

SPECIAL DELIVERY

Community hubs for several centuries, small-town rural post offices are an endangered species.

Written by
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Photography by **Jason Houston**

A few minutes past seven o'clock on a dark, snowy morning in late December, light spills out through the windows of the stand-alone, forest-green building on Route 41 that houses the Richmond post office. The service window inside the lobby is closed—customers can't buy stamps or send registered mail or make any other financial transactions until eighty-thirty—but the daily postal operations in this small Massachusetts town are well under way.

Behind the window, hidden from view of the occasional early bird residents who come in to check their personal post office boxes or to slip outgoing envelopes into the appropriate slot, Koren Ahlen is standing at a counter sorting through yesterday's bulk mail, waiting for the United States Postal Service (USPS) truck to arrive with today's deliveries. As Ahlen, the part-time flexible clerk (PTF in jargon-intense postal parlance) divides tall piles of circulars, envelopes, and

catalogs, the voices of National Public Radio float across the warm, compartmentalized space. Her takeout coffee from Dunkin' Donuts, propped in a cardboard tray, remains untouched.

Ahlen has already logged into the computer to check whether anyone in Richmond has requested any special mail services, such as holding or forwarding. Once in a while, she'll receive an electronic notice. But in this Berkshire town of sixteen hundred residents, she says, "most people just come in."

Residents of rural towns tend to hold their local post offices in high regard, and Richmond is no exception. In a community that has no coffee shop, grocery store, or gas station, the post office has long played an important role as an integral social hub. At the post office, people socialize, exchange neighborly information, and scan local announcements.

"People come in here to find out what's happening in town," Ahlen says.

Postmaster Roderick Drees, who has worked in Richmond for eight months, nods his head in agreement. "A lot of times you'll have people show up, meet someone

they haven't seen in a long time, and they'll be out in the lobby talking for a half hour or longer," he says.

When Amy Brentano and Adam Weinberg moved from Manhattan to Richmond six years ago, one of their first priorities was to set up a post office box. "We knew there was no other real gathering place in Richmond and that the post office is where you see and meet your neighbors," Brentano explains. "It's sort of rural legend that the post office is where it all goes down."

Margaret O'Clair, a thirty-year resident of the small town of Sandisfield, Massachusetts, visits the local post office almost every day. The institution, she says, is a vital part of the community. "It's more than a post office," she says. "It's a social connection. People bump into each other."

It's also a source of information. During last December's ice storm, O'Clair came in to ask postmaster Karen Cooley how far it was possible to travel on Route 47. As expected, Cooley provided the answer.

"This is the main hub for visiting and for finding out what's going on," confirms Cooley, who has worked in the Sandisfield



Caption headline:
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Since postal employees in small towns tend to know the names and addresses of all residents, an envelope sent to “Grandpa, Richmond, MA, 01254” could actually be delivered to the right place.

throughout the years. Not only did he find it personally satisfying, but it was also “good for business, because people kept coming back.”

When residents received mail or packages sent by overnight delivery, Perkins would call them in the morning to ask whether they wanted it delivered or if they’d prefer to pick it up personally—and, for a customer of Perkins arriving before the post office officially opened, it wasn’t a problem. “People could come knocking,” he says with a broad grin. “That’s small-town good stuff.”

The current core mail team in Richmond—Ahlen, Drees (who replaced Perkins), and longtime rural letter carrier Carol Chapman—tackles daily routines with remarkable swiftness and fluidity. There isn’t a moment to spare: sorting mail manually for six hundred addresses takes time, and first-class mail, periodicals, and packages must be ready for customer pick-up by 10:30 a.m. Ahlen slips envelopes in rapid succession into the two hundred-odd post office boxes maintained by residents, while Chapman sorts mail to be delivered to the four hundred addresses on her fifty-mile route. (A number

of Richmond residents are served instead by the Pittsfield post office, a long-standing arrangement that many locals—and even loyal Richmond postal employees—have contested for years, to no avail.)

Chapman knows every address in town. She’s been delivering the mail for eighteen years—and besides, she’s a Richmond native, whose Irish ancestors settled in the town in the eighteenth century. “I have deep roots here,” she acknowledges.

Like most rural carriers, Chapman drives her own car instead of a government-owned truck, and isn’t required to wear a uniform. It usually takes her about four hours to make her daily deliveries, a significant portion of which is spent on the town’s many dirt roads. In addition to stuffing mailboxes, she delivers bulky packages to residents’ front doors.

Today she has thirty-four packages—far fewer than a couple of weeks ago, during the height of the holiday season. She streamlines the process as much as possible: before carrying the packages to her car, she makes a handwritten list of recipients that she sticks to her dashboard. “You get a good workout,”

Chapman says of her daily routine. “Lots of [lifting and] stretching.” And she puts twenty thousand miles a year on her blue Chevy Blazer.

Being a rural mail carrier is demanding in other ways, too: Chapman hasn’t taken a vacation for two and a half years, since she went to Nova Scotia for a week in 2006. But she’s not complaining. “I love it,” she says. A rural carrier job is hard to come by, after all; the average wait when she started was fourteen years. (Today, it’s five to six years.) Once hired, rural carriers tend to stay in their jobs for a long time, earning as much as \$67,000 a year, with benefits to boot—though the average national salary hovers around the forty thousand dollar mark.

Since the advent of the Internet, communication structures have changed dramatically. Mail volume is down, while cyber correspondence continues to rise. “Computer, e-mail, pay[ing] your bills online, fax machines.... You’d be sticking your head in the sand to



“If you don’t use us, you’re going to lose us!” —Richmond Post Master, Karen Cooley

say that hasn’t hurt first-class mail,” Perkins admits.

It’s no secret that the USPS is struggling to maintain financial solvency. In 2008, the postal service posted a net loss of 2.8 billion dollars. Rural post offices themselves seldom make a profit; they are sustained by the overall system.

Five years ago, rumors swirled that rural post offices in the U.S. might fall prey to the same tragic fate as those in Britain, where 2,500 rural post offices have been ordered closed, despite a groundswell of protests. This past January, the Postmaster General announced a likely system-wide cutback in the number of delivery days (from six to five), and the chairman of the Postal Regulatory Commission suggested that closing small and rural post offices might be financially prudent, leaving Berkshire residents to whisper nervously, wondering if their own sites might fall victim to a challenged system in a bad economy.

Fiercely protective of their community hubs, small-town postmasters like Cooley urge residents to make transactions—buying stamps, ordering packages, sending certified

mail—whenever possible. Even ordering services online (at www.usps.com) benefits rural offices, as long as rural purchasers use their own Zip Codes—or so say officials. Some rural postmasters, however, are skeptical. “They say we get credit, but I don’t know,” says Cooley with a shrug. She prefers to dispense more practical advice, encouraging personal visits to the local post office. “Mail packages and buy stamps from us,” she tells her customers. “Not only will you get great service, it will be so much cheaper for you. My famous saying is, ‘If you don’t use us, you’re going to lose us!’”

Pam Gillette in Mill River prefers to remain optimistic. “I hope they do keep [rural post offices] open,” she says. “I really believe these little communities need them.”

Richmond’s Roderick Drees insists that it’s all about the ties that bind. “I definitely find it rewarding, meeting with people and making them happy,” he says. It’s gratifying to “[get] the job done at the end of the day.”

With a good-natured laugh he adds, “Even though you know there’ll be more tomorrow.” **BL**

THE GOODS

Glendale Post Office
17 Glendale Rd.
Glendale, Mass., 01229
413.298.3704

Mill River Post Office
8 Mill River-Great Barrington Rd.
Mill River, Mass., 10244
413.229.8582

Richmond Post Office
2089 State Rd.
Richmond, Mass., 01254
413.698.3121

Sandisfield Post Office
83 Sandisfield Rd.
Sandisfield, Mass., 01255
413.258.4940

Tyringham Post Office
118 Main Rd.
Tyringham, Mass., 01264
413.243.1225

Her family’s relocation to Richmond, Mass., six years ago from Washington, D.C., reawakened freelance writer Christine Hensel Triantos to the value of small-town institutions like the post office. She can be reached by sending a letter to “Spyros’ Wife,” or “Nicholas and Melina’s Mom,” Richmond, MA, 01254.