

Swift Couriers on their Appointed Rounds

Today, said the Today Show this morning, is the post office's busiest day of the year. You would think I was clairvoyant. How fitting for my paper - here goes: It's Christmas time again, and what better theme to touch upon, than a boy's introduction to the world

of commerce through its faltering foot servant, the United States Postal Service?

The boy, or young man, was your speaker. Simpler times: The year was 1962. Most of us Literarians remember the 3-cent letter and the penny post card as well as twice a day mail delivery. Thus, we have no more than the usual difficulty in recalling that, once upon a time, the postal service, then the United States Post Office, hired bright-eyed, college boys to assist its couriers in the swift completion of their appointed rounds at Yuletide.

A very naïve English major at Louisville's Bellarmine College, I was only recently liberated from the Archdiocese of Louisville's minor seminary after five and one half years of mindless thralldom. It was less than a year since I had entered what we call the real world. Money and jobs were scarce in those days, and I was working my way through college. I was always eager to make an extra buck. So my ears perked up when a pal alerted me that the post office was posting openings for part-time carriers for the holiday season.

The friend and I headed down to the Federal Building on the appointed day, and took the qualifying test for this august position. In only six or seven weeks, the results were in. We had passed with flying colors. Thirsting for new experiences, as well as the extra cash, we eagerly awaited the call that we were told might come from one of the local stations. And lo and behold, the call did come. My friend and I were both posted to the Okolona Station.

Okolona, Okolona - how can I sing your praises - a suburb, then being hewn out of the rural wilderness that surrounded Louisville, a weird gallimaufry of older farm houses, single rural cottages, and clapped together subdivisions, that are now probably painfully showing their age. It lies out Preston Highway, beyond the Louisville airport, with which the more economy minded of you are familiar, I am sure. The Okolona

post office building was a typical red brick government installation, replete with battleship gray desks, tables, and sorting racks. The carriers and patrons shuffled back and forth over the black and gray grit-covered linoleum floor, separated by the barred turrets of the service windows.

The station was presided over that Yuletide and for some years by a woman. Given the time and place, she must have been a good Democrat. She could have qualified as Mrs. Santa, although she went by the homespun name of Miss Betty. The outsized flour sack that she wore as a dress ineffectually hid her ample girth. Miss Betty presided over her all male battalion with a mixture of sternness and good humor. She seemed as raunchy as her band of elves, to which I must now refer. In those days of the early sixties, the post office was not making its current futile attempts to operate profitably. Postal demographics and atmosphere were much different from the present. This was years before the term "going postal" took on that modern meaning, consonant with the frequent shootouts down at the local grade school that mark our civilization as at one with the refinement of Paleolithic times. This post office was a fun place. The carriers were not vets down on their luck, subdued by Prozac, hounded by time and motion men. They were generally high school educated white guys, devoid of ambition, who had found a pleasant berth that would take them through to retirement. They saw a comfortable government pension waiting for them at the end of the line to fund a life of squirrel hunting and piloting the houseboat around Lake Cumberland.

My first morning at the post office Miss Betty assigned me to Van Meter (last name only, first name unknown, never used). Van Meter was a tallish country boy, of rangy, middling good looks, about 45 or so and prematurely gray, who had immigrated to Louisville from the Eastern Kentucky mountains after high school, and shortly thereafter caught on with the post office. Van Meter probably couldn't spell nonchalant, but that was

what he was. His manner was easy and off hand. He made you want to like him, without what seemed like trying. At that very time, a young man was growing up in Hope, Arkansas, who was cut from the same cloth as my postal mentor in appearance and proclivities - William Jefferson Clinton. I and another likely lad were to assist Van Meter with the crush of Christmas cards, presents, and the regular mail inundating the post office.

That first morning the genial Van Meter introduced us to the other carriers. My fellow assistant carrier was even more shocked than I at our initiation. Eager to please and welcome us, the carriers invited us to sample the ample library of pornography and nudie photos that they had confiscated over the years, from Okolona's apparently sizable population of perverts. Of course, we primly declined, and started our studies at Van Meter's knee.

In those days, after driving by private car to his route each carrier delivered his mail on foot. Each route was divided into ten loops. At the end of a number of loops was an olive green box (you remember them), where the postman deposited the mail for the corresponding loops, before starting his run through the neighborhood on one of them. Van Meter gave us a short dissertation on how he "cased" the mail, sorting it by hand into the racks that served as the back of his desk, one pigeon hole for each delivery address on the route. For the life of us, we didn't understand a word he said. Whether it was because Van Meter's teaching skills were lacking, or because we were abuzz with all the new sensations to take it in, I don't know.

I do remember that I was appalled by the behavior of Otis, Van Meter's next desk neighbor. While casing his mail, Otis was careful to open and confiscate the little kids' premiums - toy trucks, decoder rings, and other trinkets that came in cheap cardboard boxes from the cereal companies. Once our mail was cased, Van

Meter was scrupulously fair in dividing up the work. He had ten loops, so the other guy and I each got to do five of them. Van Meter assured us that he was turning his talents to administrative pursuits.

It was a cold and damp morning as I trudged out of the post office into the parking lot with my half of Van Meter's route. As I passed Otis' pickup truck, I could not help but notice that he was fortifying himself against the cold and damp with a healthy swig from a half-pint of Early Times, a cheap but serviceable bourbon.

And so I was out on my own, making my way through the great world, as represented by the thawing tundra that underlay the lawns of Okolona, Kentucky. "A hard time I had of it," to paraphrase T.S. Elliot in a slightly different context in The Journey of the Magi. The atmosphere was damp, the ground not quite frozen. All during those days, the temperature hovered just below or above 32 degrees Fahrenheit. As the first day wore on and the temperature went up a notch or two, my tennis shoes soaked through, adding to the general discomfort. I had blithely not donned the long underwear my mother had bought me just for the job and had scoffed at her suggestion that I wear boots. As the day became longer, I found myself slogging more and more slowly, wet, cold and stiff. About four or so, I still have part of one loop to go. Suddenly, Van Meter appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. He saw my discomfort and the time of day, and relieved me of my burden. I was awestruck, watching a real pro in action. Van Meter skipped up and down steps, deftly sorting the next house's letters and magazines, as he expertly deposited the current house's mail in its box or slot. I vowed to do better the next day.

That and the next few days were a vast improvement. Clad in the scorned long undies and a pair of boots, I became more and more agile, completing the route in less and less time. Only a few vignettes of those days remain alive in my memory over these many

years. As I approached one house, something seemed vaguely familiar. The car parked out front - I had seen it before. I noticed that a certified letter needed signature, and I rang the bell. A reasonably attractive housewife answered, straightening her hair. When she saw it was the postman, she smiled conspiratorially, and stepped back from the door. I could see into the living room, where Van Meter himself was perched on the couch. Ever solicitous, he asked me how things were going. Had I been more suave, I would have asked him the same thing. But my knowledge of the big bad world was very limited then. My savoir-faire was in short supply. I mumbled something inane, got my green receipt card signed, and beat a hasty retreat.

As Christmas Day approached, my expertise continued to increase as the load lessened. I could see that my career as a government employee would soon end. In the final days, Van Meter and I were reduced to overt logrolling. One day, driving by what had now become my route, Van Meter knew that I would be finished by 11:30 or so. He instructed me to take a long, early lunch, and not report back to the post office before 2:30 or 3:00, or he would have to go back to work. I reluctantly complied. This saved my job for one more day. That final day was an ugly one. We were back to soggy perma-frost conditions, which slowed my work considerably. By 3:30, or so, I was finishing up my last loop. A cold, fine, freezing rain had started, immediately glazing everything it hit with a thin layer of ice.

I made it back to the post office wet and cold again. There I said my goodbyes to Miss Betty, Van Meter, and the others I had befriended over the short span of days. Besides the weather, the leave taking, and the loss of a paycheck, another somber thought weighed me down. I drove a very beat-up, elderly, Triumph TR-2.5, whose heating system did not work. I would not be able to make it home down Preston Highway in the freezing rain. With no defroster, I could not

see to drive through the rime that coated my windshield.

As I warily crossed the frozen parking lot, inspiration struck. Parked next to my TR2.5 was Otis' pickup truck, and I knew just where he kept his half-pint of Early Times. This ex-seminarian experienced no moral dilemma at the time, not even a momentary one. Glancing furtively around the lot, I reached behind the driver's seat and extracted the bottle from the nest of shotgun shells, empty premium cartons, fishing gear, and girlie magazines that covered the floor. I was in luck. The bottle was more than half full -enough to get me home.

I scraped the windshield, and applied a measured coating of the bourbon. Making my way down Preston, I saw that the rain was no longer freezing on the windshield; I was a mechanical genius. I stopped a couple of times to coat the glass anew. Of course I didn't want to use the windshield wipers, because they would sweep the whiskey right off the glass. Somehow I made it home, although my car and I smelled like a neighborhood dive by the time I got there.

And so ended my career in government service, my first foray into the larger world of commerce. Before that I had worked at many jobs, but always of the delivering newspapers, working at the family luncheonette variety. In this brave new world, I had seen petty theft, perversion of the public trust, dereliction of duty, trafficking in pornography, had myself uttered false statements in writing, handing in time cards that were palpably misleading, and probably was an accessory to adultery. All this in only a few days.

A Christmas story, I suppose, should have a moral, and I do not want to indulge here in mere reminiscence. So let's go deeper: "Covatta," some of you will say, "How did an ex-seminarian fall so far, so quickly?" and: "Don't forget your theft of Otis' hard won bottle

of Early Times." And: "Are you one of those for whom the end justifies the means?" The first question, about the speed of my fall, has no answer. I admit that I had adjusted to life on the outside very quickly. As for the latter two questions you moralists have posed, I wrestle, still, with the ideal of service to others, and the thought that our actions inexorably affect those around us. I'm not sure whether the end justifies the means or not. Our actions can have many unforeseen consequences. Let's return to the parking lot in Okolona. Perhaps Otis, emerging from the post office, reached for a swig and came up empty handed. Maybe that involuntary chance to abstain put him on the right course. Perhaps his morning drink that day has been his last. Shocked to his senses he took the pledge and never drank again. Conversely, perhaps the missing bottle sent him into a towering rage. Maybe he went back to the post office and was one of the first to "go postal."

I have no evidence of either result, of course. The Louisville Courier - Journal did not report a massacre at the Okolona P.O. the following morning. Perhaps the only certitude here is that we can say that my very real theft of Otis' bourbon was my very real introduction to the real world - the one in which I have lived for more than a quarter-century in the law. Many of our actions are ambiguous, and much of what we do is from self-interest. I only wish that I had possessed the aplomb to put a five-spot on Otis' front seat, as payment for the whiskey. I must confess though, I had never thought of that alternative until I wrote the prior sentence.

No - those acts are in the past, whether for good or ill, and my closing thought is this: I hope that none of you are offended that I have spoken lightly of the post office in these tough times. Upon reflection I see that the P.O. was a serious business even then, in the days before fine white powder plunged us all into terror. Naïve young man that I was, I did not realize that the cards and letters I distributed held

250

the very stuff of life and death - love and longing; hatred and forgiveness; failure and triumph. No wonder the work weighs so heavily on our postmen and women. In light of that my wish is that Otis, Van Meter, Miss Betty and all the rest, are alive by a roaring fire somewhere tonight, either with or without a glass of Early Times to comfort them. For them, as for us, I pray that the ambiguous acts that we all must perform to get us in from the wet, the cold and the dark, have harmed neither them nor us nor others. With that, I wish them, and all of us, happy holidays and a bright new year.

Anthony G. Covatta