

This Day in History... June 11, 1897

Owney the Postal Dog

On June 11, 1897, the US Railway Mail Service mascot, Owney the Postal Dog, died in Toledo, Ohio.

On one cool fall evening in 1888, clerks at an Albany, New York, Post Office were so busy, they didn't notice a stray puppy curled up on a pile of old mailbags. Once they did, they adopted the mixed-breed dog and named him Owney.

It's been suggested that Owney may have been the dog of a former postal clerk who brought him along on his walk to work. When his owner moved away, Owney stayed at the post office, as he seemed to enjoy the texture or the smell of the mailbags.



Stamp issued to honor Owney in 2011.



Railway postal clerks sorted the mail in rail cars as the trains traveled to the next station.

Owney had such a fondness for mailbags that he rode with them as they were transferred from the Albany Post Office to the railroad depot. He eventually started traveling with the mail to New York City. After a while, he would be gone for months at a time. The railway mail clerks considered him a good luck charm. He rode the rails at a time when train wrecks were not uncommon, but in his nearly 10 years of travel, he was never in a wreck.

To ensure their friend made his way home, the Albany clerks gave him a collar inscribed "Owney, Post Office, Albany, New York." They attached a note to his collar asking employees of the Railway Mail Service to fasten leather or metal baggage tags to his collar to record his travels. They soon realized Owney was traveling around the country.

Owney's collar became too heavy for him to wear, so Postmaster General John Wanamaker gave him a special jacket to display his many tags and badges.

Over the years, Owney received 1,017 souvenirs from his travels. One reporter wrote, "Nearly every place he stopped Owney received an additional tag until now he wears a big bunch. When he jogs along, they jingle like the bells on a junk wagon."

Owney's adventures took him all across the country and around the world. In 1895, he rode the trains and steamships to Asia and across Europe! Reportedly, the Emperor of Japan gave him two passports and several medals. By the time he came home, he was famous around the world.



Mailbags were hung on a hook at stations that were too small for the train to stop. The clerk grabbed the bag as the train passed at about 70 miles per hour.



Stamp pictures steamship receiving mail for transport.

Owney was so enamored with the mailbags that when one of them fell off a wagon during a delivery, he stayed behind to protect it. When the clerks at the post office realized the bag and Owney were missing, they retraced their steps and found Owney guarding the bag.

By 1897, Owney was getting old and the Post Office believed his traveling days might be nearing their end. That June, he was to take his final trip before retiring. While in Toledo, Ohio, it was reported that he was ill and aggressive in his old age and may have attacked a postal clerk, after which he was shot and killed.

America's postal workers were distraught at the loss and ultimately had Owney preserved. He was placed on display at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and was then given to the Smithsonian. Today he has his own exhibit at the National Postal Museum.

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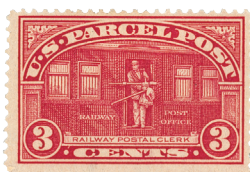
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