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What I Couldn't Be / RFD Citifies Country Folks

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An influence that's still with us.

What I Couldn't Be

By Dick Chapman

I don't really know when I learned to ride a horse; in fact, I rode quite a while without thinking anything about it. I know that I felt better when I was on a pony of some kind.

When I was very young, I thought I would be a cowboy. I didn't have anything else in view, and that's what I wanted. I had a chance to get a taste of it from all sides about eighty-five years ago, but by the time I was really ready to earn my spurs, the range was being crisscrossed with barbed-wire fences. The grass was being turned under, and many old cowhands were out of jobs and were forced to become kaffir corn woolies. The longhorn was fast becoming a relic.

The bunch grass was being replaced by Russian thistles and ragweeds. Even the rattlesnakes and buzzards were leaving out. So how could I become a cowpuncher with no cows to punch?

A significant change.

RFD Citifies Country Folks

By Donita Lucas Shields

After free mail delivery began in larger cities in 1863, farmers began asking for rural service. In the beginning, the idea seemed preposterous. Economy-minded people thought that nothing could be more ridiculous than hiring hundreds of federal employees to travel across the country to deliver a few letters.

Some visualized that country roads would be overrun with officials traveling miles and doing nothing but increasing costs of postage stamps. Small-town merchants voiced their opinions loudly that rural free delivery would ruin their businesses because farmers and their families spent money while they waited in town for irregular and uncertain mail service.

During the late 1800's when country folks carried political clout, they began petitioning their congressmen for rural delivery. Immediately politicians saw an ideal way of garnering votes at election time. When John Wanamaker, an energetic Philadelphia merchant, became Postmaster General in 1889, post offices began rural free delivery on a limited scale.

In 1893, Congress approved a resolution for rural delivery, but the system

remained chaotic until 1898. Farmers again petitioned their congressmen--this time for more efficient delivery service. As a result, the rural postal system became a miniature bureaucracy with rural agents, route inspectors, and additional carriers.

In a year's time, 9,000 new routes were added throughout the countryside. To increase mail safety, the Postmaster General requested farmers to remove their crude mail buckets and boxes and replace them with government-approved containers. Since 1899, the familiar design of rural mailboxes has become the universal symbol of farm life.

By 1906, all essential rural routes were completed, and agents were incorporated into the government postal service. Rural free delivery may have been one of the most important communication revolutions in American history, but the revolution didn't end with the U.S. government's delivery of letters, newspapers, and magazines.

Farmers still had to pick up all but their lightest packages at the nearest freight depot. Before 1913, any parcel weighing more than four pounds couldn't be delivered by domestic mail ser-

vice. Four companies--Adams Express, American Express, U.S. Express, and Wells Fargo--carried the nation's parcels--to city people.

Postmaster General Wanamaker repeatedly requested a government parcel post, but the four express companies had no desire to lose their lucrative business. The issue became a political hot potato, which the powerful farmers' lobby eventually won. On January 1, 1913, within a month after the inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson, Congress approved rural parcel post service.

Actually it wasn't the advent of rural free mail delivery that sealed the doom of rural merchants. Instead, it was parcel post and the mail-order houses that introduced farmers to the ways and conveniences of city life. During the first year of parcel post, more than 300 million packages were delivered to rural families. In a few years, the village general merchantile/post office became nothing more than a romantic memory of the vanishing rural way of life. (first published in the SENTINEL LEADER--July 26, 1984) ❧