

CB & Q 1945 RPO



THE RAILWAY POST OFFICE (RPO)

Transportation of mail was at one time an important component of the operation of passenger trains. It was decreed by an act of Congress on July 7, 1838 that every railroad was a postal route. The RPO car was literally a post office on wheels.

Railway mail cars were introduced in 1840 and by 1859 mail was being sorted in early RPO cars. All steel mail cars were first built in 1888 and by 1891 all railroads were required to provide cars meeting Post Office specifications. By the early 1900s it was not unusual to see solid trains of postal cars on routes with heavy mail traffic such as New York and Chicago. There would be trains with sealed cars and with cars where postal clerks sorted mail en route. Other trains frequently carried combination mail baggage cars such as car CB&Q 1945.

There were many regulations issued demanding top priority for the mails with heavy fines levied for violations. Among them were that the mail was to be carried on the first section of all trains. Mail was to be transferred first in the case of a wreck. Mail was to be loaded first at all stations. Mail was to be distributed and dispatched from terminals within eight hours of arrival. Delays were to be reported to the government.

Following World War II the railroads began to modernize their passenger trains with streamlined equipment. This meant putting the traditional regulation RPO facilities into cars matching the rest of the train. This was not enough to save the passenger service (by streamlining), and the Post Office began to transfer mail traffic to trucks and planes. Amtrak does carry some mail in sealed cars. The final American RPO run was carried by the Penn Central on a New York to Washington trip on June 30, 1977.

THE RAILWAY POST OFFICE CAR

CB&Q 1945

The CB&Q began buying all-steel baggage-mail cars in 1913 with the acquisition of cars 1910 to 1919 from the American Car & Foundry Company. In 1913 an additional 15 cars were purchased, also from AC&F. These were cars 1920 to 1934. Additional cars were purchased from Standard Steel Car Company for the CB&Q, and its subsidiaries the Colorado & Southern and the Fort Worth & Denver. In November 1924, AC&F built the last cars in this series for the CB&Q, those being cars 1945 to 1949. These cars were just over 70 feet long and 14 feet high. CB&Q 1945 last operated on the Burlington Lines between Denver, CO and Billings, MT. It was taken out of service in 1960.

Generally the car would be set at the mail terminal of the depot two hours before the train that it was scheduled for was due to leave. The mail end of the car was leased from the railroad by the Post Office Department by the

square foot. It was staffed by Railway Postal Clerks employed by the Post Office Department. A railway postal clerk would have special training and pass a postal examination as to sorting and dispatching of mail plus a physical examination. They worked long hours and would be on their feet for extensive periods. There was also considerable train motion.

The mail would be loaded into the car off mail carts from the mail room at the depot and placed in the bins on either side of the car. One side was for the storage mail that was going beyond the working limits of the car and the mail that was going to be worked would go to the other side. When all the terminal mail was loaded, the doors were closed and locked from the inside. A crew consisting of five men would open the sacks of working mail onto the sorting table and separate the mail that was going beyond the run of the car from the mail that they were going to dispatch along their run. A final check would be made to be sure that they had all the mail from the terminal before departure of the train.

On a trip from Denver to Billings, they would pass all the first class mail to the men at the end of the car to put it in the proper pigeon hole. The second and third class mail would go into the proper bags under the overhead bins where it would be put off at particular stations where it would be given to slower forms of transportation. The pigeon holes had the names of mail zones underneath each box for stations past the run of the car. On arrival at Billings the mail was taken out, tied in bundles for specific locations and taken into the terminal. It was then sorted again for the next train. Second class bags were also removed. The car returned to Denver on the next train after the men had their rest. The names under the pigeon holes would be flipped over and show names for the sorting on the trip back to Denver.

The overhead bins were for mail that was going to be dispatched as the train moved along. Every town that was a pick up or dispatch station was designated by the Post Office Department. A post office employee or an employee of the railroad was always on duty to hang or pick up a mail bag. It could not be left hung for a train or left lying on the station platform. As the train approached a dispatch or pick up station, the crew would get the first class mail out of the bin, put it in a dispatch bag and move to the door on the side of the car on which the catcher arm was located. With the bag in his left hand, he would operate the catcher arm with his right hand, throwing the bag of mail out as he caught the one in the catcher arm. When approaching a station where a mail bag was hung, the engineer would give one long blast of the whistle. This was a sign to the foreman in the mail car that there was a mail bag hanging. The mail car was always located at the head end of the train.

The postal clerks worked in the car for twelve to sixteen hours at a time. Train speeds would run up to 80 MPH. There was a toilet at the end of the car, and drinking water was available. They had lunch when time permitted. The mail crane alongside the car was donated to the museum by the family of deceased RPO clerk Roy Schmidt as was the picture display of a mail car foreman in action dispatching and picking up a bag at a station.

THE BAGGAGE CAR



One end of car CB&Q 1945 was utilized as a baggage car. An employee of the railroad called a Train Baggage man or a Baggage man was in charge. This half of the car was shared with the Railway Express Agency.

Among the duties of the Baggage man was to store and keep track of suitcases belonging to passengers on the train. He was to be prepared to take them off at the station where the passenger would be detraining.

Another of his duties was to handle any bags of U.S. mail for which there was no room in the RPO end of the car. The bags were passed through the opening which can be seen at the center of car 1945. The Baggage man made a report at the end of his run of how many mail bags he handled or stored, and the railroad in turn billed the Post Office Department so much per bag as they were not paying rent for storage in this end of the car.

The Baggage man also handled railroad company mail for the stations along his route. Company mail for stations where the train did not stop were put off at a regular stop, and the agent at that stop would forward it to the designated station on a local freight train which stopped at all stations. It could also be placed on a local passenger train which made more stops than the regular passenger trains.

A very important duty of the Train Baggage man was to handle cream cans. A term called Cream Can train arose from this duty. Farmers, after the turn of the century in the early 1900s, would ship their cream to a distant location for processing. They would do this as they could obtain a better price than at a local area creamery. The depot agent would tag the can and put it on the train, making out a bill to the creamery for the transportation charge. In Galesburg, hundreds of cans came in daily for a local creamery, The Meadow Gold Dairy, across Mulberry Street from the depot. A creamery at Galva, IL was also a large receiver of farm cream, and much also went as far as Chicago.

As an example, a train would leave St. Louis daily with over 200 pounds of chunk ice in the summertime in order to keep the cream cool. If the cans were allowed to get too hot, the cream would boil up and blow the lids off. By placing a large chunk of ice on the lid, this could be prevented. The odor and mess from boiled over cans were unpleasant. On arrival in Galesburg from St. Louis, the train would have more than 50 cans for delivery. The empty cans were returned to the farmer by the creamery. Each farmer had several cans in this circle, and it was the responsibility of the Baggage man to ensure proper delivery.

THE EXPRESS CAR



One portion of car CB&Q 1945 was used by the Railway express Agency, a service no longer in existence. The REA was a forerunner of today's United Parcel Service and Brinks. REA paid the railroad for use of their space in the car.

What grew into the Railway Express Agency began on March 4, 1839 by William Harnden, an enterprising Conductor on the Boston & Worcester Railroad. He promoted a new package delivery service between Boston and New York. Harnden advertised that he was operating an express car with a messenger to Providence where steamboat connections would complete the four times weekly service. This grew into the premier package delivery service in North America with agents in almost every town where there was a railroad station. They had large numbers of railroad cars and a fleet of dark green delivery trucks that was one of the largest in the world.

Two of Harnden's agents, Henry Wells and William Fargo, extended the service and joined with John Butterfield around 1850. Out of this consolidation service was extended to the West Coast and American Express and Wells Fargo were born. In addition, the Pony Express and the stage coach lines were formed out of this service. However, both of the latter succumbed to the rapid growth of the railroads. The express companies continued to grow though.

Expansion was rapid and extensive but when World War I began, the United States Railroad Administration took control of the industry and formed the American Railway Express Company on July 1, 1918 to administer the express business. It returned to private ownership in 1920. On March 11, 1929, the railroads of the country purchased the assets and changed the name of the company to Railway Express Agency. An air service was formed just prior to World War II.

By the 1960s, railroad passenger service was decreasing, creating service gaps and necessitating shipment on piggy-back trailers. Service from all passenger trains was eliminated in 1971 with the formation of Amtrak.

REA sold off its railroad equipment, and United Parcel Service absorbed the express traffic. REA ceased to exist in 1975.

In its heyday, REA operated over 190,000 miles of railroad, 14,000 miles of shipping lines and 91,000 miles of air routes. They had 17,000 trucks handling 300,000 daily shipments.

A former life-long employee of REA has described for us how the REA and its employees worked on a day by day basis.

The Messengers obtained their jobs by bidding on a particular assignment which would be posted for bid on the bulletin board. He or she would put in writing their desire to have the position and their qualifications. The position would be awarded, first on seniority, and second on qualifications. If assigned, the employee would have a qualifying period. It was hard physical work and involved long hours and travel. At times the messenger would find he did not like the job and give it up.

There were several types of railroad cars used for express transportation. The older cars had wooden floors that had become permeated with odors from material transported. They would become saturated with water dripping off shipments of fish, spoiled and rotting fruit and drippings off the carcasses of animals. Not all the odors were bad. REA transported Christmas trees during season, boxes of flowers and garden plants from nurseries. There would be live animals shipped in crates, but to offset that, there was the aroma of baskets of fresh oranges. The cars would be cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

Messengers were required to carry a gun and had what was called a "Drag Safe" for the protection of small items of jewelry, money bank paper and other valuables which would be listed on REA form 3069 and signed by the employee. It took strength at times when he had to handle a casket. Livestock was carried and the animal had to be fed and watered per a card on the side of the crate. If the animal got out of the crate, the messenger would have a real problem. One messenger on the Wabash railroad was carrying a baby elephant who escaped the crate. Fortunately, the messenger was able to use a shipment of bananas to coax the elephant back into the crate. REA made him pay for the bananas. This was in pre union days.

Steel floors later replaced the wooden floors, and they used sawdust as a cover. This was a bit of a hazard as the sawdust would blow around and get into the eyes, and clothing but it did go a long way to eliminating some of the odors. It was a tough heavy job.

The Messenger found his job at times to be troublesome with the travel, the time away from home and family and the long hours. He had to be careful to avoid personal injury from handling heavy shipments and from train motion. However, they enjoyed their jobs and earned a good living.