

Photographer's Notes

I can't remember exactly how it began but when I was about eight or nine years old, I was given a Miranda 35 millimeter camera. I soon acquired a passion for photographing rural post offices that had a unique and funky vibe to them.

Some of my first images were taken on April school vacations down south in the Delmarva peninsula of Delaware and Virginia. Before I had my driver's license, I would pore over maps of New England plotting routes through small towns which could yield good photographs for my collection. My parents would then drive these routes, often on my birthday and we would see which post offices measured up as worthy for documentation. Once I had my own vehicle, I spent many days roaming New England in search of the best images. A 1974 trip to Cornell University with my best friend from high school resulted in a bunch of excellent photos in New York's Catskill Mountains.

The vast majority of post offices are boring and cookie-cutter. I always assumed that this was by design and necessity for in larger communities, USPS facilities have to accommodate more foot traffic and need ample space for loading docks and delivery vehicles. However in rural communities, and especially in New England, there are post offices located in general stores, old mill buildings and in people's homes. It was these that usually wound up offering the most iconic features.

Nothing denotes rural character more than the pile of firewood stacked on the porch of the Plainfield, Massachusetts post office, the ratty lawn furniture outside the former Glasgo, Connecticut post office, the post office in Tasley, Virginia that was once a gas station or the tiny post office in South Tamworth, New Hampshire that looks like an over sized doll house. You can't get more Norman Rockwellian than the Taftsville, Vermont post office located in Watson's Store that proudly sells local cheddar cheese.

Universal mail service has benefited our nation since the days of Benjamin Franklin and has served urban and rural Americans alike. But rural America is still disproportionately poor, under-educated and aged. As Richard J. Margolis showed in his 1980 booklet *At the Crossroads – An Inquiry into Rural Post Offices and the Communities They Serve*, congressional debates between urban and rural interests over postal policy date back to the first postal deficit in 1820.

In the fall of 1975, I was a freshman at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The nation was just coming out of a recession caused by the 1973-1974 stock market collapse and OPEC's decision to quadruple oil prices. As a result of these factors, mail volumes plummeted, and in 1974, the Postal Service incurred a \$2.3 billion deficit. There were concerns that the volume might never return.

To address the deficit, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report in June 1975 entitled *\$100 Million Could Be Saved Annually In Postal Operations in Rural America Without Affecting the Quality of Service.* The controversial report recommended closing 12,000 small post offices that were operating at a loss.

This was not the first time rural post offices had come under assault. A few years earlier, when the Department of the Post Office was transformed into a corporate-type entity called the Postal Service, rural residents feared what would happen, and they persuaded the authors of the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 to include language in the bill that protected rural post offices. Hence, this oft-quoted passage in Title 39 [section 101 (b)]:

“The Postal Service shall provide a maximum degree of effective and regular postal services to rural areas, communities, and small towns where post offices are not self-sustaining. No small post office shall be closed solely for operating at a deficit, it being the specific intent of the Congress that effective postal services shall be insured to residents of both urban and rural communities.”

After the GAO issued its 1975 report, Congress began holding hearings about post office closings and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle spoke up for the value of rural post offices. Republican Rep. Keith Sebelius of the sprawling and rural ‘Big First’ district covering most of Kansas stated, “When a community loses its post office, it also loses its identity. There is no road back. For business and industry to locate in rural and small-town America, there must be a foundation of basic community services. The community post office is the cornerstone of this foundation. And Democrat Joe L. Evins, whose central Tennessee district in the Cumberland Plateau was a region of small farms and small county seat towns, told the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, “It is unconscionable to even consider the closing of these post offices.”

After reading Rep. Sebelius’s quotes in the newspaper, I wrote the congressman informing him about my collection of rural post office photographs and asking if he could help me stage an exhibition of my work. He was courteous to respond with a brief reply:

KEITH G. SEBELIUS
1ST DISTRICT, KANSAS

1211 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
AREA CODE 202: 225-2715

COUNTIES:

BARBER
BARTON
CHEYENNE
CLARK
CLAY
CLOUD
COMANCHE
DECATUR
EDWARDS
ELLIS
ELLSWORTH
FINNEY
FORD
GOVE
GRAHAM
GRANT
GRAY
GREELEY
HAMILTON
HASKELL
HODGEMAN
JEWELL
KEARNY
KIOWA
LANE
LINCOLN
LOGAN
MEADE
MITCHELL
MORTON
NESS
NORTON
OSBORNE
OTTAWA
PAWNEE
PHILLIPS
PRATT
RAWLINS
REPUBLIC
RICE
ROOKS
RUSH
RUSSELL
SALINE
SCOTT
SEWARD
SHERIDAN
SHERMAN
SMITH
STAFFORD
STANTON
STEVENS
THOMAS
TREGO
WALLACE
WASHINGTON
WICHITA

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

October 16, 1975

C. PATRICK ROBERTS
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

MELVIN E. THOMPSON
LEGISLATIVE ASSISTANT

AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEES:
LIVESTOCK AND GRAINS
(RANKING MINORITY MEMBER)

FAMILY FARMS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

INTERIOR AND INSULAR
AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEES:
NATIONAL PARKS AND RECREATION
(RANKING MINORITY MEMBER)
MINES AND MINING

Mr. Matt L. Barron
912 George Washington
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts 01002

Dear Mr. Barron:

Just a note to thank you for your comments regarding rural post offices. I appreciate your support for preservation and suggest you contact your area or Bicentennial officials to see if some support could be given to such a project.

Your interest and participation in government are most commendable.

With every best wish,

Sincerely yours,


Keith G. Sebelius

KGS:aa

As Margolis correctly points out, “small-town post offices nurtured and sustained their communities, not as formal distributors of the mail but as informal ministrants to the citizenry.” He identified three separate but related roles frequently played by the rural post office: “as a focal point of sociability and intimacy, as a communications center and as a neighbor and counselor.” These roles are true in my rural town of 1,186 people and across the nation. In an August 2, 1981 article *Without their post office, they wouldn't be a town* in the *Boston Sunday Globe*, datelined in the Champlain Valley town of Bridport, Vermont, the author wrote “There is no shopping center here. Fields come right up to the post office building. In most ways, the post office *is* Bridport, and if it ever closes, people would get their mail postmarked out of someplace else, Middlebury, probably, and that would be their address. Bridport would cease to exist, in one sense.”

An October 7, 2011 *New York Times* story, *Where Post Office Is the Town's Heart, Fear of Closings*, that warned of another impending round of rural post office closures, captured the relationship of residents of Neville, Ohio, a hamlet on the Ohio River about a half hour southeast of Cincinnati, with their longtime postmaster. “If I couldn't come here to get my mail every morning, I'd feel a big part of me has died,” said a retired nurse's aide who brought a bag of home grown bell peppers to the postmaster.

I can directly relate to these experiences living in a rural community. Each summer, I like to bring bouquets of cut flowers from my garden to the post office counter for Annie the postmaster and residents to enjoy. Annie, our former postmaster, was a rabid New England Patriots and Boston Red Sox fan and we could talk at length about recent games whenever I came to buy stamps or mail packages.

Matt L. Barron
Chesterfield, Massachusetts

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