



The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society

WOLFE AND THE POST OFFICE

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Presented at the 8th annual Nero Wolfe Assembly in New York, 1986

I HAVE OFTEN BEEN STRUCK BY THE HIGH regard that Wolfe has for the United States Post Office, an opinion not shared by anyone else I know. In one tale after the other, he employs the Post Office to carry his draft notices to various suspects, commanding them to appear in his office for one of his inquiries. These marching orders seem to be received minutes after they have been issued. It is equally startling that almost everyone turns up. The suspects and other assorted characters never have other plans, and only once in my memory has someone refused to play.

Given my experience with the U.S. Post Office - the letter that took a week to get from West 25th Street to West 57th Street, and the catch phrase of our time, "The check is in the mail" - I decided to take a hard look at the role played by the U.S. Post Office in the Corpus. Since I started with the premise that postal service had declined precipitously since the books were written, certainly the earlier ones, a scientific test seemed in keeping the spirit of the project. To that end, I mailed letters to family and friends selected for their geographical diversity. Each person received two copies of the same message, both mailed at the same time. One was sent from the General Post Office on Eighth Avenue and 33rd Street; that's the main post office in New York City. The other was sent from a post box on Eighth Avenue and 27th Street, my neighborhood. It's just a short walk from Wolfe's own West 35th Street. It gave me momentary pause when I thought I had missed an opportunity to mail the second batch from the post box nearest Wolfe's own address. That, however, would have been sea mail, since as everyone who has walked along West 35th Street knows, the addresses given for Wolfe's brownstone put it somewhere in the Hudson River.

I asked each recipient to note the day and, if possible, the exact time the letters were received, and this information duly made its way back to me. The mailing went to both the East and West sides of Manhattan, also to Brooklyn; Demarest, New Jersey (a small town that evidently has a direct line, if not to God, then to the General Post Office in Manhattan); Camden, Maine; Tamarac, Florida; Blair, Wisconsin; Denver, Colorado; and Los Angeles, California. East, West, North, and South, the bases were covered. The letters were mailed on June 30, 1986. The G.P.O. batch was deposited at 6:00 pm, and the mail box lot five minutes later. Gleefully, I awaited the returns.

But I found that Murphy's Law has a direct corollary: "If everything is expected to go wrong, it surely won't." The Post Office, in a display of efficiency not seen before or since, delivered most of the letters post haste (excuse the pun). The letters mailed at the G.P.O. were postmarked June 30th, the day I mailed them. Those in the post box, July 1st. That was expected since hardly any mail boxes in Manhattan provide for pickup after 5:00 pm, even on a weekday, which this was. The mail that had been deposited at the G.P.O. at 6:00 in the evening was delivered within the city the next day, even to Brooklyn, and even to Demarest, New Jersey. I have been advised by my resident correspondent in Demarest, Emily Mikulewicz, that the mail service to Demarest is always this good. She doesn't know why - it just grows that way. In each of these instances, to New York, Brooklyn, and New Jersey, letters dropped in the post box were received just one day later. This is logical since they weren't even picked up until the next morning.

As the distances grew, however, the efficiency of the postal service diminished roughly in inverse proportion and much more than I expected. The mail to Florida took two days from the G.P.O. and three days from the post box. Maine was a puzzler. Both letters were received together three days after they were mailed. They must have been held for the pony that carried the mail from Portland to the little town of Camden.

Moving well beyond these environs, it took only three days to reach a very rural area of Wisconsin, a location comparable to Lily Rowan's Montana ranch. It took the same three days to Denver and to Los Angeles (this was from the G.P.O.). The post box mail took five days to Wisconsin and California. The one that renewed my faith in my theory was the post box sample to Denver. That one arrived on July 8th, eight days after it was mailed, and five days after the one sent from the G.P.O. The pony here must have been plumb tuckered out.

While grouching to some friends about the rapid delivery to the Metropolitan New York area addresses, I was advised that I had inadvertently speeded things up by typing the envelopes. That was only fair since Archie always typed Wolfe's letters. But the Post Office now has machines that can scan and sort typed addresses, while it still requires people to read those that are handwritten. That also sounded reasonable, so that last week I sent another mailing to the original recipients, this time with addresses handwritten. I had scarcely returned from the mail box, when Emily called to say that hers had arrived in Demarest the next morning. (Laughter, as usual, rang over the phone.) Likewise the recipient on the Upper West Side, our Werowance. California called in to say that his arrived three days after the posting, which was better than the first mailing from the post box. I stopped taking phone calls. The slogan chiseled above the glorious front portico of the G.P.O. needs to be amended. "Neither rain, nor snow, nor dark of night, nor Ettagale's miserable handwriting shall keep these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

But these delivery achievements would still have been woefully inadequate for Nero Wolfe, who used the post office more in the nature of a messenger service than as mail delivery. In seven of the stories, Wolfe's reliance on the post office is absolute, and absolutely justified. Only once did I find a reference to poor mail delivery. And that, not surprisingly, was in his last book, AFAM, published in 1975. Going through the mail, Archie says, "The letter from Hewitt about an orchid was mailed last Saturday. Six days from Long Island to Manhattan, forty-two miles. I can walk it in one day."

It was a very different matter in the beginning, the very beginning, with the publication of FERD in 1934. In that story, on a Friday, Wolfe instructs Archie to place ads (sorry Mr. Wolfe, advertisements) in local newspapers to find someone who saw Manual Kimball land in a pasture. The following Monday, by 8:30 am, Archie had already collected more than twenty answers to the ad, and is tooling his way up to Hawthorne to question one of the respondents.

The ad had been seen and answered, and the answers mailed and delivered to the various newspapers, and then sorted into the sender's postboxes. And all this between the time it appeared in the Saturday papers and Archie's visit to the newspaper Monday morning. I know that people were much more inclined to take pen in hand in 1934 when telephones were not universally available, but to get responses from rural towns in upstate New York, picked up and mailed, and ready for Archie Monday morning? Pfu. There are plenty of mail boxes in New York City that offer no pickup after one o'clock Saturday and none at all Sunday. But, of course, in those less efficient days before ZIP mail and Federal Express, and kamikaze bicycle messengers, the post office diligently delivered mail to the door several times a day.

In BAND, published in 1936, Archie types a letter for Hilda Lindquist to the Marquis of Clives. It's Sunday evening, and Wolfe tells Archie the letter should be written and posted with a special delivery stamp before the morning collection. Clives has the letter in hand when he turns up in Wolfe's office Tuesday morning. These tight schedules are one of the unsung hallmarks of the stories. They merely follow the Aristotelian unities of place and action. The post office played a vital role in enabling Wolfe to follow that schedule. His use of special delivery also depends on the addressees being home to receive the mail. Obliging, they always are. For if they were not, and another try was required later, Wolfe would have been hard pressed to gather the suspects in the office for one of those tidy summings up or summing ups, as you prefer.

In SLNT, published in 1948, the post office nearly becomes a fourth operative for Wolfe. On a Tuesday morning, at ten minutes to nine, Fritz comes down with Wolfe's breakfast dishes. He also has a note for Archie, telling him to arrange for Del Bascom to be present for a meeting with Saul Panzer and Bill Gore at 11:00 am. They arrive promptly and are waking for Wolfe when he comes down from the plant rooms at 11:00 am. Archie is shooed out of the meeting, but informed at lunch time that reports from Bascom were to reach Wolfe unopened. One chapter later, Archie says (the next day, Wednesday), "Here come the envelopes from Bascom." There were four in the morning mail, three in the one o'clock delivery, and in the late afternoon nine more arrive by messenger.

There are several mysteries here. How were the operatives employed by Bascom, who could not have received their marching orders until after the meeting with Wolfe that concluded at lunch time Tuesday, able to do their investigating and write their reports and mail them so that they could be received next morning? Later that same Wednesday, Wolfe prepares to return Mrs. Boone's check, by mail of course. After signing and blotting his signature, Wolfe says, "You'd better take this to the post office. I suspect the evening collection from the box doesn't get made sometimes." How does the great detective know this? Archie says that although it was only a ten minute walk to the post office, to Ninth Avenue and back, he was in no mood for walking. So he drives there! So Wolfe has moved the post office one avenue block over to bring it closer to the brownstone. But clearly it's the General Post Office they're talking about since it's the only one in the neighborhood and the only one that is open twenty-four hours a day.

In gunw, published in 1950, Margaret Mion and Fred Wepler turn up in Wolfe's office on a Sunday afternoon. According to Archie they leave two hours later. Following up on information they have given him, Wolfe sends letters to the suspects, inviting them to a session of questions and answers. While Archie is complaining about the veracity of the clients, Wolfe says, "Shut up. Your notebook. These letters must go at once." And right on schedule, Monday evening, the six invited guests all show up. Three of them were so punctual that Archie says, "right on the dot of nine o'clock." He and Wolfe hadn't even finished their after dinner coffee in the office. Still, I must confess that all of the above is certainly possible. After all, I too was able to send mail and have it delivered the next day in the Metropolitan area.

And when Wolfe was delivering his billets dovx, he could rely on two and more mail deliveries a day. But it is when he expects the same service from clear across the country that my credulity reached the breaking point. I accept murder, deceit, blackmail, and everything Stout dishes up, but not one-day mail service coast to coast. It is 1951, and the story is BOOK. Archie has gone to Glendale, California to see Len Dykes' sister, Mrs. Clarence (Peggy) Potter. Together they send a letter to Mr. James Corrigan at the law firm where Dykes had worked. At 3:23 pm, Archie calls Wolfe from a telephone booth and tells him that he has just put an airmail stamp on Mrs. Potter's letter and dropped it in the slot at the Glendale Post Office. The next morning at 9:30 am (Glendale time - in New York it is 12:30 pm), Archie recalls, "At the Glendale Post Office they had told me that the letter would make a plane that would land at LaGuardia at eight in the morning, New York time. So it should be delivered at Madison Avenue any time now, possibly right this minute, as I stretched and yawned." By Archie's calculations, the letter would arrive at LaGuardia at 8:00 the following morning, and be delivered in Manhattan the same day. Corrigan takes a few hours to think about what he's going to do, for it isn't until nearly two in the afternoon (California time - in New York it's 5:00 pm) that Mrs. Potter calls Archie and says that Corrigan has just called her, responding to the letter. At this juncture, even the airlines are put on Wolfe's schedule. Corrigan tells Mrs. Potter that he is taking a plane in New York and he'll get to Los Angeles at 8:00 in the morning. Bear in mind that this is 1951, just a few years after the close of World War II. Passenger planes were few and far between, and with propeller planes, flying times were very long. The Red Eye had not yet made its appearance, yet that's just what Archie is describing. Corrigan would surely have had to land once along the way for refueling and the flight would have taken at least ten hours. Yet there he was in Los Angeles at eight in the morning. He leaves later the same day at five o'clock, with Archie snaring a seat on the same plane, an idea he realizes was not such a good one shortly after the plane takes off. After all, Corrigan might be the murderer.

Archie spends a long sleepless night, reaching the office just shortly before Wolfe's morning session with the plants. At 10:30 am,

Archie is shaving when Corrigan calls. The members of the law firm make an appointment for eleven o'clock. That same evening after dinner, Corrigan calls. During the conversation, Corrigan is apparently shot to death. The real denouement comes for me with the morning mail, which Archie is looking through the next day at 8:55 am. In it, he reports, is an envelope postmarked Grand Central Station, midnight. That lengthy explanation so thoughtfully provided to Wolfe by the murderer is vital to solving the case. Once again, the incredible efficiency of the post office enables Wolfe to pull a case out of the fire. If Rex Stout were still writing today, I predict Federal Express would displace the U.S. Post Office in the crucial role of summoning suspects, delivering ultimatums, and moving plots along to their inevitable conclusions.

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