

I-Search

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Thirty-four cents is Honolulu to Augusta. Thirty-four cents is Juneau to Tallahassee. One dollar and nine cents is driving from my house to the Minneapolis post office to learn how 34 cents can do so much. The United States Postal Service (USPS) has a noble history of bearing the elements to deliver anything from Christmas cards, to Dear John letters, to sweepstakes that I may have already won. I want to know how the USPS deals with the immense influx of mail it must deliver every day—from the machines that sort ZIP codes to the place my mail arrives in at my local post office. When our next assignment in AP Composition was announced, I knew what I was going to search: how the United States Postal Service moves mail.

The main reason I wanted to research the USPS is because I couldn't figure out how to do it online! I often typed into Google "how the post office works," "how mail works," and other similar phrases, but could not find any relevant websites except for the USPS's own. Naturally, I clicked on the blue link, but noticed no detail on how the mail moves, only that it would. However, I did discover the post office that serves me locally: Lost Lake Post Office 55442. My top priority was to set an interview with somebody at my local office. I dialed the number provided by the USPS site, and, after expressing that I greatly wished to interview somebody for a research paper, was placed on hold to tips for mailing oddly-shaped packages. Just as the scripted dialog between the nameless male and female became passionate, a voice cut in: "This is Bob Miles."

After discovering that Miles's son recently graduated from Armstrong, my high school, and squeezing in a half hour during the busiest time of the year, I knew that the next step would be calling the main Minneapolis post office. This task was considerably more difficult than scheduling an appointment at Lost Lake, as the number written on the USPS website yielded the "no longer in service" lady! Thanks to the Blue Pages and multiple transfers for my odd adolescent request, I reached Jim Ahlgren's office. I once again received 30 minutes and an excitement that a student was researching the Post Office. I think I hid my excitement better than he did.

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As I exited the car, a small mail truck burst from the rear of the post office. I always wondered where those trucks came from, and now I would find out.

Arriving too early, I killed a few minutes by examining the services the USPS provides and the fields of PO boxes. Five minutes before the scheduled time, I stepped in line with the stamp buyers and package senders, one of whom did not comprehend the necessity of the number attached to a street. My request at the checkout counter was more strange than the cashier was used to, but soon I sat in Mr. Miles's office.

We didn't stay in his office long; it didn't seem like the ideal spot to conduct an interview anyway, with him behind a desk one would swear was stolen from Armstrong High School. His inch-thick office door separated a "Dilbert"-esque world from a warehouse. The walls coated in drab gray, my eyes were drawn to a motivational quote painted on the rear:

"The USPS wouldn't last a day on the private market." – UPS

Prove them wrong every day!

The tour began with Mr. Miles asking me my home address. In the local post office, a slot exists for each address served. Each inch-wide opening had been labeled and would normally be full of DPS mail, had I been a few hours earlier. Of course, I had no idea what "DPS mail" was until Bob enlightened me: "DPS stands for Delivery Point Sequencing—basically, this is computers putting mail in the order it will be delivered." All of the DPS sorting was done by huge machines downtown, with semi trucks handing the mail over in bins to the Lost Lake branch in an easily manageable order. Years ago, Lost Lake hosted those monstrous devices, but the USPS found it more cost-effective to centralize the sorting in Minneapolis for many post offices.

While I was looking at "my" slot, I asked Bob about ZIP codes, the common five digit numbers that follow a city (mine being 55441). Additionally, the USPS issued more precise ZIP+4 codes, pinpointing your household to the neighborhood, rather than the city (55441-1371). I knew about the first two methods and felt pretty smart when I listed off my ZIP+4 nonchalantly. The hand clasping the bottom of my overinflated self-esteem balloon released its grip (imagery courtesy of DARE) when Bob revealed there were actually two more digits! These last two indicate where the house is on the delivery route. Since my route starts three houses away, my full Zone Improvement Plan code is 55441-1371-03. Maybe it's the mathematical part of me, but an eleven-digit number all to myself placates me more than 11455 42nd Avenue North, Plymouth, Minnesota.

Since almost all of the sorting is done at the head Minneapolis post office, not much technology was utilized; I was surprised at how much of local mail was manual. Common sights were packages tossed (gently, of course) into large bins and hordes of letters being placed into tubs for home delivery. However, technology still pervades at the local side of the post office. One of the first stops on the tour of the office was a rack of over a hundred bar code scanners recharging their batteries. "Every carrier out in the field has one of these handheld computers. They can scan a package when they deliver it, and when they come back here, it gets uploaded to a database on www.usps.com." The

flow of data was signaled by the intermittent blinking of the LEDs on each cradle. Once the data is on the USPS servers, customers can track their packages online.

One interesting low-tech solution was the storage of “hold mail”—mail not being delivered for a period (usually a vacation). Not that there really is a high-tech solution, but seeing a whole row of packages and tubs full of varying degrees of whiteness evokes a sense of a pre-digital America. Miles, leading the tour, had some fun with one of his clerks transferring mail from one of the rectangles representing a vacationing family into a more manageable sack. “And if you look carefully, Adam, you’ll be able to make out a clerk relocating held mail. These are a very rare species, so be quiet. . .” he whispered loudly, mimicking a Discovery Channel host.

Already on the topic of clerks, I asked Miles how many people the Lost Lake branch paid each month, and found that of the 75 employees, 48 were carriers. I was led to the attached garage, but only three of the angular mail trucks sat parked; all the others were finishing their routes. Problems arise even if only one of the 48 calls in sick: five other carriers must divvy up the route. If this happens at an already hectic time, like the holidays, and in poor driving conditions, the mail may not come until the evening. As I later learned, it takes just one individual to cause system-wide failure.

The tour came to an end, and as we strolled past the parcels back to his office world, I was asked the standard “Any more questions?” My notebook originally was full of great questions, but most of them had been answered by the simple tour. Actually, the only relevant one remaining was concerning competing services like FedEx and UPS. Of course, these companies have brought net profit down, but interestingly enough, the USPS and its largest competitor, FedEx, agreed to the following contract:

1. Outside of a specific number of United States Post Offices, a FedEx drop box will be placed, separate from the United States Postal Service mailboxes.
2. A portion of FedEx’s airplane cargo space will be reserved for United States Postal Service mail.

I had often wondered why a private company’s merchandise was on so much government property; one interesting illustration of this agreement is the downtown Minneapolis office, where the two-city-block concrete giant dwarfs a humble FedEx box. When I pointed out this juxtaposition to Miles, and that I would be talking with a man named Jim Ahlgren there next, Bob’s eyes glowed. “Ahh. . . Jim and I have been friends for a long time. Tell him that he will be informative, but not quite as good as I was! Make sure you tell him that, now!” Driving home from the Lost Lake branch, I saw a mail truck in my suburb and couldn’t help but grin.



Every week I would drive on 1st Street and cross over the Mississippi River, passing by the post office that all my out-of-state mail must move through, so

directions to the Minneapolis office were no problem. However, since I normally drive during rush hour, my already poor sense of time was skewed to the point that I arrived 30 minutes early. My first fear lied in that I would have nothing to do and be scolded for loitering. My second fear emerged when I read that the USPS customer parking lot was complimentary for only 15 minutes. The placards surrounding the spots implied that 16 minutes would get you your car towed, impounded, and put up for sale at a police auction.

I gave my car the Minnesota goodbye and headed into the beige behemoth. The service-facing domain of the post office was surprisingly linear—a shaft with the Postmaster’s office on one end and a small shop with the contents of a gas station “Quik Mart” on the other. Sandwiched in-between were PO boxes ranging from the size of my slot at the Lost Lake branch (about one by six inches) to ones into which I could fetal position myself. Along with the standard windows for mailing packages stood the “Stamp Shoppe.” Nothing more than an outlet for bulk purchase of stamps with a maximum occupancy of three, the glorified broom closet contained sheets of every conceivable postage rate available for purchase. With stamp collecting being the number one hobby, maybe the Stamp Shoppe is the underground hangout. That must be it.

Beside the spelling of “Stamp Shoppe,” the post office is straight out of an old detective movie. The architecture was overdone in the sense that no company would design such a magnificent hallway just for sending mail. Gold trim lined everything, metal waste bins built into solid desks, a ceiling three times taller than necessary. The structure was too noble for the vending machine being housed.

Receiving suspicious looks from the staff, I decided to kill my final minutes on the sidewalks around the downtown office. Hoping to see the Mississippi River while leaning over a railing, I aimed for the rear, but my quest was cut short when the sidewalk suddenly read “RESTRICTED AREA” in yellow stenciling. Suddenly, the suspicion seemed more pleasing than taking orders from pavement. Armed with my notebook, I walked through the glass door and asked if Mr. Ahlgren was available.

After passing Miles’s message along and laughing, I arrived in a large conference room with a television and VCR awaiting. “Well, first let me show you this video that should pretty much answer your question. You remember the PBS show ‘Newton’s Apple?’ Well, this is a segment we did for that show way back in 1997. After that, I’ll give you so many statistics, you won’t know which way to turn!” On the screen before me, my question was bookended with a viewer wondering the same things I did, but soon the answers came.

The USPS handles 180 billion messages per year, and not by accident. There are specific steps your message takes after it gets dropped in one of the blue bins. The first step is sortation, distinguishing between letters and packages. Letters are further separated based on local or out-of-state destination. To ensure that postage is not reused, a canceller machine detects which of the eight orientations the stamp could be positioned in is correct, and places a postmark showing which post office canceled the stamp, what time the mark was applied and even which machine did the canceling. This complicated task can be done at a rate

of 500 letters per minute thanks to the large device, shown in the video basking in a dull-yellow warehouse light.

Once the postage has been canceled, letters are sprayed on a bar code containing that eleven-digit extended ZIP code mentioned earlier. However, this task requires another large machine: the Optical Character Reader, capable of reading eight typed messages per second! The OCR can be used only on computer typed or well-printed human handwritten letters, as OCRs take a digital snapshot of the letter—if the typeface cannot be recognized (i.e., not in the computer’s database of fonts) the image is flashed in front of a human, who can type the address and then have the bar code sprayed on by computer once again. With these eleven digits, sorting the letters into piles based on proximity to an airport is a simple matter.

The machines that do this sorting are large, to say the least. Some extend over 100 feet in length and run constantly; a letter takes two hours to pass through the entire system. To ensure no part breaks during the crucial time of year, mechanics on duty 24 hours a day regularly perform preventative maintenance. Most employees of the 1st Street post office are night workers, as opposed to Lost Lake’s mainly daytime operation.

When the letters arrive at the airport, virtually any airplane is fair game for messages, as the USPS has agreements with almost every airline, since there is no such thing as a dedicated USPS plane. However, FedEx planes are used most often, as there is no passenger cargo, and thus less chance of needing to break up a load of mail. At the destination airport, the reverse process is performed; from the airport the letter goes to a processing center (equivalent to the 1st Street Minneapolis post office) and then to a local branch (Lost Lake) where the message is already in DPS order, awaiting the carrier’s arrival.

To understand the USPS, Ahlgren said after the video was over, one must know the history of the Post Office. The Post Office Department (not USPS) began 226 years ago, when the Continental Congress needed a way for states to stay in contact. The original Post Office Department, with Benjamin Franklin as Postmaster General, charged postage on delivery and created many of the Post Roads still in use today. Clerks could direct 300 messages per hour, all by hand, of course. For about two hundred years, not much changed for the Post Office Department.

One common myth was Pony Express, Ahlgren added. The Pony Express was a private company that delivered valuables from Saint Louis to San Francisco. Losing a million dollars, the Pony Express sought “skinny, wiry, single, or orphaned men” as not to wear out the horses. These men were also required to be brave, as criminals often shot to kill since they were carrying valuables like jewelry. With a charge of five dollars, there is no wonder why the Pony Express lasted only 16 months.

In the 1950s, the Post Office Department began to move into the phase called “Mechanization.” Via a modified typewriter with only ten keys, workers were now able to deal 3000 letters per hour, a tenfold increase from using no machines. The late 1960s brought rebellion all throughout the United States, even in the Post Office Department. A Chicago mail strike in 1969 over low wages caused

the whole system to fail within days. The main post offices had piles of mail stacked to the ceilings! The Post Office Department was in dire need of change.

The Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 radically transformed the Post Office Department into the United States Postal Service. More than a name change came with the law, however. The USPS was to be a quasi-government agency, receiving funds solely from postage, while some of the Post Office Department's input was taxpayer money. In addition, the title of Postmaster General became less grand in a way, as previous Postmaster Generals received the honor to sit on the President's Cabinet. Becoming a quasi-government agency, however, meant that no profits could be made. Thus, postage rates are set by an independent group called the Postal Rate Commission.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the second phase of the post office was enacted: "Automation." With OCRs and bar code scanners moving in and the 1950s typewriters on the way out, 30,000 letters per hour could be read. "Going into work each day and saying to yourself, 'I'm going to make no money today' can become depressing, but that's what we have to do," Ahlgren humorously noted as a consequence of the Postal Reorganization Act. However, the USPS has not been neutral, in fact losing 3.5 billion over the last two years. These losses have stirred a third movement titled "Transformation." Still developing, Transformation plans to deal with parcel competitors like UPS (agreements have been made with FedEx and DHL) and international competition such as the Royal Mail and Dutch Post, both of which have offices in the United States offering very low rates to England and the Netherlands, respectively.

Ahlgren's current project is rounding up a few million of those white mail tubs with "Property of USPS" written on the side. Apparently, these containers can hold more than just magazines, as Twin City residents have noted. With an initial purchase of twenty million and only twenty thousand left for the holiday season, the Minneapolis post office may be forced to buy more from the non-profit Iron Range company that manufactures the plastic boxes.

I had been whisked from a letter's origin to its destination and from colonial times to the front page of the December 6, 2002 *Pioneer Press* within one hour. Realizing I had expired my parking limit fourfold, I jogged to the parking lot as if the thirty seconds would make a difference.



I am definitely glad this project was assigned. If not, for the rest of my life, I would wonder what lay behind the outgoing mail slot and be destined to peeking around corners for a glimpse of the world I was allowed to be a part of one December day. Not only did I learn about how OCRs work and where my household's slot is at the Lost Lake post office, but I also received a detailed history of the country's mail service and current issues facing the USPS. I also realized the power of a little determination: two phone calls, a few transfers, and some bad hold Muzak resulted in an immense amount of information. In the end, my car was not sold at auction, towed, or even ticketed. All my initial apprehensions were for nothing.