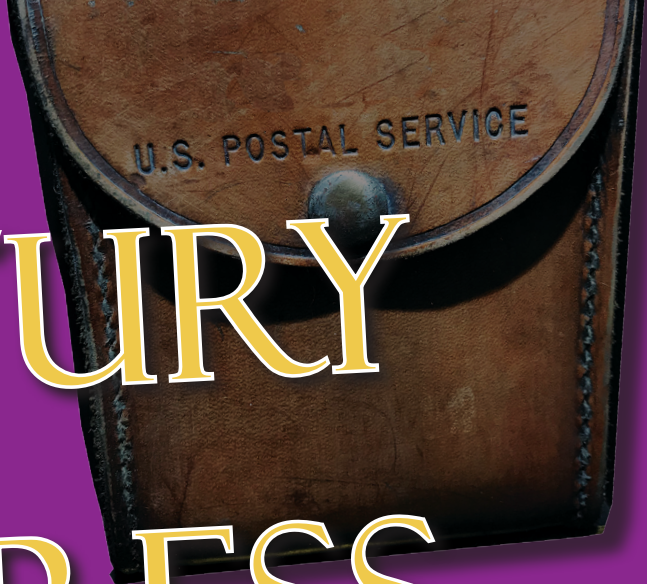


A CENTURY OF PROGRESS

HONORING THE MARCH FORWARD OF WOMEN LETTER CARRIERS



Postal uniforms have evolved since women delivered during World War I (above).

A Girl Mail Carrier.

[Portland Oregonian.]

Oregon has a woman mail carrier, Minnie Westman, and she carries Uncle Sam's mail from the head of navigation river over the coast range

Today, postal patrons think nothing of a woman bringing mail to their mailbox, but the advance of women into this male-dominated craft happened slowly. As March is Women's History Month, to mark the occasion, *The Postal Record* takes a look at the history of women in the Postal Service and at the views of some female leaders of NALC about where women stand, how they got there and what their future may hold.

The first known woman appointed to carry mail was Sarah Black, who was hired in 1845 to ferry mail between the train depot and post office in Charles-town, MD. According to the Postal Service's historian in a 2007 article posted on the USPS website called "Women Mail Carriers," she was one of several members of the Black family who held postal positions in the town, including a female postmaster.

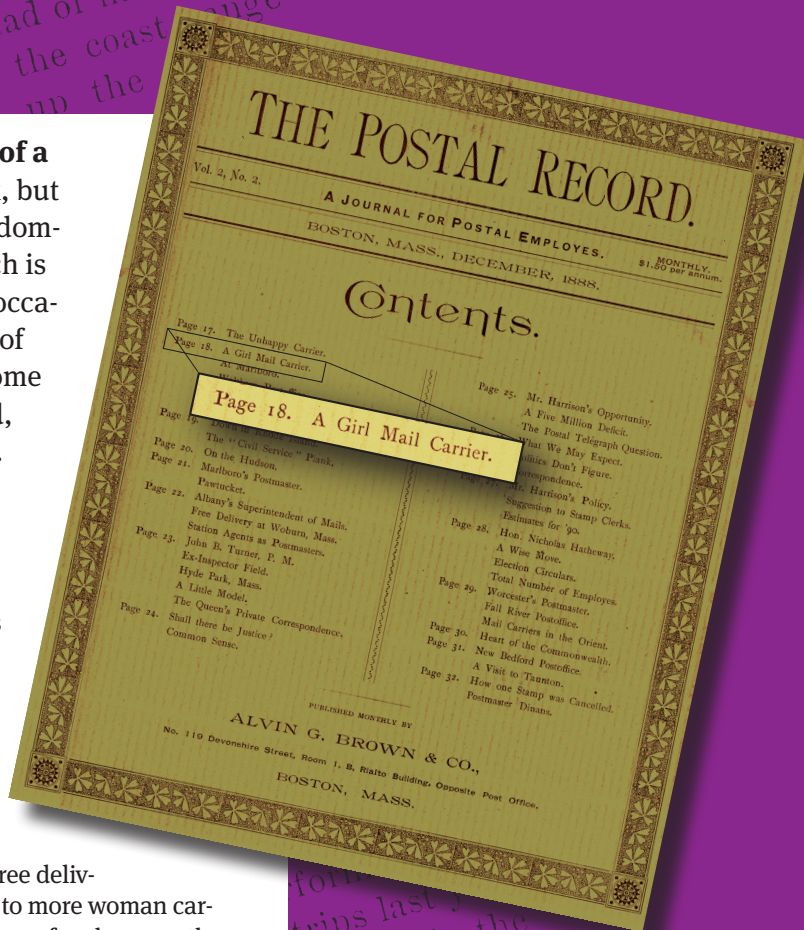
News articles from the era contain reports of several dozen women in rural areas carrying the mail in the decades following Black's appointment. In those days, female letter carriers often attracted reporters who wrote news stories about how surprising it was for a woman to handle the demanding job. The *Boston Daily Globe* described in 1884 the tough job of "star route" carrier Polly Martin, who often had to dig her team of horses out of deep snow and who once confronted a would-be robber by beating him in the face with her horsewhip.

The Postal Record also took note of female letter carriers. In 1888, when this magazine was a private publication (NALC was founded the following year), *The Postal Record* published an article titled "A Girl Mail Carrier." It was about 20-year-old Minnie Westman, a "plump little brunette" who helped her father

and uncle carry mail under contract in Oregon. The story mentions Westman's brave encounter with a trio of bears on her route.

At the turn of the century, the advent of rural free delivery opened jobs to more woman carriers in rural areas, often because there were simply no men available in remote areas to fill the jobs because they were busy working on farms or had left to work in factories. The postmaster general's annual report for 1899 reported that "on at least two routes there are girl carriers, and they are as unflagging in their devotion to the service as the men and as efficient." By 1904, their ranks had grown to 105, all in rural areas.

Still, old attitudes would take time to fade. Postmaster General Henry C. Payne decreed in 1902 that only single women would be appointed as carriers because married women "should stay at home and attend to their household duties." Postal officials often said they refused to hire a woman because she would take a job from a man.



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These New York City women letter carriers were paid the same rate as men in 1917: 35 cents an hour.



the union fight to assure that female letter carriers receive the same protection of labor laws that men enjoyed. "There is grave doubt in the minds of those familiar with the every-day work of letter carriers in the city delivery service whether women could stand the strain for any length of time without seriously impairing their health," the editors wrote in the December 1917 issue. "If women are to be employed in the service they should be granted the protection of every law on the statutes affecting letter carriers in the city delivery service. It will be our purpose as well as our duty to protect them to the fullest extent."

After two weeks on the job, both women received high marks for their service, and Postmaster Merritt O. Chance urged them both to take the Civil Service exam and apply for jobs as city carriers. He also declared that women would thereafter be eligible for the job. Over the remaining 11 months of the war, the Post Office Department hired dozens of women in several cities across the country, typically when no men were available.



A letter carrier during World War II

When the war ended, though, most women gave up their jobs as carriers, and returning veterans took their place. Only two are known to have continued carrying the mail beyond the war's end. World War II brought similar progress for women. Just as Rosie the Riveter

Women continued to prove their abilities, even as pilots carrying air mail, but it wasn't until World War I that women gained the chance to work as city letter carriers for the first time, when the war caused a shortage in the male workforce.

According to the Postal Service's historian, the first known female city carriers were Permelia Campbell and Nellie McGrath, who were hired in 1917, shortly after the United States declared war on Germany, to deliver mail in Washington, DC. Campbell was the widow of a letter carrier and McGrath's husband had been a carrier before signing up for military service. Campbell and McGrath were hired on an experimental basis as "temporary substitutes" and had no civil servant status.

After Campbell and McGrath were hired, the editors of *The Postal Record* greeted the idea of women carrying the mail with skepticism, but urged that

Capital City Tries Women as Letter Carriers

Government took a postoffice clerks from The unsatisfactory speed-up system and in dealing with postal work performed, have army of postoffice clerk sequence the service has service is a public function highest standard and be postoffices much difficult service properly manned. Owing to the publicity women letter carriers in number of inquiries to the

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kept factories humming during the war, these women kept the mail moving while men fought, proving they could do the job. But as with World War I, most women left their jobs as letter carriers when the men came home.

By 1955, there were only 95 women working as city carriers, a tiny proportion of the approximately 104,000 city carriers that year. At that time, 31.6 percent of the overall U.S. workforce was female. In the 1960s, however, efforts to end workplace sex discrimination sparked a growth in the number of women in the carrier craft. President John F. Kennedy decreed in 1962 that federal appointment be made “without regard to sex.” The ranks of female letter carriers grew rapidly, though they still lagged behind the overall workforce.

Soon the gap began narrowing. By 1972, about 8,000 women were carrying the mail as city carriers, less than 4 percent of all city carriers at the time—by contrast, the total workforce that year was 38.5 percent female. In 1983, there were 18,000, representing about 10 percent of the city carrier workforce (the total workforce was 44 percent female that year). By 2007, one in every four city carriers was a woman, though women had reached 46 percent of the total workforce.

Women now make up 32 percent of the city carrier ranks, though it still trails the overall U.S. workforce, which is 47 percent female. However, women continue to take jobs as carriers at a faster pace—40 percent of CCAs are women—so the growth trend may continue. That could bring it closer to the 43 percent of women in the overall civilian federal workforce.

Female leaders emerge

Among those early female city carriers who joined the Postal Service in the 1970s

was Megan Brennan, who advanced from carrying the mail in Lancaster, PA, to become chief operating officer and executive vice president of the Postal Service and then, in 2015, the first female postmaster general in U.S. history.

They also include several women who would rise to NALC leadership positions, beginning with former NALC Secretary-Treasurer Jane Broendel of Davenport, IA Branch 506, who became the first woman to sit on the Executive Council when she was elected to the national board of trustees in 1995. Four women now serve on the 28-member Executive Council, composed of 10 national officers, 15 national business agents (NBAs) and three trustees.

Many of these leaders brought a list of “firsts” on their résumés. For instance, NALC Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Rhine was the first female president of Lincoln, NE Branch 8, the first female president of her state association and the first woman to serve as an RAA for Region 5. NALC Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Judy Willoughby was the first female vice president and president of Tallahassee, FL Branch 1172, the first female executive board member for her state association, the first female RAA of Region 9 and the first female NBA. Myra Warren, NALC director of life insurance, was the first female RAA for Region 10 and the first African-American woman to serve as a national officer.

A carrier cases mail in the 1980s.

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NALC WOMEN: Active and Involved

Broendel has said that she was inspired to get involved in the union and assert her rights after a male union representative ignored her requests for help in a dispute with management. And Rhine recalls asking a manager why he hadn't consulted with the union on an important matter, only to be told that no union official was available. In reality, no male officers were available, but two female officers were.

For Detroit Branch 1 President **Sandy Laemmel**, who began as a letter carrier in 1976, there were practical challenges of being someone nobody expected to show up for the job.

"When I first came to the Postal Service, we didn't even have a ladies' room at the post office because we were sort of a rarity," she said. The office quickly converted an extra bathroom to a unisex, one-at-a-time facility. A full women's restroom finally was built a few years later, when more women arrived.

Another basic challenge was dressing for work. "Uniforms were not kind to female letter carriers," Laemmel recalled.

"They weren't cut to fit women; they weren't styled to fit women. You had to take a man's uniform and get it cut to fit a female letter carrier."

Laemmel also confronted doubts about a woman's leadership abilities

among some male carriers when she became a steward and then was elected branch assistant secretary in 1986.

"When I became a branch officer—talk about culture shock," she said. "When my branch president sent me out to visit offices, I can remember [some of] them looking at me like, 'You are who? And you're here to do what?'"

Laemmel raised the stakes when she became pregnant shortly afterward.

"The union office didn't know what to do with a pregnant union officer," she said. "What are they going to do with me? What if I go into labor? I said, 'Look, if I can carry mail in this state, I can surely go out there and represent letter carriers.'"

Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Wiloughby experienced a similarly exasperating response to her pregnancy. When she called the post office the day she went into labor to say that she couldn't report to work, a supervisor asked if she could at least come in to case mail.

Laemmel, who was first elected branch president in 1997, said she didn't find it too difficult to deal with the challenge of being a female union officer because she had paved her way as a female carrier.

"That's sort of what I've done ever since I joined the workforce," she said. "I never looked at it as 'these men aren't listening to me'—I just made sure that they did."

By the time Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 President **Barbara Stickler** joined the postal workforce in 1987, the Postal Service was becoming an easier place for women to work as letter carriers, and female faces were more common both at cases and union meetings. "I was never the first

It used to be that mail carriers were male carriers. But that is changing rapidly. Today, 14 percent of the carrier workforce is female—and that number is soaring. In the last year alone, the number of Level 5 female letter carriers has increased by a third. All across America, financial pressures and the desire to make a contribution outside the home have brought women into the workforce in great numbers.



Women now make up 32 percent of the city carrier workforce.

WOMEN'S

female in anything,” Stickler said. Since the branch was founded in 1973, she said, “there’s pretty much always been a female officer, more than one, at Branch 1100. They certainly made it easier, within Branch 1100, to move ahead.” Stickler was elected branch vice president in 1998 and went on to become branch president in 2010.

Still, to get along as a new letter carrier, Stickler adapted to life on the male-dominated workroom floor.

“I had to learn to adapt to shop talk because it’s still a man’s world out there,” she said. “Shop talk” is Stickler’s term for the raunchy, off-color way male postal workers often talked to each other.

“I just gave it back to them,” she said. “It’s just the way the workroom floor was. I learned to give as good as I got.”

The talk never crossed a line or offended her because of the close bonds co-workers felt. “They were really part of the family back then,” Stickler said. “It never got too low—it was like an older brother picking on his baby sister.”

Stickler also tried to keep up with the male obsession with sports. “I started subscribing to a sports magazine just to try and fit in and be a little more cognizant of what was going on, to be a part of the conversation,” she said.

As a union activist, Stickler has observed the steady change in women’s participation in NALC over the years. During a break at her first NALC national convention, held in St. Louis in 1992, “there was a three-block line for the men’s room, and I was able to sail right into the lady’s room, which gives you an idea of the makeup of the delegates at the convention,” she said. “It’s obviously changed a lot within the organization since then.” Within the

ranks of NALC today, she said, women are more common and fully accepted as leaders, reflecting their acceptance in our society in general.

Unions protect women

In the last year, the country has reckoned with the reality of some aspects of women’s progress in the workplace. While women enjoy more freedom and opportunity, they still face obstacles that seem harder to dislodge, such as unequal pay and, as recent developments have made clear, harassment.

That puts the role of NALC and labor unions overall in a new light, because union contracts, such as our National Agreement with the Postal Service, bring a rational process for handling harassment and unequal treatment that management cannot ignore, while providing for equal pay, regardless of gender.

“We’re created different, but we do the same job as men do,” Laemmel said. “Thank heaven for our union. We get paid the same money as our male counterparts.”

As a child, Laemmel’s daughter accompanied her mother at union functions, and now her twin granddaughters, age 10, do the same. She hopes her granddaughters will see what it means to be a female leader and will build on the progress she helped to make. “Strong moms raise stronger daughters and those strong daughters raise stronger granddaughters,” she said.

Though they may face their own challenges, Laemmel said, “My granddaughters will not have to walk into a place where there’s no women’s room.” **PR**

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Sandy Laemmel