

# The Railway Mail Clerks' Complaint

The following is taken from the Omaha World-Herald:

Demoralization of the mail service as a result of the policy of Secretary Hitchcock has been the subject of comment all over the country. How the railway mail clerk is affected is not generally known for various reasons. Following is the railway mail clerks' side of the situation:

Omaha, Neb., December 28.—To the Editor of the World-Herald: I would be pleased to have you publish the following article concerning the present unrest or unsatisfactory conditions in the railway mail service in the United States, from the viewpoint of the railway postal clerk. I have the honor to belong to that body of men, and have spent my best years in the service of the United States. And, although the postal authorities, themselves, acknowledge that the men of the railway mail service constitute the backbone of the whole American postal system, and that it is the only properly organized division of the whole service, to any young man today who is thinking of this as a future employment I would most emphatically say, "keep out of it."

There always have been some reasons for this attitude, but of late years they have been piling up so fast that one wonders at himself why he stays in the service at all. Why he has allowed himself to become such an automaton. Why he jumps at every crack of the whip of the great ringmaster. Why he submits to the ever increasing "thou shalt nots," until today he is entirely without many of the common rights of the ordinary American citizen. Principal among these is what is known as the "gag order." This order forbids the railway postal clerk to say or do anything for the betterment of his position or for the service except directly through his superior officers, forbids the publication, in any way, of information concerning the conditions in the service, the poor equipment of cars, poor lights, filthy water tanks, or anything he may know concerning any of the many wrecks which occur from time to time. The penalty for violation of this order is dismissal from the service, and we lately have had an example of it where a clerk found that he had been drinking water from a tank in his car which contained the remains of a decomposed rat, he made the matter public, and was promptly dismissed from the service.

There would not be so much complaint about these things if our superior officers were only zealously willing to try and get them remedied, but report after report goes in for years, and still most of the time conditions are pretty much the same. If you write to a congressman and he approaches the department with your complaint, an immediate demand is made to show why you should not be dismissed from the service for the violation of an order covering this point, and so it goes on, crimping a little closer year by year, a privilege cut off here and another there. The closer we are crowded into our groove the smoother we run; no squeak, no friction—a machine, this is what is wanted.

Now comes a great demand for economy. In the distance looming up is a probable change of administration, and it behooves the great ringmaster to make for himself a name, and also a reputation so that when the seven lean years come there will be a demand for the services of such as he. Has he not taken the greatest business department of the government, which has always been in arrears, and placed it upon a self-sustaining basis? Yes. This he will almost succeed in doing.

Now let me tell you how this economy affects you as well as me. The great ringmaster says: "Congress has seen fit to brush aside my recommendations for this and that, consequently I must withhold from all office clerks, railway postal clerks, carriers and men of that class, every privilege granted by congress, that costs the postoffice department one cent. I must cut off your yearly fifteen days with pay. I will do it in this way: When you are enjoying your vacation, other carriers are keeping up your work without expense to Uncle Sam. If he cannot do this and make two deliveries in eight hours, make only one delivery. If they cannot do their own work and yours too and make one full delivery in eight hours let the remainder go until the next day. If a clerk in the railway mail service wishes to lay off for personal reasons I will be more than willing to grant him the privilege. I will put in his

place a clerk who is not on duty and the wages of the first clerk instead of going to the clerk who performs the extra service (which has been the custom heretofore) will be covered into the United States treasury to help reduce the deficit and no one will receive pay for the day's work. If a clerk is injured in a wreck the other clerks on that line or adjacent lines must do the work of the injured man without expense to the department, thus saving the wages of an acting clerk which heretofore the department has willingly paid.

If a clerk resigns, the vacancy will not be filled at once as has been the rule but will remain vacant for an indefinite time and the work kept up by the other men, thus saving to the department the full wages of the man who has resigned. Still more, although the service continues to grow and the movement of all classes of mail is greater year by year, new men are not allowed except now and then grudgingly and we have at the Union Pacific transfer, Council Bluffs, an example of this, where a full crew of men have been engaged every night all night for over a year, performing extra service without pay so that the fast mail may go into Cheyenne, Wyo., the next day with the distribution of a certain western state completed. This distribution should be performed on the road and the crew should be sufficiently large to perform it. All the crews on the line take their turns donating to the great ringmaster this extra service. The same orders apply to the clerks in postoffices all over the country, but as far as I am aware, no officer of the department in the higher grades has been affected in any way by these orders. No compulsory overtime nor any such hardship.

Now the business man is affected in this way: The service is becoming crippled or inefficient to a greater or less extent and the crews are often unable to complete their distribution. This results in the delaying of all classes of mail, registered, special delivery, business orders and all. This will bring about more or less business loss and an eminent authority has placed this loss to the business of the country at ten times the amount saved to the department. I am informed that during the last Roosevelt term there was collected from the railroad companies of the United States \$600,000 in fines for failures to live up to contracts with the postoffice department and that one of the first acts of the great ringmaster was to relieve the railroad companies of all fines for failure of fast mail trains to make connections, etc.

Now about this "scare-crow," the deficit in the postoffice department. After all it is simply a matter of keeping accounts, nearly all the branches of the department were more than self sustaining. The rural free delivery service is not and last year showed a difference or loss of about \$28,000,000. This is a splendid branch of the service, has come to stay and should be extended, and it is not justice to the other branches of the department to charge the whole with a deficit because the railway mail service and the postoffice do not produce sufficient surplus to make up the \$28,000,000.

If the expense of carrying mail matter under the government frank was wiped off the books of the department there would result a saving of approximately \$13,000,000 per year, or if each division of the government paid for its own, this would relieve the postoffice department which is saddled with the whole amount.

Also an honest adjustment of the postage rate on second-class matter would soon more than balance the account, but none of these charges seem very much in favor, and we doubt that they have ever been sincerely recommended in late years. It would seem that a standing deficit was most earnestly desired as a move is on foot at this moment to reduce the domestic rate of postage to one cent per ounce or fraction thereof.

Now comes another addition to the already strenuous rules governing the life and labor of the railway postal clerk.

About two months ago the whole service was placed under the operation of what is known as the "demerit system." For all delinquencies, great and small, one is charged with demerits from one to 100. The omission of a figure on a trip report will subject one to a charge of one or more demerits, and the number increases with the volume of the delinquency. As far as we know, there is no such thing as a merit to offset the demerit, and when they increase to

a certain number, it is supposed some disciplinary action will be taken. It is as yet a good deal of a mystery and causing much comment and adding to the general discontent prevailing in the service. Although there has been almost a complete elimination from the service of the substitute railway postal clerk, and the regular men are required to take all kinds of extra runs without expense to the government, along comes another order outlining a general curtailment of the service, lengthening the hours of work, etc., to be put in effect after the heavy work of the holiday season is over. Chief clerks have been asked how many regular men in their districts can be disposed of. I am told one chief clerk who advised his superintendent that he needed more men than he now had, and could not dispose of any, was informed that if he could not accomplish a certain amount of curtailment that some one would be put in his place who could. This kind of an order will still further injure the service, especially on the fast trains.

Short hours must be lengthened, but no mention is made of shortening long hours or payment for overtime. I have given this matter some thought and study, and I find that the average railway postal clerk is putting in from 200 to 275 more hours per year than the office man, and many more hours at a much less salary than any railroad man whose position will in any way compare with ours.

Now, another matter: For all past time it has been the custom of Uncle Sam to pay the expenses of his servants when they are required to be away from their homes on the business of the government; in fact it is a universal custom the world over, and the principle is recognized and considered sound and right by all kinds of corporations and business firms as well.

In every department of the government men who travel are allowed a liberal per diem for necessary expenses. Postoffice inspectors receive \$4 per day whether they expend that much or not. And although every one of the greater nations in the world has for years allowed a certain amount for expense of this kind, the last congress was the first in the United States to acknowledge our right to expense money, and appropriated \$250,000 to be used for that purpose. The law was so framed that no clerk was entitled to a penny until he had been on duty twelve hours; after that he was to be paid expense money not exceeding 75 cents per twenty-four hours, 18 cents per meal and 21 cents per bed. If he was out less than thirty-six hours he was to be paid proportionately less. There are in the railway mail service approximately 10,000 men who are entitled to expense money and the inadequacy of the appropriation is apparent, and we have the ridiculous spectacle of men who are trained experts in the greatest business department of the greatest government on earth signing a payroll which grants them considerably less than \$2 for a month's expenses away from home, the appropriation being sufficient to allow them only six cents for a meal and seven cents for a bed.

Still another cloud looms up in the distance which is causing much uneasiness. This is the Gillett bill now pending in congress. Men grow old, and in the civil service especially in the departmental branches at Washington are many who are becoming too old to properly perform their duties. It is said that sixteen per cent are over seventy years of age, and the government is facing the problem of some kind of compulsory retirement for these superannuated employes. The Gillett bill, which is favored by department officials, would withhold from the salary of every postal clerk an average of more than ten per cent, this amount to be placed at interest by the government to form the basis of an annuity to be paid him at the age of retirement, which in the railway mail service is sixty years of age, and in the other departments sixty-five. We of the railway service are not in favor of any such retirement measure and most strenuously object to the withholding of any part of our wages for that purpose, feeling sure that we can handle our own funds to much better advantage than will ever accrue from the small rate of interest usually paid on government investments.

The most unjust and pernicious feature of this bill, if it is understood correctly, is that the annuities of those who may be immediately retired are in reality paid by all the clerks who remain in the service. President Taft in his

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