

Mail types

•Registered

Jewelers use this service because "it goes under lock, and when it leaves one person's hands the next person has to sign for it," says Toni, adding this is how the postal service sends its own stamp stock.

•Certified

Travels just like any first class letter; the only difference is it has to be signed for at the delivery point.

•Express Mail

Guaranteed overnight or second-day service. Most rural post offices are leery of overnight service, but they're comfortable with second-day guaranteed. But Toni says mail can be overnighted to most places on the east coast as long as you post it by 3 p.m.

•Priority

Basically, first class mail for stuff weighing 13 ounces or more. Priority packaging is free and sized to meet dimensional requirements.

•First-Class

This is your 42-cent Christmas card or thank-you note. Periodicals, travel just as fast; that's why you get the *Orange Review* on Thursday morning.

•Parcel Post

"Is going to be handled after we finish up the First-Class and Priority," says Toni. It can take as long as eight to 10 days, vs. two to three, First-Class.

•Media Mail

A special rate for mailing CDs, books, etc. but it's subject to inspection. "You can't have a stuffed teddy bear in there," which actually happened.

•Standard Mail

Everything else. It replaces the old second and third class rankings. This is mostly business bulk mail, some catalogs, flats, even what they call "marriage" mail, "your flyers that are comingled, your Wal-Mart and your Dominoes Pizza, a bunch of coupons, that's all marriage mail. It's married together and sent out as one." Even mail addressed to "Postal Customer" falls in this category. Within all this are various different categories and rates depending on how well it is pre-sorted.

Either way, Toni says standard mail "keeps us alive."



Photo by Phil Audibert

It must be a Thursday because Dan Robinson is stuffing section boxes with the *Orange County Review*. Because periodicals travel with first class mail, they arrive on the date they were published.

With the recent news that DHL is pulling out of the United States package delivery market, the field has been whittled down to three major players: Fed Ex, UPS, and the United States Postal Service, who by the way, has entered into a limited and wary local delivery arrangement with the guys in brown.

"We're the only company out there that delivers personal mail six days a week, even on Saturdays. We hit every home that has a box," pitches Toni of the post office. And she's got a point. The USPS delivers to 146 million homes and businesses from 37,000 post offices nationwide. "We don't tack on surcharges," she adds. Go back four months to when gasoline was \$4 per gallon and consider that for every penny that gasoline rises in price, it cost USPS \$8 million more to fuel up its 260,000 vehicles.

In rural areas, vehicles are owned and operated by the rural carriers who are paid according to "an evaluated table," that takes into account mileage, fuel and maintenance expenses. Although most have right-hand drive capability, there are still some who sit on the passenger side and operate the car with their left foot and hand while stretching out the window with their right to stuff the box. Toni herself did that for many years from a Crown Vic, when she worked in post offices in Deerfield and Mt. Jackson. "You use a lot of muscles," she winces.

Today, as postmaster, one of her greatest worries is the safety of the rural carriers. The Gordonsville office has had a nearly perfect accident-free record; a carrier's pickup overturned five years ago on Red Hill Road. But horror stories of close calls abound. "You think about the main roads that we have here in this area alone...busy roads that our carriers are halfway on and halfway off...not everybody slows down," shudders Toni. "We've got 18-wheelers just flying past you, and it's dangerous." Some carriers

have taken refuge in the ditch. Scott Camillucci says a woman pulled out in front of him once. "She just never saw me...I missed her by that much." He holds his fingers three inches apart.

Despite the obvious dangers and frustrations, being the postmaster of a small town that does a big business with a customer like American Press suits Toni to a tee. "It's an office that's big enough to keep you busy...and then again you have your customers to speak with and become personal with, and that's what's kinda neat about this town."

What about the future? We all know that fuel costs will rise again. But Toni assures that rural delivery will not be phased out. If anything, they might cut back on window service, replacing the staff hours with automatic postal centers that can handle everything from issuing stamps to weighing and measuring packages. And then there's USPS.gov where you can do everything on line, including scheduling parcel pickup at your home and the delivery of free packing materials. Gordonsville is growing. By next year at this time, they will most likely have added a sixth rural delivery route. And by next September, they will receive flats already pre-sorted and sequenced for the rural carriers.

"Not snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night..." Well, today we've seen two out of the four. Thankfully the heat is gone till next summer. What about the snow? Toni purses her lips. She's concerned about the safety of her carriers. "There may be times when we get out there that we can't maneuver. We might have slid around in the road and it becomes too dangerous to even try to stop. Then we do ask them to come back," she admits. Then she adds, "Any time that we can, we do, through the sleet... whatever."

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Photo by Phil Audibert

Alan Hawley cheerily recites the Post Office motto of "not snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night..." in a downpour. The 22-year veteran of the Gordonsville Post Office stresses the importance of keeping the mail in order.

Actually it's pouring this morning and the pitch black dark has given way to a half-hearted gray light; so we're batting .500 on the postal service slogan. Alan Hawley pays the rain no mind as he carefully arranges bundles of mail on the dock of the Gordonsville Post Office. The 22-year veteran of the postal service is first out of the gate this morning to drive his usual route out Rt. 231 to Cash's Corner, then down back roads to Zion's Crossroads and back to Gordonsville on the terrifying, truck-clogged Route 15. He smiles as he recites the oft-quoted inscription that is carved on the Main Post Office in New York City.

In some ways, it's a pity that the postal service has been saddled with this ambitious and impossible goal. But it's nice to know that in Gordonsville anyway, they're trying, although they should add the words, "nor tractor-trailers, nor anthrax, nor explosives, nor vicious dogs, nor rude impatient people" to its list of perils.

The complete line is this: "Not snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." The quote has been lifted and modified from something Herodotus wrote 400 years before Christ was born.

Ah yes, Jesus Christ, the Savior. It just so happens He is celebrating His 2008th birthday this month, and because we don't know how to physically mail presents to Him; we mail them to each other...that, along with other quaint holiday traditions such as Christmas cards and, if we have been brought up correctly, thank-you notes.

For the post office, it is absolutely nuts at this time of year. That's why we did this interview

three weeks ago, when they were swamped with more catalogs than you can imagine. Gordonsville Postmaster Toni Saul says during normal times, her office delivers 90,000 pieces of mail per week to 850 boxes and 2,600 rural delivery points! For some odd reason, the postal service measures mail in feet. In one week that stack of mail would be 705 feet tall! On a normal week, they'll deliver between 1,500 and 1,700 packages. This is not a normal week. Just go ahead and tack on another 1,000 packages, another 185 feet of mail or so, and you'll get an idea of what it's like back here.

Duck! Sandy Guseman launches some flat mail into Scott Camillucci's bin. Don't get caught in the crossfire! She turns and deftly flips a soft sided package into Alan's. And nooooo, she does not do this with packages marked "fragile," like Jim Carrey did in the opening scene of *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*. "That could look like we're mishandling the mail," gently chides Toni.

It's just that time is money here; you can't be physically walking back and forth from hamper to hamper, from box to box; it would take you all day. If you can flip it, and it's not breakable, go ahead and flip it.

Sandy's been here since 6:00 a.m. She and Dan Robinson are the first lines of defense in this never-ending blizzard of mail. Almost as soon as one hamper empties another arrives, putting them knee-deep in mail again. Every piece, whether it's "junk," registered, certified, express, first class or priority is touched "at least" twice by these folks. Dan and Sandy sort the mail to the five carriers and the post office box sections. Then the carriers, standing on



Photo by Phil Audibert

Toni Saul has been Postmistress at Gordonsville for three years now. She says despite economic uncertainties, morale at the local office is high, a fact that is independently confirmed by at least two employees.

INSIDER

BY
PHIL AUDIBERT
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Photo by Phil Audibert

"F.L." shows up for work in the morning in Charlottesville at 1:30 a.m. By 7 a.m. he has delivered his second truckload to Gordonsville, seen here. Next stop is Orange, then Somerset. Another truck will deliver and pick up outgoing mail at 2 p.m. and yet another will depart Gordonsville at 5 p.m.

platforms at their stations, "case" the mail in banks of slots, putting it in the order that it will be delivered.

According to Alan Hawley keeping it in order is the trick. "Once you get things out of place, out of line... you're wasting time." And, as we said, time is money. Even Dan and Sandy, when they sort the postbox mail, do it in sections so they don't run their feet off stuffing boxes and carousels up one side and down the other. Their goal, and they meet it 96 percent of the time, is to have the mail "up" in the boxes by 10:30 a.m. Scott Camillucci's goal is to be back from his rural route of 64 miles by 3:15 p.m. But at this time of the year, please cut them a little bit of slack, especially if it's a Monday.

It's still oh-dark-hundred outside and Toni Saul goes to the back door and greets the second truck of the morning. F.L., as he is known, has already been here once...at 4:30 a.m. on his route delivering hampers of mail to Keswick, Gordonsville, Orange, and Somerset (Barboursville and Montpelier Station are delivered at Somerset too, pending new and renovated facilities).

Talk about "gloom of night," F.L. has been on the job since 1:30 a.m. Asked what time he goes to bed, he responds, "Whenever I feel like it... I'll sometimes take a nap during the day. It just depends if there's a ball game I want to sit up and watch." If it's a Monday night, F.L., that's all anybody knows him as, will go to work with

maybe an hour and a half of sleep under his belt. "I gave him hell for a couple of weeks because he had a bad truck; we called him Fuel Leak," deadpans Dan Robinson. Dan is something of both office comic and sage. "If you do everything to please everybody, somebody won't like it," he muses, adding, "You have to have a sense of humor."

Like the time a package broke open revealing a rather large, uh, personal toy. This sparks guffaws from the casing stations. "Why don't you ask about the customer in the pink night robe," someone goads. Dan, poker-faced, tells of another incident when a woman came to pick up her box mail one steamy morning wearing nothing but a bra and panties. "I had two customers standing here. 'Did you all see that?'" he asked them wide-eyed. They had. "I'm glad I had two witnesses," he says incredulously.

"I delivered a full-grown swan," continues Dan of the strange stuff people send. "We've had bees; we've had snakes," adds Toni. They've delivered a coconut with address and stamps right on the nut. "We've seen that a couple of times," confirms Dan. "I've delivered three sets of human remains since I've been here, cremated bodies, one just last week. And I've also sent one set out." They've mailed fishing poles, tires, car parts, golf clubs, and "I've sent hundreds of care packages to Iraq."

This is something that Sandy has organized as a community service project. She produces a two-page wish list of items that soldiers appreciate, saying you can go to "anysoldier, anyairman, anysailor, anymarine.com" and you can get the name of a soldier you can send a package to." Better hurry. The deadline to send gifts and cards overseas is today.

As post offices go, this is a pretty nice one. It would be easy to entitle this article "Going Postal," but that's a cheap shot. Besides, nobody is wiggling out here. They're busy, but morale is good. Alan



Photo by Phil Audibert

Dan Robinson says maintaining a sense of humor helps everyone cope with the stress of sorting and delivering 90,000 pieces of mail per week. If you stacked that mail on top of itself, the tower would reach 705 feet into the air. During this busy holiday season, that volume goes up at least 25 percent.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Sandy Guseman sorts mail from Charlottesville by box section and by carrier. She saves valuable time by flipping unbreakable flats and packages into the rural carriers' hampers. They, in turn, case the mail at their stations so that when they leave, it is in sequence.

Hawley has this to say. "Everybody pitches in. There's no, 'that's not my job; I'm not going to do it.' Everybody just jumps right in and gets everything done, and that's a good thing. It's always been like that ever since I've been here." And he's been here for 22 years.

At the window, the receptionist for a local veterinarian says she would much rather go to the Gordonsville P.O. "It's faster service. It's just a much nicer place to do business," she says. "A lot of that depends on management," explains Sandy. "We have a really good postmaster. She's organized. We all work together well. Morale in this office is good." These are all unsolicited comments. No one is holding a gun to Sandy's head.

Back in her office the postmaster, Toni Saul, takes a few moments to talk about USPS and this office in particular. She refers to the late night talk show "going postal" moniker and points out the service employs 700,000 people nationwide. "You have every walk of life working in the Postal Service. We're human. Some humans flip sometimes. It happens. It happens so much less with us than it does anybody else, but it gets stapled to us, that 'going postal' term."

A particularly stressful time for the Postal service was during the aftermath of 9/11 and the anthrax scare. "It just became so hectic as to being more alert to what is actually in the mail. You really couldn't handle anything much different than you did; you were just more vigilant to what was in front of you." Some time ago, a package of PBM Products' powdered

baby formula was mishandled by a sorting machine in Tennessee. The powder spilled out, but luckily PBM's return address was on the package. "They contacted us to find out what it was. We told them what it was and resolved that issue instead of having to bring in a whole HAZMAT team. You bring in a HAZMAT team, it's a long day," groans Toni. "You have to close the building down."

Despite those pressures and the occasional rude customer at the window, Toni Saul confirms that morale at Gordonsville is good, despite the fact that "we're going to hurt here with the way the economy is now...A lot of jobs are being cut. We're minimizing the work force. And with any of that you're going to have a decrease in morale." Currently, Gordonsville employs 12, including her. The hardest part of her job is hiring, keeping and scheduling substitute carriers. "It's hard to keep a person employed with only

one guaranteed day a week."

The postal service is an independent federal agency that is operated by a board of governors and overseen by the Postal Regulatory Commission. "We're not paid by the government; we're not spending taxpayers' money," points out Toni. "We're paid by revenue only. What we make is how we get our salary." The postal service is also not allowed to make a profit. This explains why sometimes they raise rates by only one penny at a time. They can only make enough, not too much.

Around here everything except for local mail, goes to and comes from Charlottesville which processes mail 24-7 from 106 post offices in "the mountain area." The territory is huge, stretching southwest to Covington, northwest to Edinburg and northeast to Orange. Folks in Unionville and east send their mail to Fredericksburg. "That's why it takes three days to mail something from Orange to Lake of the Woods," observes Dan Robinson. On the plus side, it only takes one day to mail that same letter from Orange to Scottsville.

Gordonsville is somewhat unique in that it has a sugar daddy. His name is American Press, and, the local catalog and magazine printer does, hold onto your hats here, \$32 million worth of business with the Gordonsville Post Office every year. But none of that goes through the Main Street building; it is handled right at the dock at the plant. A postal employee mans a satellite office where he weighs and measures tractor trailer loads of magazines like *The Chronicle of the Horse*. These magazines are trucked directly to a major USPS hub at Dulles.

The biggest window customer at Gordonsville is MagicTricks.com, a mail order internet business. Which brings us to ask what effect has e-mail and the internet had on the postal service?

"Overall, first class mail has dropped almost a quarter," confirms Toni. "Since the coming of e-mail we've lost a lot to that. A lot of people pay their bills online now." It's no surprise that USPS's savior is junk mail. "I hate to use the word, 'junk,'" says Toni, "it's not junk to us because that is our lifeline."

In fact, on the delivery end, the internet has actually helped the Postal Service. Rural carrier Scott Camillucci points to a hamper full of packages. "I think a lot more people are staying home, especially with the internet," he points out. "It's way easier to shop online, and get the stuff delivered right to you." And guess who would like to make that delivery?



Photo by Phil Audibert

At American Press, Jeff Hoover checks off a fork lift load of periodicals before they are weighed and loaded on outgoing trucks. The local printing facility is Gordonsville Post Office's best customer, spending \$32 million a year in postage.

Post office dos and don'ts

"To make our job easier, bring all your packages in completely taped, with the address on there. Always put your return address on everything you have," says Gordonsville Postmaster Toni Saul. And mail your packages either with the rural carrier or at the window where they can see you and ask you the all-important question: "Is there anything liquid, fragile, perishable or potentially hazardous?" This concern about explosives and toxins predates 9/11 all the way back to the Unabomber.

Don't mail your gifts in old bleach or liquor boxes. "We might know that there's nothing in there, but when it gets to the plant in Charlottesville or Merrifield or Illinois and that person's handling it, they don't know what's in there. They are to treat it as if it's what's printed on the outside." And, she adds, "No alcohol can be transported through the United States Postal Service."

A dead giveaway for what they call "target" mail is a package with lots of duct tape, oil stains, no return address, and a bunch of stamps sticking to it. If this is dumped into one of the outdoor boxes, there is no way it can be traced back. There is also no way the post office will deliver it.

Write legibly. Believe it or not, machines in Charlottesville actually read all the addresses, even the unintelligible chicken scratch of this hapless scribe. Block letters are better; typed addresses best. And make the last line the city, state, and zip. Don't put "Attn: so-and-so" or anything else under that. The machines read from the bottom up; if they see that, they're just going to spit it around and around and it might miss the truck.

If you're sending something to someone with a P.O. Box, use the box number. In Gordonsville there are something like 30 box holders with the last name of Williams. Don't make Dan and Sandy have to guess which one should receive this package.

This, of course, is the busiest time of the year, and Mondays are their heaviest day. It won't do any good to batch out-of-town mail by zip code; it all goes to Charlottesville anyway. But, local mail, yes, put that in the local box. The next-busiest time is the week leading up to the April 15 tax deadline. Lots of certified letters here, and don't ask them to fudge a cancellation date just so you can say you filed on time. "We can't do that. We'd lose our jobs over that," says Toni stonily.

If you're putting up a mail box on a rural route, make sure it is back enough off the road that the carrier can get at least two wheels off the road and not around a blind corner. Locate the floor of the mailbox between 40 and 44 inches from the ground. And realize that if you don't get your mail till 3:00 in the afternoon while others are getting theirs at 11 a.m., it's because "we've got to start somewhere and end somewhere; so somebody is always going to be last."

Do take advantage of the various services they offer. You can go online at USPS.gov and put a hold on your mail if you're going away. You can order stamps, packaging materials, even schedule a parcel pick up with your carrier on line. If you're moving, fill out a change of address form. If you don't, they'll return it to the sender as undeliverable. If they can't do that, it's going to the dead letter facility in Atlanta.

If a carrier has to come up to your house to make a delivery, keep your dog under control. Toni almost had her hand taken off once by the sweetest Golden Retriever in the world, who had never bitten a soul. "Sometimes the bag and the uniform is the difference," she notes. City carriers have had the mail ripped out of their hands by dogs lying in wait at door slots.

And if vandals knock down your mailbox, please realize there's not much the postal service can do about it. Call the sheriff's department. If the contents of the mailboxes are being stolen, then postal inspectors will become involved, but only after local law enforcement has been notified.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Scott Camillucci drives a left hand drive car with his left foot and hand while stuffing mail into the boxes with his right. Ideally, the floor of a mailbox should be 40 to 44 inches from the ground and back far enough that the carrier can get two wheels off the highway.