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Congressional Record S. 21921 - Post Offices re: Closing of Rural ones

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Senate

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1975

CLOSING RURAL POST OFFICES

Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, there seems to be a determined effort on the part of the Postal Service to do away with the smaller post offices stretched hither and yon across the Nation. I think this is a step in the wrong direction because what it is helping to do is to erode the agricultural face of this Nation.

An excellent commentary by Richard E. Hansen, Jr., of Joplin, Mont., a columnist for the Great Falls, Mont., Tribune, entitled "Closing Rural Post Offices, Another Step Toward Closing Rural America," deals with this situation.

I ask unanimous consent that this commentary be printed at this point in the RECORD. I would hope that my colleagues will take the time to read this because what the Postal Service is contemplating doing affects every State in the Union.

There being no objection, the commentary was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

CLOSING RURAL POST OFFICES ANOTHER STEP TOWARD CLOSING RURAL AMERICA

JOPLIN, MONT.—Never before in our 200 year history of independence has citizen faith in their government—and their leaders—been so low. Countless national polls bear this out. Almost every action our leaders take, almost every statement they utter, is regarded with cynicism, skepticism, or outright disbelief.

Over the past quarter-century or so—ever since the great migration from rural America to the cities began, the federal government has poured countless billions of dollars into studies, projects, research, and other actions designed to halt—or reverse this trend. Yet, this vast, sprawling, uncoordinated mess of bureaucracies—which has come to be known collectively as our federal government, seems often to be creating on one hand, while the other works equally hard to destroy the creation. Rural development is a good example.

Despite all that has gone into trying to keep people in rural areas, to make them more attractive and better places in which to live, others are doing their best to do just the opposite, by closing or curtailing vital services—such as our rural post offices. Perhaps it might be well to examine just one small stretch of Montana—the Hi-line area, stretching about one hundred miles, for some idea of what has transpired during the past 25 years, and to see how one builds, while another destroys.

Twenty-five years ago, we had at least two

passenger trains a day that made regular stops at each Hi-line town. We had regular daily bus service. We had a Western Union Telegraph office in each town. We each had our own school—elementary and high school. We each had our own post office—with two or three daily mail deliveries, in and out. And, according to our government, we were prime candidates for 'rural development'.

Today, a quarter-century or so later, we have no passenger trains that stop. If we want to take a train—and who does with the surly personnel, dirty, often undependable trains—we must travel 50 miles or so to where one stops. (No, I haven't ridden Amtrak lately, but I hear constant, bitter reports from those who have.)

We have no bus service. Citizens who do not drive, or do not have an automobile or other means of transportation, are simply stranded. This, like most of the west, is a vast sparsely-populated area. Traveling great distances for goods and services, for the most part, is simply an accepted fact of life.

But, for some services—which our hard-earned tax dollars go to finance and support—and which we were led to believe our forefathers intended us to enjoy as privileges of a democratic, tax-paying society, such as schools, transportation, and especially postal service—all at the local level, this to me is to a large extent what our independence is all about.

We no longer have a Western Union office, or an express office. We have one mail delivery—in and out—each day. The railroad is in the process of closing down all local depots and freight offices, and rail freight in most towns is already a thing of the past. Soon, the local depot agent will also pass into history. Instead, we are told, such things as the boxcar's—necessary to ship our grain and other products to market, will be checked, billed, invoiced, and otherwise handled by traveling 'computerized offices' from the nearest rail hub, some 50 miles away. Freight and express, so we are told, will come by truck from the same center—when roads and other factors make it possible.

Our schools are under constant threat and pressure to consolidate by both state and federal government regulations—some have already gone this route. So, it seems only a matter of time when these too will no longer be a part of our towns.

Now, we are being told, our postoffices are next in line to go. How we will get our mail, send a letter, or even buy a stamp, we have yet to learn. But, one of our big Bicentennial projects is a Pony Express ride across the United States. Perhaps this is a pilot project for things to come.

So, all this in the short space of about a quarter-century of "rural development". Unquestionably, we were far better off back in the horse-and-buggy days as far as services were concerned than today.

But, with the current cynicism, one wonders if this threat to our small postoffices is real, or yet another cry of "Wolf!" Designed only to force more billions of subsidy dollars into the already wobbly operation; similar to Amtrak's threat to shut down, which resulted in massive tax money transfusions?

It seems almost incomprehensible that our vote-conscious politicians, or the federal bureaucrats who feed off the nation's taxpayers, or the millions of local postal patrons—not to mention the unions, and the multi-billion dollar businesses who's foundations are built on our local mail system—would really stand idly by and watch this most basic and necessary of our national services go down the drain.

Certainly, closing the small rural postoffices contributes nothing to rural development. In fact, the opposite is true. If any rural community can be said to have a

central heart—a hub, then it must be the local postoffice. They are the nerve-center, the most vital part of our small communities. And, besides the essential services they provide, the additional jobs they create in our always job-depressed rural areas, are an important consideration as well.

Closing our small, rural postoffices, is another large step toward closing rural America.

Once a small area—such as the Hi-line—bonds itself and future generations into debt for many years—with the help and blessing of one hand of the government—to build sewer, water, and other facilities to attract people and businesses to the area, and then finds the other hand busy taking away all the local services and other necessities, development must crumble in the face of fighting for mere survival.

So, if our postoffices do go, only a countryside of ghost towns could be left standing across our countryside, a mute testimony to our great experiment in "rural development."

Ironically, in dealing with rural Americans, our leaders and bureaucrats today seem determined to follow the precedent set some 200 years ago, which was to strip the Indians of all their land, rights, and even their pride and dignity.

In only about 25 years, through bungling, mismanagement, waste, stupidity, and just plain corruption and rip-off, rural America finds itself gradually losing its rights, privileges, and services—just as the Indians. We are managing to travel backward in the nation's countryside to almost the same point in time when it all began. We seem—those of us who live on the land—to have nearly reached the full circle.