

When Motorcycles Moved the Mail

The American soundscape changed dramatically at the turn of the 20th century, as fledgling cars, trucks, motorcycles, and planes added their combustion engine noise to the hustle and bustle of city life. The Post Office Department quickly saw the potential of all of these means of transportation and experimented with motorcycles shortly after they became commercially available. Some rural and city carriers used motorcycles in the early 1900s, although the first use of a motorcycle in either service is unknown.

Motorcycles for Rural Carriers

While horse-drawn wagons were the norm for rural delivery, the *Instructions for the Guidance of Postmasters and Carriers in the Conduct of the Rural Delivery Service* in effect March 4, 1907, authorized Postmasters:

... to permit carriers to temporarily perform service on horseback, or by use of bicycles or motorcycles, when their horses need rest or while the roads, owing to storms or other causes, are temporarily impassable for other vehicles, but all mail matter, service equipment, and supplies shall be as completely protected from damage or loss as when the regular conveyance is used, and the schedules ordered by the Department must not be varied from.

Just a year later, the *R.F.D. News*, magazine of the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, advertised motorcycles whose names are still remembered such as Indian and Harley Davidson, and others long forgotten, such as Erie, Armac, Excelsior, Thor, Torpedo, and Thiem. The June 1909 *RFD News* ran an advertisement for the New Era Auto-Cycle, made by the New Era Gas Engine Company of Dayton, Ohio – a vehicle well ahead of its time. Unlike other motorcycles of the day, it did not need to be pedaled to start. Instead, it started like a car – with a hand crank – and then kept running without needing to be pedaled.

The *R.F.D. News* in 1914 and 1915 teemed with advertisements emphasizing the power, reliability, and reasonable cost of motorcycles. Several manufacturers offered sidecars to help handle the heavy mail brought on by the advent of Parcel Post in 1913. Harley-Davidson claimed that its sidecar could be attached or detached in only a minute, depending on whether a carrier faced a day with light or heavy mail.

Many advertisers made their machines sound appealing for family use as well. For example, the Harley-Davidson advertisement in the December 26, 1914, *R.F.D. News* showed rural carrier Wallace Vance of Cowles, Nebraska, his



"The Flying Merkel," a belt-driven, two-cylinder V-twin motorcycle, Washington, D.C., circa 1911.

THE NEW ERA AUTO-CYCLE

WILL REVOLUTIONIZE THE MOTOR-CYCLE BUSINESS

The sweeping improvements found in the New Era Auto-Cycle are a revelation to the rider

TEN GOOD FEATURES		TEN GOOD FEATURES
No Pedals		No Vibration
Free Motor		Form Seat
Hand Cranked Motor		Foot Board
Two Speed Transmission		60 Inch Wheel Base
Internal Expanding Brake		Luxurious Riding

PATENT PENDING

The Carrier's Two-Wheeled Automobile. Starts like one and operates like one. Motor is free. The Rural Letter Carrier can start the motor when he goes out on his route and motor will continue to run, although he may stop the Auto-Cycle as many times as is necessary to collect and deliver mail on his route, whether it is at the foot of a hill, in the middle of a steep hill or on level ground. After stopping Auto-Cycle, in order to start, press left foot on slow speed lever on foot board and Auto-Cycle starts promptly. Will climb any hill on slow speed on which the rider can maintain his balance and have sufficient traction. When the carrier returns home from his route, he is just as fresh and vigorous as when he started. Why? No pedals and no pedaling to do.

WRITE FOR CATALOGUE AND PROPOSITION.

THE NEW ERA GAS ENGINE COMPANY

11 DALE AVENUE DAYTON, OHIO

The New Era Auto-Cycle, 1909 (*R.F.D. News*, June 1909, p. 208).

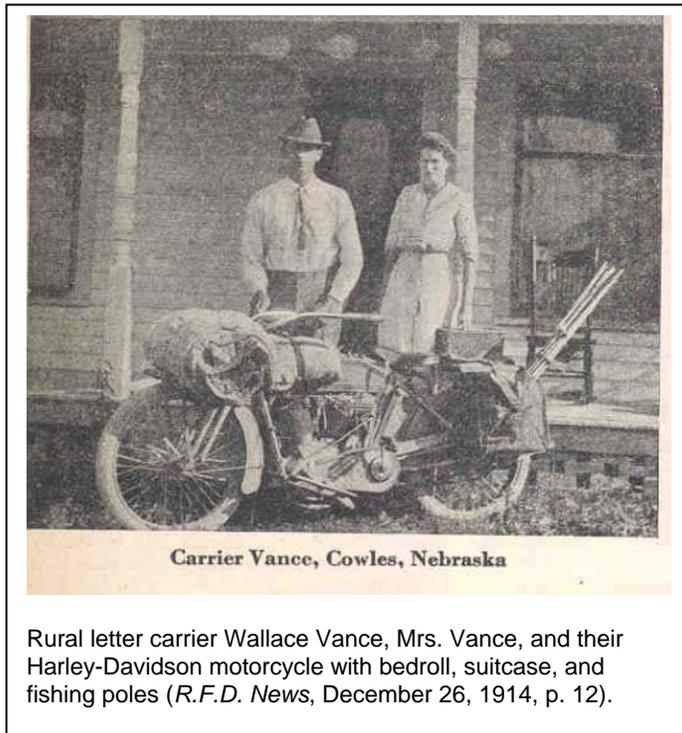
wife, and a Harley machine decked out with a bedroll on the front and fishing poles in the back with a letter from Vance that said:

I just want to tell you what a rural carrier can do with one of your machines. This is our account of one week: Monday, August 10th, ran route (25½ miles), then packed and rode to Deweere (30 miles) before dinner. Fished in the afternoon and all day Tuesday. Wednesday morning went home (30 miles) and ran route before noon.

Thursday ran route in morning, went to Hastings (32 miles) in the afternoon. Friday A.M. returned home and ran route. Friday afternoon went to Republican River, fishing (10 miles) and returned. Saturday A.M., ran route; P.M. went to Red Cloud (10 miles) and return. Tuesday was the only day I missed on the route and I could have come home that morning if I had wanted to.

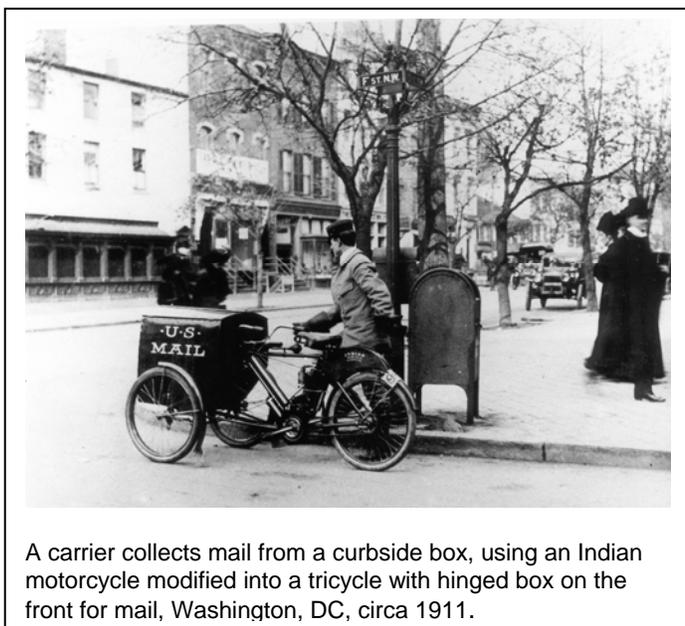
We made all these side trips and were never late with the mail, as we had no trouble at all. My wife and I have been taking these kind of trips all summer.

I have run my route (25½ miles) in one hour and fifteen minutes, and my roads are not very good.¹



Motor Tricycles for City Carriers

The Post Office Department also wanted a light, speedy vehicle to collect mail in residential and suburban areas. Motorcycles had reached speeds of over 100 miles per hour in speed trials and races; and could go 25 to 30 miles per hour in city conditions.



In 1911, the Department began to experiment with motor tricycles to collect mail without carriers having to dismount. The motor tricycles were equipped with a box with a hinged top or hinged side so the carrier could transfer mail into from a drop-bottom street letter collection box while seated on his machine.

The Department found that a carrier on a motor tricycle could do the work of three carriers on foot or two carriers using a horse and cart. Some officials predicted that motorcycles would be used in many larger cities "where the weather and the condition of the streets will permit their efficient operation,"² but there is no known record showing these contracts were issued.

Automobiles, Yes! Motorcycles, No – Well, Maybe

On July 22, 1915, Postmaster General Albert S. Burleson issued an order amending postal regulations, to permit rural carriers to use automobiles on their routes, as long as they had the express permission of the Post Office Department,

where the topography of the country and the condition of the roads permit of their uninterrupted use of an extended period.

In the same order, he warned that as of January 1, 1916, motorcycles and bicycles were no longer to be used on rural routes. At the time of the order, carriers were using bicycles and motorcycles on about 8,000 routes. Department officials felt motorcycles put carriers at greater risk for injury, did not have the capacity needed to carry and protect Parcel Post, and were fair-weather vehicles, according to an article in the September 1915 issue of *The Postmasters' Advocate*, magazine of the National League of Postmasters.

Postmaster General Burleson revisited his decision in late 1915. On October 2, 1915, postal regulations were amended again to allow motorcycles

under the same conditions as automobiles, if the motorcycle has a cylinder displacement of not less than 60 cubic inches, has an adjustable axle, and there is permanently attached to the machine a commercial body of waterproof material not less than 42 inches long, 24 inches wide and 18 inches high, so constructed as to protect the mail thoroughly from damage and loss, the assembled machine to have a tread of 56 inches.³

Post World War I

After World War I ended, the War Department transferred 1,087 motorcycles to the Post Office Department. The Department assigned 284 of these to Post Offices for use in the mail service, according to the 1919 *Annual Report of the Postmaster General*.⁴ The following year's *Annual Report* mentioned 701 war surplus motorcycles in use.⁵

By 1923, the Department was operating motorcycles and government-owned trucks in 515 cities

for collecting mail from letter boxes, delivering parcel-post matter, transporting carriers to and from their routes, and relaying mail to carriers.⁶

On Guard on Motorcycles

Besides collecting and delivering mail, motorcycles were used to guard the mail in New York City, following the spectacular armed robbery of a mail truck there on October 24, 1921. The thieves netted almost 2 million dollars worth of money, jewelry, and securities.

Soon after the robbery, postal officials pulled 15 motorcycles with side cars from storage in Newark, New Jersey, and sent them to the General Post Office in New York City. Armed guards astride the motorcycles were to escort trucks carrying valuable mail. The New York Post Office had planned to deploy the motorcycles, with armed guards, in the Spring of 1921 but said there had been a shortage of guards available.⁷



Armed postal employee on motorcycle with sidecar, following mail truck with postal driver and rifle-toting inspector, circa 1920s, Chicago, IL.

Postmaster General Will H. Hays asked United States Marines from the Brooklyn Navy Yard to help guard the mail. On November 1, 1921, 64 Marines of a planned contingent of 265 reported to the General Post Office to guard railroad terminals, post office stations, and mail trucks. Two Marines were to ride in each truck, one next to the driver, who was also armed, and the other inside the truck with an armed clerk. To further protect the mail, armed postal employees on motorcycles surrounded each truck traveling between postal stations and railroad terminals.⁸ Valuable mail received motorcycle escorts in other large cities as well, as the accompanying photograph from Chicago shows.

Motorcycles Fade Away

The 1924 *Postal Laws and Regulations* treated horse-drawn wagons as the norm for rural delivery but said automobiles could also be used if they "were of sufficient capacity to properly handle the postal business." Postmasters were required to define the months when a route could be served by an automobile, list the vehicle's carrying capacity, and decide whether the roads were good enough for extended use of an auto on a route. Postal regulations allowed motorcycles to be used under the same conditions as automobiles if they had a waterproof attachment of specified dimensions "to protect the mail thoroughly from damage and loss."⁹

The *Annual Report* last mentions motorcycles in 1928, when 27 government-owned motorcycles joined 6,392 trucks to collect, transport, and deliver mail in larger Post Offices. Four-wheeled automobiles and trucks with their larger capacity had become the vehicles of choice in collecting and delivering mail in cities and rural areas alike.

HISTORIAN
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE
SEPTEMBER 2005

¹ *R.F.D. News*, December 26, 1914, pp. 12-13.

² *Post Office Department Annual Reports... 1912*, p. 101.

³ Postmaster General Order No. 9190, October 2, 1915, *United States Official Postal Guide*, November 1915, p. 27.

⁴ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General . . . 1919*, p. 43.

⁵ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General . . . 1920*, p. 55.

⁶ *Annual Report of the Postmaster General . . . 1923*, p. 36.

⁷ "Motorcycle Guard Will Convoy Mails," *The New York Times*, October 30, 1921, p. 14.

⁸ "Mails in Transit Under Arms Today," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1921

⁹ *Postal Laws and Regulations of the United States of America, Edition of 1924*, section 800.