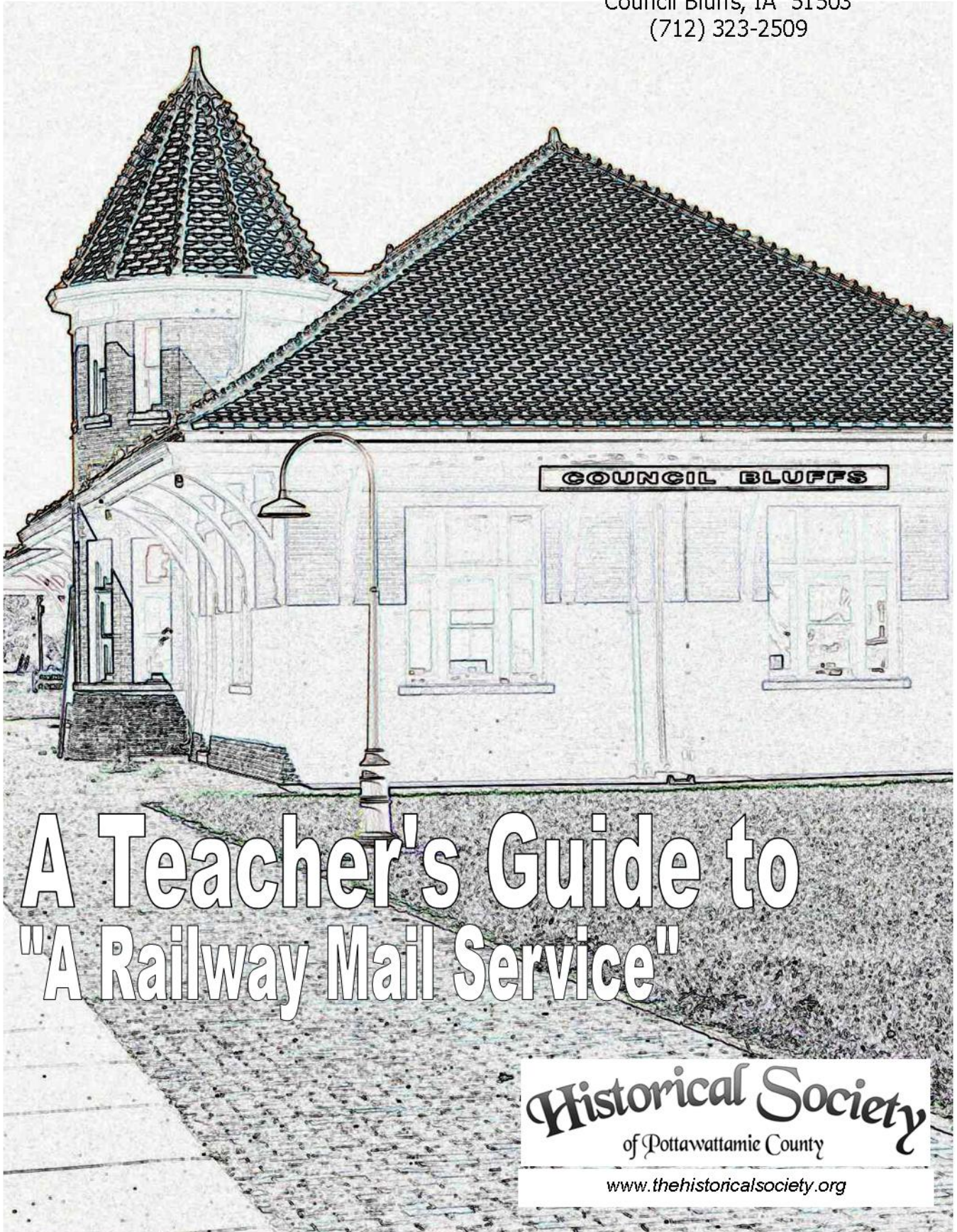


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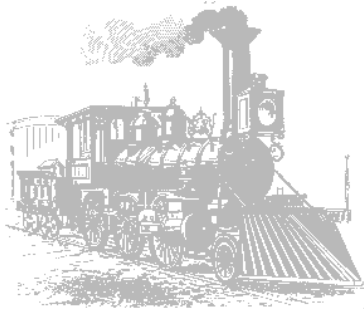
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A Teacher's Guide to "A Railway Mail Service"

Historical Society
of Pottawattamie County

www.thehistoricalsociety.org



**The Historic General Dodge House
The RailsWest Railroad Museum
The Union Pacific Railroad Museum**

Patricia LaBounty, Outreach Coordinator

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Dear Educator,

Welcome to an exciting resource for incorporating the RailsWest Railroad Museum into your classroom curriculum! Our goal is to make it easy for you to incorporate this exciting History into your planned classroom activities or before your visit to the RailsWest Railroad Museum. This Teachers Guide is designed to be flexible enough for you to pick and choose which areas you need to accomplish your goals in the classroom.

To begin, read through the Introduction and Curriculum/Bibliography to see how this Unit will fit into the standards for your grade, and then read the background information. This section can be used either as a student reading, or for your own information. There are many activities included at the end of the Unit.

Good Luck and happy journey through this exciting time in American and Railroad History. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Patricia LaBounty

Patricia LaBounty
Outreach Coordinator

RailsWest Railroad Museum

Railway Mail Service A “rolling Post Office”

Introduction

For over 100 years the railroads and the Post Office Department worked hand-in-hand to bring the mail to United States citizens. By the 1880's, Railway Post Office (RPO) routes operated on most passenger trains in the United States. A complex network of interconnected routes allowed mail to be transported and delivered in a remarkably short time. Railway Mail Clerks were subjected to stringent training and ongoing testing of details regarding their handling of the mail. On a given RPO route, each clerk was expected to know not only the post offices and rail junctions along the route, but also specific local delivery details within each of the larger cities served by the route.

Periodic testing demanded both accuracy and speed in sorting mail; a clerk scoring only 96% would likely receive a warning from their Superintendent. RPO cars were equipped and staffed to handle most processing functions. First class mail, magazines and newspapers were all sorted, postmarked when needed, and dispatched to post offices in towns along the route. Registered mail was also handled, and the foreman in charge was required to carry a regulation pistol while on duty to discourage mail robberies.

The first transcontinental Fast Mail to the Pacific ran in 1889. It operated between Chicago and San Francisco, via Council Bluffs and Omaha. Three routes linked the Great Lakes with the Pacific: the Chicago & Council Bluffs RPO (Burlington Railroad); Omaha & Ogden RPO (Union Pacific Railroad); and the Ogden & San Francisco RPO (Southern Pacific Railroad --formerly the Central Pacific Railroad). Omaha and Council Bluffs were key cities in the coast-to-coast movement of mail communications and commerce.

Lesson Grade Level: 2-8th

Council Bluffs, IA Social Studies and Math

Grade 3:

Compare and Contrast similarities and differences in why communities develop and grow

Use various maps to discuss characteristics of places including distances

Grade 4:

Compare regions based on Historical patterns

Explain the importance of transportation and communication to economic growth

Describe relation between Iowa's geography and settlement patterns

Grade 5

Identify major events, people and periods of growth in American History

Recognize technological /scientific advances and their effects on history

Recognize contributions of men, women and groups of people.

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Lewis Central Schools and Tri-Center Schools

Grades 2,3,4,5

Social Studies: Time, continuity and change
People, places and environment
Production Distribution and consumption,
Science, Technology and society

Nebraska Schools:

Grades 2-4 United States History, Nebraska History, Geography, Civics/Government and Economics

4.1.3 Explain the impact of advance in transportation, communication, immigrations and economic development.
4.1.5 Explain how historic and geographic factors affected the expansion and development of Nebraska
4.1.7 Identify, analyze and make generalizations using primary sources...
4.1.8 Identify how changing modes of transportation and communication by entrepreneurs have changed the economic system of the United States and Nebraska

Grades 5-8 United States History

8.1.5 Describe how the physical geography and various incentives influenced the movement of people goods and services
Describe the impact of inventions...

Lesson Objectives:

- 1) Identify the Railway Mail Service as an important part of our local and state heritage and history.
- 2) Discuss the effect of having timely, reliable mail delivery on westward expansion and settlement of the west.
- 3) Understand how an R.P.O. car worked and what were the risks and advantages in working on one.
- 4) Discuss how the railroads helped the development of the country by including RPOs in their passenger trains.
- 5) Utilize primary sources, letters, which traveled through the R.P.O. system and discuss their importance to the writer and recipient. Consider how that information would have been communicated if they had not traveled via a postal network, including RPOs.
- 6) Utilize local, senior, community members in correspondence to further an understanding of the Depot Museum and the RPO era.
- 7) Understand how pivotal Council Bluffs and Omaha were in the history of our nation.

Preparation to teach these lessons:

- 1) Review the background information provided.
- 2) Investigate the books and internet sources listed.
- 3) Choose and prepare for a specific activity.

Railway Mail Service

Introduction and Bibliography

RailsWest Railroad Museum

Bibliography:

Bergman, Edwin B. *29 Years to Oblivion: The Last Years of Railway Mail Service in the United States*. 1980, Mobile Post Office Society: Omaha

National Postal Transport Association. *Mail in Motion*. 1956, Railway Mail Service Library: Boyce, VA. VIDEO

Romanski, Fred J. *The Fast Mail, History of the Railway Mail Service*, Vol 37 No. 3, Fall 2005: College Park, MD.

U.S. Post Office Department. *Men and Mail in Transit*. 1956, Railway Mail Service Library: Boyce, VA. VIDEO.

Wilking, Clarence. *The Railway Mail Service*. 1985. The Railway Mail Service Library: Boyce, VA

Links:

www.railwaymailservicelibrary.org/videos/MIM-01.MPG

-a good clip of the *Mail in Motion* Video

www.railwaymailservicelibrary.org/videos/m&mit01.MPG

-a good clip of *Men and Mail in Transit* video

www.railwaymailservicelibrary.org/articles/THE_RMS.DOC

-Clarence Wilking's *The Railway Mail Service*

RailsWest Railroad Museum

Railway Mail Service A “rolling Post Office”

Before Railway Post Offices (RPOs)

At least three decades before the Pony Express galloped into postal history, the "iron horse" made a formal appearance. In August 1829, an English-built locomotive, the *Stourbridge Lion* completed the first locomotive run in the United States on the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company Road in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. One month later, the South Carolina Railroad Company adopted the locomotive as its motive power. The Baltimore & Ohio's *Tom Thumb*, America's first steam locomotive, successfully carried more than 40 persons at a speed exceeding 10 miles an hour in 1830. This beginning was considered somewhat less than auspicious when a stage driver's horse outran the *Tom Thumb* on a parallel track in a race at Ellicotts Mills, Maryland, on September 18, 1830. Later, however, a steam locomotive reached the unheard-of speed of 30 miles an hour in an 1831 competition in Baltimore. Soon thereafter, draft horses used to power the first trains were retired.

The Post Office Department recognized the value of this new mode of mail transportation as early as November 30, 1832. The stage contractors on a route from Philadelphia to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, were granted an allowance of \$400 per year "for carrying the mail on the railroad as far as West Chester (30 miles) from December 5, 1832." Although the Department apparently entered into a number of contracts providing for rail transportation as a part of the stage routes in succeeding years, the Postmaster General listed only one railroad company as a contractor during the first six months of 1836, "Route 1036 from Philadelphia to Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania. "

After passage of the Act of July 7, 1838, designating all railroads in the United States as post routes, mail service by railroad increased rapidly. The Post Office appointed a route agent to accompany the mails between Albany and Utica, New York, in 1837. The first route agent was John Kendall, nephew of Postmaster General Amos Kendall.

In June 1840, two mail agents were appointed to accompany the mail from Boston to Springfield "to make exchanges of mails, attend to delivery, and receive and forward all unpaid way letters and packages received." At this time, mail was sorted in distributing post offices. The only mail sent to the agents on the railroad lines was that intended for dispatch to offices along each route. The route agents opened the pouches from the local offices, separated the mail for other local points on the line for inclusion in the pouches for those offices, and sent the balance into the distributing post offices for further sorting. Gradually, the clerks began to make up mail for connecting lines, as well as local offices, and the idea of distributing all transit mail on the cars slowly evolved.

Introduction of “Traveling Post Offices”

The first experiment in distributing U.S. mail in so-called "post offices on wheels" was made in 1862 between Hannibal and St. Joseph, Missouri, by William A. Davis, postmaster of St. Joseph. Although this new procedure expedited the connection at St.

RailsWest Railroad Museum

Joseph with the overland stage, it was discontinued in January 1863, when the stage schedule changed.

On August 28, 1864, the first permanent U.S.A. Railroad Post Office route was officially established. George B. Armstrong, the assistant postmaster of Chicago, Illinois, placed a postal car equipped for general mail distribution in service between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa, on the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad. Similar routes were established between New York and Washington; Chicago and Rock Island, Illinois; Chicago and Burlington, Illinois; and New York and Erie, Pennsylvania.

When railway mail service began, mostly letter mail was sorted on the cars, which were not equipped to distribute other kinds of mail. By about 1869, other mail, except packages, was sorted as well.

At this time, the Chicago and Council Bluffs R.P.O. operated on lines through Council Bluffs, as well as the Council Bluffs and Quincy R.P.O. During the lifetime of your grand-parents and great-grandparents, mail was being sorted and delivered along the railroad lines that crisscross this area. If you look closely at the tracks along the Rock Island Depot you can see the pole that was used to hang the mail bags. It was called a "mail crane." R.P.O.'s would capture these bags with a special hook in the doorway called a "catcher arm," while the train was moving!

RPO network expansion and decline

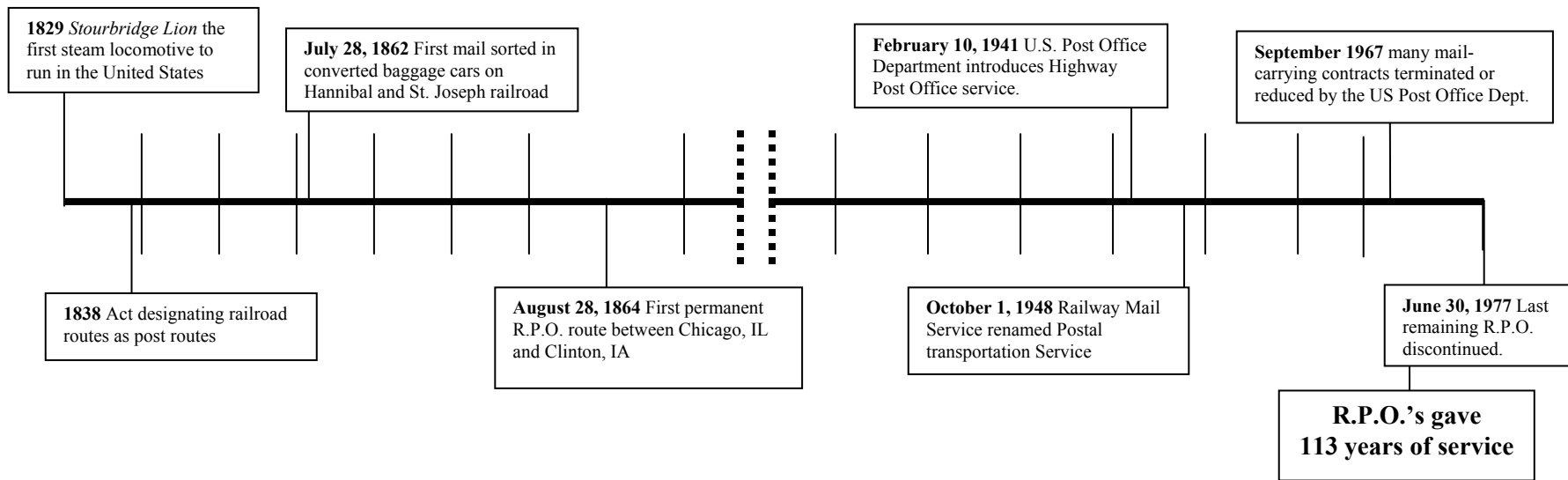
Between the 1870s and 1910s, the railroad network expanded. As tracks linked many towns in an expanding web, RPO services on those lines likewise grew. The rail network reached its zenith just before World War I. After that war, rail transportation mileage began to shrink.

In 1930, more than 10,000 trains were used to move the mail into every city, town, and village in the United States. Following passage of the Transportation Act of 1958, mail-carrying passenger trains declined rapidly. This is because passenger trains were discontinued, as more people traveled by automobiles to destinations. By 1965, only 190 trains carried mail; by 1970, the railroads carried virtually no First-Class Mail.

On April 30, 1971, the Post Office Department terminated seven of the eight remaining routes. The lone, surviving railway post office ran between New York and Washington, D.C., and made its last run on June 30, 1977.

*Courtesy of the United States Postal Service
And Dr. Frank Scheer of the Railway Mail Service Library in Boyce, VA*

Railway Mail Service Timeline



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Railway Mail Service A “rolling Post Office”

A Day in the Life of an RPO Clerk

Average Day of RPO Clerks

Responsibilities

A Railway Post Office (RPO) clerk's position was unique in that so many of the necessary tasks demanded of him could not be accomplished while he was on duty. These were performed at the clerk's home or at a terminal of his run, while he was off duty

General orders were received each week from the Chief Clerk's (District Superintendent's) office. They contained corrections to the state mail sorting lists (called “schemes”), schedules of mail routes, and the Postal Laws & Regulations. Schemes, schedules, and PL&R had to be kept up to date so that mail would be properly handled. In some cases, depending on a clerk's study assignment, general orders were received from as many as three divisions.

Studying for examinations, especially case exams, and going to the Chief Clerk's office to take exams had to be accomplished on the clerk's off-duty time. Each state assignment a clerk had required an annual examination, plus one for rules and regulations.

A Clerk-in-Charge (C-in-C) was the supervisor for a RPO crew. The C-in-C performed mail distribution alongside other clerks. In addition, he maintained pouch records (a list of all the pouches due to be received and dispatched each trip), which were checked each day for irregularities. The C-in-C had other additional payroll time-keeping, space usage, and administrative work.

All clerks were required to read their Chief Clerk's order book at the terminals of their run before reporting to work at the postal car. These notices covered operational changes that were more recent than the weekly general order information.

Work hours and pay

A portion of daily pay was allocated towards the at-home tasks. For every eight hours of pay, a clerk was on duty in a RPO for six hours and twenty minutes. The other one hour-forty minutes of a “day” were wages for the off-duty study and preparation time.

Even though clerks were paid on the basis of an eight-hour work day --6’40” on the train and 1’20” off of it-- their actual hours conformed to railroad schedules. It was not unusual for a clerk to work between two and four hours of “advance” time before a train departed. Since trip distances often ranged between 200 and 500 miles, the time en

RailsWest Railroad Museum

route might be as much as another twelve hours --if there were no delays! Consequently, one trip was often the equivalent of two work days.

A clerk's layoff was based on the number of trips his assignment was due to make each week, and the amount of time involved in each round trip. Consideration was also given to train schedules that would allow a round-trip for a crew. If there was longer than a six-to-eight hour layover at the end of a run, it affected how many work cycles could be accomplished within a week.

Under the 40-hour work week, the more popular work cycles were:

- ! 6 days on and 8 days off;
- ! 6 days on and 6 days off;
- ! 4 days on, 5 days off, 4 days on, and 7 days off; and
- ! 6 days on, 6 days off, 6 days on, and 9 days off.

Work expectations and conditions

While on duty in the moving R.P.O. car the clerk was having to accurately sort the mail picked up at stations and then prepare mail bags for each Post Office on the route all while rocking back and forth in the moving car. C-in-Cs were also required to have first-class postage stamps for public convenience, in case someone wanted to mail a letter at a station. The RPO car had a mail slot on each side for posting letters while the train was at a station platform.

Any railroad work can be dangerous. This was particularly true prior to the 1920s for RPO clerks. The car was often the weakest in the train --usually a wood-bodied car-- which was located close to the locomotive. It was sandwiched between the engine and heavier steel passenger cars and received the full impact during head-end collisions. "Tight-lock" couplers did not exist at that time to keep train cars together during a derailment. It wasn't until the Steel Car Act was passed by Congress in 1912 that RPO cars were to be constructed of steel, the same as coaches, sleeping cars, and dining cars.

From 1877 to 1884, 25 clerks were killed and 147 were seriously injured out of 3,153 employed; from 1885 to 1892 the figures jumped to 43 and 463, respectively. A particularly tragic mail train accident was made famous by the song, "Wreck of Southern Old 97." The engine and four cars of the Washington & Greensboro RPO -- Southern Railway train 97 -- crashed over the side of a 75-foot high trestle North of Danville, Virginia, in 1903. Eleven clerks were killed and three others seriously injured.

RPO clerks also had to deal with the specific danger of swinging out the special "hook", or catcher arm, to grab mail bags as they passed through stations. They would also open the side doors while moving and kick or push full sacks of mail off onto the station platforms for pick up by the local Post Office clerks. The clerk, if they made a mistake, could fall or be swept off the swiftly moving train.

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Activities:

- 1) After examining the photo of the RPO car with the mail hook (online at the railwaymailservicelibrary.org), discuss what concerns a postal clerk might have. How hard was it to operate the “catcher arm?”
- 2) Look at the Photos of the inside of an RPO car. Was it crowded? Why were some clerks given firearms? What were they protecting?
 - a. How do you think this is different from today?
 - b. What are we told not to send through the mail? Do you think that this was different 50 years ago?
- 3) Visit the RailsWest Railroad museum and experience part of the day of a Clerk and practice for your exam, by sorting mail cards. How many can you sort in 1 minute? How accurate were you?
- 4) Think about the hours on duty, as well as the fact that work was performed day and night, weekdays and Sundays, including holidays such as Christmas. What were the benefits to a RPO clerk? What were the drawbacks?
- 5) Think about what “mail” meant to a rural community. How important do you think this line of communication was?
 - a. Create a collage of all the things that the mail would have impacted in rural communities.
 - b. Look at the History of Sears Roebuck online. Did you know that you could order an entire HOUSE by catalog and then it would be shipped to you by rail?