

The Day the Mails Stopped

This was the great Chicago postal tie-up: mountains of parcels and carloads of letters—10,000,000 pieces in all—going nowhere for days. Was it only a preview?

By CHARLES REMSBERG

LAST OCTOBER 9, Chicago's police superintendent dropped a "symbolic" letter to his department into a mail sack in his office. The letter was to demonstrate how citizens can mail information to the police under the city's crash program against crime. Then, in just ten seconds, the envelope was plucked out and "delivered" to a nearby desk by the city's beaming new postmaster. Timing, however, lent an ironic ring to a press agent's claim that this constituted "the speediest mail delivery in history."

Had the letter gone the normal route, it might not have emerged from the postal maw for two weeks, and whatever clues it contained would have been icy indeed. For erupting that day in Chicago's massive main post office was the most incredible snarl in mail movement since the inauguration of the U. S. postal system—and, in the view of some experts, a nightmarish preview of mail-service horrors that lie ahead.

As Postmaster Henry McGee was hand-carrying that single letter past cameramen, the world's largest post office had all but broken down. Outside the building railway cars and semi-trailers were crammed with mail, but there were no workers to unload them. Docks and sorting room floors were jammed with more than 5,000,000 letters, parcels, circulars, and magazines that could not be processed. Gray mountains of outbound mail sacks filled storage garages, and the staggering backlog mushroomed by the minute. Before long, 10,000,000 pieces of mail were sitting in the post office, untouched from one day to the next.

Chicago area residents expecting divi-

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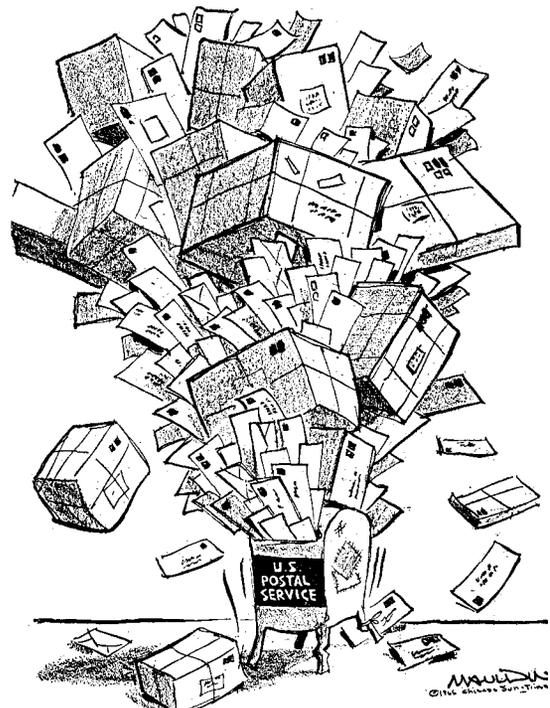
dend checks from one local corporation found that first class letters took as long as twenty-one days to get from the Loop to the suburbs. Advertising brochures heralding a department store sale were delivered weeks after the sale had ended. Even post office press releases announcing National ZIP Code Week arrived late. And because Chicago is the postal system's most important processing point for mail in transit to other cities, the impact of the paralysis was felt coast to coast. At one point, troubleshooters who had been rushed to the scene from Washington even talked seriously of setting fire to some of the outdated bulk mail as a way out.

As it developed, nothing was burned. But even with normal postal procedures altered to give Chicago every possible advantage, three frantic weeks passed from the time the historic logjam reached emergency proportions until authorities finally sounded the all-clear.

One of Chicago's major mailers, Arthur Moore, whose firm annually channels 50,000,000 pieces of bulk mail through the post office, recalls: "One of our truck drivers called at 10:30 on Friday night, September 30, and said he'd been waiting five hours at the post office and still hadn't been unloaded. It's usually about an hour's wait. We sent him back Saturday morning and it was late Saturday afternoon before that truck was finally emptied. The next week one of our trailers, carrying 350,000 pieces of

advertising, was tied up over there for three whole days. Finally, the post office called and said, 'Please don't send any more mail.' That's the most alarming thing a mailer can hear. When the post office goes stuck, there's no competition to turn to."

And stuck it was. With a quarter of its dock space already filled with construction equipment from an ill-timed remodeling project, the post office's unloading area became mired in traffic. Lines of trucks stretched around the mammoth building, and at one point an estimated 300 trailers awaited attention. Railroad cars sat for days in the yards,



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"Chronic Indigestion".

and conveyors running from the Union Station platform into the post office were jammed continually. Because of the long delays in unloading, a shortage of transportation carriers developed, and moving out mail that had been processed became an added headache.

Inside the building, the 60 acres of work space were dominated by overwhelming mountains of mail. Some stacks of parcel post and bulk matter towered 30 feet high and 50 feet long. Walkways were squeezed so narrow that workers had trouble getting through with handcars. When space ran out in the main building, thousands of bags were heaped in the postal garage, and when that was full, mailers were told to stockpile mail on their own premises.

NOW, with the realization that persistent, deep-seated problems rather than some fluke helped produce Chicago's crisis, some experienced observers fear that the return to normalcy is only temporary. Even, they say, if the postal system somehow survives this Christmas season, which threatens to generate an unprecedented tidal wave of mail, it is only a matter of time until the troubles that stayed Chicago's couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds come to roost in post offices across the land.

Chicago's catastrophe was spawned, significantly, in a physical plant that has been tailored by the times into an arena of chaos. Built in 1933 astride the maze of railroad tracks feeding Union Station, the enormous main post office, stretching two blocks long and a block wide, served adequately when most mail was moved by train and sorted in transit. But now that trucks and planes are increasingly important carriers and on-route processing has been cut back—while mail is flooding through at 6.6 billion pieces a year (double Chicago's

volume for 1954)—the building is, like postal facilities in many other cities, painfully obsolete. Semitrailers waiting to unload become snarled in traffic from a major expressway that tunnels beneath the structure into the Loop. Sharp, narrow turns into dock areas demand slow, shoehorn maneuvering. Dock space is drastically limited, and once mail is unloaded it has to flow on antiquated elevator and handcart systems throughout the building's fourteen stories for sorting and reloading. The place is so vast that some workers spend thirty minutes just getting to and from its single canteen for coffee breaks. "Yet huge as it is," says Joe Cohen, whose local Brodie Advertising Company annually sends 15,000,000 pieces of mail through the Chicago office, "that building is too small and poorly designed to efficiently handle the mail explosion."

Into this big white elephant pours a work force whose composition in recent years has changed radically. The key to smooth, swift mail service traditionally has been the long-tenure employee with fast reading ability and a good memory who devotes a career to mastering the post office's intricate behind-the-scenes operation. But the job benefits which lured ample numbers of such men into postal work in Depression years—security, insurance plans, sick leave, retirement pensions—have today been surpassed by private industry. And the post office is feeling the impact. In the last six years alone, nonretirement turnover among Chicago's letter carriers and mail clerks has leaped from less than 12 per cent to more than 18 per cent, and at the time of the mail crisis 3,000 of the 14,900 clerks at the main post office had been on the job less than one year. "Some months," says Donald Swanson, director of the Midwest postal region, "we lose more help than we gain."

The current economic boom and the

war in Vietnam have placed a premium on the kind of unskilled labor which the postal service most vitally needs. With unemployment at only 2.1 per cent in Chicago, some labor-hungry local industries award \$50 bonuses every time an employee brings in a new man who is willing to work for even four months. But bus drivers start at \$3.13 an hour, while the post office offers novices only \$2.64. "Consequently," explains J. W. Strong, personnel manager for the Chicago office, "when we call people off the civil service register to fill our jobs these days, the response is very sparse until we reach the low scorers."

TODAY'S low scores, incidentally, are lower than those of the past, for civil service scoring has been markedly relaxed in recent years in an effort to build up a pool of available labor. Moreover, among the 3,000 "temporary" employees without definite tenure in the Chicago system are carriers, clerks, and mail handlers who have been hired with no testing whatever. "In some cases," notes a close observer, "the post office today is getting little more than warm bodies."

Nevertheless, the Chicago post office has done little to strengthen its job training programs, which, in the words of Henry Jackson, a Washington management consultant who was engaged in the wake of the backlog, "have been in a deprived state for as long as the post office has existed." Citing "limited funds," Swanson concedes that employees are put to work despite their "not understanding their jobs" and not having been trained sufficiently to "perform them with dispatch." Union leaders cite instances of letter carriers so uninformed about what to do with misaddressed mail that they stash it in alley trash cans and of clerks who can "scheme" (direct) mail toward its proper destination only if it bears ZIP code numbers.

Personnel problems are complicated by a swelling contingent of workers with physical limitations. At least 7,000 of Chicago's 26,556 postal employees are women, and among the newly hired they outnumber men three to one. "There's no doubt they slow things down," explains Everett Ellis, an official of the Chicago Postal Union. "A man can carry a heavy tray of mail from one place to another like nothing, but a woman has to make three trips to empty it. And, of course, absenteeism is always higher among females, especially those of child-bearing age."

The absenteeism most characteristic in Chicago, however, has been more closely tied to a long-brewing collapse in supervision than to any physical predisposition. According to management, supervisors began losing control over their employees in the early 1960s when discipline procedures were revised in the



workers' favor and when unions began zealously turning nearly every reprimand into a *cause célèbre*. "A lot of supervisors decided it wasn't worth the battle to try to enforce rules," declares one high-ranking official. Employees, on the other hand, insist that unexcused and unexplained absences have been tolerated in the Chicago post office for years, with some workers permitted to go AWOL for as long as two months without punishment. As one ex-carrier puts it, "The world would have to turn in reverse for you to lose your job." Some observers also believe that increasingly, supervisors—who predominately are white—are reluctant to crack down on employees—65 per cent of whom are Negro—because of fear of physical reprisals.

Whatever its origin, the atmosphere of laxity toward both attendance and productivity worsened in the months preceding the crisis. Last December, Chicago lost its most experienced supervisors when 185 of the 1,300-man supervisory force retired prematurely to take advantage of a special bonus pension that had been voted by Congress. (Nationally, the post office lost 30,000 seasoned supervisors this way.) Then last March, Postmaster Harry Semrow resigned to run for political office, leaving Chicago without a postmaster until President Johnson appointed Henry McGee in September. In the interim, says Swanson, the local postal system was "a rudderless ship." Some days when a work force of 10,000 was expected at the vital main post office, unexcused absences ran a crippling 10 per cent—nearly double the national average. Says a member of the Postmaster General's mailers' technical advisory committee, "Those people were getting away with murder."

To this setting, then, were added several special circumstances which culminated in the great mail disaster.

First was a budgetary decree by Postmaster General Lawrence O'Brien, effective last July, that the nation's postal employees would be limited to one hour of overtime for every 100 regular hours worked and that postal manpower would be frozen at its present level. "The order applied across the board, regardless of special conditions that might exist in any region or city," recalls Henry Zych, president of the Chicago branch of the National Association of Letter Carriers. "There was no flexibility to allow for common sense."

Chicago workers, accustomed to liberal extra allowances, were furious. Although postal authorities officially deny it, some union leaders and members of O'Brien's advisory group assert that a deliberate slowdown took place.

Minor backlogs developed sporadically during the summer, but the main



"It's all being taped, Madam, so you can hear what your little boy wants on a replay, at your leisure."

post office always managed to produce a "clean house" before any situation became critical. However, when college students who had been hired for the summer returned to school, the local system was short-handed by perhaps 1,000 workers. Then after Labor Day Chicago, historically the nation's capital of printing and mail-order commerce, was slugged with an unprecedented avalanche of mail. Because of population increases and the economic boom, postal authorities had predicted an autumn increase in mail volume for Chicago of about 4 per cent over last year. Instead, heavy local mailings and in-transit interceptions soon had the main post office awash in twice that amount, with a daily average of about 16,000,000 pieces surging in.

At least a third of this volume was third-class bulk mail, which most of us—to the distress of the direct mail industry—call "junk mail." Chicago's big advertising mailers now say that their fall output was increased at least 25 per cent, to record levels, in part by a push from direct-mail advertisers to circulate as much material as possible before January 1, when expensive ZIP coding becomes mandatory for bulk mailings. But another important influence was a sudden shift in printing contracts from the East Coast to Chicago, apparently prompted by New York City's controversial new local taxes. Arthur J. Wolff, head of a Washington task force now analyzing Chicago's postal operations, confirms that at least 15 per cent of the mail that eventually became part of the backlog had previously been entering the postal system in New York.

At the same time that this unannounced volume upsurge hit, some other post offices around the nation, pressured by volume changes of their own, were

dumping on Chicago mail that they should have been sorting for distribution. "Chicago for years has been the big post office that could take anything," Donald Swanson explains. "So if the Milwaukee office were short-handed, say, it might sack up a load of circulars and label it CHIC DIST. and it would show up for Chicago to work. There's no way of knowing how much of this was going on, but it was more than there should have been, for sure."

BY the time McGee, who started in the postal service thirty-seven years ago as a substitute carrier, was sworn in as postmaster on September 26, unworked mail already was beginning to stack up. Trapped by the overtime and hiring restrictions, his staff could do little but concentrate on moving first class matter and leave everything else for any spare moments. When he juggled work schedules to increase production on some days, critical new gaps arose, and at a time when speed and manpower were crucial the raging absenteeism and sluggish performance of ill-trained employees swiftly took their tolls. With arrival of the usual "first-of-the-month" business mailings at the end of September, Swanson says, "the merry-go-round collapsed of its own weight."

"Mail was coming out of our ears," recalls McGee. "We couldn't even get it into the system to get an accurate count." At points, though, the post office was swamped with an estimated 28 per cent more mail than a year ago, and at the peak at least 10,000,000 pieces were logjammed. Adding to the confusion, a Negro mail handler named Robert Lucas, who doubles as head of the Chicago chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), threw pickets around the building and declared—without evi-

dence, he now privately admits—that the mail emergency was deliberately plotted by whites to protest the appointment of McGee, the city's first Negro postmaster.

By the time the huge clot became public knowledge on October 4, O'Brien's personal emissary, transportation expert William Hartigan, and a sixteen-man task force headed by Arthur Wolff already had arrived on the scene from Washington. As one newsman described it, Hartigan stood inside the vast post office "like a plumber in a flooded basement" and tried to "turn off the spigots" that were spewing mail into Chicago.

Asserting authority that both McGee and Swanson lacked, he immediately ordered other post offices, large and small, to stop dumping their problems on Chicago. Then, to further cut the input, he arranged that mail normally programmed for sorting in Chicago be diverted for processing in Atlanta, Omaha, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and twenty-one other major cities. When he learned that the Texaco Corporation planned to mail 14,000,000 credit cards in Chicago, he asked that they be so carefully sorted that they could be taken directly to appropriate railroad terminals and thus bypass the post office. Other major mailers, too, were instructed to "terminalize" mass mailings and some, such as the McCall Corporation's giant printing company in Dayton, Ohio, were told to call back dozens of loaded freight cars and trucks for resorting and rerouting of newly printed magazines.

Then, with dark predictions rampant that the tie-up would last through Christmas, he turned his attention to the backlog. With election day approaching and Republican candidates playing eagerly on postal patrons' discontent, Washington's previously unyielding attitude on overtime and extra help quickly vanished. On Hartigan's recommendation, Chicago was promised 345 extra tempo-

rary workers, and the hiring of the usual Christmas substitutes was advanced to November 1. (By mid-November, Chicago had taken on 1,600 new workers.) Moreover, Washington officials decreed, overtime could be used "as necessary," and \$3,000,000 in extra pay reportedly was earmarked for clearing the crisis and keeping it cleared. Before these orders filtered down, however, Hartigan already was enlisting as many as 500 postal workers to stay on the job voluntarily on their days off.

AS the crisis entered its second peak week, postal officials gloomily proposed to mailers that they be allowed to burn sale circulars and other third class matter that had become outdated while it lay heaped in the post office. Refunding postage on it, they said, would be cheaper than processing it. But mailers, claiming that postal refunds would by no means cover their costs, insisted that the circulars go through.

By October 14, Hartigan was chopping down the stockpile by as many as 750,000 pieces a day. Although he and other postal authorities steadfastly maintained that first class mail was never affected, some local deliveries allegedly took as long as three weeks. But the biggest bottleneck was in the third class category. Some conventions reported sharp declines in attendance because would-be participants didn't receive notices, and one Loop department store claimed a loss of \$2,000,000 because sale flyers were late getting out.

Finally, as October drew to a close, Hartigan announced that things were once more running smoothly—"better," he claimed, "than before the crisis." But when the mass moved out of Chicago, other post offices, particularly suburban installations, became so inundated that carriers had to work on one Sunday and even then fell several days behind.

As Christmas approaches, much mail is still being diverted around Chicago, and Wolff's reorganization task force—often over the protests of unions and disgruntled employees—has begun revamping internal operations to simplify and speed processing wherever possible. Mail tables are being rearranged for more efficient flow. Workers who cull mail from collection boxes have been ordered to stop wearing gloves, which hamper dexterity. Early-morning starting times are being advanced forty-eight minutes to allow a head start on pre-dawn mail arriving from the East Coast. And under a beefed up system of supervision, loafing and chronically absent employees are being suspended. Officials in both Washington and Chicago have vowed publicly that such a tie-up "will never happen again." But even now, McGee admits, "We are lucky as hell to get the mail out some days."

ONCE the Christmas crush is past, postal officials are counting on the new mandatory ZIP code regulations to cut markedly into the burdens of handling and sorting, and in the long run they hope mechanization such as the automatic scanners now being tested in Detroit will eliminate many of the system's personnel woes. But some observers are not optimistic. They point out, for example, that some big mailers may choose to escape expensive ZIP coding by using regular third class rather than bulk, which would place new sorting burdens on our post offices. As for automation, unions already have announced their intention to sternly oppose any large-scale changes. Says a spokesman for the Direct Mail Advertising Association: "There is no real reason not to consider the Chicago experience a grim warning of further trouble."

Although no other post office has suffered like Chicago's, a number, including those in Milwaukee, San Francisco, New York City, and Washington, are reporting record mail volumes and processing problems. In light of this, Representative Edward Derwinski of Illinois, a member of the House Post Office Committee, has demanded that Congress early next year launch a thorough investigation of national postal operations. Already, he reports receiving "many constructive suggestions from postmasters, clerks, and carriers on how to improve postal service." But, he says, until the service's "politics, incompetent innovations, and lag in facilities" are publicly exposed, little progress can be expected.

Meanwhile, according to Senator Daniel Brewster of Maryland, "There is a backlog of mail in almost every major post office in the country. What is going to happen as mail volume continues to skyrocket is collapse and chaos—unless we do something about it in a hurry."



"How do you do, sir? My name's Warren Owens, I'm not running for any public office, I just feel like shaking hands."

The Works of Ben Jonson

By KENNETH REXROTH

POETS AND PLAYWRITERS are seldom intellectuals in the English-speaking world, at least in the sense of being men of general ideas, a vocation which in America has always been left to the professors, as it was in England to the clergy. Only Shaw in modern times is an exception, and his general ideas were both limited in range and eccentric.

Ben Jonson was very much part of the European intellectual community of his time, as was Milton shortly after him. We forget that the great movement of re-evaluation of all values that made both the Renaissance and Reformation was led by what today we would call literary critics. Whether the reference is to Erasmus or Ficino or Scaliger, whether the Bible or Plato or Horace or Aristotle, the questions, "What is the authentic text?" and "What does it really mean?"—followed by the answers and translation into the vernacular—these were the intellectual germinators of revolution, as, in our time, are economics or physics, or psychology—Marx, Einstein, or Freud. Only if we keep this in mind can we appreciate Jonson as a source of power to his colleagues.

He was not just a roisterer or prince of poets in the Mermaid and the other bohemian taverns of his day. He was a systematic literary critic, a grammarian, an esthetician devoted to the re-establishment of poetry and drama as formally controlled, socially normative arts—this is what revival of classicism meant. *Volpone* is purposive in a way that no Shakespearean comedies before *A Winter's Tale* and *Twelfth Night* are, and it is far more deliberately purposive than any of Shakespeare's tragedies, except possibly *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. Only Machiavelli's *Mandragola* can be compared with *Volpone* as equal to equal—Machiavelli was a revolutionary intellectual, a man of wider general experience than all but a few writers in history. Jonson was no Machiavelli. He never had his hands on the levers of power, but he seems to have had a much greater range of experience than other Elizabethan dramatists. He knew all kinds and conditions of men and evidently sought deliberately to live as full a life as he could.

Most writers about Jonson begin by apologizing for him. He was scholarly in a way that no literary scholars are today

—literary scholarship mattered at the beginning of the seventeenth century; it was harder work. Jonson knew much more about erudite matters than scholars know today. And then, of course, he was not an academician but a creative artist, a bohemian intellectual, and a man who was largely self-educated. These are all great virtues, but not to modern critics. Besides, he was patently a man of the world—his plays are intensely worldly, in a positive sense. They baffle the cloistered literary mind and antagonize the schoolmaster. A play by Jonson is often presented as "hard to read" or as "seldom performed closet drama." Nothing could be less true.

Volpone, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*, are among the most theatrical and most entertaining plays ever written. They are immense fun to see, to act in, to design for. They are as far removed from closet drama as can be, for, above all English playwrights, Jonson, in his three great comedies, uses words as springs of action; there is business lurking in every line—funny business.

One thing they are not is topical satire. They deal, like the plays of Plautus, Terence, and Menander, with generalized follies and vices, with enduring sin rather than the passing crimes of politics and history. They could take place anywhere. The topical jokes and allusions that abound are not only inessential; today they go unnoticed unless explained in a footnote. Shaw wrote lengthy prefaces as notes to his plays. In a hundred years

they will have to have even lengthier notes, and even then will be difficult to grasp emotionally. In a hundred years, Jonson's plays will still be emotionally comprehensible with no notes at all.

Taste in drama has changed; once again the playwright is the scourge of folly—not of capitalism, industrialism, or the double standard. Artaud, Genet, Ionesco, and Beckett are moral rather than political or "social" playwrights. We have come to realize that greed and covetousness, power-hunger and hypocrisy, are more important than the temporary social arrangements that facilitate them. So Jonson has been revived with great success all over the world, on both sides of the tattered Iron Curtain. *Volpone*, a situation comedy, based on a purely Roman situation as unreal to a seventeenth as to a twentieth-century audience, is nevertheless completely germane to the *human* situation—in New York or San Francisco or Berlin or Moscow or Tokyo.

Luxury, greed, avarice, covetousness, fraud—all the evils of which money is the root—are analyzed and parsed out, but in action, in a kind of savage hilarity. Is this the business ethic? Critics have said the play was a sociological criticism of the new mercantile bourgeoisie. If this were all, it would never go on the modern stage. The lust for gold is not a peculiarity of a class or an epoch.

Although every moment of *Volpone* is funny, the cumulative effect is grim indeed, so grim that it ceases to be a comedy, even a black comedy, and becomes a tragedy of human folly.

It generates a growing horror, and rightly so, for it is a feast of death—a double death—for the feast is fraudulent. The characters are named after creatures that feed on carrion, so Jonson drives home Dante's point—the worship of money is life-denying, a love of corpses, and a feeding on filth. What saves the play from melodrama is Jonson's remorseless logic. It is put together like a fine precision instrument. Every speech, every action, counts. All move together like the gears of a watch. We don't see the wheels go around unless we are deliberately focusing on them, but Jonson's dramatic wheels grind like the mills of the gods.

It is this perfection of structure and function that ennobles the play. The purity of form redeems the evil—not in the plot, but in us. And this, says Jonson, is the only way we cope with analogous experiences in life. Rational control transcends the chaos of the world.

