

# U.S. special-handling service: you get what you pay for — or do you?

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Most of us are familiar with parcel post, airmail, special delivery and media mail, but special-handling service remains much of a mystery.

There are options to accommodate almost every conceivable postal need. Consider Express Mail, Priority Mail, insured mail, registered mail and certified mail for speed and security of delivery. Then prove it with delivery confirmation, signature confirmation and return receipts. Many postal customers find some of these services confusing, redundant or even obsolete.

Now consider a service that still exists, but that most philatelists and, indeed, even postal workers are unaware exists. This service is special handling. What is it, where did it come from, and more to the point — why does it still exist?

The story of special handling goes back to the early part of the 20th century, when it was customary for first-class mail to move quickly, but parcels limped along with less urgency on a

“as time and space available” basis.

Poultry breeders had a tough time with this situation. If their parcels were delivered with the same speed as normal parcel matter, their delicate baby chicks would perish. Undoubtedly, they lobbied postal employees for preferential treatment, and as a measure of their effectiveness, many live-animal parcels were given special handling, that is, they were moved with the first-class mail.

Not to miss out on this opportunity, the United States Post Office Department decided to formally introduce a new service for which they would collect an extra fee to help defray some of the added expense they were already incurring. The Postal Service Act of February 28, 1925, provided for a special-handling stamp “for use on fourth class mail matter, which would secure for such mail the expeditious handling accorded to mail matter of the first class.”

Eventually, the USPOD would issue four special-handling stamps (Scott

QE1-QE4), denominated 10¢, 15¢, 20¢ and 25¢, all with the same design. The 25¢ stamp was issued in 1925. The other three were issued in 1928. The stamps are shown in Figure 1.

Now that this service was specifically offered by the USPOD, all baby chicks and baby alligators had a good prospect of surviving their adventure in the mailstream. A typical label for a special-handling parcel containing live chicks is shown in Figure 2.

Queen bees were added to special-handling coverage in 1928. Revenue generated from the sale of these special-handling stamps for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1926, the first full year of service, was \$726,625. Poultry farmers found an ally in the Post Office Department, which welcomed the new income stream.

While researching the special-handling service, I discovered some interesting correspondence in the files of the third assistant postmaster general in the library of the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum.



Figure 1. The four United States special-handling stamps (Scott QE1-QE4), issued in 1925-28.

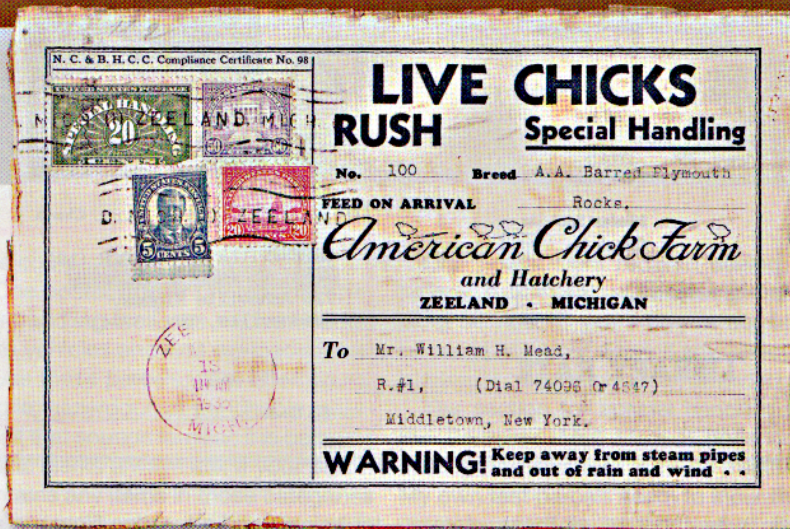


Figure 2. A typical label for a special-handling parcel containing live chicks.

To ensure that postal clerks could easily notice special-handling stamps, in a June 19, 1928, letter to First Assistant Postmaster General John H. Bartlett, H.N. Hanson, Boston assistant postmaster, suggested that they should be, "... of a distinctive shape, perhaps a large triangular shape, something that could not be mistaken for anything but a Special Handling stamp even by the most ignorant of railroad porters or the most careless of post office employees." My conception of what would have been the first U.S. triangular postage stamp is shown in Figure 3.

On June 27, 1928, Third Assistant Postmaster General Robert S. Regar responded, dismissing the suggestion for numerous reasons, not the least being the "... difficulties that would be encountered in the perforating."

The proposal demonstrates that, in 1928, delays in the delivery of special-

handling parcels were of concern, providing credible evidence that the service itself was indeed necessary. Revenue for special handling for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1928, was \$1,085,504, an amount that would not be exceeded until 17 years later.

In a July 2, 1942, letter to the officer-in-charge of the St. Louis Office of the Inspector, post office inspector M.L. Edwards in Sedalia, Missouri, questioned the necessity of the use of special-handling stamps to show payment for the service. He cited postal employees' familiarity with the regulations for handling parcels containing day-old chicks, and suggested that regular postage stamps would be sufficient to show payment for the service. His letter was forwarded up the chain of command with a favorable recommendation.

On July 23, 1942, Third Assistant Postmaster General Ramsey S. Black,

whose office was responsible for stamp design and production, responded that live chick parcels were just one type of fourth-class matter eligible for special-handling service, and pointed out that regular postage stamps were already authorized for use on special-handling parcels, so long as the parcels were labeled "Special Handling."

Not easily deterred, Edwards responded in an August 15, 1942, letter that, in his experience, 99 percent of use of the special-handling service was for "... the purpose of expediting delivery of baby chicks."

Edwards reiterated the advisability of eliminating the special-handling stamps, stating, "... it should not be difficult to instruct the mailers relative to such substitution of ordinary postage stamps for special handling stamps.

"Inasmuch as each parcel on which the special handling privilege is requested must be endorsed conspicuously 'Special Handling,' it is my opinion there will be no delay or other failure of service should ordinary stamps be affixed in all instances in lieu of special handling stamps."

Edwards' recommendation was discussed at a staff meeting of the Office of the Third Assistant Postmaster General December 10, 1942. A memorandum from that meeting, dated December 27, 1942, states that

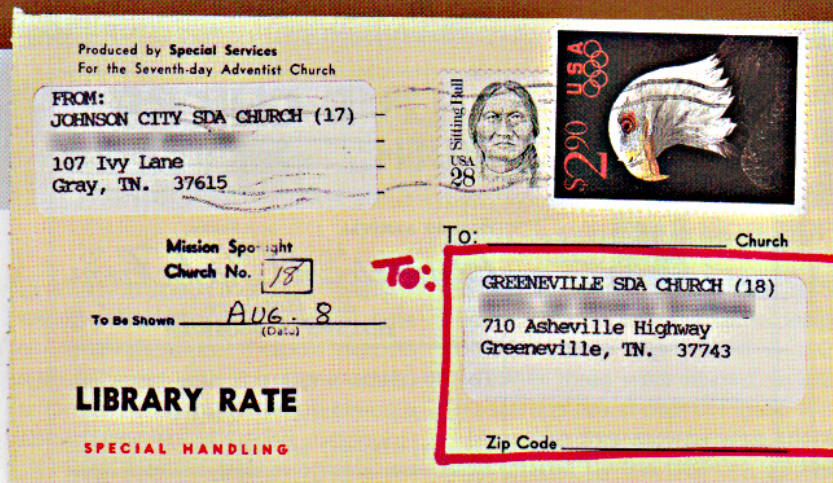


Figure 3. The author's mock-up of what the special-handling stamp would have looked like if the suggestion that it be triangular format had been adopted for the stamps.



Figure 4. A baggage tag for mail bags containing parcels with special-handling service, form No. PS TAG 4. The form number is dated May 1972.

Figure 5. A package insert card for 16-millimeter training and education films mailed at the library rate with special handling in July 1991.



at the meeting, U.S. Superintendent of Stamps Robert E. Fellers "... did not think we should discontinue the issuance of the special handling stamps." Subject dismissed.

Special-handling stamps were produced every year from 1940 through 1955, but in quantities of fewer than 1 million stamps annually in an era when a typical run of commemorative stamps would be 55 million to 110 million stamps. After 1955, the stamps were never produced again, and all the printing plates were melted for recycling in 1959.

There is no trail of evidence to ex-

plain why the use of these stamps was phased out, but there is a plausible scenario. On July 1, 1957, the rate for this service at the minimum weight category of 2 pounds or less increased from 15¢ to 25¢. The stamps' denominations, however, had been unchanged since 1928, when the 10¢, 15¢ and 20¢ rates and corresponding stamps were introduced. The new minimum-service fee was higher than the face value of any of the existing special-handling stamps. The rates, of course, were even higher for the two higher-weight categories.

Rather than issue a new denomination, special-handling stamps were phased out and replaced by regular postage stamps. Most surviving examples of use from the early 1950s indicate that regular postage stamps were predominantly being used to show payment of special handling on most pieces.

The USPOD *Postal Bulletin* indicates that the stamps were withdrawn from post offices in October 1957. The final official removal from sale to the public occurred September 11, 1959, when the *Postal Bulletin* announced their removal from sale at the Philatelic Agency.

Although the stamps were gone, the service remained. By postal regulation, baby chicks and honeybees were still eligible for the special-handling service, but now only regular postage stamps were available to show payment of the fee.

A baggage tag for mail bags containing parcels with special-handling service, form No. PS TAG 4, is shown in Figure 4. The form number is dated May 1972.

A package insert card for 16-millime-

ter training and education films mailed at the library rate with special handling in July 1991 is shown in Figure 5.

This service continues today but with competition from modern expedited shipping options, such as Priority Mail and Express Mail, which would seem to render special handling obsolete. Extensive interviews with U.S. Postal Service personnel reassure me that the service is alive and well, and their official billing determinants reports indicate that revenue generated by special handling was just shy of \$9 million for fiscal year 2009.

Statistics for the first quarter of fiscal year 2010 (the latest period available) are shown in the table shown here.

About 83 percent of the 1.1 million transactions specifying special-handling service in fiscal year 2009 were associated with first-class mail. However, I made an extensive random survey of large poultry and gamebird breeders, and all these shippers of live chicks and birds use Priority Mail (95 percent) or Express Mail (5 percent). None use and most never have heard of special handling, including several veterans of their shipping departments. Since first-class service under current regulations is only applicable for packages weighing up to 13 ounces, baby chicks and bees would seem to be a negligible factor in the continuation of special handling.

While acknowledging the statistics showing that it is still being used, Postal Service officials cannot identify the customers who use special handling. Postal clerks are generally caught by surprise when I guide them to the location of special-handling options on their automated-rate and ser-

Special Handling		
Fiscal Year 2010, 1st Quarter - Preliminary		
Mail Category	Transactions	Revenues (\$)
First Class Mail	211,961	1,568,512
Priority Mail		
10 lbs. and less	17,859	132,155
More than 10 lbs.	289	3,005
<b>Total</b>	<b>18,148</b>	<b>135,160</b>
<b>Package Services:</b>		
Parcel Post		
10 lbs. and less	6,435	71,514
More than 10 lbs.	5,177	12,301
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,612</b>	<b>83,815</b>
Media Mail		
10 lbs. and less	1,440	16,003
More than 10 lbs.	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,440</b>	<b>16,003</b>
Bound Printed Matter		
10 lbs. and less	183	2,034
More than 10 lbs.	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>2,034</b>
Library Rate		
10 lbs. and less	627	6,968
More than 10 lbs.	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>627</b>	<b>6,968</b>
<b>Total Package Services</b>	<b>13,862</b>	<b>108,820</b>
<b>Total to Mail Classes</b>	<b>243,971</b>	<b>1,812,492</b>
USPS	300	—
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>244,271</b>	<b>1,812,492</b>

Category detail for United States special handling — first quarter fiscal year 2010, the most recent reporting period.

vice computers.

One postal worker offered that special-handling mail was the last loaded onto vehicles and first off-loaded, because these parcels were often liquid, fragile, hazardous or perishable material. If that sounds familiar, it is because postal clerks always ask if your parcel contains any items in those categories when you present a parcel for mailing. They are the four check boxes for Priority Mail declarations. Insured mail forms for both the over \$200 coverage and the \$200 and under categories carry the same four check boxes, and there is a separate fee-option line for special handling.

It is possible that clerks and patrons in some parts of the country have discovered this option and are requesting special handling for insurable parcels with delicate contents.

One postal clerk recalled seeing a funerary urn sent with special-handling service 10 years ago or so, but he could not recall what, if any, special treatment might have been afforded.

The section for special handling in the *Domestic Mail Manual* does not specify how this mail is to be treated. My own test parcels seem to incur the same processing as the rest of the mail in the class that they are mailed in, such as media mail or parcel post, even though I have paid for the special-handling service.

Special handling remains on the books, and the service was used 1.1 million times last year, but what special handling was accorded in these instances remains unclear.

I have found many post offices that handle baby chicks and honeybees, and have confirmed the special treat-

ment afforded these parcels. I have yet to discover a commercial shipment that has been designated and remitted with the special-handling service.

I wonder if postal patrons using the service understand that it "secures for such mail the expeditious handling accorded to mail matter of the first class," or do they expect something special — maybe even something extraordinary?

If not delicate fuzzy and scaly critters, what are postal patrons shipping with special-handling service, and what do they think they're getting for their money?

As one good-humored window clerk quipped, "Somewhere at the end of your journey, I expect you'll find out 'Why the chicken crossed the road,' but I doubt it will have anything to do with getting to the other side!" ■