



Albert S. Burleson



Will H. Hays

A tale of two POSTMASTERS GENERAL

For most of its existence until 1921, NALC had struggled with management at the Post Office Department. In fact, one of the first major actions of the union after it was formed in 1889 was to sue the Post Office to get it to comply with an eight-hour workday law (see the March edition of *The Postal Record*).

By 1913, relations had not improved and were about to get worse. Albert S. Burleson, appointed as postmaster general that year by President Woodrow Wilson, remains one of the most anti-union postmasters general in postal history. He immediately declared a new war on postal employees and their unions. His goal was to run the Department at a profit, and he chose to do this at the expense of the postal workforce.

From the moment he took office, Burleson opposed any pay increases for letter carriers, despite a dramatic rise in the cost of living once World War I began in 1914. By 1916, the U.S. dollar was worth half of what it had been in 1907—the year letter carriers had last received a pay increase. Incredibly, when Congress voted for a 10 percent pay increase for all federal employees in 1917—a year when the cost of living jumped 20.3 percent—Burleson succeeded in excluding postal employees from the raise.

Burleson refused to recognize or

meet with any representatives from NALC, and even called for the dissolution of all postal employee unions. In fact, he refused to grant leave without pay to the officers of the postal unions, forcing NALC President Edward Gainor to resign from the Post Office to continue performing his union duties.

At the time, the union was lobbying Congress to establish pensions for postal employees, something Burleson fervently opposed. He believed that when a worker's job performance declined due to old age, the worker should be demoted or fired—no matter how many years that employee had labored for the Department.

This cruelty was best demonstrated in 1915, when the Fairmont, WV, postmaster, complying with Burleson's strict instructions, fired an older letter carrier because he could no longer perform his job satisfactorily. Furious at the postmaster, the remaining 25 employees—letter carriers and postal clerks alike—decided to protest by resigning from their jobs at the same time. All 25 workers were then immediately arrested and thrown in jail for striking against the federal government.

The jailed workers were shocked at the government's reaction. They were not striking—they had simply quit their jobs. But the government persisted in prosecuting the case. Without money to pay for their

defense, the carriers and clerks threw themselves on the mercy of the court. In turn, the court imposed fines ranging from \$5 to \$500 on all but one of the employees—the 25th worker, a letter carrier by the name of W. H. Fisher, hanged himself in his cell the night before his trial.

In response to Burleson and the Fairmont action, NALC made a retire-



ment bill its main priority, lobbying Congress until May 22, 1920, when the Civil Service Retirement Act became law. For the first time, letter carriers received retirement benefits. The legislation provided for retirement at age 65 with annuities ranging from \$180 to \$720 per year. Carriers also registered impressive legislative gains on June 5, when a bill giving carriers their first sick leave benefits—10 days a year—and a salary bill increasing wages to a scale ranging from \$1,400 to \$1,800, a year were enacted.

They'd get more good news one year later. In 1921, the new president, Warren G. Harding, appointed a new postmaster general, Will H. Hays, to succeed the much-hated Burleson. Four days after taking office, Hays electrified postal employees with this proclamation:

Every effort shall be exercised to humanize the ... [Post Office Department]. Labor is not a commodity.... There are 300,000 employees. They have the brain[s] and they have the hand[s] to do the job well; and they shall have the heart to do it well.

Seven days later, on March 16, Hays invited Gainor and the leaders of other postal unions to meet for informal discussions. At the meeting, he announced an open-door policy to the leaders of the unions and invited them to see him whenever they had a problem. Letter carriers responded enthusiastically to Hays' proclamation and his positive attitude toward NALC, with the April 1921 issue of *The Postal Record* describing the outpouring of good feeling in an article titled "The Dawn of a New Day":

When one emerges from a dungeon into the sunlight, one is temporarily blinded and confused. Letter carriers

and other postal employees are in a similar situation.... The selection of Mr. Hays of the word 'humanize' in expressing the Department's attitude toward the men and women workers in the postal establishment, was happy.... Not in years has such a sentiment been expressed by a head of this Department. How strange and yet how sweet!

To improve the working conditions of postal employees, Hays sought to develop a closer relationship with representatives from the various postal employees' organizations. To this end, he established a National Welfare Council—later called the National Service Relations Council. NALC's national president and secretary both played an active role in the activities of the Council right from its inception in 1921. NALC Secretary Edward Cantwell served as the executive of the Council from its inauguration until his death in 1924.

On the national level, the National Service Relations Council discussed topics directly related to the welfare of city delivery letter carriers such as uniforms, the possibility of a Christmas holiday, working conditions within local post offices, cafeterias, credit unions and free physical examinations for workers. Local Welfare Councils also were established to focus on conditions within individual post of-

Opposite page: A cartoon about the need for pensions for letter carriers, which would allow them to retire
Below: A cartoon that appeared in *The Postal Record* about the new relationship with PMG Hays



fices, including such issues as drinking fountains, swingrooms, dust, sanitation and lighting.

Hays remained in office only one year, but his commitment to improving the working lives of letter carriers and his belief that improvement in conditions and morale would improve delivery service for the American people left a lasting legacy.

When Hays resigned, NALC continued its tradition of honoring friends by making Hays an honorary lifetime member of NALC. Pleased, yet uncomfortable with the term "honorary," Hays asked to become a regular dues-paying member instead. The *NALC Constitution* did not allow for anyone who had not earned that right by carrying the mail, but an exception was made for Will Hays—a member of NALC until his death in 1954.

For more about Postmasters General Burleson and Hays and the fight for pensions, read Carriers in a Common Cause, available at nalc.org. PR