



Tom Riley in Westchester County, NY

A life of letters

From rather bleak beginnings, Tom Riley has built a life replete with meaning and accomplishments, one that has touched thousands around him. While his journey has been a constantly evolving one that has taken him across multiple disciplines and great distances, much of it centers around a single activity he cherished—delivering the mail.

Riley, a member of Hudson Valley, NY Merged Branch 137, has written more than a dozen books, including one titled *We Deliver: A Chronicle of the Deeds Performed by the Men and Women of the U.S. Postal Service*.

At age 78, he is an adjunct college professor, teaching five courses on postal issues, history and writing/photography, including “The history of postal services from 6,000 years ago to the present.” It explains how the invention of the adhesive postal stamp “changed the world.”

For a dozen years, Riley would finish his route in Rockland County, a suburb 30 miles north of New York City, and drive one night a week to a public library in the city to teach stamp collecting and the value of stamps—both literal and figurative—to inner-city youngsters.

Riley’s journey began in an orphanage. His father had left; his mother faced challenges and was unable to care for the nine boys and three girls—“We were all starving, ages of 7 to 17,” as he puts it—so five were sent to an orphanage and four to foster homes (three already were in the military).

Riley and four siblings landed in Happy Valley School, which was a home for neglected and dependent

children in Rockland County. From age 12 on, his schoolwork was accompanied by hard work “on a road gang, repairing roads, picking apples, pruning trees, working as a ball boy for the gym”—for the princely sum of \$1.62 a month, which allowed him to buy chocolate bars at the school’s commissary.

On weekends he’d mow lawns, shovel snow or dig ditches for folks in town to earn a little extra.

“When I finished high school, the director of the home called me in,” Riley recalls. “He said, ‘Tom, you were good. Here’s \$20; have a good life.’”

With nowhere to go and no job prospects, he signed up in 1959 at age 17 with the Air Force. “I was used to living in a barracks, so it was a natural evolution to join the service,” he says. After stints at bases in Texas, Colorado and California, working on subjects as diverse as nuclear weapons, hypersonic rockets and mechanical photography, “They said: ‘You’re going to the Far East.’ I knew where I was going. I was scared.”

Riley, who was among the initial 5,000 troops deployed to support U.S. policy in Vietnam, was sent to an Air Force base in the Philippines. There, he was given Top Secret clearance and worked as a photo analyst, developing and enlarging strategic photographs to help pilots and commanders understand the Ho Chi Minh trail in Vietnam and other key locations. He was ordered not to tell anyone where he was but instead to “just say ‘overseas.’”

Not that he had anyone in particular to tell. “You’ve got to realize, when I ran into problems I couldn’t call

Some of Riley's books



anybody,” he says. “Not my father, he wasn’t there; not my mother, she was overwhelmed. I could call guys in the institution, but I didn’t know where they were.”

After serving until 1963, he left as a disabled veteran.

A series of episodic education and jobs ensued, including stints working at an orphanage for boys in Brooklyn and a home for the deaf in Queens; he eventually earned a degree in behavioral psychology at Iona College, using GI benefits. As a YMCA director, his team won the New York City championship in basketball. Riley, who hoped to be a physical education teacher, enjoyed the job, but his wife informed him about a test for letter carriers, adding: “They get benefits.”

Indeed, as a letter carrier, he found a steady job, beginning in 1982, that offered stability; yes, good benefits; and wonderful customers—he was struck by “how kind the patrons often were,” especially when carriers faced inclement weather. He also took joy in organizing softball games with carriers from other post offices.

To provide for his wife and their two daughters, Riley buttressed his earnings by writing obituaries until midnight for a local newspaper after finishing his route. And once a week for 12 years, after delivering the mail he’d drive to one of New York City’s 75 public libraries to teach the youngsters about stamps and postal history. Even though some of the branches were located in dangerous areas, he proudly notes that he visited every one of them over the years—some as many as five times—aiming to show the children

that there was another world out there. “I figure I taught over 35,000 inner-city kids stamp collecting and the history of mail,” he says.

Riley also began writing books. His volume on USPS, which took two years to research, explores “what happens when misinformed governments privatize their postal system,” as he puts it, and also discusses the many lives saved by letter carriers on the route. Another book is on stamp collecting for children.

Four others, fittingly, are about orphans, stemming from a “treasure trove” of material Riley chanced upon while researching the home he grew up in. Told to go to a hayloft to find some material, he found 26 boxes of documents containing about 32,000 names of children who had been placed in industrial schools in New York City by the American Female Guardian Society, to help them learn a trade.

“I was really impacted by it,” Riley says, “because I could identify with what these kids were going through.” Many of the youngsters had been liv-

ing in sewer pipes, alleys or cardboard boxes.

He later learned that a total of “273,000 kids, some as young as 6 months, had been shipped out of Grand Central Station in New York City by the Children’s Aid Society or the Foundling Hospital” to places across the nation—“the largest migration of children in American history.”

One story Riley tells is about Theodore Roosevelt Sr., a philanthropist, father of the future president and co-founder of the Children’s Aid Society, leaving a building in New York City one day and being greeted by a desperate youngster saying his friend was dying.

Roosevelt helped pull the boy out of a sewer pipe he’d been sleeping in. The youngster, John Green Brady, recovered from pneumonia, was sent at age 11 on an orphan train to Indiana, attended Yale University, trekked to Alaska to seek his fortune, and ended up becoming a three-term territorial governor of Alaska from 1893 to 1907.

So many orphans were sent to Iowa, Riley says, that “it is estimated that



Above: Riley with his wife, Crucy, daughter Dr. Bernadette Riley and grandson Ben
Right: Riley at Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado in 1959



really proud of my family.”

Riley delivered mail until his “retirement” in 2005; shortly afterwards he put on yet another uniform, serving six years in the Coast Guard Auxiliary. In 2007, after he had helped rescue a husband and wife whose sailboat had capsized in New York City’s Hudson River, the Coast Guard commended him for having “demonstrated exceptional devotion to duty and the ability to problem-solve under pressure.”

He also started writing and taking photos for *Rivertown Magazine*, and has been with it for 14 of its 20 years. The recently retired editor, Phil Burton, calls Riley “one of the finest reporters/writers I’ve ever worked with. He

was my star reporter for more than 10 years.”

Much of Riley’s time now is spent at Westchester Community College, where his courses include one on the history of the Orphan Train Era, 1853-1929.

Sarah Fowler-Rogers, director of community education at the college, calls Riley “a remarkable man,” noting his “talent for educating.” She adds that his students say he “has a wealth of information to share and does so in an informative and enjoyable way.”

She notes that Riley’s “experiences as a letter carrier were the inspiration to develop a course on the history of the Postal Service and the rewarding hobby of stamp collecting.”

Riley is proud of his wife of 48 years

and their two daughters—the family he never really had growing up. “I’ve had some real rough times; that’s why family to me is everything,” he says.

The pride is evident when he talks about one daughter having earned a doctorate in education, working as a professor at Hunter College, and now finishing a book on education; and about the other having become a physician and director of a clinic on Long Island, NY.

Speaking with Riley is like taking a trip back into history. He may start talking about how carriers often play a key role in disasters and suddenly take you back to the 1890s and the work letter carriers did delivering medicine for diphtheria in Alaska—covering 980 miles with a dog sled over a month and saving about 100,000 lives because people had access to the medicine.

The way his life has turned out surprises him. “I was raised in an orphanage. I had met with so much failure growing up,” Riley says. “I somehow thought I never could achieve so much.”

At the same time, he says, “I really believed in the American dream, that you could achieve anything if you put your mind to it.”

He attributes much of what has subsequently taken place to his work as a letter carrier.

“I got to really love my job in the Postal Service,” Riley says. “I’m so happy that I stayed, so happy I was a letter carrier as long as I was. I tell carriers, ‘Stick it out, it’s worth it.’ No matter how hard it is, it’s worth it. It’s a steady job, through thick and thin.

“And, you have a union behind you. Most of all, you have a union behind you.” **PR**