agitation, ordinary articles of merchandise and domestic use can now be deposited in the United States mail. An effective parcel post is no longer merely a favorite subject for magazine discussion and high school debates; it is a practical, accomplished fact. In every American city and town, a constant line of people forms before a window labeled "Parcel Post;" they hand in their packages, have them weighed for postage and inspected for proper packing, and watch with contentment as the attendant throws them into a large receptacle, which, when full—and it fills with amazing speed—is wheeled off to the mailing department. Every city letter carrier shows evidences, in a somewhat more bulkily filled shoulder bag, of the new dispensation; and brightly painted "screen wagons" and automobiles, packed to capacity with miscellaneous bundles, are dashing thru every city street. On every country road the wagon of the rural carrier, for many years yawning half vacant for an adequate load, has now found its occupation; in more remote recesses the lonely star route man, making his way over mountains and thru forests on horse, mule, wagon, stagecoach, or even snow shoes, plays his part in advancing civilization. At certain times of the day the mailing departments of the large city post offices are piled mountain high with bundles and packages; forces of shirt-sleeved men work day and night sorting them out, throwing the smaller into their appropriate bags, placing aside for careful treatment the parcels marked "fragile" and "perishable," and loading into mail wagons the bulging canvas sacks. The rapidity with which these enormous masses disappear under expert handling, the expedition with which they find the way from sender to receiver, the comparatively few complaints made about breakage and losses—all these things emphasize again this quiet revolution in transportation.

European travellers no longer express their amazement at the hostility of the American post office to articles of merchandise. They do not now call our attention to the fact that one can send packages more cheaply from San Francisco to Germany than to Oakland or Sacramento. John Wanamaker's four famous reasons for the absence of a parcel post—always quoted in an article like this—are only reminiscently amusing. The flaming wrath against the express companies has changed to one of pleased satisfaction. The express companies themselves, in place of their former arrogance, are now pleading for mercy. One has announced its intention of suspending; the others have their backs against the wall in a struggle for their lives. In other directions the parcel post shows its influence. For the first time since 1852, the Post Office Department has what seems to be an actual surplus. Already its success is stimulating thought along similar lines. Governmental ownership of telegraphs and telephones is the announced policy of the present post office administration; whatever one may think of the same idea applied to railroads, it is unquestionably a more practical issue than it has ever been before. The importance of the parcel post, therefore, goes far beyond the service immediately rendered. Its demonstrated success thru several years is likely to change fundamentally our conception of government. What, then, have been the results so far?

## Results So Far

Up to January 1, 1913, when the new regulations went into effect, the United States had really had no complete system for the transportation of merchandise. The railroads were practically the

only agencies used for this purpose. They transmitted the bulkier kind of freight at their own profit and their own risk. They had always regarded this kind of business as properly their affair; it was, in fact, their largest source of revenue. For some strange reason, however, they had farmed out the transportation of smaller packages—articles that needed to go quickly on passenger trains—to private companies

emphasized sufficiently the evils, real and imaginary, of this system; these evils, however, did not constitute the basic iniquity. The social and economic wrong is apparent when we carefully study a railroad map of the United States. These railroad systems naturally penetrate only the commercially profitable regions. They link together the cities and towns and those sections of the country where business

no way of enjoying even the expensive service performed by express companies. So far as this element was concerned, they were isolated from civilization. They lived in little towns and ranches, in lumber and mining camps, on inaccessible farms. They represented a valuable and worthy element in the population; precisely the type of pioneer and agriculturist that the government is attempting to encourage. They were found, not only in far Western and middle Mississippi Valley states, but largely in the longest settled communities. There were hundreds of thousands of them in New York, in Pennsylvania and in New England. The express companies ignored these people simply because it did not seem profitable to serve them.

The government, however, had organized its mail service on a different principle. It long ago adopted the policy of putting these people into communication with the rest of the world, whether it paid or not. It did this on the broad principle that without a mail service life would be so unattractive that the settlement of the country would be delayed; and that city concentration, admittedly one of the great evils of the time, would be intensified. National policy thus regarded it as necessary to subsidize the mails in these regions, for the same reason that a subsidy for general education is justified. For several years it has indirectly taxed the people from \$40,000,000 to \$50,000,000 a year to bring the mails to these districts.

In this way the government had built up a great and financially unprofitable plant. It had about 42,000 "rural carriers," who collected and delivered mail in the country. In addition it had about 12,000 men known as "star route" contractors. These picturesque individuals operated in sections where there were no railroads at all. They themselves performed the mail service that railroads perform in more thickly settled sections. The rural carriers really operated in a circle; they took the mail from the railroad points and carried it into the surrounding country, going back to the original headquarters. The star route contractor operated in a straight line, from post office to post office and return. Originally his business was simply to carry the mails from post office to post office; as time went on, however, a certain amount of delivery work developed.

Until January 1, 1913, the American citizen could mail a package weighing not more than four pounds at the rate of one cent an ounce. The total postage, on four pounds, was thus sixty-four cents. That was the American parcel post as it existed up to that time. As a result of the limitation in weight and the high tariff, merchandise, in practical quantities, was excluded from the mails. The enormous and expensive plant the government had built up to serve these 20,000,000 people was lying almost idle. In these days of scientific management, that was probably our most glaring illustration of inefficiency. On January 1, however, the situation changed. The mails were then opened to packages weighing eleven pounds—afterward, in the first two zones, increased to fifty pounds, and in all others to twenty pounds—at comparatively low rates. In a twinkling the plant that had been largely idle and unproductive became a useful, going organization.

## No Hardship to Rural Carriers

Greatly as this change stimulated postal business it brought no particular hardship upon the working force. Congressmen may talk eloquently about the sufferings the parcel post inflicts on rural carriers; in the main, however, these speeches are merely for political effect. The rural carrier, in most instances, has never been an overworked

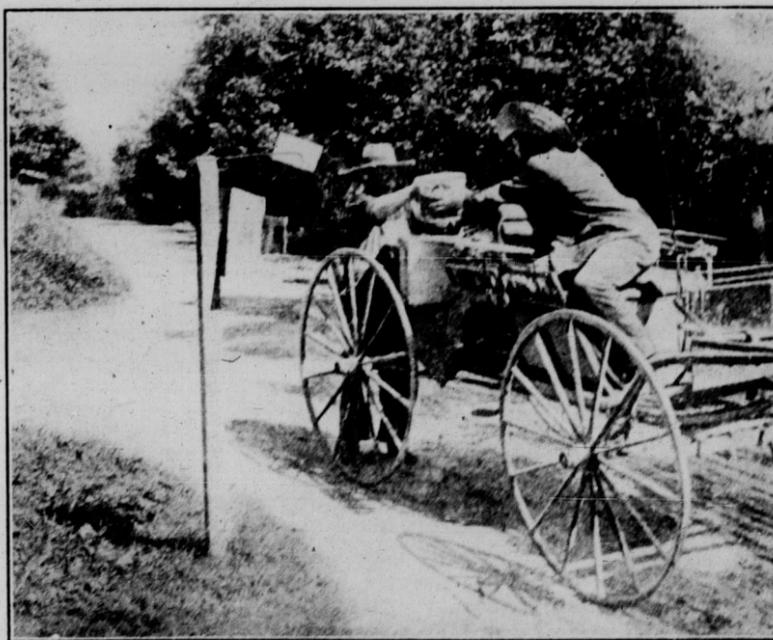
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Some Kinds of Mail Matter that now go by Parcel Post

These companies made a business of collecting such parcels in cities and towns and of delivering them in places of destination. With the exception of guarding them in transit, by means of messengers placed in baggage cars, the express companies performed no other service. The real work, that of hauling the parcels, the railroads did themselves; their capital, represented by

accumulates in considerable quantities. The express companies, having no transportation systems of their own, and being dependent absolutely upon the railroads, do the same thing. They furnish a service only where the railroads go—in the centres of large population. They skim the cream of the business. Unless one lives on a railroad line, or conveniently near to one, he has no ex-



A NEW BOND BETWEEN THE COUNTRY AND THE TOWN  
A Farmer Sending his Produce to a Customer in the City by way of the Parcel Post

press service at all. And in the smaller country districts reached by railroads the express service is only half what the large centres obtain; there is no "pick up" and delivery service: one has to carry his parcels to the station and call for them himself. Now there are 20,000,000 people in the United States—one-fifth of the population—who live in sections not reached by any railroad. These people have had

track, stations, cars, locomotives, was what really performed the express service. The railroads and the express companies were practically partners in this work. The express companies did not pay a graded rate for transportation as did private shippers; they made certain charges to the public, generally regarded as exorbitant, and divided these receipts almost equally with the railroad companies. Popular writers have