

# Government quietly killing rural post offices

The United States Postal Service may be nickel-and-diming rural America to death. Quietly, but efficiently, it is shutting down village post offices in every state. Miracle Hot Springs, Calif.; Twin Village, Mass.; Belew Creek, N.C.; Summer Grove, La.; Yetter, Iowa; Gray Mountain, Ariz.: These are just a few of last year's victims.

No one in Washington is rushing to the rescue. Congress has looked the other way. Worse, the Postal Rate Commission (PRC), whose many watchdog assignments include that of protecting small post offices, has gone over to the other side. There are now two foxes in the chicken coop.

The figures speak for themselves: The Postal Service closed 86 small post offices in fiscal year 1981 and 87 the following year. Then the tempo picked up: 165 closings in 1983; 202 last year, and an estimated 240 in fiscal '85. At the current extinction rate, about one-third of all rural post offices will disappear over the next two decades. The threat is imminent but unheralded.

The stakes here may be greater than meet the eye; not just the continuation of convenient mail service but the very survival of rural community life. In thousands of hard-pressed villages the post office has emerged as a center of stability — something people can count on — in a world grown bewilderingly unreliable.

**MARTHA HAMLIN**, the postmaster in Caliborn, Md. (population 212), put it as well as anyone when she remarked that, "We're the only thing here." I have visited scores of towns where the post office is "the only thing." It may be consigned to humble quarters — a small frame or cinder-block building that also serves as a store or luncheonette — but it looms large in the lives of local residents.

As often as not there is a metal box for ice cubes out front, along with one or two gas pumps. Inside one is likely to find a wooden bench where citizens can lounge and pass the time of day. Such modest establishments define the lives of many an American village. In addition to gas, each post office pumps life and meaning into the community. For one thing, there is the flag that bravely flies out front. Its presence constitutes red-white-and-blue proof that the town still exists. "We already lost our newspaper and our school," an elderly gentleman in Fittler, Miss., told me. "The post office is about the only thing we got left

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to be proud of."

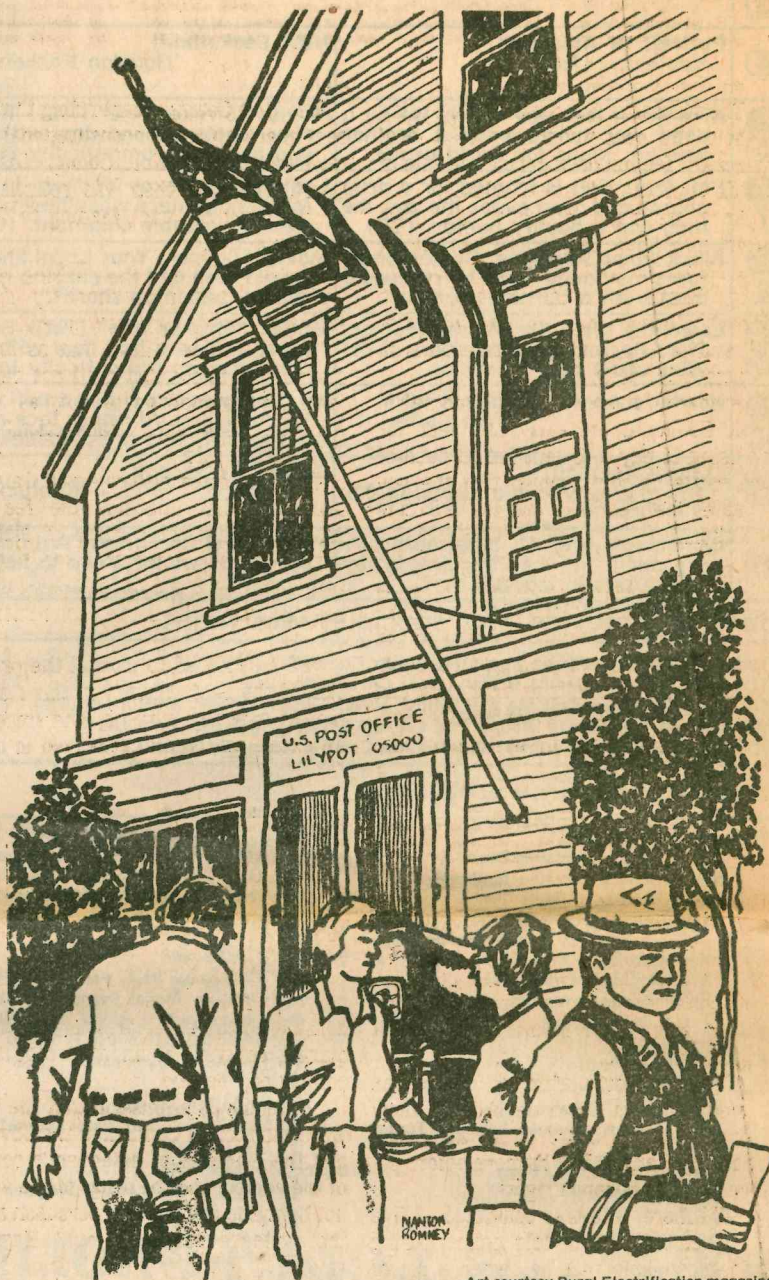
For another, there is the easy feel of democracy inside the post office. As a village resident you will be hailed and humored the instant you walk in the door. The postmaster will cheerfully grant you all manner of favors: wrap a package for you, advise you on filling out your tax forms, tell you who's taken sick of late, search for rare stamps if you're a collector, tack a notice about your lost cat on the bulletin board, even keep your house keys while you go to visit your Aunt Martha in Fort Wayne. Because the rural post office is a model democratic institution, every citizen who uses it becomes king or queen. That, in effect, is what the Postal Service would have us do without: the royalty of equality.

**POSTAL SERVICE** officials have good reason to keep quiet about this latest antirural crusade. A similar campaign 10 years ago backfired when its promoters waxed too enthusiastic. It was a lesson the Postal Service would not forget.

The General Accounting Office (GAO), a research arm of the Congress, fired the opening shot when it published a study in 1975 which called for the elimination of 12,000 small post offices and promised annual savings of \$100 million each year. Not surprisingly, the GAO's thrifty notions appealed to the managers of a deficit-ridden Postal Service, and they began to push for a wholesale shutdown of rural post offices. But the Postal Service's widely ballyhooed intentions alarmed certain rural Congressmen. They responded by securing passage of a novel amendment to the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act, one intended to preserve endangered post offices.

Sponsored by Jennings Randolph, the now-retired Democratic senator from West Virginia, the amendment was cryptic but elegant. In "making a determination to close or consolidate a post office," it stated, the Postal Service should "consider the effect . . . on the community. . . ."

**IN SPEAKING** for the amendment, Sen. Randolph perfectly mirrored the feelings of his rural constituents. First, he reminded his colleagues that "when the post office is closed, the flag comes down." Then he told them about Bessie Sparks, the postmaster



Art courtesy Rural Electrification magazine

in his hometown of Daniels, W.Va. "She makes us feel welcome," he said, "She makes us feel we're wanted." Finally, he issued a warning: "When the human side of government closes its doors, we're all in trouble."

Randolph's amendment had teeth in it, but now the teeth have come loose. He expected the PRC to enforce the new rural wrinkle in postal law: Any resident of a town in danger of losing its post office could appeal the closing within 30 days of the official announcement. If the PRC found that the Postal Service had been lax in its duty to "consider the effect . . . on the community," it could affirm the appeal, order the post office kept open and send the Postal Service back to the drawing board.

At first, during the Carter years, that is precisely what happened most of the time. A rurally sympathetic commission tended to side with the appellants, the folks trying to rescue their post offices from oblivion. But with the Reagan administration came a new commission and what appears to be a new policy. Last year, for example, in 16 decisions the commission reversed only one closing. This year, so far, the commission has heard 20

appeals; it has sided with rural residents twice and with the Postal Service 16 times. (The other two appeals were withdrawn or dismissed.) It is hard to escape the conclusion that the PRC has turned its back on "the human side of government."

**TO THINK ABOUT** these dismal numbers, and about the many village mortalities that lie behind them, is to ask an old question: What is to be done? Probably we need a small crusade of our own, one waged just among us rural residents and advocates. To start with, it wouldn't hurt if we taught each other our post office rescue rights and responsibilities. Where was everybody last year when those 202 small post offices were being flushed down the tubes? Why only 16 appeals? Fifty might have made the PRC sit up and take notice; 100 would surely have overloaded the commission's circuits and maybe have inspired some second thoughts about the value of small town post offices.

Apparently, it's up to us to save our post offices. No one else seems likely to volunteer for the job. Look around. We're the only thing here.