



U.S. Parcel Post Stamps of 1912-1913

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## U.S. Parcel Post

By Douglas Files

### History of parcel post

For well over a century the U.S. post office system only carried letters. No allowance was made for carrying packages. That changed in 1878 when the Universal Postal Union (UPU) set up the basis for an international system to deliver parcels. By treaty the post office had to deliver packages sent to the United States from other UPU nations.

After many years of delivering only inbound international packages, American government officials decided that they finally had the infrastructure to begin a domestic and outbound international parcel service. Congress passed a law on August 24, 1912 authorizing the Postmaster General to begin a domestic parcel post. Four months later the long-awaited service began, on New Year's Day 1913. To garner publicity the postmaster of New York City and the Postmaster General in Washington, DC posted parcels to each other at midnight on the day the service began.

Parcel post service was overwhelmingly popular and in the very first week 4 million parcels were carried. The advent of domestic parcel post galvanized the mail-order business. Soon food, clothing, medications and tobacco were being regularly sent by mail. Specific “parcel post stamps” were issued but they were found to be unnecessary and were discontinued soon thereafter.



Staged photo of a toddler in the U.S. mail

Image from the National Postal Museum, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/05/24/mail-that-baby-a-brief-history-of-kids-sent-through-the-u-s-postal-service/>

When parcel post service was first established in 1913, few restrictions were placed on what could be placed in the mail. It did not take long before one Ohio couple placed their baby in the mail. Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Beauge of Glen Este, Ohio sent a ten-pound baby to his grandmother’s home a mile away. They paid 15 cents in postage, plus, in their defense, they paid extra for insurance to make sure their son would be delivered safely. They were not the only ones to mail family members. Other children were mailed much farther. Six-year-old Edna Neff was mailed from Florida to Virginia. May Pierstorff gained fame for travelling on an Idaho mail car in 1914 to relatives nearby. The stamps paying the postage were affixed to her coat. May’s journey was covered in a popular children’s book called “Mailing May”.

Readers will be relieved to learn that children in the mail were not placed in cardboard boxes. Instead, they were carried or walked alongside mail carriers and all reports state that they were treated well during transit. Still, in 1914 the Postmaster General established a regulation that prevented the carriage of human beings in the U.S. mail. After all, these children were increasingly mentioned in the press and the media attention was avid. It was only a matter of time before a “human parcel” would be lost in the mail.



The “musical instrument” box that held William DeLucia in 1980

The 1914 policy forbidding people to be carried in the mail effectively ended the practice of mailing children. However, decades later another person was accidentally carried in the mail. In 1980 William DeLucia sealed himself in a crate with food, water and an oxygen tank. A label identified the contents of the container as musical instruments. During his trip DeLucia climbed out of the box, stole thousands of dollars’ worth of items from the registered mail and closed himself back in the crate. Unfortunately for him the crate popped open when it arrived at the Atlanta airport and DeLucia was promptly arrested.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century package delivery makes up a greater part of its overall business than ever before. Today private carriers compete with the U.S. Postal Service to deliver packages, but the USPS still carries 3.3 million pounds of parcels each week.

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