

Reporter spends day with mail carrier

By Kathryn Gurfinkel

The Goodland Star-News
Keeping up with a mail carrier isn't as easy as it looks.

When I first got the assignment to spend the day with a carrier, I thought about how I see mail. I'm always rushing out to the mailbox to see what exciting bits of paper have been delivered. Is it a birthday card, a long letter from my best friend or a series of photos my mom took of her new dog?

No matter what it is, even if it's bad news or a bill, I eagerly anticipate what others have stamped and carefully addressed to arrive in my box.

But what do I really know about the job of a mail carrier? I empty my mailbox daily and drop letters off at the post office, but what happens after I let go and finish my errands? I showed up at 7:30 a.m. at the post office and was let in through a back entrance.

The place was already swarming with the early rising postmen, sorting through piles and piles of mail. Postmaster Stephen Schultz paired me with mail carrier George Van Vleet for the day and we walked



Reporter Kathryn Gurfinkel spent an entire morning last week learning what a mail carrier does. After carrying the bag for the first leg of the trip, she let her host, mail carrier George Van Vleet, take over.

Photo by George Van Vleet

over to his brightly lit workstation. As he welcomed me into his area, I saw that he was surrounded on three sides with a slotted shelf that had address numbers printed underneath.

While we talked, he began stuffing letters into their assigned slots. I gave it a try, but with a different

address written on each piece, I got in the way more than I helped.

The sheer number of individual pieces to be sorted struck me. Everything from the thinnest, smallest items to bulky newspapers is meticulously sorted through at least three different piles in the office.

After all the mail is sorted out, Van Vleet and I pulled the contents out of each slot, stacked them in order and placed them in mail sacks.

The sacks were taken by another mail carrier to storage boxes along Van Vleet's route.

He put the rest of the mail into his carry sack and we headed out of the post office.

To get the full experience, I insisted on carrying the bag. As soon as I dropped it on my shoulder, I was surprised at how much it weighed.

Van Vleet said carriers take only 35 pounds at a time, but he thought my bag was probably lighter. Along with the bag, I held one stack in my arms and we handed out the mail in order as we walked Main.

The pace was quick and Van Vleet knew the route, explaining who got a delivery and who we skipped.

Everyone we met greeted him with a smile and a hello. They asked why I was carrying his bag and he held my camera.

At the first reloading point, he placed outgoing mail along with the undeliverable pieces on the top shelf and reloaded the bag. This

time, he took the mail and I followed as he did his job.

Even without the bag, I had trouble keeping up. He didn't miss a beat.

By the time he dropped me off back at *The Goodland Star-News*, I had a newfound respect for mail carriers.

I was tired, hot and even though I felt I had dressed in flat, comfortable shoes, I had some blisters.

I learned that a mail carrier faces many hazards. He has to know when to pack gloves and a jacket or wear sunblock and shorts; he is careful to watch for speeding cars as he maneuvers through downtown; and although he tries to make friends with as many as he meets, the dog, his natural enemy, remains a threat.

To know Van Vleet is to like him. He said he loves his job and the people he sees along his route. He likes to bring people cards, packages and other mail that makes them happy.

Now every time I see George in the street, I honk or wave. I appreciate what he does for Goodland, and I appreciate my air conditioned desk even more.

Post Office offers web service

Snail mail has moved into the online age with the Postal Service web site, www.usps.com.

The service allows customers to buy stamps, send cards and letters, file a change of address, hold mail, calculate postage and find ZIP codes.

The web site features Click-N-Ship, a new option that allows customers to create and pay for shipping online using a credit card. Click-N-Ship will produce labels for Express Mail, Priority Mail, Global Express Mail and Global Express Guaranteed service. The new feature standardizes and saves addresses and records shipping history.

The web site offers the Postal Store, where visitors can buy stamps, books, coins, envelopes and more.

Mail carrier brings letters, smiles

MAIL, from Page 1

thorough sort of all the mail on his route. Almost 10,500 pieces go through the office on an average day, said Stephen Schultz, Goodland postmaster, with mail carriers seeing twice that near the beginning of the month and after holidays.

Van Vleet says his mail comes from the sectional office in Colby, where it is sorted to come to Goodland. Early in the morning, it is sorted again by the postmaster and sent out to Van Vleet, who sorts it one last time. He said mail is measured in feet, that is the height of the stacks of magazines, newspapers and letters he carries.

"A lot of people don't realize how much mail we go through," he says.

He sorts each piece, from the thinnest of post cards to thick newspapers, putting them in place on a specially-made shelf. With so much mail going through his hands, Van Vleet said he has to concentrate to avoid mistakes.

"You have to be thinking," he said. "You can't be angry at your wife or husband. You have to concentrate on what you're doing."

With new mail codes, some pieces are electronically sorted, but Van Vleet said he prefers manual sorting.

After almost two hours of sorting, he heads out to pound the pavement at about 9:30 a.m.

Because the load is large, he takes only part of the mail with him. The rest is stashed in two mail storage

boxes along his route. When he runs out of mail, he runs into a box.

He said he knows many of the people on his route because he grew up here.

Even in high school, he said, he thought about delivering the mail. He said he wanted to be a parts manager for an auto dealership and a mailman.

"So far," he adds, "I've done both."

Although it is sometimes difficult, he said he loves his job and likes the mail in general. He said e-mail doesn't deliver the same emotion as a letter.

"On Valentine's Day," he said, "you wouldn't believe the number of cards that smell. You don't get an e-mail that smells."

Goodland High remains in Class 4A

CLASS 4A, from Page 1

their count is prorated, he said.

Board member Marty Melia, the district's representative on the Northwest Kansas Technical College board, reported that the house the students build last year had been sold to a person from Hoxie.

The lack of a buyer had been a major concern for the college, he said.

Melia said college President Ken Clouse was working on a scholarship initiative designed to attract new students. He said between \$10,000 and \$20,000 from the endowment fund would be used to get the program going.

Melia said this year's enrollment at the college was 272, down from 602 in 1999.

After a short closed session, the board voted 7-0 to terminate the supplemental contract of Tony Diehl as head football coach, yearbook advisor and assistant baseball coach effective immediately. A copy of the resolution signed by each board member will be given him either in person or by restricted mail.

Diehl was given the opportunity to ask for a hearing when he was notified for the board's intent to terminate his supplemental contract, but did not ask for one. The coach was charged with arson on Aug. 30 and released on \$25,000 supervised bond.

In other business, the board:

- Voted unanimously to hire Idaly

Bacasequa as a bilingual tutor at West Elementary effective last Monday, and to accept the resignations of Char Avila as assistant high school volleyball coach and of Beth Rutz as a teacher aide at the high school, both effective Sept. 15.

- Agreed to renew the board members' subscriptions to the National School Board Journal for another year.

Jonathan Whisnant, a social studies student-teacher at the high school from Fort Hays State University, attended the meeting along with two of his students, senior Chris Johnston and junior Bobby Schnug.

Whisnant said, as an assignment, each of his students has to attend either a city commission or school board meeting by December.



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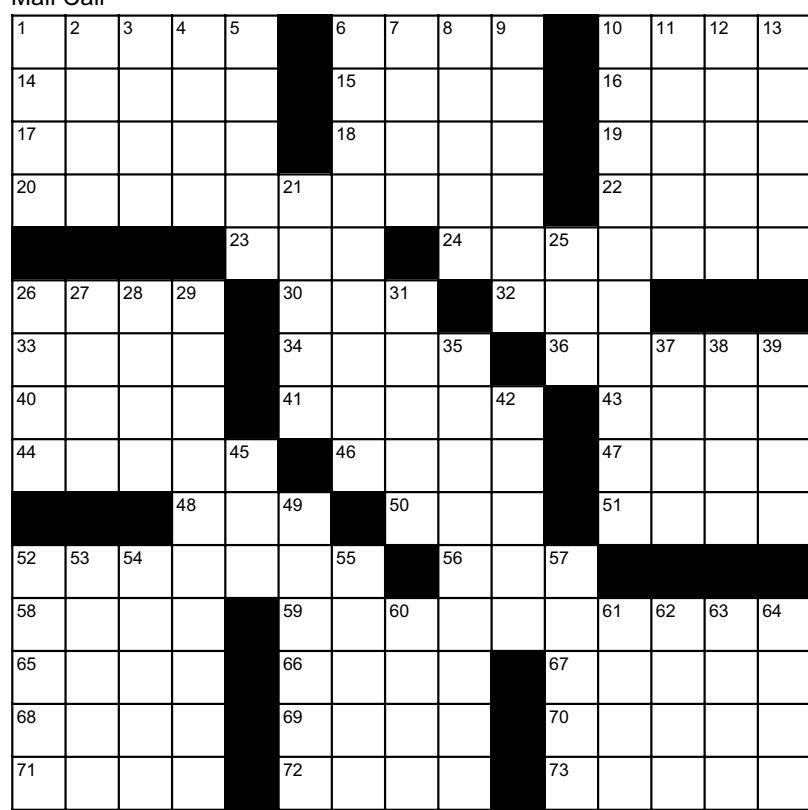
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Crossword Puzzle

Mail Call

ACROSS

- Succotash beans
- Iditarod vehicle
- Jelly holders
- ___garde
- Well-___ (rich)
- Lone Star State sch.
- Hamburger unit
- Fail to name
- "___ of your beeswax!"
- Slow rate
- Swiss artist Paul
- "Am ___ believe ..."
- Walked like a tot
- Elder or alder
- Drop the ball
- Bridal bio word
- Kennedy coin
- Make changes in
- Thin cookie
- Caspian Sea feeder
- Toy building blocks
- Wash up
- Dieter's choice
- "Arrivederci, ___"
- Canal of song
- Deadlock
- Loser to JFK
- Drum sound
- Pollen producers
- Since 1/1, to a CPA
- Soprano ___ Te Kanawa
- Trendy sneakers
- Black, to bards
- Con ___ (vigorously)
- Like horror films
- Floor model
- Poland's Walesa



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