Postal Museum Launches “100 Years of Parcels, Packages, and Packets, Oh My!”

Celebrating 100 Years of Parcel Post Service in America

The Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum has launched a new microsite, “100 Years of Parcels, Packages, and Packets, Oh My!” (www.npm.si.edu/parcelpost100), telling the story of the evolution of the Post Office Department’s parcel post service.

American’s ability to order just about anything—from any seller, no matter how distant—has become a fundamental part of our lives. But before Jan. 1, 1913, sending and receiving packages was a far more complex effort. The Post Office Department had no package service as such, limiting mail items to four pounds or less in weight. As a result, many Americans began pleading for a national postal parcel post service in the 1880s. Pleas turned to demands after the beginning of Rural Free Delivery mail service in 1896. Postal officials, who had studied similar services in Europe, joined in the call, asking Congress for funding to expand the postal mandate to cover packages in the U.S. Calls for congressional action were long doomed to failure, making the road to a government-run standardized parcel service in the U.S. long and torturous.

Parcel Post Service would mark the Post Office Department’s entrance into an area where commercial interests were already plying their trade. The debate against parcel post centered not on the issue of a government entity competing with private companies, but on the service’s possible impact on small-town merchants. Merchants argued that the service would not only ruin them but also bring the decline of other fixtures of rural life—schools, libraries and churches.

The service began Jan. 1, 1913. At the stroke of midnight Postmaster Edward M. Morgan in New York City and Postmaster General Hitchcock dropped packages addressed to each other into the mail, racing to be the first to use the service. They were not alone in looking to create a “first” out of the new service. These packages were the first objects officially mailed under the new service. The first package to be delivered, however, was 11 pounds of apples sent to New Jersey governor (and President-Elect) Woodrow Wilson.
“At that time of year when packages of all shapes and sizes have been flying through our various delivery systems, it’s fun to take a moment and look at a time when that was a new and exciting adventure,” said Nancy Pope, historian and curator at the museum.

National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). For more information about the Smithsonian, call (202) 633-1000 or visit the museum website at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.

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