

The Bank of Vernal: The "Parcel Post Bank"

Prior to 1913, by law, the Post Office Department could not carry parcels weighing more than four pounds. Private express companies, which had begun to flourish in the mid-1800s, delivered larger packages. Many products were out of reach of Americans who lived far from railroads, the main arteries of the private express system.¹

New Year's Day 1913 heralded a new era of opportunity for many Americans: the Post Office Department began accepting packages weighing up to 11 pounds for mailing via a new service called Parcel Post, bringing a world of merchandise as close as a customer's mailbox or Post Office. The weight limit for parcels was increased to 20 pounds in August 1913, to 50 pounds in 1914, and ultimately reached 70 pounds.² Parcel Post was an instant success, with three hundred million packages mailed in the first six months. The year Parcel Post began, Sears, Roebuck and Company filled five times as many orders as it did the year before.



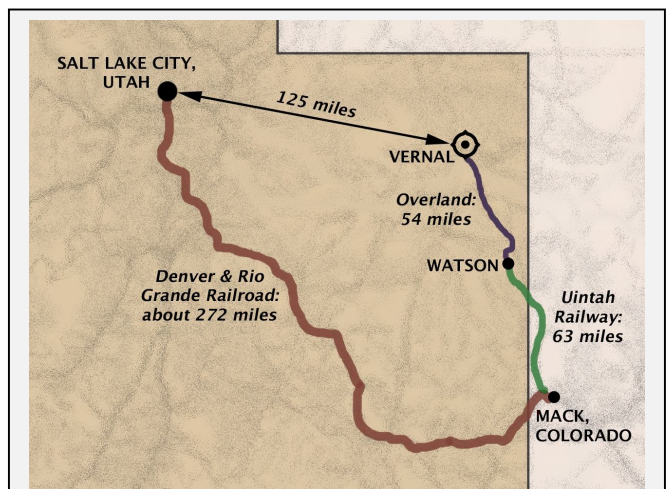
Bank of Vernal, circa 1920

In 1916, more than 37 tons of bricks were mailed to Vernal, Utah, from Salt Lake City, to help build the Bank of Vernal. In 1973, the bank became a branch of Zions First National Bank. It is located at 3 West Main Street in Vernal. *Used by permission, Uintah County Library Regional History Center, all rights reserved.*

Vast amounts of Parcel Post poured into Vernal, Utah — an average of two tons per day in 1916. Located in northeastern Utah in a high desert valley bordered by mountains and cliffs, Vernal was far from railroads and accessible only by rough roads. Shipping packages to Vernal by Parcel Post cost less than half the rates charged by private carriers. In 1916, it cost just 54 cents to mail a 50-pound package to Vernal from Salt Lake City. As the crow flies, Vernal was only about 125 miles from Salt Lake City, which put it in the second delivery zone for Parcel Post. But because of challenging terrain, the distance by land was nearly 400 miles.

Parcel Post from Salt Lake City had to travel by two railroads — via Mack, Colorado — to get to Watson, Utah, and then go the remaining 54 miles to Vernal on trucks operated by the Uintah Railway Company. The Post Office Department paid the company 1 ½ cents per pound to take parcels overland to Vernal, so the Department lost 21 cents on every 50-pound package from Salt Lake City — before counting the cost of rail transportation to Watson. The June 2, 1916, issue of *The Vernal Express* reckoned, conservatively, that the government was losing "between \$25,000 and \$30,000 annually" hauling parcels to Vernal. Cement, plaster, flour, sugar, canned goods, and other merchandise regularly swamped the Vernal Post Office. Postmaster David Bennion and his assistant put in 15-hour days trying to keep up.

In the summer of 1916, William Horace Coltharp, one of the directors of the Bank of Vernal, wanted pressed bricks to help build a new two-story home for the bank and other local businesses. Although he planned to use cheaper, locally-fired bricks for most of the building, he wanted pressed bricks for its facade. Coltharp's problem:



Salt Lake City to Vernal, Utah

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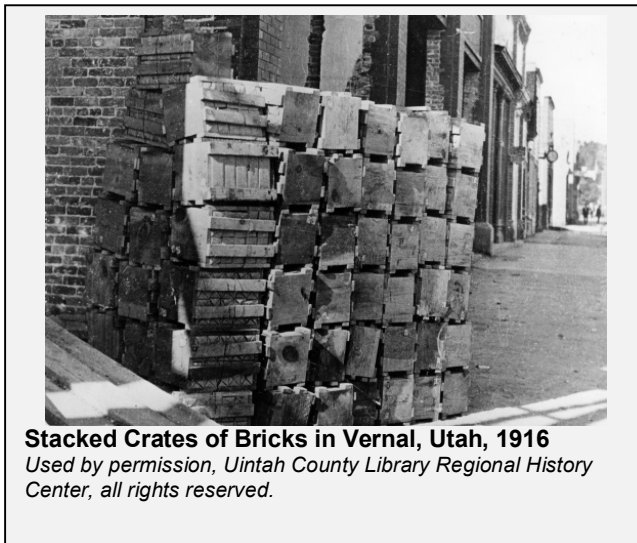
¹ In 1913, the mileage covered by private express companies totaled 301,621 — 83 percent of this mileage was by railroad. The Post Office Department went more than four times that distance — 1,316,664 miles. Nearly 80 percent of the Department's mileage consisted of rural delivery routes which fanned out into the countryside, bringing mail directly to farmers' mailboxes.

² The maximum allowable weight varied by delivery zone from August 15, 1913, to August 1, 1931, with heavier parcels allowed for nearer zones. Weight limits varied again from 1952 to 1983, when the limit was set at 70 pounds for all parcels.

the nearest pressed brick supplier was located in Salt Lake City. His solution was to have the bricks shipped in by Parcel Post.

John B. Cahoon of the Salt Lake Pressed Brick Company recalled that his company shipped 15,000 bricks to Vernal via Parcel Post.³ The bricks were individually wrapped in paper and packed ten to a wooden crate to meet the maximum allowable 50-pound limit for packages. In total, the bricks filled 1,500 crates and weighed about 37 ½ tons. The brickwork on Coltharp's building was completed by November 1916, and the bank moved into its new home the following February.

This massive shipment was noteworthy not only for its size, but also because it destroyed one of the Uintah Railway Company's trucks. The truck's brakes failed and it started coasting backwards after breaking a drive chain while struggling uphill, loaded with several thousand bricks. The truck then turned over and caught fire. The driver was not injured, but most of the bricks were lost.



The Bank of Vernal's bricks weren't the only unusually large shipments received at the Post Office that summer. Cheap postage rates contributed to a construction boom. Many building materials, including cement, plaster, nails, and other hardware, poured into town. Meanwhile, all the merchants in town received merchandise for their stores via Parcel Post. In September 1916, a train carload of twelve tons of canned tomatoes — 9,720 cans packed in 486 cases — arrived at the Vernal Post Office for area stores.

Although in November 1914, Postmaster General Albert Burleson had ordered Postmasters to check with the Second Assistant Postmaster General before accepting "a very large or unusual" number of parcels for mailing, he had left "very large or unusual" open to interpretation.⁴ Because Postmasters had different opinions on the matter, acceptance policies varied by Post Office.

For more than a year, beginning in 1915, Postmaster Noble Warrum of Salt Lake City had asked the Department to define "large or unusual." Finally — inspired, in part, by 37 ½ tons of bricks — the Department did so. On November 7, 1916, Second Assistant Postmaster General Otto Praeger published a notice to Postmasters in the *Postal Bulletin* that read "hereafter when more than 200 pounds of merchandise, other than perishable matter, are offered for mailing by one sender to one addressee on the same day, it shall be considered a large or unusual shipment . . . and postmasters shall, in every instance, before accepting such shipments, notify the Second Assistant and await instructions."⁵ Postmaster Bennion was notified of the new policy, which effectively ended single shipments greater than 200 pounds, around November 24.⁶

Although the 1916 policy change ended massive single shipments of Parcel Post, the overall amount of Parcel Post received by the Vernal Post Office continued to grow. By 1921, more than three tons were arriving every day. An article in the November 18, 1921, issue of *The Vernal Express* highlighted the importance of Parcel Post to the town:

³ "Ship Brick by Parcel Post," *The American Architect*, October 27, 1920. Contemporary issues of *The Vernal Express* more or less corroborate Cahoon's figure — the August 25, 1916, issue stated that "red pressed brick to the number of 13,700 have been shipped in from Salt Lake" and the September 1 issue reported that "several thousand" more were due.

⁴ *Postal Bulletin* 10581, November 6, 1914, contained Order No. 8454 of the Postmaster General which read: "When a very large or unusual number of parcels containing merchandise of the same kind, other than perishable matter addressed to the same post office, are offered for mailing, the postmaster should notify the Second Assistant Postmaster General and await instructions before accepting the same."

⁵ *Postal Bulletin* 11191, November 7, 1916.

⁶ In July 1959, the requirement that Postmasters ask for and await instructions before accepting shipments of more than 200 pounds of non-perishable matter (offered by one sender to one addressee on the same day) was removed from postal regulations.

To give an idea of what comes in as parcel post because of our being so far off a railroad, the mention of a few will be interesting. Bert Evans shipped in all the fire brick for his large new bake oven at the bakery, also all of the oven doors, etc. Our merchants receive bags of cement, rolls of woven wire fencing, garden hose, nails, building paper, roofing, lumber for bee hives, cases of canned goods, paint, castings, pipe cut so it can come through the mails, electric batteries for cars, tires, electric supplies for the power plant, bales of dry goods, large record books for the recorder's office. . . . in fact nearly everything brought to Vernal and surrounding territory including practically all of the merchandise.

Included in the newspaper's description of "nearly everything" was the very paper upon which the newspaper was printed.⁷

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⁷ "Shipments Will Increase as the Country Grows," *The Vernal Express*, November 18, 1921.