

Handling the Mail at the White House



WHITE HOUSE SECRETARIES AT WORK.



GROUP OF WHITE HOUSE STENOGRAPHERS.

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If the president of the United States were obliged to pay postage on every piece of mail matter sent out from the White House the expense would amount to one-sixth of his salary. Since President Roosevelt has been in office the mail addressed to the chief magistrate has been the heaviest in history and it is steadily growing rather than diminishing in proportions. Probably no other one man in the world receives every day in the year so many personal letters as are sent to the president of the United States, and very certainly no other man receives communications of such varied character. At the present time anywhere from 500 to 1,000 letters are received at the White House every day. In addition to this hundreds of pieces of printed matter are received every day.

To consider and answer the half a million communications which come to the presidential mansion each year requires the almost continuous services of upward of a dozen men. This, too, without taking into consideration the employees of the general postoffice at Washington, who are detailed to distribute the president's mail.

The first step in the handling of the White House mail at its destination is taken by the trusted employe of the White House, who makes three or four trips daily to the postoffice to secure the mail. Upon the arrival of the letters at the White House they are turned over to a clerk whose sole duty is to open the envelopes and unfold the letters. The communications next pass to a clerk who sorts the missives. Many of the letters pertain to what might be termed routine governmental matters and are turned over to one or another of the executive departments. The great bulk of the president's mail goes to his secretaries, and most of it they answer over their own signatures without ever troubling the busy chief magistrate with the matter.

What the President Reads.

The president does not peruse personally one-tenth of the letters which are addressed to him. Indeed, fifty communications a day is a liberal estimate of the number which comes under his eye. The letters which by reason of their seeming importance or the doubt of the secretaries as to their proper disposition do finally pass the gauntlet and come into the hands of the president himself are disposed in one of three ways. In the case of many of them he turns the letters over to the secretaries with an indication of the character of the reply to be sent. To a few of the letters the president dictates replies which he signs personally, and to a very limited number of personal friends he pens confidential letters. President Roosevelt writes very few autographs letters.

Naturally such inscriptions as "personal" and "private" cannot be regarded in opening the White House mail, but there are ways in which the initiated may insure their communications reaching the president personally. The approved plan is for the writer to place his initials or name in autograph in the lower left hand corner of the envelope. For instance, a confidential note from the president's personal friend, Senator Lodge, bears in the corner the initials H. C. L. In a majority of cases the provision of these safeguards is superfluous, for the clerk who opens the mail has come by experience to recognize instantly the handwriting of relatives and intimates of the chief executive, and their letters go through without molestation. Sometimes individuals not personally known to the president, but who have learned of the plan in vogue, seek to reach his ear by placing their initials on a missive, or occasionally even resort to the

ruse of affixing the initials of some one known to be close to the chief magistrate. Such efforts never avail, however, for if the deception is not detected by the assorting clerk the schemer's letter is turned back into the proper channel by the president when he detects its character.

How They Are Answered.

The work of answering the presidential mail is a task of herculean proportions. An effort is made to acknowledge in some manner every communication sent to the White House. Five or six stenographers are constantly employed typewriting the letters dictated by the president and his secretaries. Naturally great numbers of letters can be answered by what are known as "forms"—that is phraseology arranged to cover any and all inquiries on a certain subject. For instance, the hundreds of people who, after the president has delivered an important address or sent a message to congress, send congratulatory letters and telegrams to the White House all receive letters of acknowledgment and thanks which are practically identical.

The general public and particularly the feminine portion of it appears to cherish the belief that, whereas there is no possibility that a letter can reach the president unviolated, there is reasonable surety that a missive to a member of his immediate family will reach its destination unmolesated. This is utter fallacy, for every letter addressed to Mrs. Roosevelt or any of the children passes through through exactly the same channel as does the mail designed for the head of the household and the chances that it will ever come under the eye of the intended recipient are quite as remote. The general mail for the various members of the Roosevelt household must all come under the scrutiny of Assistant Secretary William Loeb, jr., popularly known as the "president's right hand man," and the social activities at the White House and the prominence into which Miss Alice Roosevelt has been brought by the christening of the kaiser's yacht and other events has necessitated the devotion of an unprecedented amount of time to this class of correspondence.

Takes Care of Invitations.

Another important and decidedly arduous duty which has fallen to the lot of Mr. Loeb is the management of the voluminous correspondence connected with social activities at the White House. The dispatch of the invitations for dinner, luncheons, balls and receptions is not so serious a matter, since all those designed for residents of Washington are delivered by mounted messengers, but the replies help to swell the volume of the regular stream of mail and these make work for the office force under Mr. Loeb's direction, for each declination or acceptance must be properly tabulated and each name checked off, so that it will be possible to estimate accurately the number of prospective guests at any forthcoming function.

Every rich man of any prominence in America receives daily a number of the oddest requests imaginable, but it is safe to say that the communications in no case compare in novelty and absurdity with the curiosities which crowd the White House mail bags. There are letters humorous and sad, missives pleading and threatening and communications of praise and censure. Many of the letters received are infinitely sad, but a far greater number are in some degree ludicrous.

Appeals for Personal Aid.

Most numerous possibly are the appeals of persons who wish the president to aid them to secure positions either in the government service or elsewhere. The "begging letters" form a vast proportion, ranging all the way from the importunations of

professional beggars to the requests of churches and charitable organizations seeking subscriptions. It may be noted that every appeal for aid which bears the slightest evidence of possible worthiness is turned over to some charitable organization in the community from which it has emanated. Great quantities of anonymous letters are received and a surprisingly large number of appeals comes from persons who seek to enlist the aid of the president in paying off mortgages. Finally there are the threatening and "crank" letters of various kinds and the number of communications of this kind received is simply astounding. Comparatively but a small portion of them, however, are deemed of sufficient importance to warrant investigation by the secret service.

Many of the letters addressed to the president are induced by newspaper comment. A striking evidence of this was afforded recently when an item went the rounds of the press to the effect that the White House was infested with rats. No sooner had publicity been given the re-

port than there was an avalanche of letters recommending various plans for getting rid of the rodents. Manufacturers of rat poisons and traps donated their wares and one solicitous citizen sent five cats which were declared to be famous rat catchers. This latter donation still further complicated matters for the correspondence corps, for a report was printed to the effect that the felines were being persecuted by Jack, the White House dog, and this brought a number of indignant protests from sympathetic women who denounced as an outrage the supposed cruelty.

Letters to the Family.

From the day the announcement was made that Miss Alice Roosevelt had been chosen to christen the yacht of the German emperor the letters addressed to the daughter of the White House increased in number until they threatened to rival those addressed to the president himself. Many of the persons who wrote to Miss Alice offered suggestions relative to the launching. Many women besought her to use water in-

stead of wine in the christening and others suggested that the baptism be made with flowers.

The president, Mrs. Roosevelt and Miss Alice have all three come in for most generous attention on the part of merchants and manufacturers seeking the endorsement of articles of various kinds. Mrs. Roosevelt receives proffers of sufficient eatables to stock a grocery store and both women are deluged with the wares of soap makers and manufacturers of toilet preparations, many of whom plead for endorsements. Any gifts which are received at the White House with a request for endorsement are immediately returned. It will doubtless surprise many persons to learn that threatening and denunciatory letters are sent to the women of the presidential household as well as to the chief executive. Thus Miss Roosevelt's participation in the christening of the emperor's yacht has brought forth not a few rabid expressions from cranks who are agitated by anything touching even remotely monarchical institutions.

Executive Scrap Book.

One member of what might be termed the correspondence bureau at the White House devotes his time to clipping the marked articles relative to the president and to pasting these extracts in large scrapbooks. President Roosevelt is unlike his predecessor in his methods of keeping in touch with public opinion. The late President McKinley was wont to order the submission to him of every publication of any prominence which commented on topics bearing upon national policy. President Roosevelt does not do this, but he is a great newspaper reader and thus keeps pretty closely in touch with affairs generally.

The stationery used at the White House is white and bears inscriptions in purple. When President Roosevelt took up the reins of government all the old stationery was discarded and a new supply printed in order to enable the substitution of the words White House for executive mansion as the official designation of the presidential residence. Special paper is provided for the letters which the president signs personally and also for the social correspondence of Mrs. Roosevelt and Miss Alice. All envelopes in which are dispatched communications bearing upon public business bear the inscription "White House—Official" and are transmitted through the mails without postage stamps or other franks.

With the increasing demand upon the time of the chief executive and the inevitable curtailment of the number of callers whom he can see personally the volume of White House mail has grown surprisingly. In order to prevent being overwhelmed the secretaries frequently work at the executive offices until long past midnight, day after day. However, the work has been systematized to a marvelous degree, as may be imagined from the fact that of all the thousands of communications handled during the past half a decade not a single one has been lost.

Not Yet Too Late

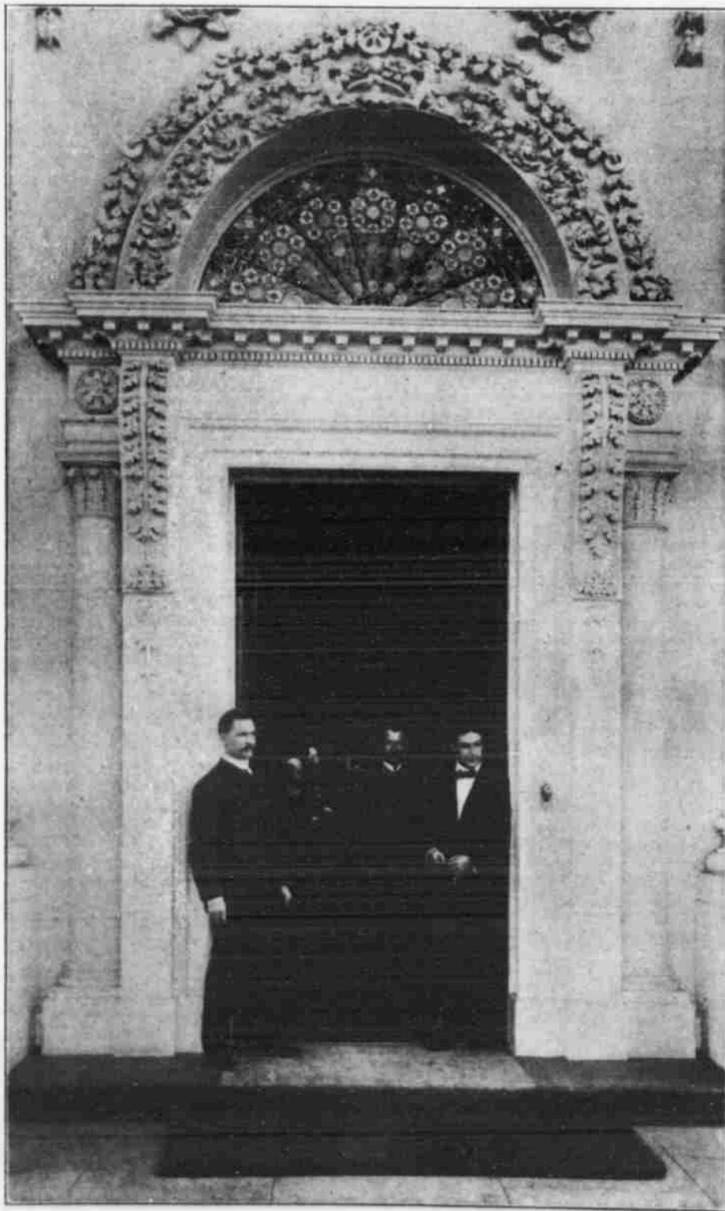
Portland Oregonian: The joke reeled out of the stage entrance and fell prone across the endman's trunk, which the property man was just then lowering gently down the incline.

"Alas!" it muttered, when the fresh air had revived it somewhat, "I am too old and feeble to work longer in the minstrel show."

We were shocked at this astounding news, but after a moment's reflection we felt able to speak words of encouragement.

"Cheer up, old fellow!" we said, soothingly; "there are still comic operas to be written."

At this the joke jumped up excitedly, and was soon on its way to the railroad office, to inquire the price of a ticket to New York.



WAITING FOR THE WHITE HOUSE MAIL.