

# THE RAILWAY MAIL CLERK AND SOUTHERN RY CAR 188

Frank R. Scheer, visiting the  
North Carolina Railroad Museum  
East Carolina Chapter, National Railway Historical Society

Southern Railway car number 188 stands before you as a memorial to the Railway Mail Service and its personnel. Within this car and about 4,000 others like it, the United States of America was served for 113 years with excellent postal services.

SOU 188 is nearing its centennial, having been built by Bethlehem Steel Car Company in 1922. Under the care and preservation of the dedicated staff at the North Carolina Railroad Museum, it is expected to see its second century. This time, it will serve as a reminder of the lives of Postal Transportation Clerks and their collective contributions to society over 11 decades.

Former Postal Transportation Service staff witnessed the passing of the car to a new generation in a new era. When they visit this car, they reflect upon their own career contributions as well as comrades who worked shoulder-to-shoulder with them on the iron road.

Let's look back to the Twentieth Century for a moment. We'll survey the work, these people, and their capabilities in that era.

The Railway Mail Service --the mail distribution and transportation arm of the Post Office Department-- was growing in 1910, matured by World War II, and began a transition in the 1950s to highway and air services. Established in 1864, there were approximately 12,000 Postal Transportation Clerks in the year of car 188's birth. Work performed daily aboard thousands of trains, operated as a national network of Railway Post Office routes over the majority of track miles. That battalion of clerks --who disliked going "stuck"-- made just shy of 16 billion distributions of mail annually during the mid-1930s so that each letter, parcel, and newspaper could reach destinations with certainty, celerity, and security.

Formerly known as "Railway Mail Clerks," this was a misnomer as the USA approached mid-century. This was corrected in 1949 when these jobs were renamed "Postal Transportation Clerks." Not all Postal Transportation Clerks road aboard RPOs on trains. Within the group "Postal Transportation Clerks," some also worked in mail Terminals at major cities such as San Francisco, Transfer Offices, Air Mail Facilities, and some registry offices.



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Postal Transportation Clerks valued their jobs and were dedicated to above-par performance. Advertisements in popular magazines trumpeted "steady work and good pay," along with a somewhat misleading statement of "see the country." Clerks may have traveled as many as 400 miles in as much as a 16 hour workday, but they peered at little else other than a mountain of pouches and sacks, or the distribution case and racks in front of them.

While the pay was good in the 1930s --clerks earned an average \$2,400 per year-- it was not princely. Frugality was hallmark of Railway Mail Clerks, with cash payments covering most transactions.



Positions were competitively filled by those who scored high on a Civil Service examination especially designed to test aptitudes needed for mail distribution. This was not an easy test; one clerk recalls that his lasted seven hours. Clerks who were accepted and endured the rigors of their positions were especially bright. Those who were educated to become doctors, lawyers, and teachers found a career in the Railway Mail Service when other job opportunities were limited.

The clerks who have assisted with the display are living links with SOU 188. Looking ahead, today's tribute demonstrates that the North Carolina Railroad Museum represents more than just artifacts on display and rail equipment preservation. The museum likewise remembers the people who wrote railway and postal history with their lives. Postal Transportation Clerks now have a lasting tribute of their service to America, supported by North Carolina Railroad Museum staff and volunteers who will convey their aspirations and achievements for years to come.



**Southern Railway 188 - 30-foot apartment Railway Post Office**



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