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National Postal Museum Opens “Systems at Work” Exhibit

A letter is dropped into a mailbox. How does it go from there to its destination? The answer to that and other questions unfolds in “Systems at Work,” a new permanent exhibit opening today at the Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum.

The exhibit recreates the paths of letters, magazines, parcels and other pieces of mail as they have traveled from sender to recipient over the past 200 years. In 1808, a stagecoach carries newspapers and the latest news to people hundreds of miles away. Two hundred years later, the integration of ZIP codes, barcodes, intelligent mail, automated sorting machines and advanced technologies enable the U.S. Postal Service to process and deliver mail to 150 million homes and businesses across the country.

At the exhibit’s core is a 270-degree high-resolution film experience that puts visitors into the middle of the mammoth world of a mail-processing center, surrounded by examples of automated machinery that moves mail through the system at astonishing speeds.

Interactive moments are spread through the galleries challenging visitors to process mail at various points in history. Tossing packages into mail pouches as mail clerks did in 1917, keying letters on a computerized version of a multiple position letter-sorting machine operated in 1968 and engaging handheld intelligent mail devices to scan barcodes are activities that will inform, educate, enlighten and challenge exhibit visitors. Visitors receive a postcard to gather cancellation marks from various eras to take away from the exhibit.

“The most commonly asked question by our visitors concerns how mail gets from somewhere else in the country to their home,” said Allen Kane, director of the museum. “This exhibit answers that question and shows the impressive technology that enables the Postal Service to deliver almost half of the world’s mail.”

“At a time when Americans are debating the very nature of their postal system, this exhibit reminds us of what it does, and why it has been a central part of American life,” said Nancy Pope, curator of the exhibit.

The exhibit is made possible by Motorola Solutions Foundation, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Siemens.

A special Web version of the exhibit has been created for people who are not able to visit the museum in person, and for those who want to share, relive and deepen the experience gained during their onsite visit. The address for the online version is www.npm.si.edu/systemsatwork.

The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). For more information about the Smithsonian, call (202) 633-1000 or visit the museum website at www.postalmuseum.si.edu.

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