

# “Live Chicks” Require First Class Treatment: The U.S. Special Handling Service

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The Special Handling service was introduced in 1925 and flourished through the middle of the twentieth century, according fourth-class mail—parcels generally in excess of 4 oz. and up to 70 lb.—the speed and urgency of first-class mail service.

## **SPECIAL HANDLING: FORERUNNER OF PRIORITY MAIL**

One of the most popular and well-recognized services of the U.S. Postal Service today is Priority Mail, which moves parcels by air or surface, whichever is faster for the distance covered. Although Special Handling has never been viewed as a forerunner to Priority Mail in the philatelic community, its importance to commerce and industry during its heyday, 1925–68, was significant.

Not long after the advent of Parcel Post in 1913, farmers began shipping day-old chicks and queen bees, among other “lives” (the Post Office’s term for live animals), through the mails. At first, there was little effort given to moving these parcels with any greater urgency than normally accorded Parcel Post, and such goods languished with the “time and space available” protocol normally given this less-than-first-class mail category. Over time, however, shippers and customers alike learned to petition mail clerks and carriers to give live chicks special treatment, moving them with the first class mail and thereby improving their prospects for survival at final destination. Call them opportunists if you will, but since the Post Office Department realized they were providing this “first-class” service anyway, they asked why not codify the service as “Special Handling” and charge a fee for this special treatment? And so the Special Handling service was born in 1925. When introduced, it provided the first means by which shippers of time-sensitive merchandise could specify expedited movement from the Post Office.

The Postal Service Act, approved on 28 February 1925, provided for a Special Handling stamp denominated at 25¢ (Figure 1) “for use on fourth class mail matter, which would secure for such mail the expeditious handling accorded to mail matter of the first class.” Now that this service was specifically required by the Post Office, all baby chicks (Figure 2) and queen bees (Figure 3) would have a good prospect of surviving their adventure in the mail stream.

Baby alligators (Figure 4) would be added to the regulation in July 1925. For a 25¢ flat fee, regardless of distance, parcels up to 70 lb. would be moved with the first-class mail from the post office of dispatch to the post office of destination. Parcel Post was distance and weight based, but Special Handling was not, at least when it was introduced. This new service was further promoted in 1928 with the introduction of significantly reduced fees for three new weight categories for Special Handling within the overall

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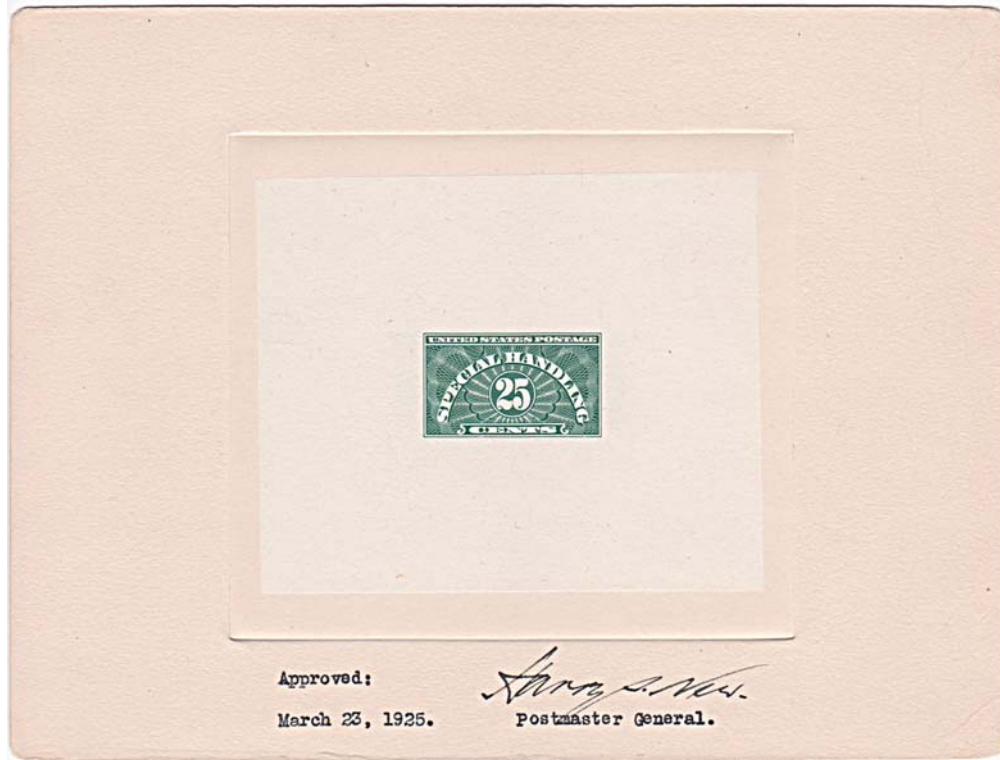


FIGURE 1. The Special Handling service was introduced in 1925 with a 25¢ denomination stamp, which provided flat-rate service anywhere in the United States. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.



FIGURE 2. Mailing label glued on cardboard, 13 May 1935, from Zeeland, Michigan, to Middletown, New York, for day-old chicks, the living merchandise for which the Special Handling service was established. These lives were expedited and moved with the first-class mail. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

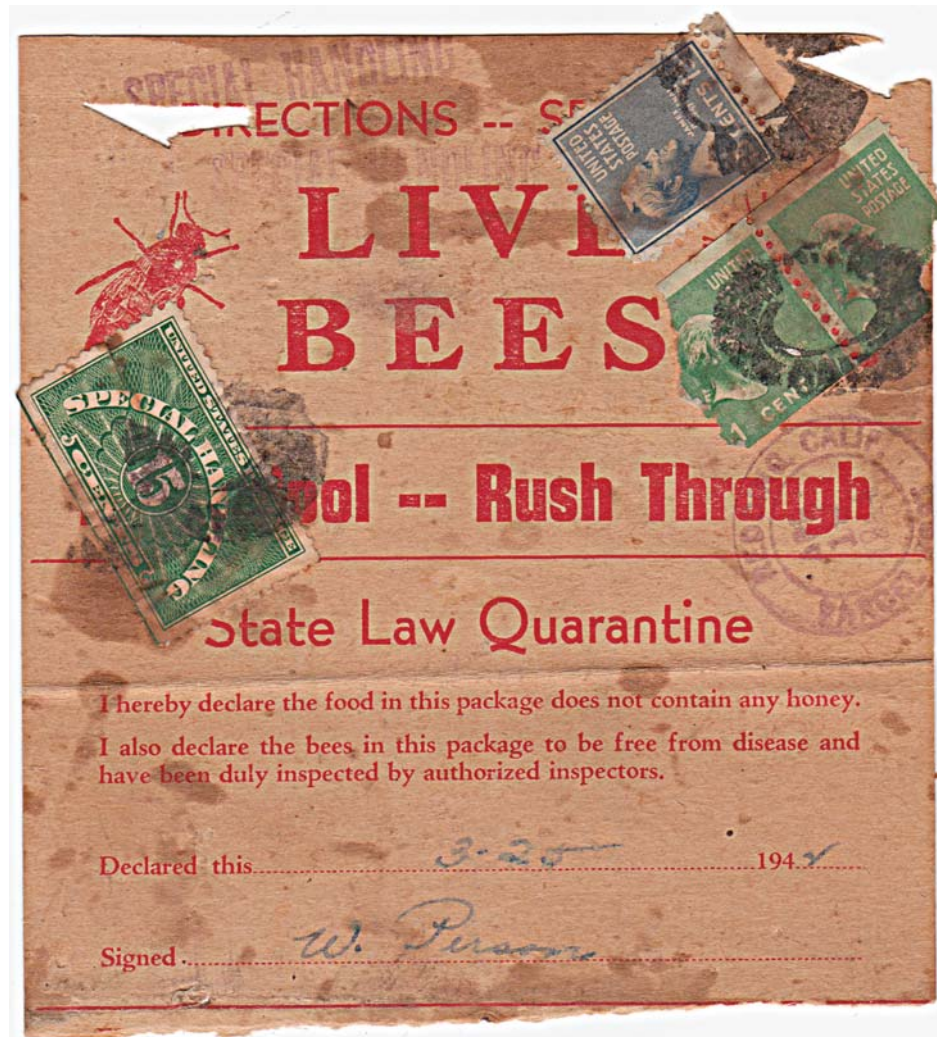


FIGURE 3. Quarantine declaration card with address and handling information, 25 March 1944, to Redding, California (town of origin illegible), for live bees, the second category earmarked for expediting by Special Handling. The card is signed by the quarantine inspector. The 15¢ fee covered contents from 2 to 10 lb. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

weight limitations for fourth-class matter (Figure 5): 10¢ up to 2 lb., 15¢ from 2 to 10 lb., and 20¢ from 10 lb. to 70 lb., the maximum weight allowed for Parcel Post.

### SPECIAL HANDLING VERSUS SPECIAL DELIVERY

Special Handling was not Special Delivery and vice versa. In the broadest sense, Special Delivery accorded immediate dispatch and delivery of all mail matter, regardless of class, upon arrival at the destination post office. Special Handling accorded first-class treatment of Parcel Post matter between the post offices of receipt and delivery. For Parcel Post matter the primary

difference in practicality was that Special Handling assured the expeditious movement of packages between post offices, whereas Special Delivery provided for immediate delivery upon arrival at the post office of the addressee.

Special Delivery could be, and often was, added to Special Handling parcels. The April 1925 Supplement of the Postal Guide was very clear: “Add the Special Handling (25¢) to the Special Delivery (10¢, 15¢, or 20¢) and one has the very best service possible for any article of parcel post”<sup>1</sup> (Figure 6).

As part of the 1928 rate changes and all subsequent rate changes, Special Handling service was included as part of Special Delivery, but always at a higher cost. Conversely, Special Handling has never been accorded Special Delivery service from the destination post office, except that the “Special Handling fee

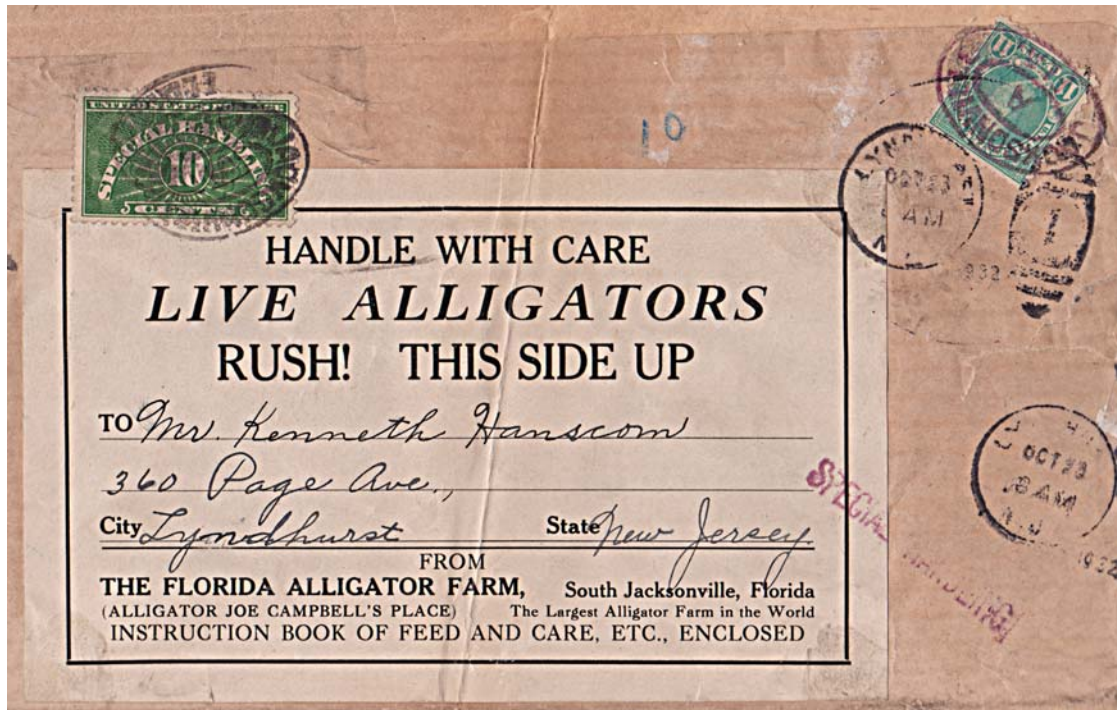


FIGURE 4. Mailing label glued on wrapper remnant, 23 October 1932, from South Jacksonville, Florida, to Lyndhurst, New Jersey, for shipment of baby alligators, the third category of lives that were specifically identified as requiring Special Handling service. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.



FIGURE 5. Fees were reduced in July 1928 to promote Special Handling services. The top rate was reduced from 25¢ to 20¢ for parcels from 10 to 70 lb. The other new fees were 10¢ for less than 2 lb. and 15¢ from 2 to 10 lb. Special Handling fees were based on parcel weight, not distance shipped. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

should assure the most expeditious handling possible.<sup>72</sup> This meant that Special Handling parcels would be delivered with the next scheduled first-class delivery, but not immediately, as Special Delivery required.

### POPULARITY AND PRACTICALITY OF SPECIAL HANDLING

Although the service was developed for lives, numerous businesses and individuals outside agribusiness found this new

mailing category perfectly suited to applications in their mailings. A few examples have been verified by the mailing wrappers that have survived these applications. The printing industry moved both printing plates and finished print jobs with Special Handling to meet press run and issue deadlines (Figure 7). Non-profits, libraries, churches, and service organizations, including, for example, AA, shipped time-sensitive movie film and slides with Special Handling to assure arrival by publication or meeting schedule requirements (Figure 8). On a strictly personal level, college students and some military personnel were kept in clean clothes and tasty snacks by the movement and return of laundry



FIGURE 6. Mailing tag, 14 October 1926, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Buffalo, New York, assured the fastest delivery possible for a parcel: Special Handling to move between post offices with the first-class mail and Special Delivery to provide immediate delivery from the post office of the addressee. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

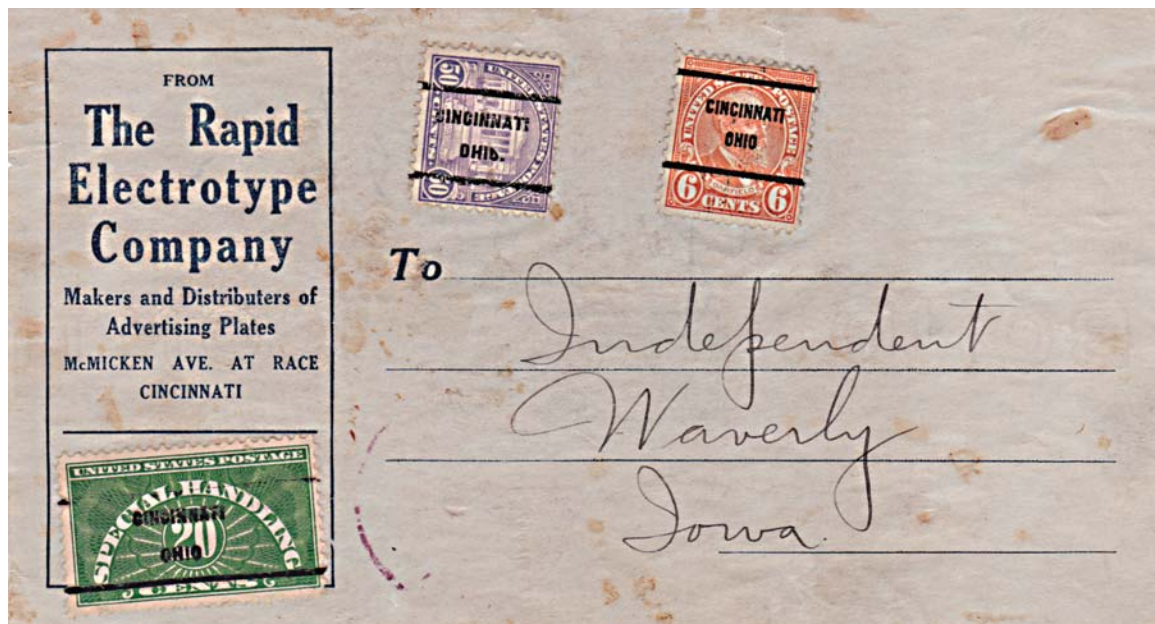


FIGURE 7. Mailing label, June 1931, from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Waverly, Iowa, for an expedited shipment of printing plates for advertising to the Waverly *Independent* newspaper. The 20¢ Special Handling stamp covered from 10 to 70 lb. for any distance shipped. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

cases between dorm or barracks and home with the speed provided by Special Handling (Figure 9).

Special Handling had both its supporters and detractors, but proponents and opponents alike took sides relative to the stamps and not to the service. Service-designated stamps were

introduced in 1925 and updated in 1928 to reflect the new reduced rates. In fact, the 10¢, 15¢, and 20¢ stamps remained available until withdrawn in 1959, fully 31 years later, and arguably, they hold the record for the longest-running, regularly available postage stamps in U.S. history. Almost simultaneously,

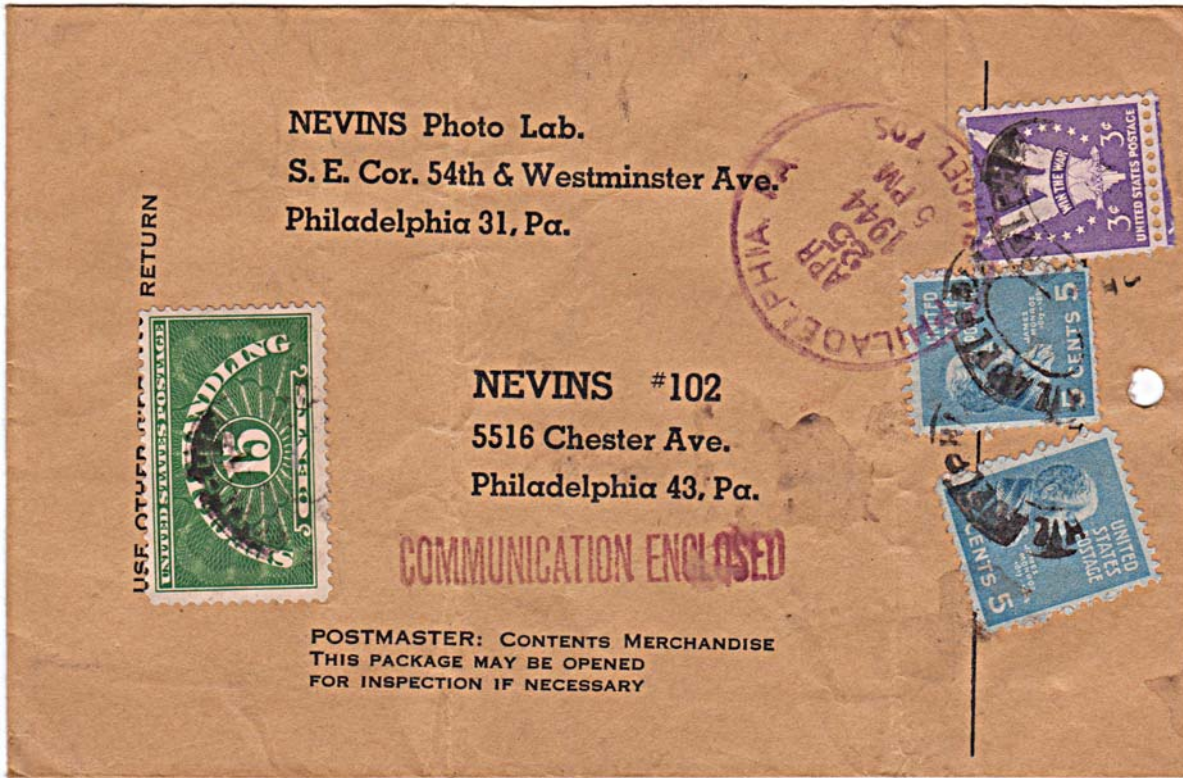


FIGURE 8. Preprinted address mailing card, dated 25 April 1944, Philadelphia intracity for a 5 lb. parcel to a Philadelphia photography laboratory. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

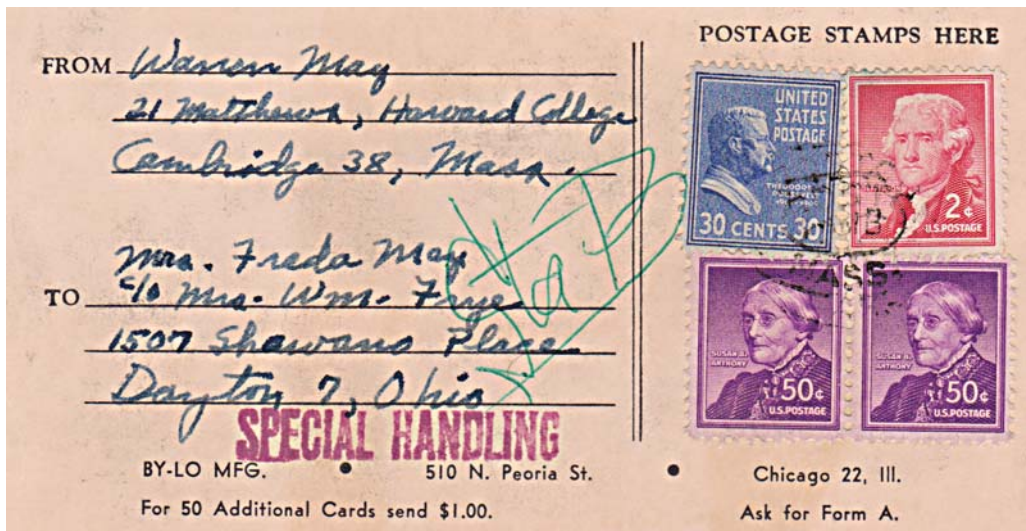


FIGURE 9. Address insert card, 22 October 1955, from Dayton, Ohio, to Cambridge, Massachusetts, placed in a reusable laundry case for a Harvard University student to have his weekly laundry done at home and returned with the speed of first-class mail. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.



FIGURE 10. Author's rendition of what a postal inspector's proposed design for a distinctive triangular Special Handling stamp in 1928 might look like.

Special Handling rates were unchanged from 1928 to 1949, and only raised 5¢ in each weight category until their next advance in 1957. Opponents of the distinctive stamps claimed everyone knew that day-old chicks required special handling to survive and that dedicated stamps were unnecessary, regular stamps would suffice. Representing the other side of the argument, one postal inspector claimed this service was so critical that even more distinctive stamps were essential; he proposed the first triangular stamp design in U.S. postal history (Figure 10).

Suffice it to say, the public generally has never understood Special Handling or the advantages of using the service. First Assistant Postmaster General John H. Bartlett, in the January 1928 *Postmasters' Advocate*, recommended increased advertising for the service, pointing out that "Ordinary parcel post not having the special handling stamp thereon, and therefore not entitled to the special handling service, is . . . necessarily slower and less careful than the special-handling service . . . [wherein] a bundle is specially handled from beginning to end. It is not put into storage cars with other parcel post, but travels in the railway postal cars where men are employed." And further, "The Department has recommended the consolidation of these two stamps, but that has not yet been enacted into law."<sup>3</sup> Had Special Handling and Special Delivery services been consolidated, the result would have provided a means for parcels to move from the post office of origin to the addressee at the same speed as a first-class letter.

### TRANSITION TO PRIORITY MAIL

The value of Special Handling itself has never been questioned, and its benefits have been acknowledged ever since its introduction; however, the service never really caught on with the general public. From 1925 to 2005, revenues grew from \$0.7 million to \$10.3 million, relatively insignificant in terms of overall U.S. Postal Service operations. To put this into perspective, total package services revenue in 2010 was \$1.5 billion.

In the presence of competitive services, Special Handling revenue fell in 1948 when Air Parcel Post was introduced (Figure 11) and again in 1968 when Priority Mail and Parcel Airlift services were introduced (Figure 12). Air Parcel Post allowed the shipper to specify parcel movement by air but carried a higher-priced rate structure than Special Handling; however, Special Handling also required shipment via air if it were deemed faster than surface movement.

Priority Mail incorporated the best of both Air Parcel Post and Special Handling services, moving parcels with the speed and efficiency of first-class mail and incorporating both the weight and distance factors associated with Parcel Post, but at a lower cost than Special Handling. Shippers of lives still used Special Handling but transitioned to Priority Mail over time as they found clerks willing to accept their time-sensitive parcels—live chicks, game birds, bees, and bait, for example—at the lower rates of Priority Mail. Today there are but a few shippers of lives who specify the Special Handling option, perhaps a result of tradition and confidence in the service.

### CURRENT REGULATIONS

As of this writing, Special Handling still exists, although it would seem to be obsolete in the presence of Priority Mail and Express Mail services. It is unclear from extensive interviews with U.S. Postal Service (USPS) personnel exactly what service is provided for the fee charged, but the regulations are so brief as to allow the complete statement of what the current Domestic Mail Manual, section 503, part 13.0, says:

The Special Handling Fee is in addition to postage and other fees, per piece.

The applicable special handling fee must be paid in addition to postage for each addressed piece for which special handling service is desired. Except for official mail, the special handling fee must be paid at the time of mailing. For official mail, the special handling fee is collected under established reimbursement procedures.

Special handling service provides preferential handling, but not preferential delivery, to the extent practicable in dispatch and transportation. The service does not itself insure the article against loss or damage. Special handling service is mandatory for material that requires extra care in handling, transportation, and delivery.

Special handling service is available only for First-Class Mail, Priority Mail (excluding Critical Mail), Package Services, and Parcel Select pieces.

The following extra services may be combined with special handling if the applicable standards for the services are met and the additional service fees are paid: COD, Delivery Confirmation, Insurance, PAL (for Package Services only), Return receipt for merchandise, and Signature Confirmation.



FIGURE 11. Air Parcel Post service was introduced on 1 September 1948 at rates substantially higher than Special Handling. This is one of four covers prepared by Henry Hammelman to commemorate this new service. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.



FIGURE 12. A new Parcel Airlift service was introduced for shipments up to 30 lb. to overseas military post offices. This had little impact on Special Handling revenues since very little international mail employed the Special Handling option. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.



[Regarding] Bees and Poultry, unless sent at the First-Class Mail or Priority Mail prices, special handling is required for parcels containing honeybees or baby poultry.

The marking “Special Handling” must appear prominently above the address and to the right of the return address on each piece for which special handling service is requested.

The Parcel Select nonmachinable surcharge is not charged on parcels sent with special handling.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, even the specific regulations written for Special Handling support the use of Priority Mail for honeybees and baby poultry, and the lower rate structure for Priority Mail seems to favor Priority Mail over Special Handling. First class is also supported, but with a 13 oz. weight limitation, this class of mail service is not really applicable for chicks and bees.

Historically, Special Handling pieces were the last parcels loaded into a given shipping container or vehicle and the first offloaded upon arrival at each destination. Mail sacks containing Special Handling matter had their own special yellow tags for high visibility (Figure 13). The fee for this special treatment was, and is, in addition to the basic postage for any class of service and is not included in any class of service; further, Special Handling is specifically excluded from the new Critical Mail category, a reduced-cost commercial subset of Priority Mail.



FIGURE 13. Since 1928, distinctive yellow baggage tags have been used to alert postal workers that Special Handling parcels were enclosed, which required shipping with the first-class mail. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

### SPECIAL HANDLING AND INSURED MAIL FORMS

Another ambiguity regarding the intention of the U.S. Postal Service regarding Special Handling becomes evident upon examination of the current domestic insured mail receipt forms, both the black version for \$200 and under (PS Form 3813) and the blue form for over \$200 (PS Form 3813-P; Figure 14). Both forms provide check boxes for declaration to postal clerks as to whether parcel contents are fragile, liquid, perishable, or hazardous. The form indicates that items so marked are to be segregated from other parcels, but postal clerks differ as to whether

FIGURE 14. U.S. Postal Service Form 3813-P, May 2007, offering postal patrons the opportunity to purchase Special Handling service (enlarged in inset). There is the perception, if not the implied guarantee, that special care and attention will be given to parcels so designated. From the collection of Robert G. Rufe.

this occurs in reality. Further, these are seemingly rhetorical questions—what difference does it make if one or all four boxes are checked? The questions appear on the receipt portion of the form, which is taken by the customer and is not even attached to the parcel. These same forms also provide the expected lines for declaring the amount of insurance to be purchased and the fee for the coverage.

There is another line on these forms, however, that is virtually unknown to postal clerks and the public and is never explored, much less requested or utilized. This line provides the option to specify Special Handling, available for first-class mail, Priority Mail (excluding Critical Mail), package services, and Parcel Select pieces, as cited in the *Domestic Mail Manual*. One could argue that Special Handling was intended to be required whenever one of the four boxes was checked: fragile, liquid, perishable, or hazardous. This is not nor has it ever been the case.

The ambiguity of Special Handling in the presence of the availability of Priority Mail is most evident in interviews with USPS personnel. At the local level, window clerks, postmasters, and carriers for the most part are not aware of the existence of Special Handling. At the national level, USPS personnel acknowledge its existence as a special service, primarily as a reporting category, and verify its justified continuation because of reported stable revenues of approximately \$10 million per year. These same cooperative interviewees admit they have no idea what mail matter receives such service. One employee recalled hearing of custom-made canisters containing funerary ashes being shipped with Special Handling, “but that was many years ago.”<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Given today’s classes of mail and service options, Special Handling seems at best redundant and at worst obsolete. Even though the role of Special Handling in today’s postal system is questionable and its future uncertain, the importance of the Special Handling service is significant in the context of this year’s symposium theme: “How Commerce and Industry Shaped the Mails.” Initially it provided an upgrade to the Parcel Post system of 1913; for a small fee it allowed time-sensitive parcels or delicate lives to move with the speed of first-class mail.

Special Handling was the Post Office Department’s first response to industry’s demand for expediting Parcel Post matter. As the earliest service of the postal system to satisfy this need, Special Handling should be recognized as the forerunner of, initially, Air Parcel Post and, ultimately, today’s Priority Mail.

## NOTES

1. Post Office Department, *United States Official Postal Guide*, Monthly Supplement for April 1925, p. 3.

2. *United States Official Postal Guide*, Fourth Series, Vol. 11, No. 1, July 1931, p. 14.

3. John H. Bartlett, First Assistant Postmaster General, “Advertise the Special Handling Stamp,” *The Postmasters’ Advocate* 33, no. 7 (January 1928): 220.

4. United States Postal Service, “Mailing Standards of the United States Postal Service,” *Domestic Mail Manual*, Chapter 500: Additional Services, Section 503: Extra Services, Paragraph 13.0: Special Handling. Latest revision May 7, 2012. <http://pe.usps.com/text/dmm300/503.htm#1064255> (accessed 6 June 2012).

5. Audrey Meloni, Business Systems Analyst, USPS, in a discussion with the author, August 14, 2009, Washington, D.C.

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