

# Central Illinois Teaching with Primary Sources Newsletter

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
EDWARDSVILLE

CONSTANT MOTION: THE JOB OF  
RAILWAY POST OFFICE CLERKS

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## CONSTANT MOTION: THE JOB OF RAILWAY POST OFFICE CLERKS

Welcome to the 31st issue of the **Central Illinois Teaching with Primary Sources Newsletter** a collaborative project of Teaching with Primary Sources Programs at Eastern Illinois University and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. This will be the last newsletter for the school year so we are moving away from the traditional format to bring you a special newsletter on the Railway Post Office (RPO). On March 6, 2010, the Teaching with Primary Sources program at Eastern Illinois University hosted **Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerks**. This project brought together former railway post office clerks to share and record oral histories about their time on the railroad.

In the 1800s the United States Post Office began to realize the potential of using the railroad not only for transporting mail but also sorting it along the route. Mailbags once left untouched were now opened and the contents sorted as the train sped towards its destination. This idea proved so successful that an Act of Congress on July 7, 1838, declared all railroads postal routes. By the 1900s railroads were essential to the postal service.

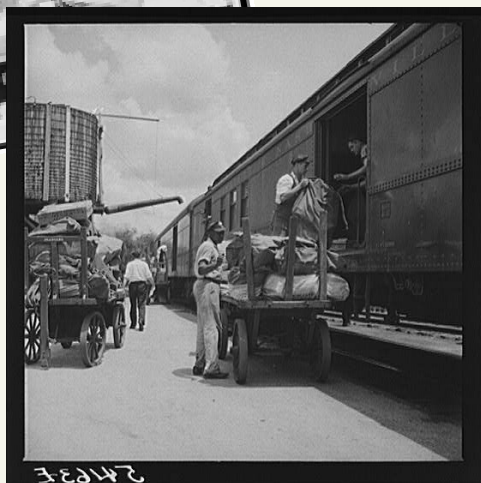
The first railroad cars used by the postal service were wooden and equipped only to sort and distribute letter mail. These cars posed a great danger being vulnerable to fire from wooden stoves and oil burning lamps or total destruction upon impact either by jumping the tracks or a collision. As more railroads began to push west, time became increasingly important to reach every destination. As trains began to travel at higher speeds the number of casualties began to rise. From 1890 to 1900 the RPO had over 6,000 accidents killing over 80 mail clerks and injuring 2,072.

Train wrecks and unsafe railroad mail cars were not the only hazard of being a Railroad Post Office Clerk. In the 1920s train robberies were on the rise. It was not unusual for the mail trains to carry large amounts of money or gold. This proved a great temptation to many robbers and the main reason railway postal clerks were required to carry a .38 caliber pistol.

When exchanging mail, trains would slow down to almost a stop so clerks could exchange mail by hand. This was very inefficient and dangerous. This system was replaced by mail cranes which were a simple steel hook and crane. The mail bags would hang from the crane and attach at the bottom with the hook. As the train sped by, a mail clerk would raise the train's catcher arm to grab the mail bag. "Mail-on-the-fly" was not easy to master. Clerks had to pay attention and know when to raise the catcher arm. If raised too soon, it could hit switch targets or telegraph poles that would rip the catcher arm from the train. If raised to late, the exchange would be missed and the clerk would receive demerits. Clerks had to stay alert because mail cranes could be on either side of the train and there were often numerous cranes within seconds of each other.



*Men working in a railway mail train  
Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs*



*Loading mail into mail car. L & N  
railroad station, North Florida  
Library of Congress  
American Memory*

**CONSTANT MOTION: THE JOB OF RAILWAY POST OFFICE CLERKS**

Catching the mail was only part of the process, the clerk also had to throw or kick the mail for that destination off the train. If the bag was not thrown far enough, a "snowstorm" would occur. This meant the mail bag would get trapped under the train and rip open causing mail to scatter.

Railway Post Office clerks were considered the elite of the postal service's employees. Their jobs were exhausting and dangerous and entrance exams were demanding. A passing score on the civil service exam was 97% or higher. They were required to sort 600 pieces of mail an hour. This was not a test that was taken once and you were assured the job, RPO clerks were tested over and over to ensure their skills remained sharp. The memorization abilities clerks possessed were remarkable. One route was not the extent of their testing. There were different routes just for individual home states plus the routes of other states to be memorized. If a clerk was a substitute, which was how most clerks started, had to know countless train routes with staggering numbers of towns, each with a post office that received mail. Clerks also had to know where connecting trains met so the mail going either north/south or east/west could be delivered to the correct train. It was mind boggling.

These Railway Post Office clerks had stong camaraderie. No clerk rested until everyone was caught up and every piece of mail was sorted. It was truly a "one for all and all for one" atmosphere and each took pride in their job and the responsibility of making sure the mail was delivered.

For 140 years the Railway Post Office operated to allow the mail to be delivered across America. As highways were built across America and the speed of air travel became popular, the U.S. Post Office began to faze out mail trains. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail, by 1970 no first class mail was carried on the railroad. The last Railway Post Office, which operated between New York and Washington, D.C., made a final run on June 30, 1977.

*Smithsonian National Postal Museum, Mail by Rail, Accessed 3.15.10 [http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2c1\\_railwaymail.html](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2c1_railwaymail.html)*

*United States Postal Service, Mail by Rail, Accessed 3.15.10 [http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/\\_pdf/MailbyRail.pdf](http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/_pdf/MailbyRail.pdf)*



*Marines standing with rifles guarding U.S. mail car  
Library of Congress  
American Memory*



*Washington D.C., Unloading mail from a mail car  
Library of*



*Mail train  
Library of Congress  
American Memory*

## LEARN MORE WITH AMERICAN MEMORY COLLECTIONS

**Railroad Maps 1828-1900** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/rrhtml/rrhome.html>

The railway mail service is represented in this collection by the Galbraith maps. Frank H. Galbraith, a Chicago railway mail clerk, designed these maps to assist clerks in memorizing post office routes in several states. The maps were designed in 1897 and were not published but could be rented to prospective postal workers as a study guide. These maps are nothing like ordinary maps, they are truly a work of art. Like a typical map there are names of towns but the maps also have intricate artwork. The artwork gives a clue or hint to remembering the town. Some of these hints are easy to figure out while others require some research to decipher. Frank Galbraith created maps for Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, Nebraska, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri, all are found in this collection. Unfortunately today some of the towns on these maps no longer exist and like the railway postal service are just a fond memory.

*Library of Congress, American Memory, Accessed 3.22.10*

**America from the Great Depression to World War II Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

This collection captures life in America between 1935 to 1944. The Railway Postal Service was at its peak during this time with over 10,000 trains moving the mail. The images in this collection show the postal clerks at work. Loading the mail cars, emptying mail bags and sorting mail were all part of the day of postal clerks.

*Library of Congress, American Memory, Accessed 3.23.10*  
*USPS, Mail by Rail, [http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/\\_pdf/MailbyRail.pdf](http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/_pdf/MailbyRail.pdf), Accessed 3.23.10*

**America at Work, America at Leisure Motion Pictures from 1894-1915** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awlhtml/awlhome.html>

A series of films taken of the U.S. Post Office operations in 1903 is a special highlight of this collection. Most of the postal films were taken in Washington, D.C., quite possibly at the Washington City Post Office (first occupied in 1898 and still standing today, known as the Old Post Office Pavilion). The motion pictures of rural free delivery service (instituted in 1896) were filmed in adjacent areas of Maryland. These films cover almost every aspect of the post office. One of the most unique films shows how mail train used the catcher arm to collect mail while the train continues to speed ahead.

*Library of Congress, American Memory, Accessed 3.23.10*



*Emptying a sack of mail on board a mail car.*

*Library of Congress  
American Memory*



*Sorting mail on board a mail train*

*Library of Congress  
American Memory*



*Fast mail, Northern Pacific R.R.*

*Library of Congress  
American Memory*

**IN THE CLASSROOM:  
LESSON PLANS, ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES**

In this section you will find items pertaining to the current theme that can be used in your classroom. This is a sample of items available through the Library on the Railway Postal Service.

**Exhibitions**

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/>

**Postal Memory Maps** <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr153.html>

**Galbraith Railway Mail Service Map** <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr168.html>

**Prints and Photographs**

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures>

The Prints and Photograph Division does not have a collection specifically for the Railway Postal Service but a search for mail car will have more than 50 results.



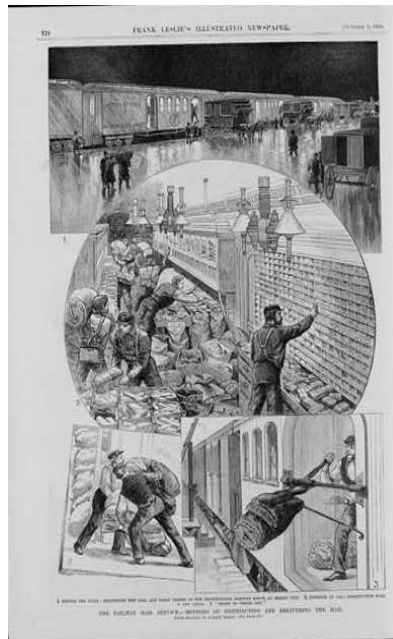
*Galbraith's railway mail service maps, Illinois  
Library of Congress  
American Memory*

**Today in History**

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/index.html>

**July 1, 1847: U.S. Post Office Issues First Stamp** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/jul01.html>

**December 25, 1830: Choo! Choo!** <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/dec25.html>



*The Railway mail service-methods of distributing and delivering the mail  
Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs*

**Teacher's Page**

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/>

**Collection Connections:**

**Railroad Maps, 1828-1900** <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/railroad-maps/history5.html>



*Stick To The Mail Lines! New  
Mail Arrangements For The South!  
Library of Congress  
American Memory*

*Unloading the mail from the morning train. Montrose, Colorado  
Library of Congress  
American Memory*



## TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

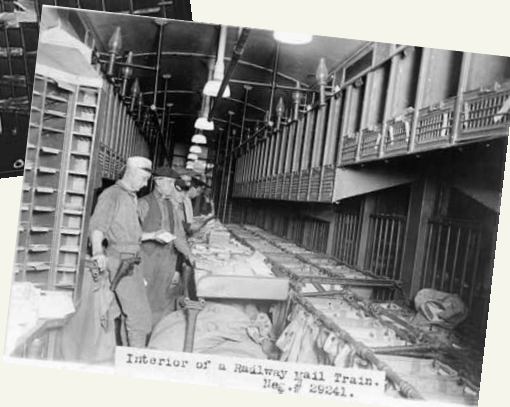
**Railway Post Office Clerk Lingo:** Match the slang words used by Railway Postal Clerks to their meaning.

1. Mail in sacks and pouches consigned to RPO cars to be worked or sorted in transit.
  2. Unloading a storage mail car.
  3. Railway post office clerk.
  4. Pile of mail sacks or parcels occupying the full width at each end of a car.
  5. A shipment of mail consigned to a certain RPO terminal office for sorting and reshipment in other sacks.
  6. Space inside a mail or baggage car containing mail or parcels consigned to a certain destination and separated from other shipments by removable steel posts.
  7. A completely filled storage car containing sixty feet of mail and parcels, equals 100% load.
  8. A shipment of magazines, catalogues, or automobile license plates in small mail sacks weighing approximately 100 pounds each.
  9. Baggage car for the transportation of newspapers exclusively.
  10. Railway Post Office unit, usually at or near the railroad station, where mail is removed from sacks, sorted and forwarded to its ultimate destination.
- A. Tier
  - B. Slugs
  - C. Paper Car
  - D. Working Mail
  - E. Terminal
  - F. Stall
  - G. Uncle Sam
  - H. Terminal Load
  - I. Solid Car
  - J. Working A Car

Catskill Archive, <http://www.catskillarchive.com/rrextra/glossry1.html>, Accessed 3.24.10



Sorting mail on board a mail car  
Library of Congress  
American Memory



Men working in  
a railway mail train  
Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs



Fast mail  
Library of Congress  
American Memory

## IMAGE SOURCES



The Library of Congress  
 Sorting mail on board a mail car  
 American Memory  
 America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945



The Library of Congress  
 Two men working in railway mail car  
 Prints and Photographs



The Library of Congress  
 Loading mail into mail car. L&N railroad station, North Florida  
 American Memory  
 American from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945



The Library of Congress  
 Marines standing with rifles guarding U.S. mail car  
 American Memory  
 Photographs from the Chicago Daily News , 1902-1933



The Library of Congress  
 Washington D.C. Unloading mail from a mail car  
 American Memory  
 America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945



The Library of Congress  
 Mail Train  
 American Memory  
 The South Texas Border, 1900-1920



The Library of Congress  
 Fast mail, Northern Pacific R.R.  
 American Memory  
 Early Motion Pictures, 1897-1920



The Library of Congress  
 Sorting mail on board a mail car.  
 American Memory  
 America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945



The Library of Congress  
 Emptying a sack of mail on board a mail car.  
 American Memory  
 America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945



## IMAGE SOURCES



The Library of Congress  
Galbraith's railway service maps, Illinois  
American Memory  
Railroad Maps



The Library of Congress  
The Railway mail service-methods of distributing mail and delivering mail.  
Prints and Photographs



The Library of Congress  
Stick To The Mail Lines! New Mail Arrangement, For The South!  
American Memory  
Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920



The Library of Congress  
Loading mail into railroad mail car. Carson City, Nevada  
American Memory  
America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945



The Library of Congress  
Sorting mail on board a mail car.  
American Memory  
America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA\_OWI, 1935-1945



The Library of Congress  
Men working in a railway mail train.  
Prints and Photographs



The Library of Congress  
Fast mail/ by E. Brooks  
American Memory  
Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music

### Test Your Knowledge Answer Key

1. D—Working Mail
2. J—Working a Car
3. G—Uncle Sam
4. A—Tier
5. H—Terminal Load
6. F—Stall
7. I—Solid Car
8. B—Slugs
9. C—Paper Car
10. E—Terminal

## CONSTANT MOTION: THE JOB OF RAILWAY POST OFFICE CLERKS

Constant Motion: The Job of Railway Post Office Clerk was an exciting project connecting EIU TPS, WEIU, EIU College of Education Department of Early Childhood, Elementary and Middle Level Education, College of Arts and Humanities Department of Communication Studies and Booth Library at Eastern Illinois University. Some items on loan to EIU TPS from the former clerks will be on display in the Marvin Foyer on the north side of Booth Library. The exhibit will run from April 2 through May 31, 2010. To find out more about this project visit the EIU TPS website at [www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks](http://www.eiu.edu/~eiutps/clerks).



WE'RE ON THE WEB  
[WWW.EIU.EDU/~EIUTPS](http://WWW.EIU.EDU/~EIUTPS)

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If you or your school is interested in learning more about the Library of Congress resources please contact us. Our program offers individualized professional development using the rich resources offered by the Library of Congress.

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EDUCATION/TPS](http://WWW.SIUE.EDU/EDUCATION/TPS)

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