

Engineering Department

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Rural Mail Delivery and Road Improvement.

The following extracts from the address of the Hon. A. W. Machen, General Superintendent, Free Delivery System, Post Office Department of the United States, delivered at the Buffalo Roads Congress in September last, are indicative of the value of good roads in one matter alone. A rural mail delivery is not the only benefit of which bad roads are depriving us. Mr. Machen said:

No other branch of our great postal system is as far-reaching in its effect as the rural free delivery service. It means the extension of the post-office to the doors of the people. The rural letter-carrier is, in fact, a travelling post-office, performing practically all the functions of a postmaster. Besides delivering and collecting ordinary mail, he delivers registered letters, registers letters, sells stamps and stamped envelopes, cancels the stamps on the letters he collects, and receives money en route for the purchase of money orders. He is an anticipated and welcomed visitor to the country home, and becomes a fixture in farm life.

It is no wonder, then, that the people want a service of this kind, and that the demand for it has become more and more urgent until to-day it is practically universal, and not to be resisted. The people are determined to have it, and after receiving it are bound that it shall be efficient and satisfactory. This it cannot be unless the roads over which it is operated are in good condition. Good roads are indispensable to really efficient rural service. It is essential that the service be performed with regularity and punctuality. It must be a daily service, and the patron must be reasonably sure that the carrier will pass the gate at about the same time every day. A well-built and well-kept road will permit of such a service; over bad roads it cannot be maintained. Even though a carrier is able to cover his route over bad roads, the time consumed is often from one to three hours in excess of what it should be were the highway in proper condition. A good rural service, then, means good roads, and as the people insist upon the former, they must eventually obtain the latter.

It should, therefore, be apparent to anyone who gives the subject careful consideration that the good roads propaganda, which started some years ago with the progressive people of our country, must receive a powerful impetus from the establishment of this new and popular service.

It may be said that the only obstacle now encountered in the extension of rural free delivery is the unimproved condition of our country roads. In many sections of this country the roads are what are

called dirt or mud roads. They are narrow and tortuous, and the only work done on them is practically confined to going over them with a road machine or scraper once a year. The principal effect of this work is to pile up in the middle of the road all the muck and rubbish which has accumulated on the sides during the rest of the year, so that in wet weather, unless the soil is very sandy, the whole surface becomes rutted, and is soon converted into a series of mud-holes. This is particularly the case in most of the farming sections of the middle west, and to a large extent in the south; also as far east as western New York and Pennsylvania.

The department soon became convinced that steps should be taken to remedy these conditions if a desirable rural service was to be provided. When it was demonstrated that the rural free delivery service would become a permanent feature of the postal service of the United States, the Post Office Department promptly laid down as one of the requirements for the establishment of rural free delivery that the petitioners for the same must agree to place the roads to be traversed by the proposed service in a passable condition, and keep them in repair throughout the year. Petitions including the agreement that the department's requirements will be met are promptly referred to special agents for investigation. A special agent drives over the highways of a proposed route, and is required by the regulations to make a special report on their condition. In many instances special agents find themselves obliged to exact a pledge from road supervisors or other officials having charge of the building and maintenance of public highways that the roads will be improved before the service is established, and kept in proper condition after the same has been put in operation. In Iowa alone over one hundred agreements have been entered into between county commissioners and special agents of the rural free delivery service to open, repair and maintain roads.

This plan is producing very good results. Reports come from all sections of the country to the effect that, prompted by a strong desire to obtain free rural delivery, the people are not only insisting on the improvement of roads in advance of the service, but that creeks have been bridged, in many instances by substantial stone bridges, for the special accommodation of the rural letter-carriers.

Now that I have shown what the department is doing to bring about an improvement of the public highways in advance of the establishment of rural free delivery, I will briefly explain the efforts it is putting forth to effect a betterment of the roads where the service has been in operation for some time, and where failure in the

past to maintain daily trips on account of the poor or impassible condition of the roads during certain seasons of the year, has brought forcibly to the attention of the department the absolute necessity of repairing these roads to insure a continuance of the rural free delivery service. After routes have been established and in operation for some time, route inspectors have been sent out at regular intervals to make a general investigation of the rural system. Among other points on which they report are the quality and condition of the highways traversed. These inspectors are required to specify definitely such portions of the highways travelled by rural carriers as are impassible, and to give the names and addresses of the road supervisors, or others in authority, who are responsible for their repair and maintenance. In addition to this information the department has gathered data from more than 2,400 of the rural free delivery post-offices bearing upon the condition of the public roads.

This information has been received in answer to the following questions:

What is the condition of the roads travelled by the rural carrier?

Were the roads impassible at any time during the past winter?

If so, for how many days, and for what cause?

Are the roads being properly repaired this year?

If any roads need attention, give name and address of road supervisor or other official.

It is the intention of the department to continue on these lines, and by every possible means to point out to the people that a prompt and regular service can be provided only where good roads are maintained. Postmasters are requested to report from time to time on the condition of the roads, and in that way the department will be kept continually and intelligently in touch with existing conditions. The need for this work may be more clearly shown, and the effect of it on the highways of the entire country may be better understood and appreciated by considering a few figures relative to the rural free service as it exists to-day.

The total number of carriers employed in the rural free delivery service at present is about 5,700; total population served by them daily about 3,500,000; total number of miles travelled each day, about 140,000.

When one considers that no two carriers (with few exceptions,) travel over the same roads, it becomes clear that if the department succeeds in its efforts for good roads on the routes now travelled by the 5,700 carriers, there will be 140,000 miles of good roads in the country districts now enjoying the benefits of rural delivery. At the present rate of increase, the rural service will be practically doubled within the next twelve months, and as it is the