

# BEGINNER'S CORNER

## Highway Post Offices

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*Editor's Note: This installment of Beginner's Corner is written by Will Keller who offered his knowledge of HPOs after reading about RPOs. If you have a topic that you are knowledgeable in, please share your expertise with your fellow PMCC members. If you have a question you would like answered, please submit it to the editor at pmcceditor@comcast.net or 1236 Sequerra St., Broomfield, CO 80020. I would like to keep this column going. To do so your questions are needed.*

### What is an HPO?

In the February, 2012 *PMCC Bulletin* Paul Schroeder discussed the collection of postmarks from mail posted on trains. These are known as RPO's, short for Railway Post Office. A fascinating topic and one I have pursued for 50 years. However, there is another totally fascinating adjunct to the RPO known as the HPO, or "Highway Post Office."

In the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, railway passenger transportation was being assaulted by new, publically funded roads. This resulted in the discontinuance of many branch line passenger trains as locals purchased automobiles and started driving, versus riding the rails. The resulting train discontinuances over the years resulted in mail service being disrupted in many local areas, as the trains often carried Railway Post Offices. The Post Office Department needed to address the transportation/distribution situation. With the increased highway construction, and the more reliable highway vehicles, the POD inaugurated the concept of Highway Post Office in 1941, after an act of Congress allowing it to do so.

The concept was to outfit a highway vehicle, initially converted city busses with sorting facilities to enable clerks to perform mail distribution as the vehicle traveled over the highways in the same manner as distribution was performed in RPO cars in the trains. The HPO's (pronounced as 'HYPO') were

over-the-road RPO's and performed all the same distribution (sorting) functions as the RPO's. Clerks were assigned to an HPO or RPO as their seniority allowed, the occupation was identical in either mode. However, the HPO actually stopped at the local Post Offices along the route, as opposed to the local train stations, thus saving local mail messenger services.

From a postmark collecting standpoint, the HPO era offers a multitude of opportunities. Inauguration of new HPO service in the early years was a philatelic event equal to a new stamp issue. Special "First Trip" postmarks were issued for the inaugural trips and covers often received special cachets by the Post Office as well as many local



A Twin Coach HPO vehicle operating on the Gary & Indianapolis HPO (Photographer unknown).

stamp clubs and private individuals. Day to day operations provided a variety of postmarks very similar to those of the RPO's, which included old RPO postmarkers used as HPO postmarkers on a temporary basis, a vast variety of rubber postmarkers used as "provisional" (or temporary) postmarks, and a variety of "First Trip" ceremonial postmarks provided over the years by the POD.

Collectors also value cachets on special event HPO Trips, usually First Trips, which were provided by the POD as well as very often by private collectors.

Another aspect of HPO collecting is that of the "commercial" or "postally used" cover. These are basically "regular mail" covers that were deposited in courtesy collection boxes in towns along the HPO route that were cleared by the HPO crew as they traversed the towns. The mail received was "raw" and thus received the postmark of the HPO as the receiving unit. These covers are distinguished from "philatelic" covers sent by collectors to the various HPO foremen for example postmarks. Some routes

have many examples of the commercial cover, others have no known examples.

In total, there were 410 HPO routes established between 1941 and 1974 when the last route was discontinued.

For more HPO information contact the writer, or the Mobile Post Office Society. A good reference on both RPO's and HPO's from a day-to-day basis is *The Railway Mail Clerk and the Highway Post Office* by H. K. Culbreth.



Illustrated are the inaugural trip of HPO # 1, Washington DC & Harrisonburg, VA HPO, Trip 1, February 10, 1941 and the Last Trip of the Cleveland & Cincinnati HPO Trip 4 from June 30, 1974 with the Government supplied blue cachet.