

The Genealogy Box



A supplemental newsletter for genealogy and family history research in Harrison County, Kentucky .

By Philip Naff.

Farmers Going “Postal”

In a day before telephones were common or radio came into their lives, letters were a most precious means of communication between rural families and the outside world. For the first century of this country’s history rural residents had to go to town or to their local country store to pick up their mail. Nearly two out of three Americans lived in a rural community or on a farm, and even though they paid the same for a postage stamp as anyone else, they had to work harder to get their mail and to keep in touch. Farmers didn’t like it.

In 1896 the government began an experiment called R.F.D., or Rural Free Delivery. Believing that mail delivery to rural residences could be financially risky Congress appropriated only \$40,000 for the first trial runs, but it was proven that R.F.D. could be a success! It was so popular that rural folk everywhere were clamoring for the establishment of mail routes in their own counties.

On November 16, 1901 the *Log Cabin* published the following outline under the headline of “New Rural Routes: Harrison County to be Traversed by Five New Rural Carriers;” it documented the establishment of the first six routes in the county and read as follows:

“Col. H.G. Rising . . . Special Agent of the Post Office Department, Rural Free Delivery Service, dropped into our city quietly Monday evening for the purpose of investigating the five applications for rural delivery routes through this county . . .

“Rural Delivery Route No. 1 to Broadwell, Leesburg, Leeslick, Connersville, etc., was established a year ago last April and has been in continuous operation since that time.

“Mr. Rising has gone carefully over the proposed routes, noting the character and density of the population, number of residences, etc., along the various routes . . . The routes recommended by Col. Rising are as follows:

“No. 2.—Commencing at the Cynthiana postoffice, going north east on the Oddville pike to Smitsonville postoffice, thence west on dirt road to Avena postoffice, thence north to Avena school house, thence return to Cynthiana via Two Lick and Falmouth pikes. The length of this route is 24 ¼ miles and there are on the route mapped out 155 residences. Mr. Z.T. Laforce will be the carrier over this route.

“No. 3.— Cynthiana via Oddville pike via Indian Creek pike via Republican church to the residence of G. Jenkins, thence returning to Sylvan Dell, thence via Venus and Sylvan Dell pike to Oddville pike to Cynthiana. On this route there are 153 residences. Lawson Miller will be the carrier.

“No. 4.—Cynthiana via Millersburg pike to Gibbons toll house, thence on Shadynook pike to

Shadynook, thence to Morning Glory in Nicholas county, thence to Hooktown, thence to Colville, to Gibbons toll house, thence to Cynthiana. On this route are 158 houses. John F. Holley will be the carrier.

“No. 5.—Cynthiana over Falmouth pike to R. Blackburn’s residence, thence to Kelat, thence to railroad one-fourth mile north of Robinson, thence to Dutch Chapel, thence to Breckenridge pike near J.A. Hughes’ residence, thence to Cynthiana via Raven Creek pike. There are 143 houses on this route. Jas. M. Thorp will be the carrier.

“No. 6.—Cynthiana to Breckenridge via Raven Creek pike, thence to Renaker, thence to Rutland, thence by dirt road to A.J. Renaker’s residence on Selma pike, thence to Selma, thence to Cynthiana. There are 155 residences[.]”

Knowledge of R.F.D. addresses can be of aid to the genealogist in establishing where a research subject lived and who his neighbors were. R.F. D. directories were published over the years for the county. Combined with information from U.S. Census records of 1910, 1920, and 1930, one may be able to locate a residence of a research subject on a map or in reality. Or it could just help to make more sense of the addresses on old letters which have become family heirlooms.

For more information on all that is “postal,” seek out a guide offered by the U.S.P.S. entitled *Sources of Historical Information on Post Offices, Postal Employees, Mail Routes, and Mail Contractors* (Publication 119), or visit www.usps.com/cpim/ftp/pubs/pu_b119.pdf to get a copy.

The National Postal Museum (www.postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibits/2b2_reaching.html) has even more history and info on the web about Rural Free Delivery, what one might call the “farmer’s internet” of the early 20th century.