

States of the Union

THE LITTLE RED POST OFFICE ON PIKE STREET

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

LEMONT, PENNSYLVANIA
THE LITTLE RED post office in Lemont—a pretty village at the base of Mt. Nittany, several miles from the Penn State campus—houses 364 PO boxes, and all but one is rented. Box No. 364, in the righthand bottom corner, has had a broken lock all year; instead of fixing it, Postmaster Russ Eminhizer decided to turn it into a Children's Box. He keeps it filled nowadays with junk mail—the stuff addressed to “Occupant”—so when a child comes to inquire, “Any mail for me today?” Eminhizer can say, “You better take a look.”

The Children's Box is a great success. It has made the post office, located on Pike Street, in the exact center of the village, a regular after-school stop for dozens of Lemont kids. They come on foot, on bikes, even in wagons pulled by older friends or siblings.

“Did I get anything today, Mr. Eminhizer?”

“Think so. Take a look.”

I am visiting this community of 757 souls to learn more about their postal affections. So strongly do the citizens of Lemont feel about their post office

that when push came to shove last spring, more than 300 of them cheerfully donated \$8,000 of their hard-earned cash just to make sure that the Federal government would not make good on a threat to move it to a locale beyond village limits. The villagers' show of civic fervor was all the more remarkable in the light of Lemont's rather shaky position in the world-at-large: Being unincorporated, the village boasts no municipal government and only the flimsiest of voluntary civic associations; moreover, it is in constant danger of being engulfed by its burgeoning academic neighbor, the town of State College. Yet the people of Lemont continue to insist on their integrity both as a place and as a community, and they continue to see their post office as the vital center of the life they hold in common.

Lemont's powerful and stubborn community mystique against all odds and incursions—industrialization, suburbanization, four-lane highways, regional airports, fast-food establishments, school consolidations, to name a few—suggests that most modern sociologists have been wrong in so casually writing off *gemeinschaft*. The

death of village life may have been greatly exaggerated in such widely accepted sociological works as *Small Town in Mass Society* and *The Eclipse of Community*.

The Lemont struggle is indirectly related to recent postal political history. In 1975 the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), an investigative arm of Congress, issued a report alleging that the deficit-ridden Postal Service could save \$100 million a year through the simple expedient of shutting down 12,000 rural post offices. Although the report stirred the animosities of rural citizens and their congressmen, for a while it appeared that the Federal bookkeepers might carry the day. Lured by the promise of multi-million-dollar savings, the Postal Service promptly revised its guidelines to make the closing of small post offices considerably easier than before. Among other things, the new regulations included a catch-all clause that permitted shutdowns wherever “changing conditions related to the community, or to the staffing of facilities of the post office, make it impractical to operate a post office”—in other words, wherever Postal Service officials cared to abandon service.

In due course, however, the Postal Service's dream of imposing a purely rural solution on what was clearly a nationwide problem gave way to doubt, and then to embarrassment. The change of heart came in consequence of several Congressional committee hearings designed to focus on the GAO study, all of them markedly pro-rural and anti-GAO. Ultimately, GAO officials giving testimony began to show signs of indignation at their own report, calling it too “severe” and claiming that if they had to write it again, “it would be different.”

But the hearings were notable for more than shame and indignation. What much of the testimony seemed to indicate was that the rural post office did considerably more than deliver mail. Witness after witness attested to its nuclear role in village life—as a social center, a communications center, a business center. A witness from Kan-

sas summed it up: "We all realize that the post office is a necessity in all towns, and to lose it is to lose our identity."

As usual, Congress proved more sensitive than administrators to voters' wishes. In June 1976, it passed an amendment to the Postal Reorganization Act that sharply restricted the circumstances under which small post offices could be closed. Using precedent-breaking language, the legislators implicitly recognized connections between post office life and village survival, instructing the Postal Service to "consider the effect on the community" when deciding whether or not to shut down a post office. At the same time, Congress made it possible for communities slated for closings to appeal to the U.S. Postal Rate Commission, a separate, independent agency.

The Postal Service then began exercising extreme caution in attempting shutdowns. Whereas initially it hoped to abandon some 300 post offices a year, since the "effect on community" amendment it has zeroed in on fewer than 100 towns and has received permission to go ahead with closings in only 33 of those. Several court suits brought by small-town citizens and their representatives constitute one reason for the low batting average; another reason is the Postal Rate Commission's new role as a hearer of community appeals. In taking seriously the "effect on community" clause, the commission is making an effort to discover what the clause means and how it might be applied. Some lawyers there recently asked me to help, and that is why I went to Lemont.

Let it be said at once that technically Lemont was never in danger of losing its post office, which does more than enough daily business to satisfy the fussiest of cost accountants in Washington. No, the Lemont post office was a victim of its own success: The lobby was frequently jammed, more than 80 families were on a waiting list for numbered boxes, and parking space was at a premium. Everyone understood that Lemont needed a bigger post office.

So the Postal Service hired a contractor. This contractor happened to be very experienced; he had built other post offices in other parts of Pennsylvania. The location he disingenuously proposed for the new Lemont post office was on his own land—a parcel off the main highway, several miles from the center of Lemont. Very hastily and foolishly, without consulting anyone in town, the Postal Service approved the parcel and the plan.

The community's response was instantaneous. Like members of an endangered species, the citizens huddled together forming a group they named Concerned Citizens of Lemont (CCL). It took the CCL about six months of constant, strident pressure before the Postal Service—at the 11th hour, with a bulldozer already churning the earth—at last backed down. They would cancel the contract, Federal officials told Lemont representatives, if the citizens would consent to reimbursing the contractor for funds he had allegedly spent. The price of redemption was \$8,000; and, as in an old-fashioned fable, the community was given just two weeks to find the treasure.

THE MONEY was raised with surprisingly little trouble. Some gave nickels and dimes; many gave more. One citizen purchased a lithograph at a raffle—produced and donated by artist Harold Altman—for \$1,000. (One pictures the humble Lemont peasantry delivering the treasure in a burlap bag to an enraged Postal Service functionary, who mutters, "Curses! Foiled again!")

By the time I arrived in Lemont the excitement was over. Indeed, most of the people I talked to seemed amazed in retrospect that they had displayed such passion and exerted such energy over what, to most outsiders, would seem a minor issue. I asked them why they had fought so hard. Here are some of their answers.

Louise Mayes, longtime resident: "The post office is where people say hello. It's the one public place used by *all* the community."

Jeffrey M. Bower, an attorney who

was one of the leaders of the campaign: "The post office is a social center for all age groups, especially for the elderly. It's inconceivable to me that this town could exist without a post office."

Constantine ("Chris") Exarchos, owner of a restaurant across Pike Street: "Every morning I look out the window and see the same people walking to the post office. They're my friends and neighbors. It's very reassuring for me to see them each day, to know that they're there."

Warren Smith, a Penn State professor and chairperson of the CCL: "Everybody identifies with the post office. I never saw the people here so united—or so angry."

Let me add a few thoughts of my own. In small communities like Lemont, a post office offers many reassurances. It is a *Federal* presence, meaning that the United States of America explicitly recognizes the existence of that small dot on the map. It is also a distinctly *local* presence, meaning that you will be recognized the moment you walk in, and that you will be entitled to the best of service simply because you are known to exist. Thus the Lemont postmaster will spend time chatting with you; he will wrap your package for you; he will search for rare stamps if you're a collector; he will advise you on how to fill out your income tax form; he will even keep your house keys while you go visit your Aunt Sophie in Pittsburgh.

Finally, the village post office serves in commonplace ways to reassure people about their own existence. It gives them a locus, a place within the universal whole. The letter that Jane Crofut received in *Our Town* helps us to enjoy this sweet mystery. You may recall the address written on the envelope: "Jane Crofut; the Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God."

But maybe they don't read Thornton Wilder at the GAO.