

The handling and delivery of mail has always been a serious business, underpinned by the trust of the public in requiring timeliness, safety, and confidentiality.

After early beginnings using horseback and stagecoach, and although cars and trucks later replaced stagecoaches and wagons, the Railway Mail Service still stands as one of America's most resourceful and exciting postal innovations.

This service began in 1832, but grew slowly until the Civil War.

Then from 1862, by sorting the mail on board moving trains, the Post Office Department was able to decentralize its operations as railroads began to crisscross the nation on a regular basis, and speed up mail delivery.

This service lasted until 1974.

During peak decades of service, railway mail clerks handled 93% of all non-local mail and by 1905 the service had over 12,000 employees.

Railway Post Office trains used a system of mail cranes to exchange mail at stations without stopping.

As a train approached the crane, a clerk prepared the catcher arm which would then snatch the incoming mailbag in the blink of an eye.

The clerk then booted out the outgoing mailbag.

Experienced clerks were considered the elite of the Postal Service's employees, and spoke with pride of making the switch at night with nothing but the curves and feel of the track to warn them of an upcoming catch.

They also worked under the greatest pressure and their jobs were considered to be exhausting and dangerous.

In addition to regular demands of their jobs they could find themselves the victims of train wrecks and robberies.

As successful as it was, "mail-on-the-fly" still had its share of glitches.

If they hoisted the train's catcher arm too soon, they risked hitting switch targets, telegraph poles or semaphores, which would rip the catcher arm off the train.

Too late, and they would miss an exchange.