

CARRYING FOR CHANGE



RETIRED CARRIER REFLECTS ON HER HISTORIC 'FIRSTS'



Delsene Hauser's life has been captured in photos. Above: A young Delsene Hauser (second from right). Below: A 1980 newspaper photo that ran with an article in *The Greensboro Record* on her distinction as the first female letter carrier in Greensboro and her commitment to her patrons.



BY THE TIME DELSENE Hauser joined the Post Office Department as a letter carrier in 1965, her hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina, had already become a focal point in the civil rights movement that was reshaping American culture.

Almost six years before the member of Greensboro Branch 630 picked up her satchel for the first time, four African-American freshmen from North Carolina A&T university were refused service at the F.W. Woolworth lunch counter in downtown Greensboro because they were in the five-and-dime's "whites only" section. This was a commonplace and widely tolerated form of discrimination, but instead of moving, this time the students did something different—they began a peaceful protest "sit-in." Within three short months, their understated but nonetheless dramatic example spread to restaurants, theaters, beaches and other segregated venues in more than 50 cities across a dozen states.

Hauser's own contribution, not just to the civil rights movement but also to the women's rights cause, garnered far less attention than the story of the "Greensboro Four," but it was in many ways just as trail-blazing: She was the first female letter carrier in the city, and doubly distinctive as the first African-American woman to carry the mail there.

'A DECENT JOB'

Far more mundane matters were on Hauser's mind in 1965, however. "I had gotten married early and had four kids," she said, noting that three of her children were already in their teens by the time she decided to enter the workforce. Her husband, Charles, worked nights as

a warehouse manager for textile giant J.P. Stevens and Co. "What I wanted was a decent job where I could be home at night," she said, because what is true now was just as true then: "You couldn't just leave three teenagers home alone!"

"I took just about every exam you could take," she continued, "and I passed the clerk and letter carrier exams." It wasn't long before she was told there was opening for a mailhandler.

"I didn't doubt that I could do it," she told *The Greensboro Record*. She reasoned that moving heavy sacks of mail between trucks and the loading dock wouldn't be so hard after managing a house, a husband and four children, so she took the job. "That first day, the guy I worked with said I almost worked him to death," she said.

"I did what I could, and I got used to it," she added. "The important thing to me was that I kept busy."

After three months of slinging bags of letters, bills and catalogs, a supervisor offered her a spot as a full-time substitute letter carrier and she accepted. A year later, she was promoted to regular and assigned a 300-stop mixed residential and commercial route in the city's Warnersville section.

A DIFFERENT TIME

In the 1960s, women—of any color—who carried the mail were a novelty, Hauser said. Most everyone referred to their carriers as "mailmen," as some still do.

Women were so rare in the carrier craft there was no regulation uniform for female letter carriers, so Hauser wore a regular skirt to work. And she found herself having to answer one



question, over and over: “What are you supposed to call a lady mailman?” She would just smile and say, “A female mail carrier.”

In an interview with the *Greensboro Daily News*, Hauser said she occasionally encountered some hostility as a black, female letter carrier, but the pleasures of her route outnumbered the trials. Infrequent but annoying accusations from a few customers of mishandling the mail sometimes made her want to quit, but “when my spirits were low, my family and friends encouraged me to stick with it,” she said.

She had been on the job for just over four years when the Great Postal Strike of 1970 took place. Although the walk-out never reached Greensboro, Hauser remembers “it was a tough time. We rode it out and just did the best job we could, like we always did.”

Hauser stuck with the job for 25 years, retiring in 1990 at age 60. By then, her route was around 600 stops, although an increasing number of cluster and curbside boxes made the growing number manageable. “But 25 years was plenty!” she said with a laugh.

And in the course of her quarter-century delivering mail, women and minorities joined the letter carrier workforce in such numbers that the official term “letter carrier” pretty much became the generic, “politically correct” title. In a victory for equal rights, the uniqueness of seeing a black woman carrying the mail had long since worn off.

A LIFETIME’S LEGACY

Since her retirement, Hauser has managed to achieve her goal of staying busy, doting on her grandchildren and

serving as her Dudley High School class’ reunion secretary. (Dudley was Guilford County’s first black high school, racially segregated from its opening in 1929 until legally required to integrate in 1971.)

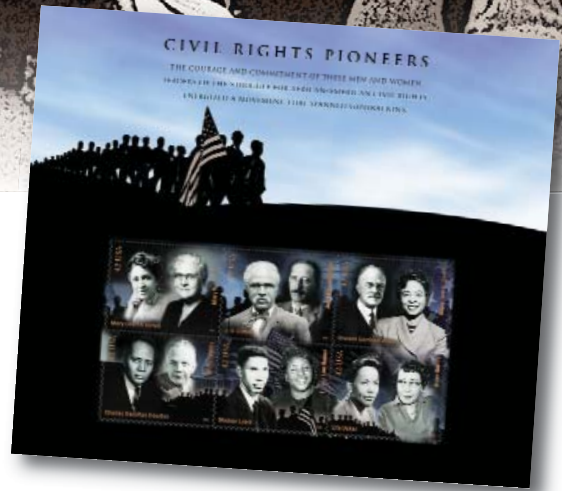
Perhaps drawing on her years of keeping an eye out for her customers all around Greensboro, Hauser also continues to act as president of her neighborhood watch association.

As this issue of *The Postal Record* was being prepared, close to 100 family members, postal colleagues and friends were gathering to help Hauser celebrate her 80th birthday. And Hauser’s niece, Pamela, has been working hard to ensure her aunt’s place in Greensboro’s history.

This past February, the International Civil Rights Museum opened its doors in the space once occupied by the Woolworth’s where the Greensboro sit-ins began 50 years ago. To help celebrate the event, the Postal Service donated enlargements of its Civil Rights Pioneers stamp series issued last year.

Pamela has been working closely with officials in the Postal Service’s Greensboro District office, serving as Hauser’s advocate to assure formal commemoration of her aunt’s unique contribution to the civil rights and women’s movements is included among the museum’s permanent exhibits.

Hauser is grateful for the attention, but remains mostly modest about it. “The job has been good to me,” she told *The Greensboro Record*. “I’m none the worse for it.” ✉



Hauser (c) celebrates a birthday with friends and family.

