

# Careers for the ages



Philip  
Dine

**A**s we know, once letter carriers land on their routes, they often make a career of it. The twin tales that follow depict the exceptional careers of men with differing experiences but a shared love for the craft, profound admiration from their colleagues, and unyielding support for—and by—their families.

**When Johnnie Bell began delivering mail in Oklahoma City on Feb. 11, 1956,** Dwight Eisenhower of neighboring Kansas was a first-term president. Americans were enjoying Elvis's first hit.

Johnnie retired on June 2 as the country's longest-serving letter carrier—100 days into his 67th year.

Johnnie, who delivered during the terms of 30 percent of America's presidents, was a great-grandfather his last 16 years on the route; his newest (the 15th) arrived in late June. With his Korean War-era Navy stint (1950-54), his federal service totals 71 years.

Yet, remarkable numbers don't define Johnnie Bell's career—enthusiasm, dedication, reliability and skill do.

"At his retirement party, one thing I said was I always enjoyed station visits at the station he worked at," Branch 458 President Ken Mayfield says, "because I knew I'd get to see his big smile and hear his thunderous laugh."

"Everybody loves Johnnie," Ken adds. "We always bragged on him being No. 1 in the nation. I never thought I'd be going to his retirement party, because I figured he'd still be carrying mail when I retired."

Johnnie worked nearly seven decades, rarely missing a day, for a simple reason: He loved the job, his customers, and his co-workers.

Retirement, he says, is "all right, but it's a hard switch. The thing about it is, I was used to being around people. That makes your day pass. But as you get older, you realize you can't work all your life."

At 91, Johnnie's sharp as a tack. He's an ardent Boston Red Sox fan, so I told him that during a 1992 interview, Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) offered me "everything I have in my wallet" (*a Rockefeller...*) if I could name the team's early 1950s second baseman. But I couldn't. "Bobby Doerr," Johnnie informed me without pause.

Post-Navy, he attended Oklahoma University but ran out of money, then was a carpenter's helper and train switchman before a Navy pal—also named John—encouraged him to take the post office test. John stayed one and a half years; Johnnie stayed, and stayed—ending up revered by legions of

younger carriers for his knowledge and mentoring.

His entire family of 33 descendants and spouses—including Johnnie Bell II, Johnnie Bell III and Johnnie Bell IV—live within 20 miles around Oklahoma City and gather frequently.

"You just don't really think about how unusual it is, what he did," his daughter Deneen says, "until you start hearing people, the look on their face, the shock that they have, when they find out. We're just extremely proud of him."

**Pearl Harbor was a fresh wound, WWII in its early months—**and Lloyd N. Pearson Jr. had just begun guarding the mail on Florida trains. It was October 1942.

In small towns, folks would stare through the train's windows at the sight of a black man, badge and pistol on his belt. Prudence told him to remain onboard during local stops.

He switched to the carrier craft in 1947, encountering racially separate post office restrooms and water fountains.

Soon, Lloyd joined the Navy Reserve, guarding the East Coast as a ship gunner two weeks a year. For decades, he delivered mail and championed racial and labor causes—delegate to 20 NALC national conventions and 25 NAACP ones—while serving North Florida Branch 53 as treasurer and scribe.

He retired, so to speak, 46 years ago in January 1977. His first dozen years, he registered 35,000 Duval County voters from a folding card table outside stores and schools.

"I was on a good pension," Lloyd, 101, explains, "so I gave my time for free." He still attends Branch 53 retiree breakfasts.

Past Branch President Bob Henning calls Lloyd "unbelievable," using the same term to describe "the stories this guy can tell." They involve, I can attest, vivid details about long-ago events.

To Lloyd's children, what resonates are the dual lessons imparted way back: Treat others well, tell the truth.

"What he taught us is your word is all you have, so you have to be true to that," Lucy says. "And, to treat people with kindness and love and respect; life is about reciprocity.

"That's how he's lived his life. We're all like little stairsteps; one after the other, all six of us took those lessons."

Not that they had a choice. Lloyd, a PTA officer throughout their school days, spent his postal day off (Tuesdays) in their school, observing. "So, we were good kids," Lucy recalls. "We stayed in line."

**EDITORIAL STAFF:**  
Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine  
Managing Editor Mike Shea  
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges  
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner  
Editorial Assistant Joelle Dine

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