



The ZIP Code turns 00060

On July 1, 1963, the Post Office introduced the ZIP Code to the nation. The system has become such an accepted part of addressing an envelope or package that it's hard to imagine a time when it wasn't in use. Those five little digits may not seem like a big deal, but they mark a major turning point for the Post Office.

While the Post Office had kept up with changes in transportation technology, from horses to trucks and trains to planes, mail sorting had always been done by hand. After a customer dropped a letter off at the post office or a mailbox, a human be-

ing would have to look at the address and move it along toward that destination's post office, where a letter carrier would sort it into delivery order and then deliver it along their route. But the Zone Improvement Plan (ZIP) Code would be the key to the shift from this sorting being done by human eyes and hands to machines directing the majority of the nation's mail after it arrived at a post office and until it reached the letter carrier for delivery.

As the nation grew and the volume of mail continued to multiply, especially after World War II, the Post Office saw that the ways it had handled the mail since the founding of the nation could not keep up. By 1963, a letter

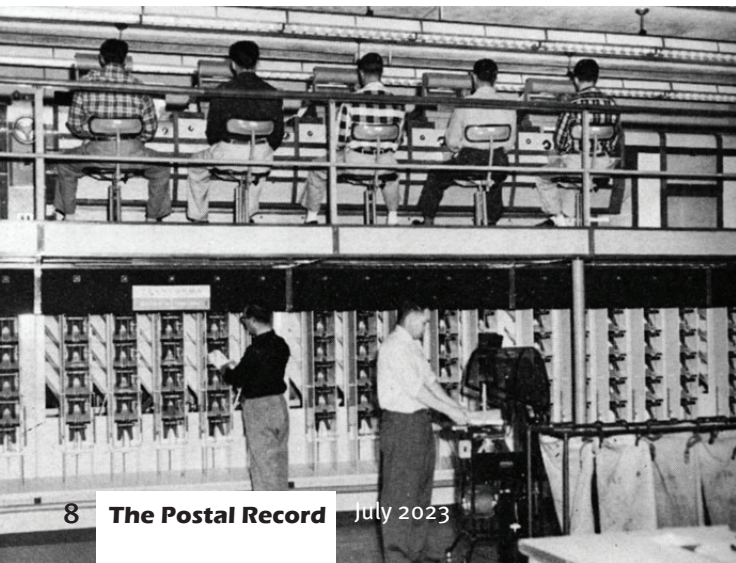
went through about 17 sorting stops before reaching its intended address, with many coast-to-coast pieces taking a lengthy crisscross route through those sorting stops across the country.

As automation transformed other industries, postmasters general saw the opportunity to use automation to reduce the number of employees and resources needed to sort and move the mail. In the late 1950s, the Post Office introduced sorting machines, but they still relied on human decision-making. The machines would put a piece of mail in front of a human operator, who would read the address and, through some keystrokes, code that mail to its destination.

For automation to have a significant impact, though, the next step was to take the operator out of the equation. These efforts led to the establishment of the Nationwide Improved Mail Service (NIMS) program in 1961. The goal of NIMS was to get the mail ready to be sorted by machines. One part of that was standardizing the sizes and shapes of envelopes. Another involved the creation of some type of machine-readable code.

The Post Office saw the ZIP Code as an essential step toward the use

A sorting machine in 1957 had operators sitting in front of keyboards on the upper level. The operators read the destination and keyed a sorting code. The letter was then deposited into one of 300 chutes that returned the mail neatly stacked to the lower level.



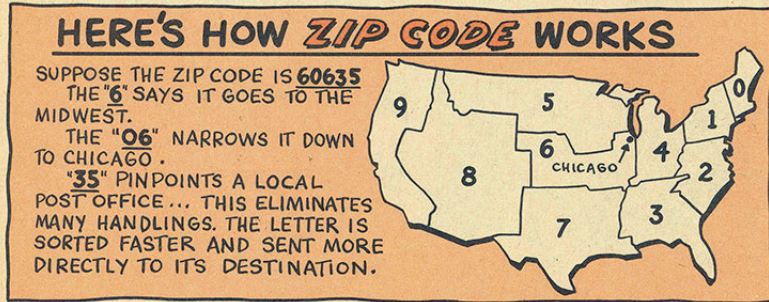
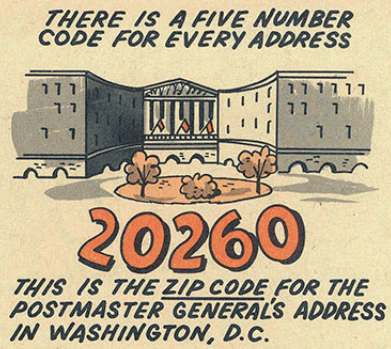
One of the pages from a comic made to help children understand how the ZIP Code works

of scanners, as explained in its 1963 annual report: “Widespread use of the ZIP Code is expected to pave the way for a smooth transition to mail sorting by mechanized optical scanning equipment which is now under development.” As part of this development, private companies, under contract with the Post Office, developed optical character recognition (OCR) software that could read handwritten and typed addresses. Descendants of this OCR software are still used to convert all kinds of images to readable text today.

A multi-digit code had been in the works for almost two decades before the ZIP Code was unveiled in 1963 and it was created through the combination of two separate codes. The first was a three-digit code proposed in 1944 by Philadelphia Postal Inspector Robert Moon, who suggested codes for processing hubs throughout the country to make it more efficient for mail to travel from hub to hub. Moon persistently proposed the system to every postmaster general, getting nowhere until newly appointed Postmaster General Edward Day took up the idea in 1961.

Day noted that between 1943 and 1962, annual mail volume had doubled, growing from 33 billion pieces of mail to 66.5 billion, and so the processing system needed to be modernized to efficiently handle the rising mail volume. He proposed adding an additional two digits that were already in use in some big cities. Here’s how the Post Office described the five-digit code in its 1963 annual report:

[T]he five-digit ZIP number is a structured code in which the first digit identifies one of ten large areas of the Nation, and the second digit indicates a State, a geographic portion of a heavily populated State, or two or more less



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populated States. The third digit identifies a major destination area within a State, which may be a large city post office or a major mail concentration point (Sectional Center) in a less populated area. Five hundred fifty-three of these Sectional Centers have been designated across the country. The final two digits indicate either a postal delivery unit of a larger city post office, or an individual post office served from a Sectional Center.

There was a problem with adding five digits onto an address, though. At that time, most mail addressing equipment used by business mailers could fit only 23 characters in the bottom line of an address. To make room for the ZIP Code, state names needed to be abbreviated. In June 1963, the Post Office came up with an initial set of abbreviations, but many had three or four letters, which was still too long. So, four months later, the Post Office created the two-letter abbreviations we know today, except for one—in 1969, at the request of the Canadian





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postal administration, the abbreviation for Nebraska, originally NB, was changed to NE, to avoid confusion with New Brunswick.

With the new system created, a bigger problem faced PMG Day—getting the American public to use the ZIP Code. Day turned to the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) for advice, as AT&T held a monopoly on phone service in the country and had recently tried to get Americans to start using area codes for long distance service. Executives at the telephone company told Day that the public had been hesitant about learning the three-digit codes and, further, that it was a struggle to get people to use them. That posed a problem, as the Post Office couldn't make use of the new sorting machines—and take advantage of the cost savings—until acceptance rates for the ZIP Code were nearly universal.

Day looked to West Germany for a possible solution. That country's postal service had created a coding system a few years earlier and had seen an 80



The Swingin' Six sang on TV about the benefits of the ZIP Code.

percent adoption rate within one year. The solution had been a public campaign to educate and excite the public.

Enter Mr. ZIP, a cartoon character who happily—and speedily—delivered the mail. Mr. ZIP actually predated the ZIP Code, having been created in the 1950s to advertise a bank-by-mail campaign for Chase Manhattan Bank. The design was eventually acquired by AT&T, which offered it to the Post Office Department at no cost. The Post Office elongated his body, gave him a letter to hold, and eventually changed his name from “Mr. P.O. Zone” to Mr. ZIP when the name ZIP Code was settled upon. Mr. ZIP was designed to indicate to customers that the ZIP Code would increase the accuracy and speed of delivery while limiting future rate increases.

Taking no chances, the Post Office adopted a saturation campaign for several years. Cutout Mr. ZIPs, including some that featured audio recordings, appeared in many post offices. In addition, Mr. ZIP appeared on posters, on mail trucks, on buttons worn by postal employees and on carriers' satchels. The Post Office partnered

with AT&T to put Mr. ZIP in AT&T offices, on that company's trucks, and in local yellow pages.

The Post Office Department got even more creative over time. Miss ZIPs were crowned at some local post office banquets and dances. Lesson plans were designed for teachers. At Christmastime, children were informed that Santa now had a ZIP Code—99701.

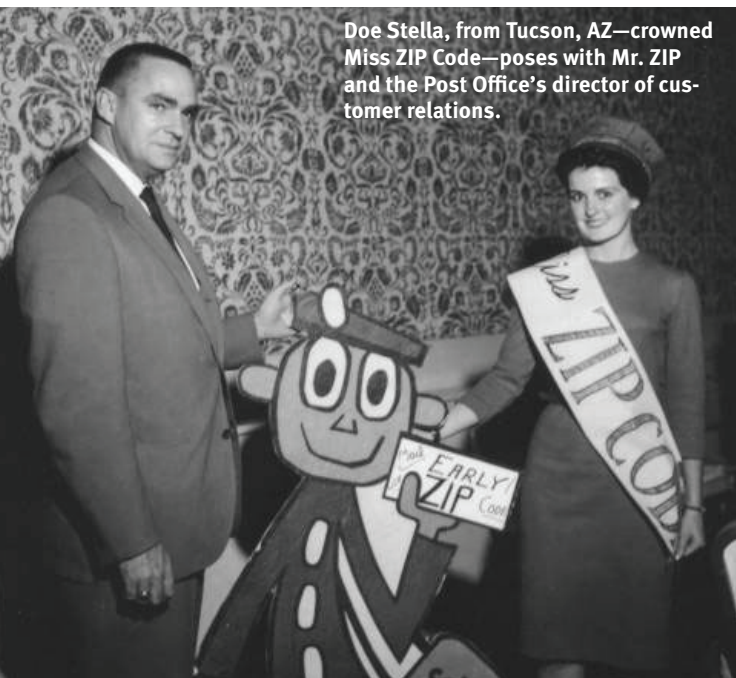
A Post Office booklet explained why children were such an important audience: “The child who is taught to appreciate the value of ZIP Code can be a tremendous asset in reminding both parents and playmates to use ZIP Code.”

ZIP Codes were everywhere. The Five Americans released the 1967 song “ZIP Code,” which reached No. 36 on *Billboard* magazine's “Hot 100” singles chart. Elsewhere on the radio, Ethel Merman sang a jingle to the tune of “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” for a public service announcement:

*Welcome to ZIP Code,
learn it today.
Send your mail out
the five-digit way.
For a time-saver
to lighten the load,
your return address
should have the ZIP Code.*

Ads were placed on television, too, with a 15-minute one that featured the folk group the Swingin' Six singing the benefits of the ZIP Code:

*What is the ZIP Code? A postal quirk?
What does it do? How does it work?*



Doe Stella, from Tucson, AZ—crowned Miss ZIP Code—poses with Mr. ZIP and the Post Office's director of customer relations.

Right: An early ZIP Code directory
Far right: An ad for the ZIP-A-LIST, which was sent to customers to help them get the ZIP Codes they'd need

If you'll lend an ear, we'll be glad to explain how the ZIP Code eases your postal pain.

While Mr. ZIP never appeared on a postage stamp, he often appeared in the margin—the selvage—of stamps until he was retired in the 1980s.

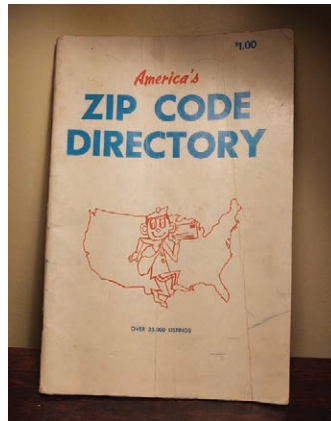
Despite the campaign, the public was initially skeptical. In a July 30, 1963, column, humorist Art Buchwald of the *New York Herald Tribune* complained of now having to remember his own ZIP Code and having to know the codes for everyone he wished to send mail to.

In response to such complaints, the Post Office sent ZIP-A-List kits to nearly every mailbox in the United States. These kits consisted of postcards on which people could write an address for which they needed a ZIP Code. They would then send the postcard to the Post Office, which would then send them the ZIP Code. While many liked the ZIP-A-Lists, one woman sent it back with messages on each card, including: “The Pony Express would be more efficient.”

Others expressed fears that the ZIP Code was a conspiracy to depersonalize or dehumanize them and possibly even part of a Communist plot to undermine American society.

Some letter carriers voiced their own concerns about the way the ZIP Code campaign was conducted. Medford, OR Branch 1433 scribe **Steve Dodge** wrote in *The Postal Record* in September 1963, “I believe our Postal Department has goofed, and this may well bury Mr. ZIP amid jeers and laughter from those who do not understand the reason for this... The public should be better informed. They should know the reasons for Mr. ZIP and the expected results.”

Lois Ardoyno, a member of the NALC National Ladies Auxiliary from Fort



Worth, TX, declared in the August 1967 *Postal Record*, “I am tired of the image of the American Letter Carrier being held up to public ridicule. No Letter Carrier that I have ever seen looks as absurd as Mr. ZIP.”

The campaign initially struggled, with only 50 percent of one survey’s respondents using the ZIP Code by 1966. But a renewed push, along with assistance from the National Ad Council, helped the ZIP Code’s use rise to 83 percent by 1969.

Large mailers were initially skeptical of the change as well. The Post Office forced large mailers to spend more than \$200 million to comply with the new NIMS-based requirements. The large mailers turned to Congress to push back the conversion deadline from 1967 to some later date, but the Post Office refused to budge and Congress did not intervene. Holding firm worked, as by 1970, 84 percent of large business mailers agreed that the ZIP Code was a good idea, probably because the public had embraced the new code so quickly.

The ZIP Code has expanded in size over the years, growing to nine digits in 1983, but the ZIP+4 has never been adopted universally by the public and has mainly been used by large-scale mailers.

Beyond postal usage, the ZIP Code long has been a useful tool for other businesses, national and local government entities, and academic study. In its 1967 annual report, the Post Office reported some ways in which the ZIP Code was being used beyond the mail:

The California Council of Growers bases much of its planting tips to

farmers on their ZIP Codes. An Ohio gas firm uses the codes to determine concentrations of stockholder groups. The routes of meter readers in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, are divided by ZIP Code areas, as are those of salesmen in many sections of the Nation. Several insurance companies assign accident report and claims investigators by the codes. The Kentucky Health Department requires the ZIP’s of patients to trace the source, concentration, and spread of communicable diseases. Some military reserve units detail new personnel to training centers near their homes by ZIP.

In the decades since, the ZIP Code has been called one of the first digitization of surface space, converting names to numbers. The U.S. Census Bureau quickly adopted the ZIP Code to help it conduct its every-10-year census. Communities embrace it as part of their identity. In the 1990s, the TV show “Beverly Hills, 90210” made one ZIP Code a Hollywood star.

While it’s easy to look back some 60 years later and smile at the campaign and some of the silly things the Post Office did to try to get people to use the ZIP Code, it’s important to recognize that this was just the public-facing aspect of a major turning point in the evolution of the nation’s postal service. Six decades ago marks the time when the Post Office began to transform itself from a human-driven sortation system to one handled mostly by machines.

Nowadays, it’s impossible to imagine how the mail—some 127.3 billion pieces last year—could be handled without automation. But then again, it’s impossible to imagine the mail without the ZIP Code. **PR**