



## "Sharing the Legacy of a Transportation Empire"

### *Roads Well Travelled: Pictures from the Past and Historical Information*

#### **Rural Free Delivery: How Mailboxes Came About**

Story by Adam Hanger, Photos by Adam Hanger and Library of Congress



Today, we have elaborate mailboxes on country roads, mail collection boxes in neighborhoods, and small post office boxes all across the country, but how did mailboxes come about?

The first contracted mail was carried by horseback. Later, the stagecoach and horseback went back and forth in popularity and usage. In 1845, Star Bids and Star Routes came about, and in 1863 Free City Delivery was started.

Prior to 1863, postage paid for only the transportation of the mail from post office to post office where citizens would then pick up their mail. An Act of Congress, that went into effect July 1, 1863, changed that when Free City Delivery began. The Free City Delivery provided a free service, other than the postage paid, to have mail delivered city-wide, "as frequently as the public convenience...shall require," according to the U.S. Postal Service history page. This eventually lead one farmer to ask, "Why should the cities have fancy mail service and the old colonial system still prevail in the country districts?" This thought continued with the Postmaster of 1889-1893, John Wanamaker, who thought it made more sense to send one person out of town delivering the mail rather than everyone from the country into town to pick theirs up. Proposals were made and on October 1, 1896, Rural Free Delivery (RFD) commenced in three towns in West Virginia; Charles Town, Halltown, and Uvilla. Within a year, 44 other routes were in place in 29 different states. Rural Free Delivery, which provided delivery of the mail from post office to mailbox, was a success and became a permanent service on July 1, 1902, after going through nearly 6 years of experiment.

To provide this service, buggies and wagons were utilized. Larger wagons were used on the post office to post office transfers, while smaller wagons and buggies were used on the actual rural routes. These buggies and wagons were driven both single and as a team. RFD buggies commonly had an enclosed cab that set on top the buggy or wagon running gear in which the driver would sit along with the mail. Some buggies or wagons would also have little boxes directly behind the buggy dash that would hold mail for the route.



**Rural Free Delivery Buggy at Pony  
Express Barn & Museum,  
Marysville, Ks.**

**This buggy was driven by John  
Boyd, a rural carrier from Irving,  
beginning in 1911.**



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### **Rural Free Delivery: How Mailboxes Came About (cont'd)**



Left: Pictured here are two photos taken of the inside of a RFD Mail Buggy. One picture looks to the front of the buggy and the other to the back showing the seat.

RFD Buggy from Pony Express Barn & Museum, Marysville, Ks.

One style of access door on these buggies was a sliding door. The sliding door ran in a groove that was at both the top and bottom of the opening. This can be seen in the picture at right.



### **Sources:**

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