Owney First Day Cover Warm Up Lesson

Begin this lesson by asking students, “Who has a pet?” and charting the types of pets mentioned. Next discuss what is a “pet”. Is the animal only a to be a friend or companion for the owner or does it have to “do something” like a dog helps a hunter. What does the pet owner have to provide for the pet? What are an owner’s responsibilities?

(Students might discuss providing food, water, a safe place to sleep, baths, yearly shots and check ups, registering it with the city for a tag, giving the pet a name, attention or love.)

That sounds like a lot of work and costly, so why do people have a pet(s)?

Ask students to put on their History Detective hats and show the first day cover, Image A.

Ask students to find as many facts as they can in the picture.

(Students might create a written list of facts and then share verbally)

Facts could include:
- a brown dog with a white face
- a dog tag with the name Owney
- a black train engine number 999
- the train engine puts out lots of smoke.
- there are several dog tags such as Bucks Transfer #61 in Helena Montana, Steamer Griffith #25, Phoenix Hotel #2 in PA, Albuquerque, NM the City of Sunshine, Owney the Globe Trotter, Postal Clerks of Baltimore, First in Everything Boston Mass, His Dogship

To read how Owney collected so many tags go to www.npm.si.edu/owney/Postmasters_Advocate_Owney_article-2011-04.pdf

- there is a bag labeled U.S. Mail
- the stamp has a dog on it and the word forever.
- the postmark is from Washington, D.C. on July 27, 2011

Now that the students have collected the facts, ask how might the facts be connected to each other? What does a dog have to do with a train and the U.S. mail?

To help students answer that question, show the second first day cover, Image B.

After analyzing this image, who is Owney? When did Owney live?
What does Owney like about the railway post office?
Why does the post office let a dog travel in a railway/train’s mail service car?

To use a map and see where Owney traveled and if Owney traveled to your town, go to www.npm.si.edu/owney/#map

Image B states that “Owney was the 1890’s mascot of the Railway Mail Service”.

What is the definition of a mascot?

“a term for any person, animal or object thought to bring luck”

What is the student’s school mascot? Does it bring their school luck?
How does a mascot advertise for the school or football/basketball team?
Is the bald eagle our nation’s mascot?

Is a mascot different from a pet?

Why does the Post Office have a mascot? Was Owney also a pet?

Conclusion: Assign the students to draw a stamp for their school’s mascot.
**Lesson Extension:** Assign the students to create a mascot for someplace/something that they enjoy. Students would be required to explain why they chose that place/thing and then how the mascot is appropriate to bring it luck.

**Teacher Notes:** A first day cover is an envelope that contains a commemorative stamp issued on an appropriate day and place with artwork depicting the stamp topic. The cancellation states that it is the “first day of issue” for the sale of the stamp. For example, the Owney stamp was first issued on July 27, 2011.

According to the National Postal Museum, an RPO (Railway Post Office) was a special mail car on a train. From the 1860's until the 1950's, most inter-city mail in the US moved by trains, and much of it was processed by hand, en route, in special RPO cars - the mail was not only transported by train, it was postmarked and sorted there as well. This was known as RMS, the Railway Mail Service. At the peak of the RMS, there were 3,500 RPO cars in use, traveling a distance of over 486 million miles, and handling over twenty billion pieces of mail. But from the 1950's on, the Railway Mail Service cars, were replaced by buses, trucks, and planes. The last true RPO made it final trip on June 30, 1977. For more RPO information go to www.npm.si.edu/RMS/index.html

For student’s information, Owney did bring the trains good luck. When he was in the railway mail car, the trains never broke down or crashed. For students to compare the myth to the reality of Owney, start by comparing the artist image on the first day covers to a photograph of Owney, as well as reading his biography, which can be found at www.npm.si.edu/owney/Postmasters_Advocate_Owney_article-2011-04.pdf

**For more resources about Owney,** from his life, to how his stamp was designed, to a short video using primary source photos of Owney and the 1890’s postal system, to other lessons, go to www.npm.si.edu/owneycurriculum/

To download the free app and bring Owney the Dog to life, go to www.npm.si.edu/owneyapp/ or to the iTunes app store.

**Image A: reprinted by permission from the National Postal Museum, art by Fred Collins. Image B reprinted by permission from the National Postal Museum, art by Cynthia L. Scott.**

**National Standard for History K-4**
Standard 1A The student understands family life now and in the recent past; family life in various places long ago. (Compare and Contrast family life now with family life in the local community or state long ago by considering such things as roles, jobs, communication, technology, style of homes, transportation, schools, religious observances and cultural traditions.)
Standard 4E The student understands national symbols through which American values and principles are expressed. (The students is able to explain how the post office supports freedom of speech and press.)
Standard 8C The student understands changes in communication and their effects.