

Fifty Years of Service to the Nation:

Highlights from the USPS 50th Anniversary Oral History Project

On July 1, 1971, the U.S. Postal Service officially began operations, following its transformation from the U.S. Post Office Department by the *Postal Reorganization Act of 1970*. To help commemorate its 50th anniversary, the Postal Service interviewed 25 postal employees who were on the job when this historic transition took place. All 25 employees began their careers under the U.S. Post Office Department and were still working for the Postal Service nearly half a century later, when they were interviewed in early 2021.

Most of the participants were born in the 1940s and were in their 70s at the time of the interviews. Although a few employees declined to provide their age, of those that did, the youngest was about 67, and the two oldest were 84 years old. They served in a variety of occupations—as clerks, carriers, and in administrative roles—with the highest percentage—10 of the 25—serving as city letter carriers.

Eighteen men and seven women were interviewed, spanning the country from coast to coast. Over the past 50+ years, they have served in the nation’s largest cities—New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago—and in some of its smallest towns, including Hebron, Nebraska; and Bristol, Vermont.

Topics of discussion during the interviews included the employees’ backgrounds, early on-the-job memories, and some of the changes they had experienced during their careers. While their backgrounds and careers were diverse, giving them different points of view on some topics, common themes emerged in many of the interviews: a love for the job, dedication to their customers, and respect for customers and coworkers.


The USPS 50th Anniversary Oral History Project was directed by the USPS Historian’s Office. Interviews were conducted by USPS Corporate Communications field staff in person, by telephone, and via computer—all during the global COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for long-term preservation in the Historian’s Office at USPS Headquarters in Washington, DC, where they will be available to future generations of researchers.

A full list of the employees who were interviewed appears on the next page, followed by highlights from the interviews.

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Listed below are the names of the employees interviewed, the year they joined the Postal Service, their position in early 2021, and the page numbers on which they're quoted.

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On joining the Postal Service

The project participants joined the Postal Service for a variety of reasons—some had family members who worked for the Postal Service, while some were simply looking for a good paying job. Although uncommon today, it was not unusual in the 1960s for postal employees to begin working when they were teenagers.

Yolanda Soto started right out of high school: “The Post Office was actually my very first job. I graduated when I was 17 and went directly into the Post Office. As a matter of fact, I started on graveyard [the overnight shift], and my parents had to sign, you know, because I was 17—I wasn’t 18 yet—because I was starting on graveyard.”



Yolanda Soto began working for the Postal Service in 1969, at age 17. Shown here is her first ID badge.

Gary Thompson was also 17 when he went to work at the New York Post Office. “I was in high school, my last year of high school and I was working at Grand Central Station. ... I was doing part-time regular at the evening, doing the—from 4 to 11, or 4 to 12.” He recalled his supervisor “would always tell me—when I finished doing the collections or whatever she told me to—‘Go upstairs and do your homework, do your homework up in the break room.’ ... And I would have to go upstairs and do my homework, and then come back down and do whatever she asked me to do.”

Linda Lathrop’s first job was at her local Post Office: “When I got out of high school, in the small town where I lived, the Postmaster needed help, and that’s where I started.”

Ronald Kuhlmann wasn’t looking for a job at the Post Office, but was recruited at age 19. “I was asked by my rural carrier there, Roland Grueber, if I wanted to be a sub carrier and said, ‘Sure.’ So, I got started about January 19th, I think it was, in 1968.”

Patricia Everett also started working at the Post Office when she was 19. “I was a Christmas casual between 1957 to 1963—excluding 1960, I didn’t work—for six years. I enjoyed it, and then I applied

for the job to be a regular employee and I got the job February 22, 1971.”

Passing the test

The key to getting hired was successfully passing the civil service examination. Larry Schultz recalled, “I got into the Post Office right after high school. ... I took the civil service test and became a mail handler in 1966.”

William Pendergrass said he didn’t know anything about the Post Office, but his dad told him what a good job it would be. Pendergrass said, “So, I went with him and met the personnel man in charge of hiring, who told me that I’d have to take the civil service exam and get 70% or more to be hired. I ended up with a 79%, so I was hired. ... I started at \$2.95 per hour.”

Thompson recalled that in New York City the tests were given on demand. “They had the walk-in exams, you just had to walk in and take the test. ... It was a memory test. ... With streets and addresses and all that you had to memorize and see if, remember that you seen it, or knew if it was same name. It was a memory game.”

Jennifer Perkins recalled, “I was a housewife, and my husband came in one day and told me that they were giving the test at the Post Office. And so, I thought it was a great idea, and I thought we both would be taking the test. But he just said no, he said, ‘You just go on and take it, you know, and after you take it, then I’ll see if I want to take it.’”

Robert Lombardo recalled that taking the test was not his choice: “My father made my brother and I both take the Post Office test and told us we better get a higher score than he did, because he was out of school for 30 years. And my brother worked at a Post Office for 42 years and retired, and I’m still here. ... In those days, you could take the test either for clerk or for carrier. So, I took the test for the clerk.”

Veterans’ preference

By law, many military veterans had 5 points added to their test scores. Fifteen of the men who were interviewed were veterans of the military.

Buddy Wright recalled, “When I was getting ready to get out of the Air Force, they were giving tests ... for the Post Office. So, I said, ‘Oh, well.’ So, I went down and took the test for the Post Office, and I passed it. And so, then I got my VA benefit for it—5 points. ... and the Post Office called me.”

Jimmy Putman recalled, “When I first got out of the Marines I worked for my dad and he worked me to death. So, I said, ‘There’s gotta be an easier life.’ And I was watching the letter carrier go ‘round the

streets and looked like he was having a good time whistlin' and singin'. I said, 'That's for me.' So, I took the test and passed, went to Memphis right then in 1966."

Ronald Emerick also took the test after his military service. "I spent four years and three months in the U.S. Marine Corps and upon getting out of the Marine Corps, I took the civil service exams. And, from that point, the Postal Service called me first. And that's how I got involved with the Post Office."

Project Transition

Several veterans recalled participating in "Project Transition," a program developed by the Department of Defense in 1968 to provide job training and counseling for servicemen transitioning back to civilian life.

Earl Rolle remembered how Project Transition prepared him to pass the civil service exam. "I was in the service for three years. And before you got out of the service, they had different jobs that you [could] ... try out. And I think they called it Project Transition. ... I was at Fort Meade, Maryland. They would come and give you what's going to be on the test and so

forth. For five days you studied and then the fifth day you took the test—clerk/carrier or either mail handler."

Joshua Dial recalled taking the exam in 1969 while he was still in the Army, "They offered a program they called Project Transition for those persons who were within six months of leaving the service. And, I wanted to go in one direction, but a counselor suggested that I enter the program and take the postal exam, because he thought that would best put me in a position to be employed and able to provide for a family, because I was planning on getting married."

William Geake also credited Project Transition for launching his postal career: "When I was in the military ... I was down at Fort Rucker, Alabama. And they gave this course called Project Transition. So, they trained me for six months on how to take the [civil service] test. So, I said, 'Well, I'll take the test.' And I sent the scores up to three offices in Vermont. ... Well, I got home in '69 and never heard anything. Then in January, they called me, and they said, 'Well, we called you now because you finally converted your Alabama driver's license over to Vermont.' So, they called me up. I said, 'Okay, I'll be right down.'"

On their pay

A step up

Many of the project participants reported that they were drawn to the Postal Service because it paid good wages. Lilas Harrison joined for Postal Service "for financial reasons." "The Postal Service was paying pretty good money," she said. Some employees remembered their starting wage to the penny.

For Jimmy Putman, the Postal Service paid four times as much as working in his father's ice cream factory: "When I first started I made \$2.00 an hour. My dad [had] paid me fifty cents an hour washing milk cans and working the hardest job in the world, right there, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven."

Larry Schultz said he had no idea what he was getting himself into: "I had *no* idea. Luckily it was a good move. Not only that, back then, you know, people were making \$1 an hour, and here I'm making \$2.50, \$2.70, you know. New car every year, whatever—good times."

Robert Lombardo said he was happy with the pay, "When I started with the Post Office ... as a part-time flexible, I was getting \$2.64 an hour. And when you made regular, you took a pay cut—you went from \$2.64 down to \$2.58. Because you got paid that extra

... because you'd have to work on holidays and things like that. I had no problems with the pay. You know ... back in 1968, I thought it was great."

Jennifer Perkins recalled feeling joy when she learned her starting wage in 1969: "Right before I started at the Post Office, I just applied for a little food service job at St. David's Hospital. ... Minimum wage had just gone up from \$1.25 an hour to \$1.30. And so ... I took the test and then was hired on by the Post Office. And I found out that I was going to be making \$2.95 an hour. I'll tell you! I just felt like whatever rich feels like. I hit the jackpot!"

Dannie McGill recalled that her starting wage was "like \$3.25 an hour. And whatever my checks were at that time, I would send them home to my mother and father."

Buddy Wright remembered his first postal job "paid \$3.51 when I started. I left the job I had making \$2.50. And I started in makin' \$3.51. ... That was a good salary back then. My grandfather used to ask me, 'How much money you makin' boy?' And I would tell him \$3.51. He said, 'Man, you makin' *lots* of money.'"

Jimmy Putman remembered a coworker in Memphis who quit: "He got 'bout eight paychecks and he said he's gonna quit. And I said why? He said,

'Look at all that money I can draw. I can go out and have a big time.' Which he did, he quit. And yet that was \$2.00 an hour, right there. He thought he made a lot of money. Which it was a lot of money back in the '60s. But you know, if he'd come back now and see what they're making, he would probably have a heart attack, wondering why he quit."

But hardly enough to support a family

The starting wage was fine for someone who was young and single, but it was difficult for some postal workers to earn enough to raise a family, especially in cities with high costs of living. Thomas Dean recalled, "In those days, the Post Office did not pay well, you know... they were way behind in pay."

In Cleveland, Alfonzo Wilson recalled, "The money was ... very meager. Almost everyone in the Post Office at that time had a second job, especially if they had any children, because you couldn't make it. In some cities where the cost of living was high, a mailman could get welfare and his salary. Because we just didn't make any money." Wilson added, "In 1970 we went on strike. And everyone knew ... you could lose your job, because we had a no-strike clause. But we felt like something had to be done. It was just, we just weren't making a living. You could—if I wanted a second job, I could ask anybody in the station almost, say, 'Can you get me a job, a second job?' Because everybody had second jobs. I didn't have a second job, because I didn't have any kids at the time."

"We went on strike," said John Magliaro, "and this is what came of it. ... Everybody was happy, though, because we started getting decent money, and the union had more strength."

The Post Office strike

On March 18, 1970, letter carriers in New York City walked off the job, demanding better pay and working conditions. Although it was illegal for postal workers to strike, 152,000 other employees in 671 locations soon joined the walkout, halting much of the nation's mail. Robert Lombardo had just returned from military duty and was caught off-guard by the strike:

"When I came back from the service, my first day back I think was March 15, and I'm here on a Sunday... And all of a sudden, all 8 clerks that were here ... they all got up and they left. And the supervisor ... came up to me said, 'You might as well go with them.' I had no idea what was going on. I'd been gone for two years. And went down to the Columbus Hall in Framingham and they were having a meeting with the NALC [National Association of Letter Carriers] about the strike, you know, the proposed strike. Would the two unions cooperate? Which they did. There was a one-day strike here, but I had no idea... So, they had that meeting, and they had the one-day strike, and then we came back to work."

Although many employees joined the strike, most employees did not participate. Jimmy Putman said that the carriers in his office in Tennessee were warned they would go to jail if they didn't deliver the mail. Putman said he did not join the strike because, "It was illegal, and we wanted to keep our jobs."

On March 23, 1970, President Richard Nixon declared a state of national emergency and sent federal troops to New York City to sort and distribute the backlog of mail. The strike ended two days later with the start of negotiations for a general wage increase. The unprecedented walkout helped secure passage of the *Postal Reorganization Act* later that year.

On their working conditions

Prior to the *Postal Reorganization Act*, employees had little say in their hours or working conditions. Jennifer Perkins recalled her erratic work schedule, "We were called distribution clerks, basically. And I was hired on as a substitute career clerk. That means you worked very irregular hours. I called it, 'They own you.'" William Pendergrass recalled the long hours, "I didn't know anything about seasons or anything. I just know that I worked 30 straight days, eleven and a half hours each day."

Musette Henley recalled how hectic her life was when she was first hired: "We worked Monday through Friday. Then later on, they added weekends.

And so, then we had to check the board every day to see if you worked the next day. We would not know ... what day we would be scheduled. They did have us in lead groups, and so you would have to check the board to see if your group was working. And then if you had to work on the weekend, you had the choice of coming in anytime between 7 a.m. in the morning, and 6 p.m. in the afternoon, evening."

The *Postal Reorganization Act* authorized collective bargaining between labor and management. This led to dramatic changes in pay, benefits and working conditions. Yolanda Soto recalled improvements in working hours: "A lot of

strides from the union ... were made. Because before that date ... we were only guaranteed two hours' work. If there was no work, you could be sent home. After that date ... they said that they have to guarantee you eight hours' work, which I think was a big achievement."

Lombardo recalled immediate improvements in working conditions once the first labor contract was signed: "The contract got signed, all of a sudden there's no more forced overtime. You could sign up for the overtime desired list, 10 and 12 hours, they put in double-time and a half. ... So, they made some concessions, you know, with that. Before, they could just tell you to stay two hours, and you had no say in it."

On changes in the workforce

In 1960s, more women joined the postal workforce. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy ordered that federal appointments be made "without regard to sex." Later in the decade, stagnant wages for federal workers led to the hiring of even more women, especially in cities where men could find better paying jobs. Robert Lombardo recalled that there were no women working the mail when he started at the Framingham, Massachusetts, Post Office in 1967:

"There was one young lady who was the Postmaster's secretary. I remember ... there were no female letter carriers here. When I came out here, I don't think there were many women clerks. By the time I got drafted to go into the Army in [1968], there were a few women here. I come back two years later ... [and] there were a lot of women, and they even had to install a women's bathroom, which did not exist in those days."

Fun at work

Musette Henley recalled having so much fun at the Chicago Post Office that she and her coworkers never took off: "We worked on the facing table, and they would have a facing table and we—as short-hours we started at 3:42. And we had a little jingle, we used to sing:

*Come to work at 3:42,
Facing mail is all we do,
Long in the front,
Short in the back.*

And we would just keep singing that over and over and over again. Because that's how you would separate the mails that would go down the trough ... to the cancellation machine. They would take the shorter letters and cancel them all at the same time. And then the longer letters on the cancellation machine would be cancelled at the same time. So,

Joshua Dial recalled, "When I came in ... there was no collective bargaining. You know, workers had very little say as far as workers' rights, and working conditions, or even pay. Most of this was decided by Congress. ... But in 1971 all of that changed. And then when collective bargaining became the rule of the day, that \$3.00 that I was so glad to get in '69, which was heaven-sent, that began to gradually increase and see a significant difference. But that was a major change, that was a very major change, the collective bargaining rights with unions, where they have—the employee has a say, in working conditions, and even in his compensation. So that was really big, really big."



In the 1960s increasing numbers of women entered the postal workforce.

we would just drop them in those troughs, and ... that would be our cadence. 'Come to work at 3:42.' ... And then we would play games ... when we—you were not standing on the facing table—we would play games called 'case,' you know. It would be who would get the first letter in the center, or you'd get four corners, or you would get straight across. We made it like a bingo game."

Lilas Harrison recalled, “I just enjoyed going to work because it was kind of like a family. ... We would have fun. We'd have little parties and things, and it was just interesting. We cared about each other. That was the main thing. We looked out for one another.”

Different management styles

Buddy Wright's experience in Memphis, Tennessee, was quite the opposite. Wright felt like he was back in the Air Force. He said it was “kind of like being back in the military again. Back then, just about everybody was retired from the military, and they kind of run things like the military. And I thought, ‘What did I do? Did I get out? Or am I still in the military?’” He said, “I think it's kind of laid back [now] compared to what it was then, because like I said, most of the people worked for the military, were supervisors. And they moved pretty quick, and they wanted everybody else to move pretty quick. So, you got used to doing that.”

Yolanda Soto recalled that in the past, postal managers in Los Angeles were less approachable. “Back then at the Terminal Annex, I could not go up to a top manager. ... I once went up to her, and I said, ‘Excuse me, Miss, can I ask you a question?’ And she looked down at me and she pointed like this, and I looked and said, ‘Where is she pointing?’ She was pointing to her [subordinate] supervisor. In other words, she was too high and mighty for me to address her. And believe it or not, now we have a lot more—kind supervisors. They're approachable.”

But Alfonzo Wilson remembered managers being more respectful of employees when he began: “Even the people who were in the supervisory thing, they felt like, they could not look good unless the workers made ‘em look good. And so, they treated everybody with respect and dignity. And it was a great thing.” He also remembered more of a team spirit or esprit de corps: “We had competitions—like, every station almost had a baseball team, where we played against each other and things like that. And we had a fund, social recreation fund, where we helped ‘em buy gloves and different things and so forth. So, it was like a real family-type thing. Everybody worked in the Post Office, you knew each other.”

John Magliaro recalled, “If you had a small accident, it was like nothing, you know. You break a mirror, you just bring the truck to the boss and he'd put a new mirror on. There's a lot of things like that, so different than today. If you were on a new route, some of the older guys would meet you during the day and help you. That, that was a nice thing that stood out.”

Jennifer Perkins recalled that she had really good supervisors in Austin, Texas. “You know, there was no such thing as being tardy ... you had to call in, you understood that, but they weren't too extreme. There [was] discipline, but at the same time, they had the compassion to understand. I seem to have been very fortunate to have supervisors like that.”

On changes in their work

Manual work

Throughout much of the 20th century, the Postal Service relied on manual mail sorting and processing methods. When Robert Lombardo started working in the Post Office in 1967, all the mail was sorted by hand: “Everything was manual back in those days. You'd just sit down and sort and sort and sort. ... You'd punch in, you'd get a green card, and they would assign you where to go, and if you had to leave, the card got moved.”

Musette Henley recalled that when she was hired, sorting mail was all they did, “To see mail everywhere, stacked to the ceiling, people everywhere—it was like a bustling little village. And now everything's a machine with one or two people.”

Not only was mail sorted by hand, stamps were also cancelled by hand. Patricia Everett recalled that in Indianapolis: “When I started, in the open unit ... we were cancelling with a, something like, I don't know, it was like a hammer, where we was hittin' the stamp,

but with a hammer. ... Ain't nobody hitting no stamps with no hammer now. It's going through the machines. And ... we would be on a reject belt where the mail would come down the belt, and we had to separate the SPRs [small parcels and rolled up newspapers], we had to separate the flats, and all the stuff like that.”

Learning the scheme

In order to accurately sort mail to the correct destination, clerks were required to memorize a scheme. A typical scheme might consist of hundreds of streets and addresses. Clerks were tested on their scheme knowledge and failure could result in removal from the Postal Service. At first, Jennifer Perkins was thrilled to work at the Post Office, but then she found out about the scheme requirement:

“We didn't get it at first, we didn't know we had to learn schemes. You had to go to scheme training, and it was just like being in school. It was serious. ... You had certain scores you had to make, and how

many you could miss, which wasn't very many at all—it was called failure. Because you had to actually separate this mail out as accurate as possible, because we were it. This was it for separating out the mail.”

Jimmy Putman recalled trying a shortcut to pass the test: “I was watching Art Linklater on television and they had a mailman on there. And they asked him how he memorized all the streets. So, he said, ‘I got a tape recorder and put it in my ear and slept on it all night. The next day I knew every street number there were.’ So—which I did. I woke up the next day and I didn't know one single one. So that was a bust.”

Mechanization

Robert Lombardo recalled the arrival of mechanized mail processing equipment. “When I came out here beginning of October '67, everything was manual. And then machines started coming in. My brother worked the LSMs [letter sorting machines] in Boston. Out here [in Framingham] we were still, you know, in the dark ages—cancelling—but they put in a couple of machines called Ziptronic. They were long machines, 100 separations. And you'd need a three-man crew to work these machines, two sorting and one loading ledges. So, I bid on [requested] the outgoing tour. I was running the Ziptronic machines on that, and it was fun, it was a good time. And then I bid on nights after I got married, and I bid the city scheme [sorting mail for delivery]. ... It was good. It makes the night go fast. You're doing different things.”

Buddy Wright remembered the days when he was an LSM operator in Memphis. “I think they came in ... around '67 or '68. 'Cause I know they were there when I came in, in '70 they had two machines there. And eventually I had worked on them a little bit as an operator. ... They had those probably for a couple of years.”

In Austin, Texas, Jennifer Perkins recalled, “At the time the Post Office hired us [in 1969], they were hiring like anywhere from 10 to 20 people at a time. ... When I started out, they had one LSM machine and then shortly after that, they had two...The LSMs were on the second floor. ... seemed like most of the hampers and flat cases and stuff like that was on the lower floor. Some scheme cases were there too. ...You just had lines of cases with people sitting there separating out this mail.”

Joshua Dial recalled the early days of mechanization in Charlotte, North Carolina: “When I came in, the bulk of the mail was being processed manually, you know, people worked the mail at letter cases and flat cases.” “We used to work mail from the little, 2-foot trays. That was what they called 2-foot of mail. And it would take us about 20 minutes to work a tray of mail.” “In Charlotte, in '69, they had just implemented the first LSM machine. You know, the



Learning the scheme required clerks to memorize hundreds of address elements.

culture was changing at that time when I was coming in from manual operation to a mechanized processing. ... The plant grew to about maybe seven or eight machines over the course of that mechanized period. And there were several flat sorting machines also, in addition to the LSM.”

Dial also recalled how the LSM boosted productivity: “On the LSM there were 12 key-in consoles. We used little piano-style keyboards, to key-in mail codes to sort the mail. And we were trained to key that mail at one piece per second, 60 a minute. That meant with all things being perfect, one person could key 3,600 pieces of mail an hour. That was quite significant—all things being perfect. But then, of course there was a high error rate, there were machine malfunctions, and that cut into productivity. But again, on paper, 3,600 pieces of



Letter sorting machines became more widespread in the early 1970s.

mail per hour, was quite a—that's one person. And we had 12 people keying. That was over 40,000 pieces of mail that could be finalized in an hour... The amount of mail it took 18 people to finalize, those first- and second-generation automated machines could do that in an hour with just two people."

Automation

The Postal Service's automation program began in the early 1980s, with the installation of optical character readers that could "read" address information.

"Now, there's more technology, more machines," said Patricia Everett. "Back then we didn't have all the DBSs [delivery barcode sorters, for sorting letters] and all the machines back then, it was more just like hand. ... Now modern technology separates everything and helps everything. It's completely, it's completely different worlds."

Dial called the changes in mail processing methods "the biggest changes" he'd seen in the Postal Service. "Not only that, but from the LSMs, to the flat sorters, to the what we call DBCSs, that's a third-, fourth-generation mail automated machines. We now have package sorters and small bundle sorters. And we're almost completely automated. We still process mail by hand, there's still an amount of mail that we process by hand, but we are overwhelmingly automated."

Delivery point sequencing [DPS], the automatic sorting of mail into delivery order, began in the early



In 1983, Musette Henley operated one of Chicago's early barcode sorters.

1990s. Darold Woodward saw it as a benefit: "The carriers in Albion [Michigan], they get like two or three trays of mail, each day, and it's all collated, they just start at the beginning of the route, and go all the way through. And that makes it much more convenient."

On changes in city delivery vehicles

Several project participants recalled different types of vehicles they'd used in the course of their careers.

From no vehicle

The Post Office Department began motorizing city delivery routes in the mid-1950s but procuring vehicles was a slow process. Until 1970, most city carriers continued to deliver mail on foot.

Alfonzo Wilson began delivering mail in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1958. He recalled, "They didn't have no trucks when we started. When I started, you went to your route on the bus."

In Worcester, Massachusetts, John Magliaro also recalled riding the bus: "As far as things that stand out? ... Riding the bus. No—hardly any trucks. We rode the bus, so we walked out to our routes."

In Beverly, Massachusetts, Thomas Dean recalled carriers being trucked to their routes: "When I first started there was probably three trucks in the whole town. And those trucks took the carriers, 4 or 5

carriers at a time, to their spot where they were dropped off. Then you'd drop off their relays [mail prepared for delivery along a route] and probably parcels."

To little bitty vehicles

A succession of vehicles were introduced in the 1950s and 1960s, including the three-wheeled Mailster. The number of Mailsters peaked in 1966, at about 17,700. City letter carriers also used less well-known vehicles, like Chevetttes and Ambassadors.

In Oceanside, California, Ronald Emerick recalled: "I used a Cushman scooter-type thing [Mailster], something like what a traffic officer for the police department would use to mark parking downtown. Also, at one point used a bicycle."

In Cleveland, Wilson recalled: "The first vehicles we had were little bitty vehicles, Chevetttes or something. And they were so small that you'd have to take the seats out, except for the driver's seat, to get the mail in. But in the meantime, they'd had other



Several of the letter carriers recalled using Mailsters, like the one pictured here in 1964.

things that they tried, you know, didn't work. They had a thing called a Mailster. It didn't work, it would turn over and stuff. But the first that everybody had was these little Chevettes."

Dean recalled: "I think the first [vehicles] we had were like Nash Ambassadors [AMC Ambassadors, 4-door sedans]. It wasn't a very quality vehicle, but it still was a vehicle that we hadn't had before."

To Jeeps and LLVs

Mailsters were found to be unsafe and were soon phased out; by the early 1970s they had largely been replaced by Jeeps. In 1987, the Long Life Vehicle (LLV) was introduced.

Dean recalled: "[After Ambassadors], they went into Jeeps, and then finally down the road they've gone to these postal vehicles, the LLVs. And I have to tell you, for a vehicle that was designed 40 years ago, the thing still works."

Emerick stated: "[After Mailsters], we had a Jeep vehicle, which was very slender. It was a stand-up vehicle, where it really just had a lean bar on it, no seat. And after that came the International. We had several types of right-hand-drive vehicles. And finally, it evolved into what we have today, was the LLV, Long Life Vehicle. And in my opinion, this vehicle has been the best of all of them, as far as delivering mail."

To great big trucks

Post Offices in larger cities used two-ton trucks to make collections and deliver parcels. Gary Thompson was still in high school when he learned to drive them. Thompson recalled: "They were the big—in New York they had the two-ton big trucks all the time riding around, when we were doing the collections. Getting the mail out of the UN building [United Nations Headquarters]—we was pickin' the mail out of the UN building." Thompson said that no commercial driver's license was needed: "You had to just go in the Post Office to train you to drive the truck. And then they put you out on the street and train you to drive the truck. It was a really good experience though. You know, like I said, I was only 17."

A few words about vehicle safety

Prior to the 1990s, letter carriers weren't required to turn off their vehicle's engine when parking. Jimmy Putman recalled an incident from early in his career:

"Back before we had to turn the motor off on a mail truck. ... I was out delivering mail and saw a truck go by me. And I said, 'Well that's one of the other carriers.' And I waved, and I looked at it. It was my mail truck went by me. And I ran 'bout 100 mile an hour and I caught it just before it hit a ditch. And I learned then, right there, they didn't have to tell me to turn the motor off after that."

Memorable moments

During the interviews, employees were asked to recall particularly memorable moments of their careers.

While working at the Montpelier, Vermont, Post Office, William Geake supervised both of his parents:

When I was a supervisor over Montpelier, I got to supervise my father and my mother. ... My dad had switched over and he became a clerk. And my mother delivered a star route. ... The whole time that I did it, my dad never called in sick.

The 29-cent Elvis Presley stamp, issued in 1993, was the best-selling commemorative stamp of the 20th century. William Pendergrass, a window clerk at the Ventura, California, Post Office, recalled its first day of issue:

At 11 a.m. that day, the Postmaster locked up the lobby in anticipation of a large crowd wanting to buy the stamps. I had already told several of my customers of this event and told them to buy as many as they could. I ended up selling over 6,000 stamps that day. There were 80 people in line when the Postmaster opened the door at 12.



Jennifer Perkins began working as a distribution clerk at the Austin, Texas, Post Office in 1969. She recalled with pride the dedication of Austin's letter carriers during a time of upheaval:

When I worked at Capitol Station, we had asbestos contamination in the building. So, they shut us down. So, we had to come over here to the GMF [General Mail Facility]. ... because Capitol Station was here temporarily for a few months, until they ... took care of everything. And, there were no cases. There were no cases. They were able to get the carriers their mail while they were there, and ... the beat never stopped. They [the carriers] got down on their hands and knees and separated out their mail to deliver. It was just absolutely amazing. What dedication! I loved it!

Braving the elements

More than any other type of postal employee, letter carriers must endure the elements. Two letter carriers waxed philosophical about the weather.

Alfonzo Wilson delivered mail in Cleveland, Ohio, where the average annual snowfall tops 5 feet.

I remember the first—I was still living at home—the first real, real blizzard, snowstorm, I ever seen. Snow was already on the ground up to my knees, and it was snowing still, but the snow was blowing sideways it was so bad. So, I announced to my father, "I'm not going to work today." And he let me know, "You're going to leave here." So, I said, "You see the weather out there? Daddy, it's terrible." He said, "The weather's the Lord's business, carrying mail is yours. You got to leave here. Get out of here." And I've never complained about the weather since.

... Sometimes I think I like the winter better. It's easy to do your job. With good weather, people are stopping you, talking to you, asking you how you're doing? The next—you look up, and it's the end—you gotta run to try to finish your route on time. In bad weather, nobody's out.

Jimmy Putman recalled delivering mail in McKenzie, Tennessee, when an F4 tornado struck in 1971:

I was training a boy onto my mail route right there and we had that tornado that [devastated] McKenzie and tore up McKenzie. And we're trying to deliver mail right there, and I said, "Oh man, oh man." I was about to cry, and he was laughing and singing, and he thought it was the happiest day of his life, right there out in that tornado. So, I learnt right then, the weather is a bad thing only, or a good thing.

Yolanda Soto recalled working when the San Fernando earthquake struck Los Angeles:

The earthquake of 1971. ... was very terrifying. At that time, they had these real huge poles, and ... I remember me and my friend, we grabbed each other's hands and held real tight around that pole. And just everything seemed to shake. ... And it was really quite a dramatic experience, it really was. It's in my brain even now as I talk about it. ... We had very, very good, understanding supervisors, and they let us sit in the break [area] until, you know, we came to ourselves. And actually, we had like a break all together in the break area until everybody calmed down.

Tony Madera described how he escaped winter weather by transferring to Florida in 1987:

I remember back in 1962 we were watching TV, and they used to advertise Tropicana orange juice, "Come on down to Florida." And I saw Weeki Wachee advertising with the mermaid, and it was snowing that night like crazy in New York. So, I said, "One day."

Coming to the rescue

Several employees recalled responding to life-or-death emergencies.

Rural letter carrier Ronald Kuhlmann recalled saving a customer while on his route:

I will always remember—it was on a cold winter day, in February of 2007. I was on the route and I came to the mailbox and I noticed the mail was still in there from the day before. ... I just decided maybe I should take it to the house. And, you know, maybe he was sick or something and couldn't get back out, because I didn't see any tracks or anything.

And I walked up through the snow to the house and then found an elderly man layin' on the front porch, by the door. He had laid there all night, he said, and then—he'd lost his keys on the way to the house, that's why he couldn't get into the house. He dropped 'em in the snow and couldn't find 'em.

So, he was out there till about noon that next day, when I got there on the route. So, then I called his daughter. ... then [we] got him into the house and set him up there by the kitchen table. And he was very, very cold, but he insisted to his daughter-in-law, he did not want to go to the doctor. But later on, they did take him to the hospital. And he was in the hospital for, oh, probably about a week.

James Bircher, a bulk mail technician in Fort Worth, Texas, recalled catching a customer who collapsed:

One day I was working with a lady at the counter and she kept complaining about how she smelled perfume. And the lady working to the right of me, well, I didn't know she had perfume on. And this lady, she kept saying, "I'm getting sick." Literally, she turned green and her eyes rolled back up in her head. Next thing I know, like it was a reflex action, I grabbed her arm with my left hand, as she was falling to the floor. And she literally pulled me up on top of the counter. She almost pulled me over the counter, but what stopped me was the little projection where we had our scales. And I had my right hand trailing behind me and

caught the desk, which kept me from going over the counter with her.

And everybody was screaming and finally somebody jumped the counter, went over and grabbed her, and we lowered her to the floor. And I got down, but that was the most—you can't call it exciting, but it was scary, because I thought, "Ooh, she could have pulled me over the counter on top of her." They had to call an ambulance. She had some kind of allergic condition and was allergic to perfume and aftershave lotion.

Tony Madera, a letter carrier in Tamarac, Florida, recalled stopping traffic to protect a woman who had fallen in a busy street:

I have called the ambulance [and] I called the police in certain cases, down here and mostly in New York, [when] I have encountered somebody who needed help. I had a lady, like, three or four years ago, I was making a turn into Commercial Boulevard and the lady fell halfway in the road, and the traffic was coming. Nobody would stop, so I just pulled my truck across the street.

Neither snow nor rain nor ... dog attack

Bruce Van Lieu recalled an instance when a dog attacked him while delivering mail in Pompano Beach, Florida:

One dog—I never did see him. I was at the house. I knocked on the front door and all of a sudden, somethin' hit me. And it was a dog [that] ran around from the side, bit me and run on. Never even saw him. The woman [owner] says, "Well, he doesn't bite." I said, "Well, I got this hole in my pants and I'm bleeding, but you know, for a dog that doesn't bite..."

Larry Schultz recalled surviving a dog attack while filling in on another carrier's route in Lincoln, Nebraska:

I started backing up, then all of a sudden, I look up and there's a Doberman coming. Here thinking, "There goes your face, there goes everything." Well, my legs weren't going as fast as my body. I kinda, I tripped. And then I hit my elbow, and I just kind of covered my face with my arm. And the dog—the lady came out, said whatever the name of the dog—and it just quit, just then. And I felt like I ran a marathon. I was hot and sweaty. And she says, "I suppose you're going to turn me in." I said, "No, just give me a wash rag." And, yeah, that was really scary. Until—people make fun of it until it happens to you. Then it's not so funny.

What has remained the same: providing an essential, valued service

Many of the employees were asked not only what *had* changed during the course of their careers, but also, what *hadn't* changed.

William Geake, letter carrier in Barre, Vermont, on caring for his customers:

It's the customer contact that's stayed the same. And the letter carrier is like—I consider this COVID a war and we're on the front lines. And you know, that hasn't changed, even the fact that we're in a pandemic scenario. But when I first started, I started developing relationships with my customers. I stopped, and I talked to the ones, and I knew the ones that, that weren't feeling that great, and I would check on them. And when I see the mail build up, I knock on the door and make sure they're okay. That hasn't changed. That's, that's pretty much stayed the same.

Musette Henley, customer relations coordinator in Chicago, on maintaining the public's trust:

Nothing's better than the Postal Service. And the trust—and even our customers, you know, when they call now, even since we're in this pandemic, there's nothing more important than the mailman now. And if they don't see—people tell me, they, they've been sitting in the window, waiting for the mailman. They watch, and they'll tell me, "The mailman didn't come all day." So, it's a wonderful thing, when you think about it, to work for a company who for all these many years, has been able to maintain the trust of the public.

Ronald Emerick, letter carrier in Oceanside, California, on serving his customers:

I've always thought of the Postal Service as a service. And if I was a regular on a route, I tried to get to know the people, so I could find out how I could serve them better. And that's still my challenge today, is how can I make that customer happy, you know, build a relationship with them. And consequently, if we have a good relationship, there's less complaints, people will talk to me, rather than calling the Post Office and complaining about things.

Darold Woodward, window clerk in Albion, Michigan:

You know we touch everybody. We deliver to every address in the United States. We aren't always able to make a great profit, but we have such a service that we provide. Because a lot of people are just sitting there looking for a letter from somebody, anything that comes in the mail—they just wait. And they're so happy when the mailman comes and gives them something to, you know—kids are so happy. Little kids are really excited when they get something in the mail. And like I said, we, we service everybody. We go everywhere. We aren't picking and choosing where we deliver mail. And we do the hard work. We help everybody. And I just love to do it, I really do.

Jimmy Putman, letter carrier in McKenzie, Tennessee, on changes over the last 50+ years:

It's a lot busier and a lot more huff and puff, and go, and run, and jump, and stuff like that. ... But as far as the job, it's still get the mail to the people, treat the people right, treat 'em like you wanna be treated. And I made more friends out there than Carter's got oats, right there. ... I'm just crazy about every one of 'em.

Alfonzo Wilson, letter carrier in Cleveland, Ohio, on the enduring value of mail:

Communications now ... online ... doesn't take the place of a letter. ... I can take a letter that my mother wrote me when I was in the Army ... and I can read that letter. All of these things—I ask my children about their phones and cellphones, everything, because they say, "Well, it's in the clouds and if anything happens I can get it back or whatever." But it's not like holding a letter in your hand.

Dannie McGill, clerk in Greenwood, Mississippi, on the dependability of the Postal Service:

Rain, shine, sleet or snow, you know, we just continue to go. And, and I'm glad to be a part of that organization. And it just makes me feel good, because, you know, we haven't stopped, even during this pandemic. We haven't stopped yet.

Rain, shine, sleet or snow, you know, we just continue to go.

—Dannie McGill

Advice for new employees

One of the most important questions asked in the oral history interviews was: *What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the Postal Service?* The most frequent response was *come to work*. Other responses were: be patient, stay out of trouble, save for the future, seize opportunities, be honest, and be respectful. Collectively, the project participants had more than 1,250 years of postal experience. Here's a roundup of the lessons they've learned.

Do your job

Nearly all the project participants stressed the importance of coming to work. Joshua Dial said, "Above all else, come to work. ... we can't do what we do if you're not here." Gary Thompson said, "Be consistent, come to work." Yolanda Soto advised, "Take pride in what you're doing. Because, after all, what you do is a reflection of yourself. Mind your own business, come to work every day. ... this really is the key to everything, you know. Feel good about yourself. If you don't have a good attitude by yourself, you're gonna always find fault in everything. I try to find the *good* in people."

Be patient

Darold Woodward advised employees to "Be patient. Know that there's a lot to learn. Just don't give up." Jimmy Putman advised, "Do not get discouraged." Jennifer Perkins acknowledged that the working hours, especially for new employees, can be irregular, but advised them to "hang in there" and "hang tough ... because it's not always like that and you can be assured that every last one of us that works here, we go through the exact same thing. ... You cannot beat the pay and the benefits and the people that you work around, you know. And so, I just encourage you to hang in there."

Stay out of trouble

Several project participants cautioned new workers to stay out of trouble. Buddy Wright advised: "Keep your nose clean. Do what they tell you to do." Bruce Van Lieu said, "Just do what they tell you and stay out of trouble." Ronald Emerick said, "You can't get fired for doing your job. So, I encourage them to follow the rules, do the things that they're told to do, and always look ahead for better days."

Save for the future

William Pendergrass and Thomas Dean both advised new employees to save for retirement. "The more you can do now," Pendergrass stated, "even though it hurts to put money away, is to your benefit later on." Dean advised "Save your money. Find the plans that they got, to stuff more money into the thing. ... If you're getting time and a half, right, and

you're working all this time, tuck it away, don't squander it away." Earl Rolle advised new employees to save their leave: "Also try to save your sick leave and your annual leave. Right now, I have about 4,700 hours of [sick] leave."

Seize opportunities

Robert Lombardo spoke about the importance of trying new things: "Try to get to do different things, you know, get your fingers into different things. Again, you know, I sorted the mail, I worked on machines. As I went on, you know, they would ask you can you do things. You got to be willing to try something new, you know. Have your fingers on a lot of different areas where they can rely on you to do this and do that, makes the job easier, makes the time go fast, you keep the boss happy."

Joshua Dial's advice for new employees also included seizing opportunities: "Above all else, come to work. And once you're here, learn your job. Learn how your role fits in with all the many other jobs in the service here. And then seize every opportunity that's available to you. Those are three things I would emphasize. First, come—we can't do what we do if you're not here. So, come to work, learn the job, then shoot for the stars. Take advantage of *every* opportunity, because there are many. There are many."

Be honest and true to yourself

Several participants stressed the importance of honesty. John Magliaro said, "I would advise new people to always be your own person. Do what's right for you, not for what somebody else wants you to do. Be honest, [and] you won't have to look over your shoulder. And do the job, the best you can, as if you would pay yourself, and you'll have a great career. [If] you start falling into groups of people that are cliquy, you're going to have problems."

Lilas Harrison also spoke on this theme: "Be trustworthy, be honest, and do your work. Don't try to get by on somebody else's work. Do what you can do and trust in the Lord and He'll see you through it. If you really want to do what's right, don't put the work on nobody else. Do what *you* can, and you'll be successful."

Musette Henley also spoke on the importance of honesty: "Do the right thing. If you know it's the right thing to do, just go on and do it. And be yourself and always be able to have integrity. And we all make mistakes, including me. And I make mistakes. And I acknowledge them and move on and do—if I can, I apologize and I make things right."

Finally, care for and respect each other

Patricia Everett, the unofficial “doctor, lawyer, and psychiatrist” in her work unit, counselled employees to: “Get along with each other, share their ideas, and help the Post Office to survive. I want them to take and—not only think about themselves, but think about other people in there. Don't be selfish. Share. Be kind. And most of all, I try to tell them it's always a brighter day on the other side. I don't care what goes on in your life, how your life might be, you can come in on a job and still make it good. ... Life is good. And you can make—you're the one who can make it good. That's how I feel.” Like Soto, she also emphasized finding the good in people: “Over the

years, I try to find things in people that's good, not bad things. Everybody's got something good in them.”

Musette Henley stressed the importance of respecting coworkers no matter their position. Highlighting the importance of cleaning staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, she asked: “[Who] is the most important person in this Post Office right now? ... It's the janitor. If they don't clean up, you can't even get in the building. ... *Everybody* has something to offer. And we're all human beings, and we should all be treated with dignity and respect. No matter what the position is.”

Any plans to retire?

Some of the participants in this project were asked if retirement was on the horizon. After more than 50 years of service, most had no immediate plans to retire—they enjoyed the challenge and the satisfaction of a job well done. For many, their customers had become part of their family.

William Geake, a letter carrier in Barre, Vermont, said, “I look at my route as my extended family. You know, I mean, it's keeping me going, especially in this COVID time.”

Ronald Kuhlmann began delivering mail out of the Hebron, Nebraska, Post Office in 1968. Over the years his rural route was consolidated with nearby routes—at 177 miles, in 2021 it was one of the longest delivery routes in the nation. In addition to delivering mail, Kuhlmann farmed part-time. He expressed concern that farming, by itself, wouldn't keep him busy:

I just turned 73. I know my family thinks it's maybe time to call it quits, but I don't know. I enjoy—I don't know if I'd have enough to do. Don't farm that much. I'm afraid I'd get bored. You know, this way you got a set schedule and you just go, you know. No, there'll be a time. It's, uh—I always thought maybe I'd like to go to 55 years. I don't know if I'll go that long. Starting on the 54th, now, in January I did. So, we'll see how things go. ...

Right now, I'm only farming about 200 acres, which isn't very many. ... That was one reason why I got into the Postal Service too, 'cause we just didn't have enough ground to farm. ... It's worked out very, very good. And it's, you know, then you get a holiday once in a while and you get caught up with some things then too. Sometimes during harvest, I'll take off a couple of days of vacation or something and use that to harvest the grain.

Larry Schultz, a letter carrier in Lincoln, Nebraska, described his love for the job:

I just enjoy it. I really do. ... I enjoy seeing everybody every day and making their day and they make mine. Figuring out things, you know, people that are upset about something, trying to remedy the problem. It's a challenge every day—it beats sitting there thinking about, looking out the window at the snow. I gotta, I gotta get through the snow. I gotta get the job done.

Thomas Dean, a letter carrier in Beverly, Massachusetts, put it this way:

Things change from when you're 18 until you're 50 and stuff. So, I think early in life, I thought, “Well, this looks pretty good. Maybe, [in] 35 years, I retire at 55.” And as I got closer to 55, I started realizing how much I liked the work, how much it's kept me healthy. It's almost funny to say, “I like work.” I still do. ...

I feel a part of community. “Why do you go to work?” Well, I go to work, one, to stay healthy. And the other thing is that I have a feeling of satisfaction that what I'm doing, people want it—especially on the Express Mail. People, sometimes they don't want to thank you for their bills, but when they get their cellphone, car's number plates—and I'm there early in the morning, because I can feel what's inside that thing and I know that they want it. Yeah, it's small potatoes, but it does give a little satisfaction to your job.

Jimmy Putman, a letter carrier in McKenzie, Tennessee, explained:

I've got the best people here. They just like family out there. I tell you what, that keeps me going. I'd miss 'em, and I probably won't see most of 'em the rest of my life when I do retire, if I ever do.

But if my health holds out, I may be here until I'm 100 years old. ... I'm a Type-A personality. I just got work in my blood. I guess I'll work till the day I die. My Doctor Crenshaw told me, said I'm going to die in that mail truck one of these days. And I said, "I'd rather die in a mail truck than setting there watching Gunsmoke ten hours a day." So he said, "Alright."

Darold Woodward, a sales and services associate in Albion, Michigan, also saw his customers as family. He joked:

I like [being a] window clerk, because you get to have a conversation with people. It gets to be like they're family, you know, when you've been around folks. ... And you just, you know, it makes you feel good. It makes you happier to have a rich and rewarding life, just by working. I don't know when I'll retire. I hadn't really thought about it. I figure I'm only 78. I haven't quite reached middle age yet, so I've got a ways to go.