

States of the Union

A FINE METER OF 'CIVILIZATION'

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

For my part, I could easily do without the post office. . . . I never received more than one or two letters in my life that were worth the postage.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

The power of a drop of wax or gluten to guard a letter, as it flies over the sea, over land, and comes to its address as if a battalion of artillery brought it, I look upon as a fine meter of civilization.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

I USUALLY prefer the raspiness of Walden to the rhapsodies of Concord, but in the case of these contrary weighings of the mail, I side with Emerson. How could Thoreau, a free-lance writer of sorts, so carelessly dismiss the uses of the P.O.? Hadn't he ever received a letter of praise from a grateful reader, or a check from a publisher?

As a free-lancer, I can testify to the power of Emerson's "drop of . . . gluten"—as well as to the probable truth of Thoreau's famous remark that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Many a morning

have I trudged in quiet desperation to my Rural Free Delivery (RFD) mailbox and prayerfully faced east, the direction from which Al Mecozzi, our neighbor and the town's postman, generally makes an appearance.

At 10:15 or thereabouts, Al's squarish Scout usually lurches into view. I watch impatiently as it creeps toward me, stopping along the way at my neighbors' boxes: Barrett, Haajanen, Corbett, Hill. . . . Now I can make out Al's large, bald head through the car window. . . . Diotte, McBrinn, Haase, Margolis.

"Hey, Al, whatcha got?"

"Looks like all bills, Dick. No checks today—damnit!"

I ask, "What good are bills without checks?"

"Your bills can keep you warm, Dick. Just burn 'em in your fireplace."

Al's practiced eye can always spot a check. He has a set speech for the occasion: "Better not show this to the Mrs. She'll just spend it."

These days both Al Mecozzi and the town's RFD system are on my mind. There's a rumor going around

that the government intends to shut down our small operation. That wouldn't surprise anyone. For at least two generations Federal bookkeepers have been methodically snuffing out post offices such as ours, reducing the total from 76,000 at the turn of the century to 31,000 today. All signs point to further depredations. A recent report issued by the General Accounting Office (GAO) argues ominously that \$100 million could be saved every year if only 12,000 rural post offices were ploughed under.

The GAO's recommendation is a fiscal daydream and a social nightmare. As Representative Keith Sibelius (R.-Kan) has pointed out, "the meat axe approach to small rural post offices" has already hastened the death of countless towns and villages. He warns that "there is no turning back. For business and industry to locate in rural and small-town America, there must be a foundation of basic community services. The community post office is the cornerstone of this foundation."

Some of the community services that Al Mecozzi provides go beyond

the postal service's definition of "basic," but I suspect they are typical of the RFD circuit. Al, who has been traveling essentially the same route for two decades, regularly rescues cats from trees; drives tearful children to school when they have missed their bus; delivers medicine to the sick and milk and eggs to the elderly; pushes cars out of snowdrifts; and changes tires for people unable to fix a flat.

"At one time," Al says, "the post office was all for service to the people; now it's all for saving money and cutting services. Me? I'm sort of an old-timer. I still see myself as a good-will ambassador."

Most of us Georgetowners have taken all this for granted; probably we've been spoiled. The other day I heard that Al's colleagues—members of the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association—named him an "Outstanding Carrier of the Year" at their 1975 convention. He was one of 45 chosen from a field of 50,000, so from now on I shall think of Al as an uncommon carrier—in fact, as a suitable successor to those legendary pioneer RFD postmen who, whatever the obstacles they encountered, always managed to deliver the mail.

*The postman and his horse are
cold*

*But fearlessly they face the gale;
Though storms increase a
hundredfold*

*The farmer folk must have their
mail.*

This inspirational doggerel is in the 1907 *Congressional Record*. Back then farmers felt Rural Free Delivery was the greatest invention since the McCormick reaper. They had lobbied fiercely for it in Washington, taking as their slogan, "Everyman's mail to everyman's door."

"No governmental service ever belonged more completely to the nation's farmers than the RFD," observes historian Wayne E. Fuller in his interesting book, *RFD*. "They

had been responsible for the service's establishment in the 1890s as they were in the 1900s for its expansion. They initiated and circulated the petitions. . . . They had planned their own routes, drawn sketches for them, and plotted them on maps. . . . And in return the routes came, nearly 40,000 of them in the first nine years of the 1900s."

THE NEW system was a great emancipator. It freed the farmer and his family from dreary isolation, brought them within range of city luxuries and culture, and rescued them from the



burdensome need to go into town every time they wanted their mail.

Indeed, much of the political opposition to RFD came from small-town retailers who feared for their profits. "The business men of Kalida," wrote an Ohio postal agent cogently but ungrammatically, in 1905, "aver that the Rural Free Delivery hurts the town, as it keeps people away since they do not have to come after their mail, they even claimed that the saloon business had fallen off. . . ." Opponents found ready support in Washington among politicians like Wilson Bissell, Grover Cleveland's unimaginative postmaster general, who predicted that the program would "soon bankrupt the nation."

Well, the farmers persevered, and we Georgetowners are remote beneficiaries. Of course, the farms are gone. "The last farm on my route was the Lockwoods'," Al told me. "Mrs. Lockwood used to leave little notes for me in the box. If it was a cold day, the note might say, 'Come in for some hot soup.' The people now, they don't do that any more. They live in subdivisions and I can't even remember their names, they move in and out so fast."

In fact, Georgetown isn't really a town at all. It has no laws, no government, no municipal status—just an old wire mill, a few stores and bars, a bank and a post office. The post office goes back to 1852, when Silliman Godfrey was hired as the first postmaster. After that people could put "Georgetown" on their stationery. It became, not really a place, but an *idea* of a place.

Quite a few vital institutions sprang from that flimsy idea: churches, lodges, a volunteer fire department, a school with a slate roof built by volunteers during the Depression days. The school is closed now and so are some of the churches, but the notion of a "Georgetown" persists among the residents, even in this era of no-hot-soup transiency. Al and the post office may be supplying the last drops of gluten to hold things together.

So Emerson was right: The postal delivery system is "a fine meter of civilization." But what it mainly measures, I suspect, is not so much our technological progress as our belief in community. To be sure, Rural Free Delivery was a logistical and organizational triumph; yet more than that it was a triumph over loneliness and a victory for human inclusiveness. Nowadays, when so much of the information we get has been processed, packaged and puréed, the U.S. mail begins to look like a genuine alternative medium through which we can still tell one another what is on our minds and in our hearts.