



# FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE

## ON TWO WHEELS

**I**f it weren't for a bicycle, Bill Spotts would be retired by now.

"The postal bike is the greatest invention USPS has ever made," said Spotts, an Arizona Merged Branch 1902 carrier in Mesa, AZ, with nearly 32 years of service. "It has prolonged my already lengthy career."

Spotts credits his bicycle, which he uses to haul as much as 50 pounds of mail on about two-thirds of his route, with relieving the pains and strains in his knees and shoulder. When his bike, a sturdy, steel American-made Worksmen, broke down for two months recently, old injuries flared up. "I developed tendonitis in my knees, pain in my feet, and pain in my neck and shoulders from using a satchel." When the bike was finally repaired, "all those ailments magically disappeared."

Spotts is one of the last remaining U.S. carriers delivering on a bike, as mechanized sorting and suburban sprawl have made routes longer and easier to serve using motorized vehicles. The other bike carriers, about 70 in all, are in Arizona and Florida. But Spotts hopes that bikes will be part of the Postal Service's future, not just its past.

A one-man postal-bike lobbying firm, Spotts writes about the benefits of bicycle delivery in newsletters and in Branch 1902's Branch Item in *The Postal Record*, and he presses management to expand bike service. And now someone in management may be listening.

Pressured by such factors as skyrocketing fuel prices and LLV maintenance and replacement costs, Arizona District

managers tell Spotts they are considering expanding some of the routes served by carriers on bikes.

The Postal Service estimated recently that the carriers on bikes in nearby Sun City, AZ, alone save 7,800 gallons of gasoline a year, which adds up to roughly \$27,300 at today's prices for gasoline.

Then there's maintenance. "If you are constantly starting and stopping those vehicles for over six hours a day, you are burning out the starters, alternators, batteries and tires prematurely. How much does that cost to service them?" he asked. "Other than a rare flat tire or a rusted-out spring on the kick stand, those Worksmen bikes are virtually indestructible. They are commercial bikes meant to last for decades. My first bike lasted 18 years before it played out." When his LLV breaks down on his route? Spotts hops on his bike to keep working—no dead time.

"I really want to see this take off," he said. Spotts thinks bicycle routes could work in Southern California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas and Florida—"anywhere it's flat, dry and sunny."

### BACK TO THE FUTURE

Letter carriers have been using bicycles since the invention of the "safety bike"—the same basic design as modern bikes, with a chain, gears and air-filled tires that allow for a comfortable, stable position on two wheels the same size. (It was called a "safety" bicycle because it eliminated the ridiculously large and unstable front wheel found on the "penny-farthing" bikes of the day.)

Bill Spotts



The safety bike launched a bicycle craze in the 1890s that literally paved the way for the advent of the automobile, as cyclists demanded the paving of country roads and smoother surfaces for city streets. City carriers across the country, from Newark, NJ, to Boston to San Francisco soon were using bicycles as a way to hasten their door-to-door deliveries.

Some other countries still rely on bicycles as a significant part of their postal delivery systems. Urban residents of Denmark and Holland get much of their mail delivered on two wheels. In New Zealand, 80 percent of letter carriers deliver using a bike. But changes like automation, and the longer routes that resulted, caused the U.S. Postal Service to drop bikes in favor of trucks. Today, bike routes are found only in areas with warm weather and flat terrain like Arizona and Florida.

Spotts uses a rack on an LLV to ferry his bike to park-and-loops, then carries the mail on it. "I can do well over half the route on my bike," Spotts said. "That means I only have to hop-and-stop and do apartment stops for less than three hours instead of six hours." He also uses his bike instead of an LLV for hop-and-stop delivery.

Nearby Scottsdale had 13 bike routes until a phase-out began in 1996. Ironically, switching from bicycles was an effort to cut costs in Scottsdale. But in 1996, gasoline cost about \$1.30 a gallon. With the retail price now nearing \$4 a gallon on average, Spotts thinks the economics of bikes could make sense in many parts of the country.

"I've personally saved the USPS thousands of dollars in gasoline by biking my route rather than hop-and-stop," Spotts said. "When other carriers do my route, they burn up a quarter tank of gas per day. I can easily milk seven or eight workdays out of a tank of gas. Considering that LLVs get a paltry nine miles per gallon and gas is \$3.70 per gallon and rising daily—well, you do the math."

## STAYING COOL

City carriers in the historic Open Air station in downtown St. Petersburg, FL, have been using bikes since 1917. Chris Hubble of West Coast Florida Branch 1477 is one of the 13 carriers who ride nearly every part of their route on a bike.

"It's the most efficient way to deliver the mail," Hubble said, given the many narrow, one-way streets there. An avid cyclist before he joined USPS, Hubble bid his way to Open Air station after seeing a carrier on a bike. "That is so cool!" was his response. Now he rides about six miles each day on the job, and 90 or so more each week off-duty, including commuting to the station by bicycle.

"There's a different *esprit de corps* at Open Air because of the means of delivery," said Hubble. "Once the carriers at Open Air get on a bike, they never leave."

Hubble and his colleagues make several loops with about an hour's worth of mail from relay stations served by two trucks. The trucks also handle parcels.

"It almost doesn't seem like work when you're riding the bike," he said.

Arizona and Florida are two of the hottest states in the country, but Hubble says the bike beats the heat. "Believe it or not, the bicycle is actually cooler than the LLV," he said. "As long as you're moving, you get a pretty good breeze."

Spotts agrees. "LLVs are probably the only motor vehicles in Arizona that are not air-conditioned! Who wants to be cooped up in a hot vehicle with temperatures in the 120s or above in the summertime in Phoenix? Biking the route is much cooler."

On a bike, Spotts added, he is more aware of his surroundings and can anticipate hazards like dogs that he might not notice on a hop-and-stop. Plus, the bike is a good barrier against angry dogs.

Spotts, 57, says most of the bike riders are older carriers using the bike to ease the strain on their bodies. "We're just trying to squeeze out another year." Each mile they ride squeezes a little savings out of the Postal Service's budget, too. ☒



The Postal Service has a long history of using bikes for city delivery.