

OREGON'S PROVISIONAL, POST OFFICE

The first official notice that the Provisional Government of Oregon would attempt to furnish its citizens with mail service is found in the Organic Law of Oregon adopted by the people July 26, 1845. Article II., Section VI. of this document gives the House of Representatives the power to "establish post offices and post routes".¹ The legislature was prompt in availing itself of this power, for during the afternoon session of December 15, 1845, "Mr. McClure gave notice that on tomorrow, he would introduce A bill to provide for post offices, and post roads, in Oregon."² The bill was introduced and read for the first time December 16, 1845;³ the next day it was read the second time and referred to the Committee of the Whole.⁴ The same day the bill was considered in the Committee and adopted.⁵ On the 19th it was read for the third time and passed.⁶

The law provided for a post office department, and a postmaster general who was to be elected by the House of Representatives. The postmaster general was given the power to establish post offices, post routes and to appoint post masters. In the discharge of his duties, he was to be governed by "the laws of the United States as published in *Ingersoll's Abridgement of Acts of Congress, A.D. 1825, Regulating the Post Office Department*, so far as they may be considered applicable to the circumstances of Oregon, and where there is no provision made by the House of Representatives of Oregon."

The employees of the department were subject to the provisions of the same law, but the House saw fit to make special provision as to those who were eligible to carry the mail, limiting them to free males, descendants of white men. Any violation of this provision by a contractor was punishable by a fine of not less than \$20.00 for each offence.

The rates of postage were fixed by the law, and were rather high. This was considered later as one of the causes for the failure of the experiment. The rates were: "For every letter composed of a single sheet of paper conveyed not to exceed thirty

1 Brown's *Political History of Oregon*, Vol. 1. Portland, Ore., 1892; p. 168.

2 L. F. Grover, *The Oregon Archives*, Salem, 1853; p. 145.

3 L. F. Grover, *The Oregon Archives*, Salem, 1853; pp. 145-6.

4 L. F. Grover, *The Oregon Archives*, Salem, 1853; p. 148.

5 L. F. Grover, *The Oregon Archives*, Salem, 1853; p. 149.

6 L. F. Grover, *The Oregon Archives*, Salem, 1853; p. 150.

miles, fifteen cents; over thirty miles and not to exceed thirty miles, thirty cents; over eighty miles and not exceeding two hundred miles, forty cents; two hundred miles, fifty cents." The rate of postage on newspapers was four cents each.

The postmaster general was authorized to allow the postmasters a commission on the postage they collected; provided it did not exceed the rate per cent allowed by the fourteenth section of the said law of the United States. The compensation for the postmaster general was to be "the sum of 10% upon all monies received by him and paid out." The law also provided that the postal employees should be exempt from jury and militia duties.⁷

The House of Representatives elected William G. T'Vault postmaster general on December 19th,⁸ and on the 22nd appropriated fifty dollars for the Post Office Department.⁹ With this liberal appropriation the fortunes of the Post Office Department passed from the legislative branch to the postmaster general.

Postmaster General T'Vault on February 5, 1846, advertised in *The Oregon Spectator*, (the first newspaper published in Oregon), for sealed proposals for carrying the mail on two routes described as follows: "Route No. 1, from Oregon City to Fort Vancouver, once in two weeks, by water. Route No. 2, From Oregon City to Hill's in Twality county; thence to S. J. Hembres in Yam Hill county; thence to Andrew Smith's, Yam Hill county; thence to N. Ford's, Polk county; thence to Oregon Institute, Champoeg county; thence to Catholic Mission and Champoeg to Oregon City, once in two weeks, on horse back."¹⁰

In the same paper, Postmaster General T'Vault advertises that he had made a contract with Hugh Burns to carry the mail to Weston, Mo., for one trip only, and that the charge would be fifty cents for a letter of a single sheet.¹¹ The tenor of the advertisement led people to believe that Burns was to receive all the postage charged the letters; so in the next issue of the *Spectator* T'Vault hastens to explain that Burns was to receive 25% of the postage paid, for his services.¹² Burns was to leave early in March and planned to cross the Rocky Mountains by way of South Pass.¹³ This is the only attempt I have found on the part

⁷ *The Oregon Spectator*, Oregon City, Vol. 1, No. 1.

⁸ Grover, *The Oregon Archives*, p. 152.

⁹ *Laws of a General and Local Nature Passed by the Legislative Committee and Legislative Assembly*, Asahel Bush, Territorial Printer, Salem, Oregon, 1853; p. 53.

¹⁰ *Oregon Spectator*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

¹¹ *Oregon Spectator*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

¹² *Oregon Spectator*, Vol. 1, No. 2.

¹³ *Oregon Spectator*, Vol. 1, No. 2.

of the Department to send mail east during its active life of nine months.

The organization of the department must have progressed for on March 4, 1846, *T*'Vault published the official instructions for postmasters and they give us considerable information concerning the service.

After covering routine matters such as an oath of office and property responsibility, it states that: "The mails were established for the transportation of intelligence; the articles, therefore proper to be sent in them are, letters, newspapers, and pamphlets." No packets were to be accepted that weigh over three pounds, and articles that would hazard or deface the mail are to be excluded. Under this head are listed "models of inventions and other things of wood, metal, mineral or glass."

The following sections seem to be so illuminating that I quote them in full: "Letters received to be sent by mail should be carefully marked with the name of the post office at which they were received, and the initials O. T., the day of the month on which they were forwarded in the mail, and the rate of postage chargeable on them." "The law fixes the rate of postage. Letter postage is also to be charged on all hand bills, printed or written proposals for new publications, circulars written or printed, lottery bills, advertisements, blank forms, manuscript copy for publication, and any memorandum which shall be written upon any newspaper or other paper conveyed in the mail, except it be a note from the publisher of a newspaper to a subscriber stating the amount due." "You will charge letter postage on all packets that be known. You will receive in payment of postage, specie, and approved orders on solvent merchants. You are not authorized in any case, to give credit for postage." "At the beginning of every postoffice quarter, you will require the subscribers and others who receive newspapers regularly through your office, to pay the quarter's postage in advance, and with out such payment, you will not deliver them any papers, even though they tender you the postage on them singly." "You will permit any person who desires it to pay the postage on any newspaper, letter or pamphlet, which he deposits with you to be sent by mail, marking upon it the rate of postage, and against the rate the word 'paid' at full length. Such paid letters are to be entered in the post bill, and when the mail is made up in the proper column in the *account of the mail*

sent. The postage on the paid newspapers and pamphlets is to be placed at the foot of your account of newspapers and pamphlets received."

I have omitted several sections dealing with such routine subjects as locking the mail bags, and that letters shall be held for three months before they are returned to the central office as not deliverable, but the directions in regard to the handling of postal funds are of interest. First the postmasters are instructed to send no money to the department, for the department will draw on them for the amount due and they must hold themselves in readiness to meet all drafts when they are presented. In no case will a draft be drawn unless there is evidence of funds in the possession of the post master.¹⁴

The above is a brief description of the machinery that put the post office into being and with which it carried on the struggle for existence several months, but the printed materials dealing with the subject are scarce. We find no further notice until the issue of the *Oregon Spectator* for October 15, 1846. This carries the following advertisement which marks the end of the Post Office Department as an important part of the machinery of the Provisional Government: "To the Public:—The last Legislature of Oregon passed a law creating a Post Office Department. Accordingly, in the month of February last, Post Offices and Post Masters were appointed in the several counties south of the Columbia. Since that time, the mail has been regularly carried to the said offices semi-monthly. The revenue arising from the postage falls far short of paying the expense of transportation of the mail. It is deemed advisable to stop the transportation of the mail for the present, the last legislature having only appropriated fifty dollars for the purpose of establishing a Post Office Department in Oregon, and fixing the rate of postage so high as to amount to prohibition of carrying letters by mail. Notwithstanding the strictest economy has been used, the last quarter's mail has been carried, having been paid entirely by contributions; yet the whole revenue arising from the postage of three quarters, will not pay the transportation for one quarter; and to attempt taxing the people for transportation of the mail, is a responsibility the Post Master General declines at the present time. If there should important mail arrive from the states, the mail will be despatched immediately to the several offices. W. G. T'Vault, P. M. G."¹⁵

¹⁴ *Oregon Spectator*, Vol. 1, No. 3.

¹⁵ *Oregon Spectator*, Vol. 1, No. 18.

That he was as good as his word is evidenced by the advertisement in the next issue of the *Spectator* which gives a list of fourteen men for whom there was mail in the central office at Oregon City. This mail had not been called for and the advertisement gives the additional information that these letters were brought from the States by Lieutenant Woodworth of the United States Navy.¹⁶

I find no further reference to the mail service until December 1, 1846, when Governor Abernethy gives some space to this problem in his message to the Legislature of that date. I quote as follows: "The law establishing the post office department needs altering, very materially. It was found, after being in operation but a very short time, that the rates of postage were altogether too high, amounting, indeed, to prohibition. Very few letters passed through the office; the revenue arose almost entirely from the postage on newspapers, but so far short of the expenses, that the postmaster-general, at the close of the third quarter, stopped sending the mails. I would recommend that the rates of postage be reduced to five cents on each single letter, double letters and packages in proportion, and one cent on each newspaper. A mail route should be kept up between the principal sections of the territory; and I have no doubt, if the postage is reduced, the revenue, arising from the receipts of the office, will nearly or quite pay the expenses."¹⁷

The legislative activity that followed the delivery of the governor's message shows that the interest in the mail service was far from dead. On December 3 the Speaker of the House announced among the standing committees, one "on post offices and post roads" composed of Boon, T'Vault and Peers.¹⁸ On the same day that part of the governor's message which dealt with postage, was referred to this committee.¹⁹ Mr. Boon, speaking for the committee on December —, reported "A bill amendatory to the act establishing a post office department."²⁰ The bill was read for the first time on the same day²¹ and on the 15th was read a second time and referred to the committee of the whole²² which reported it back with amendments.²³ The bill got no further on its legislative journey, and was not printed; so we are ignorant

16 *Oregon Spectator*, Vol. 1, No. 18.

17 *The Oregon Archives*, p. 159.

18 *The Oregon Archives*, pp. 165-6.

19 *The Oregon Archives*, p. 164.

20 *The Oregon Archives*, p. 186.

21 *The Oregon Archives*, p. 187.

22 *The Oregon Archives*, p. 190.

23 *The Oregon Archives*, p. 191.

as to its provisions but it seems safe to assume that it followed the Governor's suggestion as to placing the postal rates lower. This is idle speculation for the legislature on the 18th passed a deficiency appropriation of \$116.00 for the relief of the post office department²⁴ and the next day passed an act repealing all laws relative to the establishment of the Post Office Department to take effect January 1, 1847.²⁵ This marks the final effort of the Provisional Government to furnish its citizens with mail service for there is no further mention of the subject in the records of the House of Representatives as recorded in *The Oregon Archives*.

As early as 1845 and continuing down into the territorial days, we find the people of Oregon trying to induce the government of the United States to furnish them with mail service. On June 25, 1845, the Provisional Government of Oregon sent a memorial to Congress which says in part: "We pray: * * * That a public mail be established, to arrive and depart monthly from Oregon City and Independence, and such other routes be established as are essential to the Willamette country and other settlements."²⁶ This appeal and the growing interest in the Oregon Question had some effect for on January 23, 1846, Mr. W. Gilpin wrote to Senator Atchinson on the question, and from his letter I quote the following: "Two gentlemen, now residents of the Willamette, formerly mail contractors in the states of Illinois, Iowa and Missouri, and familiar with the route and the country, stated to me that they would undertake a monthly mail for ten dollars a mile, going and returning. The Indians beyond the Rocky mountains may be employed safely in this business, and horses are very abundant and fine on the lower Columbia. The average price of a good horse is ten dollars. * * * The law should make provisions for the enlargement of the monthly service to a weekly service, and provide for extension to the Sandwich Islands and later to China."²⁷

That letter seems to have had some effect on the deliberations of the committee on Post Offices and Post Routes for in their report of March 2, 1846, I find the following: "The committee have determined that the immediate establishment of a mail route from the western line of the state of Missouri to the mouth of the Columbia River is a measure required by the growing interest of the government and people of the United States on the

24 *The Oregon Spectator*, Vol. II, No. 2.

25 *The Oregon Spectator*, Vol. I, No. 25.

26 *Brown's Political History of Oregon*, p. 162.

27 Sen. Doc. 1st Session of 29th Con., Vol. IV, Doc. No. 178.

shores of the Pacific Ocean. * * * Population of Oregon is ten thousand people [?] * * * These people feel a great anxiety to have regular communication through which they can correspond with their friends in the United States. While the Federal government possesses the exclusive power to establish post-offices and post roads, it is expected that the facilities afforded by this means of communications will be equally extended to every part of the United States. Ten thousand people in Oregon with out post-offices and post roads. * * * No other body of people of that size in the United States are without mail service. * * * A mail route established would not be expected to pay the cost at first, but it might later, not only for a monthly service as now proposed but in time might support a daily mail."

The report goes into great detail, in urging the trade of the Pacific as an excuse for establishing the service. It also gives the following information as to the probable time for the transportation of the mail. "The time for a letter to go from New York to Independence, Mo., is thirteen days. * * * It is believed that the mail can be carried from Independence, Mo., to the mouth of the Columbia in forty days. After the service is established this time can be reduced to twenty days."²⁸

There was no favorable action taken on this report; so President Polk in his message to Congress on August 6, of the same year, says in part: "It is likewise important that the mail facilities, so indispensable for the diffusion of information, and for binding together the different portions of our extended Confederacy, should be afforded to our citizens west of the Rocky Mountains";²⁹ and again in his message at the beginning of the special session of Congress December 8, 1846, from which I quote: "It will be important during your present session * * * the establishment of * * * post-offices and post roads, and provision for the transportation of the mail on such routes as the public convenience will suggest," in the territory of Oregon.³⁰

That these efforts produced some legislation and other activities is shown by a letter from Secretary of State Buchanan to John M. Shively who had been appointed deputy postmaster for Astoria, Oregon, dated at Washington, March 29, 1847. I quote an extract: "Sir: On the eve of your departure for Oregon the

²⁸ Sen. Doc. 1st Session of 29th Con., Vol. IV, Doc. No. 178.

²⁹ Richardson's *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1789-1897*, Washington, 1897, Vol. IV, p. 457.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 504.

President has ordered me * * * An earnest of this is afforded by the recent act carrying into effect the recommendations of the president, so far as regards the extension of our post office laws, and the grant of mail facilities to our fellow citizens of Oregon. This will appear from a certified copy now furnished you of part of an act approved March 3, 1847, 'to establish certain post routes and other purposes.' I am authorized by the postmaster general to assure you that all the provisions contained in these sections will be carried into effect with as little delay as possible. You will perceive, that means have already been provided for the conveyance of public information and private correspondence amongst our citizens in Oregon themselves, and between them and our states and territories east of the Rocky Mountains."³¹

The quotations from the certified copy of the law referred to above are as follows: " * * * an act to establish certain post routes * * * Oregon. From Oregon City, via Fort Vancouver and Fort Nisqually, to the mouth of Admiralty inlet. From Oregon City up the Willamette valley, to the Katamet River, in the direction of San Francisco.

"Section 2.—*And be it further enacted*, that the above routes shall go into operation on the first day of July, 1847 or sooner, should the funds of the department justify the same: *Provided*, that as soon as a responsible contractor shall offer to transport the mail over any portion of the routes included in the bill, for the revenue arising therefrom respectively, the postmaster general shall have the power forthwith to put them under contract.

"Section 6.—*And be it further enacted*, That the postmaster general be, and he is hereby, authorized to contract for the transportation of the mail from Charlestown to Chagres, * * * and across the Isthmus to Panama and from thence to Astoria, or the mouth of the Columba river * * * The mail to be conveyed from Charlestown to Chagres, and from Panama to Astoria in steam ships, and to be transported each way once in two months or oftener, as the public interest shall demand: *Provided*, that the expenditure shall not exceed one hundred thousand dollars per annum.

"Section 7.—*And be it further enacted*, That the postmaster general be, and he hereby is, authorized to establish a post office and appoint a deputy postmaster at Astoria, and such other places on the Pacific within the territory of the United States as the

³¹ *The Oregon Spectator*, Vol. II, No. 17.

public interest may require: That all letters conveyed to or from * * * Astoria and on other places on the Pacific within the United States shall pay forty cents postage."³²

This resulted in the publishing of the following advertisement in the *Oregon Spectator* for September 16, 1847:

"MAIL CONTRACTS TO LET.—The undersigned, special agent for the post-office department of the United States for Oregon Territory, will receive sealed proposals for the carrying of the mail from Astoria to Oregon City and back again, and such other intermediate offices as shall be established. Also, for carrying the mail from Oregon City to the mouth of Mary's river and back again, and such other intermediate offices as shall be established. Also for carrying the mail from Oregon City via Fort Vancouver and Fort Nesqually, to the mouth of Admiralty Inlet and back again and such other intermediate offices as may be established. Persons wishing to propose for carrying the mail on any of the aforesaid routes, are informed that the amount of pay will be the entire yield of the respective offices on the route, over and above the commission of the postmasters respectively. As Oregon City will be situated on more than one route, a division of the proceeds will be made between the different contractors coming to that office in proportion to the number of trips performed. The person proposing to carry the mail will express definitely the number of trips he will carry the mail per month for the compensation above offered, and the contract will be continued for four years from date unless sooner annulled by the department. Sealed proposals will be received until the first Monday in October next, for the carrying the mail on any aforesaid routes, and may be deposited with W. G. T'Vault of Oregon City.—C. Gilliam, Special Agent Post Office Department of the U. S. for Oregon Territory, Oregon City, Sept. 9, 1847."³³

The publication of the above articles in the *Spectator* must have raised high the hopes of the people, but the United States failed more miserably than the Provisional Government and there was no mail service. For Governor Abernethy in a letter to President Polk dated Oregon City, October 19, 1847 says: "Desired:—Appropriation for the transportation of the mails in Oregon and to Oregon (we have postmasters and agent but no mail)"³⁴ and in a letter dated April 3, 1848 as follows: "Col.

³² *The Oregon Spectator*, Vol. II, No. 17.

³³ *The Oregon Spectator*, Vol. II, No. 17.

³⁴ Brown's *Political History of Oregon*, p. 301.

Gilliam killed accidentally in the Indian war * * * He was appointed by your excellency to the office 'Agent of the Post Office Department' * * * Nothing was ever effected in that department, as an advertisement was put in the paper offering to let contracts, but as the contractor was to get pay out of the proceeds of the office, and even that could not be guaranteed to him for four years, no one would enter into contract to carry mail, consequently no mail has been started in this territory under the authority of the United States."³⁵

This ends the story of the efforts to establish a mail service during the tenure of the Provisional Government, but the question comes to mind, what was done in the matter of communication during this period when there was no mail service. From the scanty sources I have gathered the following examples: On April 17, 1847, the Board of Directors who controlled the fortunes of the *Oregon Spectator* announced that they had employed a person to carry the paper to subscribers.³⁶ Then in September of the same year a notice is published in the *Spectator* that Captain Gilston of the bark *Whiton* expected to sail direct to Panama from that place, Oregon City, and he would be glad to take any letters entrusted to his care. The editorial comment was that such letters could reach the United States in three months.³⁷ The third newspaper to be published in Oregon was the *Oregon American Evangelical Union* published at Tualitin Plains and in its issue published June 7, 1848, said: "Probably the greatest embarrassment to the successful operation of the presses of Oregon is the want of Mails." It announced that arrangements had been made for two carriers to make the rounds through the settlements; also, by special arrangement, it was to receive the mail from Portland, twelve miles away, once a week, and by special express whenever foreign intelligence reached the river.³⁸

Thus ends the struggle of the people of Oregon for mail communication with their old homes in the States and between the settlements in Oregon. They failed, yet it was a splendid attempt to achieve a task beyond their means.

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35 Brown's *Political History of Oregon*, p. 373.

36 *The Oregon Spectator*, Vol. II, No. 6.

37 *The Oregon Spectator*, Vol. II, No. 18.

38 Carey, *History of Oregon*, p. 682.