

## Uncle Sam's Efforts to Aid Careless Correspondents

Departments of Postoffice Where Mistakes of Patrons Are the Care of Experts



The "Nixie" Room



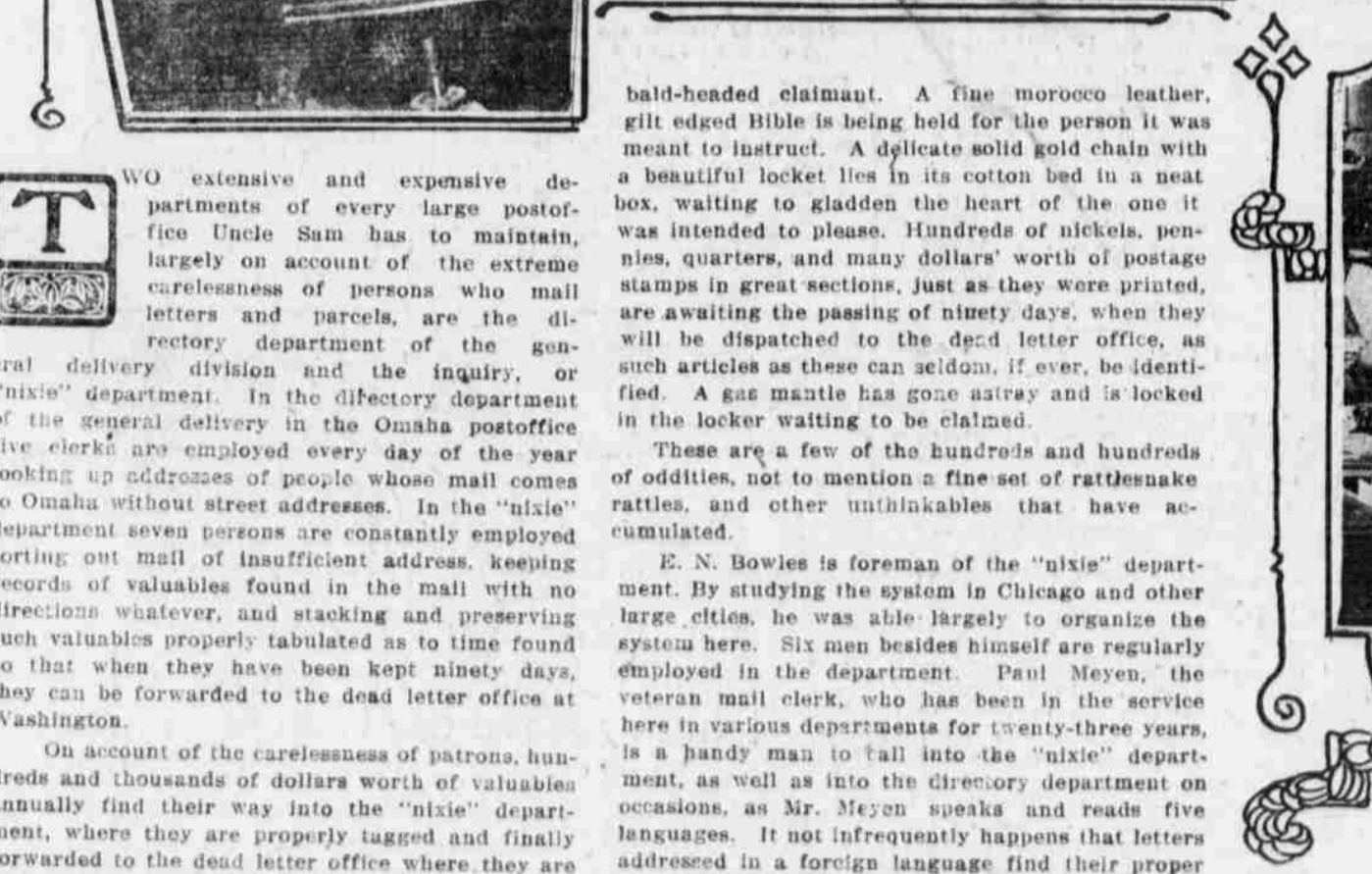
Mailing Outgoing Nebraska Mail



Directory Department



City Distributing Department



Stamping 40,000 Postal Cards

**T**WO extensive and expensive departments of every large postoffice Uncle Sam has to maintain, largely on account of the extreme carelessness of persons who mail letters and parcels, are the directory department of the general delivery division and the inquiry, or "nixie" department. In the directory department of the general delivery in the Omaha postoffice five clerks are employed every day of the year looking up addresses of people whose mail comes to Omaha without street addresses. In the "nixie" department seven persons are constantly employed sorting out mail of insufficient address, keeping records of valuables found in the mail with no directions whatever, and stacking and preserving such valuables properly tabulated as to time found so that when they have been kept ninety days, they can be forwarded to the dead letter office at Washington.

On account of the carelessness of patrons, hundreds and thousands of dollars worth of valuables annually find their way into the "nixie" department, where they are properly tagged and finally forwarded to the dead letter office where they are sold at the proper time. The proceeds accrue to the national treasury. In the "nixie" department a constant effort is being made to discover the right addresses for parcels that find their way there, while at the same time an effort is being made to locate the persons who can properly identify and claim the valuables that happen to come to the departments loose.

Gun stocks and twenty-dollar gold pieces are among the heterogeneous collection that has been found, piece by piece, lying loose on the tables in the mail cars in the fourteenth division of the railway mail service. Omaha being headquarters for the fourteenth division, every loose valuable that is found by the clerks in their cars, where it has in some way slipped out of its parcel, must be turned in at Omaha. The railway mail clerk brings it to headquarters with a note attached, telling exactly the time of day it was found, where in the car it was found, and whether it was entirely free from any wrapping. Thus, a clerk, a few weeks ago, brought in four shining new twenty-dollar gold pieces that were found on his table in the car after he had worked a great pile of mail. Several five-dollar gold pieces have come into the office in the same way. A fine walnut gun stock awaits identification in the lockers. A pearl handled pocket knife has just arrived. An electric toy engine has long lain in store waiting for someone to claim it. A box of hair tonic awaits its

bald-headed claimant. A fine morocco leather, gilt edged Bible is being held for the person it was meant to instruct. A delicate solid gold chain with a beautiful locket lies in its cotton bed in a neat box, waiting to gladden the heart of the one it was intended to please. Hundreds of nickels, pennies, quarters, and many dollars' worth of postage stamps in great sections, just as they were printed, are awaiting the passing of ninety days, when they will be dispatched to the dead letter office, as such articles as these can seldom, if ever, be identified. A gas mantle has gone astray and is locked in the locker waiting to be claimed.

These are a few of the hundreds and hundreds of oddities, not to mention a fine set of rattlesnake rattles, and other unthinkables that have accumulated. E. N. Bowles is foreman of the "nixie" department. By studying the system in Chicago and other large cities, he was able largely to organize the system here. Six men besides himself are regularly employed in the department. Paul Meyen, the veteran mail clerk, who has been in the service here in various departments for twenty-three years, is a handy man to fall into the "nixie" department, as well as into the directory department on occasions, as Mr. Meyen speaks and reads five languages. It not infrequently happens that letters addressed in a foreign language find their proper destination only through the aid of Mr. Meyen's linguistic powers.

If anyone is under the impression that the clerks in the "nixie" department are having a jolly time, he might just glance at a few figures. During the month of November last, this department of seven men supplied addresses for 15,471 pieces of mail. During the same month, this department returned 5,000 pieces to the sender for better addresses, wherever the return card was found, or where the name of the sender was otherwise learned. No, these clerks are not infallible. They make mistakes. They are human. Yet out of 15,471 pieces of mail, for which they supplied addresses, they made just exactly eleven mistakes. Twenty mistakes is the highest this department has ever made in a single month.

And this record of a minimum of mistakes is made in a department which in the very first place has to deal with a gigantic "comedy of errors." The dear patrons of the postoffice, the senders of mail, are allowed to make all the mistakes they choose. But this department, hidden away in the back corner of the postoffice, and never on dress parade, is silently, patiently plodding through directories, postoffice guides, records of new post-offices established, and every other available source of information that will help them get a letter to the person for whom it was intended. And for this service of five men the sender of the letter has

paid Uncle Sam the magnificent sum of 2 cents. Often letters come into this department addressed to a man with only the name of the state given. For example, a letter gets into the mails and starts on its way in the mail car addressed to "John Smith, Nebraska." This is returned to the sender if a return card is on the envelope. If not, it is sent to Washington marked, "insufficient address."

A "nixie" division guide of postoffices is kept in this department. It contains the names of all the postoffices in the United States. Every day a bulletin published by the Postoffice department at Washington reaches the "nixie" department. It contains the names of all the new post-offices established. It also contains the names of postoffices discontinued. From this bulletin the "nixie" force revises its guide and keeps it constantly up to date. When a town name appears on a letter and the department is unable to find such a postoffice in the guide for the state to which the letter is directed, then if there is a postoffice by that name in another state they try that office. If there are three towns by that name in three states, they try those three offices. If, however, there are more than three offices in the United States by the name found on

the questionable address, the "nixie" department tries none of them, as it is a rule in the department not to "work" more than three offices on a letter.

That "to err is human" is seldom better shown than in the fact that postoffice officials themselves may be guilty of sending mail so poorly directed that it must find its way into the "nixie" department. A bulletin is now being held at the Omaha postoffice coming from the fourth assistant postmaster general at Washington. The return card shows this. Then there is the large, smooth, white blank space for the address but no address appears. This will go back to the fourth assistant postmaster general marked "insufficient address."

Five clerks, working studiously at five desks in a large room in the general delivery department, constitute the directory department. Here are city directories of Omaha, divided into five sections. Each clerk works with a section of the directory, for example, the first clerk works the directory section, including names from A to E, while another would work the next section and so on. Then when an individual has the inconceivable assurance to mail a letter to "John Smith, Omaha, Neb.," and pays 2 cents postage on that letter, he has for that 2 cents hired the services of one of these clerks for perhaps half a day; per-

haps half a month. The clerk will turn to his Smith column in the directory. There he finds that in Omaha there are exactly thirty-two John Smiths listed. He will take the address of one of these and on the envelope he will write "try address so-and-so." This operation may have to be repeated thirty-two times before the right John Smith is found.

During the Christmas rush the letters and parcels in the "nixie" department, of course, increase to a great extent. The same is true in the directory department. Along with the accumulation of stacks of mail addressed in haste, and mailed in greater haste, come the insufficient addresses, the blurred and blotted addresses, and the parcels and letters with no address at all.

During the Christmas rush last week, the Omaha postoffice handled perhaps a greater quantity of mail than it ever handled in any one week before. There were days when sacks of mail like straw stacks on a Nebraska farm, were piled high and long so that a man had to get a stepladder to look over them. Many extra clerks were put on duty for the occasion, and the regular clerks and carriers on several days volunteered to work ten hours per day, instead of merely the eight required, in order to help clear the congestion.