

A BOSTON AND MAINE MAIL CAR

## *The Postoffice on Wheels*

By J. A. Crowley, *Correspondent, Terminal Division*

A sketch of the beginning of the railway mail service when the first operated "traveling postoffice" car, as compared with the present day railroad postoffice car, would be about the same as the caboose of the "ice" train, compared with the observation car of the "Minute Man," may be of interest to employees of the Boston and Maine Railroad, particularly to those who assist in handling the tons of mail moving regularly on our trains in custody of your Uncle Samuel.

"The date of beginning of railway mail service in New England, and on the Boston and Maine, is not definitely known," says our office of the manager of mail, milk and express. "The United States Railway Mail office at Boston, however, has the service record of a postal clerk, J. H. Pitney, who was appointed to the railway mail service on the Troy and Boston Railroad on July 22, 1861, in the term of President Lincoln. He served on this same line (now our Berkshire division) until Sept. 27, 1915, when he died on duty."

In the government building in Chicago, Ill., stands a modest bronze bust erected to the memory of George B. Armstrong, "the father of the railway mail service." And singularly enough the memorial was installed by postoffice clerks whose lot Mr. Armstrong made easier. Like all men of vision, Mr. Armstrong encountered hostility in many quarters before the fulfillment of his dream. Merchants and bankers had their doubts and fears about the security of valuable mail being sorted on railroad trains. Some newspapers were "fiercely hostile." "I did not ask him if he was crazy, but I had my suspicions," relates a man to whom Mr. Armstrong confided in 1861 that he was going to put the postoffice on wheels.

Even the railroads had little confidence in the scheme. They looked with undisguised disfavor on the new plan. However, by the personal industry of Mr. Armstrong the first railway mail service was established under his supervision on the Galena division of the Chicago and North Western Railway, August 28, 1864, from the Wells Street station,

Chicago, to Clinton, Iowa, in an apartment car improvised for the purpose. The car equipment included a stove and two letter cages borrowed from the Chicago postoffice, where Mr. Armstrong was assistant postmaster. Two clerks from the same postoffice sorted the mail while train was en route to destination. Some letters were carried beyond their stations, but the success of the experiment was immediately apparent.

By the act of June 3, 1865, the traveling postoffice was recognized by law under the name of "railway postoffice." The first complete railway postoffice cars were built by the Chicago and North Western Railway in 1867, and put in service between Boone and Council Bluffs. The service was rapidly extended to other railroads. Mr. Armstrong's scheme had simplified the mail service by improving regularity and dispatch through the distribution of mail on trains, thereby relieving the congestion and consequent delays at large postoffices.

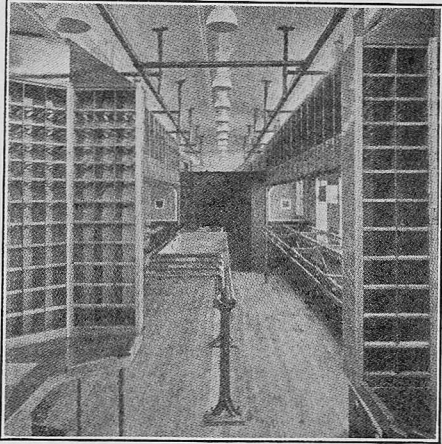
General Grant, in 1869, when serving as President of the United States, approved the consolidation of the railway postoffices with all other railroad mail service, and appointed Mr. Armstrong the first general superintendent of the railway mail service. President Grant was mindful of the services rendered the Union cause by this man during the Civil War. President Lincoln personally urged Mr. Armstrong to visit Europe as United States Postal Commissioner, and study foreign postal systems, but the germ of the "postoffice on wheels" idea was too firmly rooted to forsake it even for the duration of such a trip.

Many of the letters entrusted to Mr. Armstrong's care were "a message to Garcia." He particularly labored to get letters to soldiers of the western and southwestern armies as fast as a passenger could travel. A letter for Admiral Porter from the Navy Department at Washington, D. C., made up in the Chicago distributing postoffice in separate pouch, by Mr. Armstrong's personal guidance, reached the flagship via the Illinois Central Railroad "as fast as the

Admiral's gunner could have made the trip."

It may be that Mr. Armstrong conceived his great idea as he sat by a campfire on the banks of the Missouri on a bleak winter night, as he helped guard stacks of mail on the ground.

Following in the track of the covered wagons bearing settlers to the far west, and in the wake of the Federal armies



INTERIOR OF BOSTON AND MAINE RAILWAY MAIL CAR

of the west and southwest an avalanche of mail descended upon the Chicago and the St. Joseph, Missouri postoffice, the final clearing house for dispatching west-bound mail.

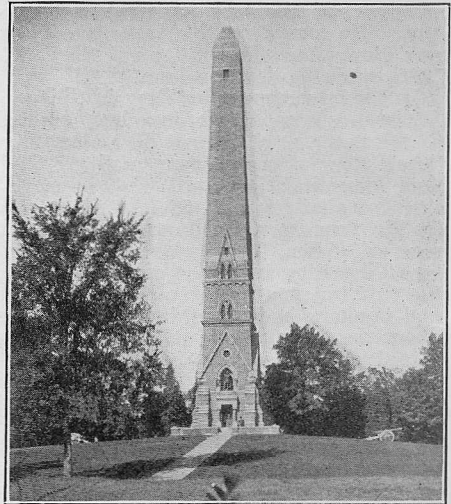
These pouches were labelled for the large distributing postoffices at Salt Lake City, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Denver. The pouches were unloaded at Council Bluffs by postal clerks, who sometimes had to take from one to three large double wagonloads of mail out of baggage cars into wagons, which then would trudge over corduroy roads for three miles to the Missouri River opposite Omaha. In wet weather, oftentimes, the wagons would stick in the mud; and the mail would have to be unloaded, the wagon retrieved from the mire; the mail reloaded on wagon before journey was completed.

In summer weather the wagons crossed the river by ferryboat, and in the winter on the ice, but in severe weather the mails would accumulate on the eastern bank of the Missouri River, there to remain overnight in the custody of clerks who buried themselves under the pile to keep from freezing, or built campfires to endure the rigors of the weather. At the break of day, if the storm subsided sufficiently to permit landing the ferryboat, the clerks would carry the pouches to the boat and, after crossing the river, would reload them onto wagons for the Omaha office.

These are the scenes Mr. Armstrong witnessed as his idea took form. But, one little incident which brought forcibly to the mind of Mr. Armstrong the necessity for speedier handling of the mails, possible by the expansion of railroads west, southwest and northwest of Chicago, was the mouse incident. In 1853 mail for the upper peninsula of Michigan was loaded at the Green Bay postoffice, thence by dog-sleds in care of postoffice route agents in snowshoes and arctic boots over glare ice to Ontonagon. One day when the mail was unloaded at destination a nest of mice was discovered in a mail pouch. Investigation, aided by the postmarks of letters in the sack, disclosed that "Pa" and "Ma" mouse boarded the pouch at Green Bay, mistaking it for their honeymoon express, and that they had a grown-up family before the pouch reached its destination. Mr. Armstrong decided then and there that the measuring stick for the speed of transporting mail should be the speed that a passenger could travel, and not the speed with which rodents rear families. That is one of the reasons railway mail cars travel on passenger trains.

### Old Saratoga

An American victory in one of the world's fifteen decisive battles is to be celebrated on October 17th at Schuylerville, New York, on our Schuylerville branch. The battle of Saratoga, as it



is known, was fought at Schuylerville, one hundred fifty years ago. The photograph shows the Saratoga battle monument erected to commemorate the success of the Continental Army, which was to result in the freedom of the United States.