

“It’s in the Bag” – The Shape of Turn-of-the-Century Mail

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Abstract

A Congressional Investigation of the United States Post Office Department in 1900 disclosed that postal expenditures were not and, in some cases, could not be apportioned to revenues. A remarkable anomaly in Maine, at the intersection of mail bags and a printing press, provided, at the time, a basis for costing questions of policy and regulation and, for us now, an understanding of the postal commons in its Golden Age.

Introduction

By 1900 a Joint Postal Service Commission investigating Railway Mail Pay had instigated a Special Weighing of the Mails by the Post Office Department and a Special Report by H.C. Adams, professor of political economy and finance at the University of Michigan. Adams highlighted his report with a dramatic map of the mail stream originating in the northeastern United States to disappear into the countryside, south and west.

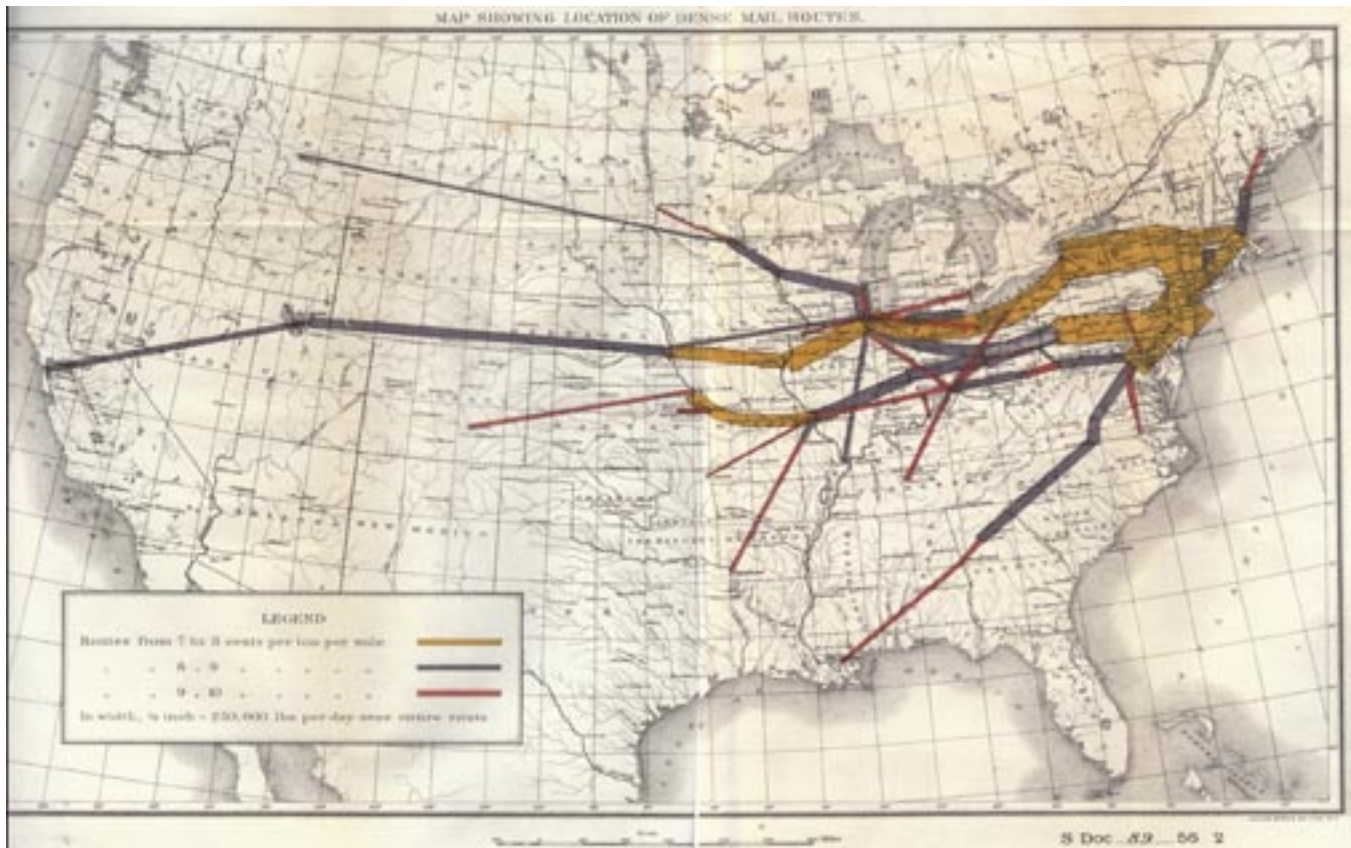


FIGURE 1. Folding map lithographed by Julius Bien & Co., NY, included after page 230 of Senate Document 89, Part 2 (56-2) “Testimony taken by the Commission to Investigate the Postal Service. Part II. Railway-Mail Pay.” 1901. H.C. Adams designed the map for his included “Special Report on Railway-Mail Pay” February 1, 1900, and observed: “The map shows the role which the dense routes play in the railway mail system of the United States...a more economical use can be made of transportation facilities where the traffic is dense than where it is sparse, and, in the absence of specific considerations to the contrary, the possibility of economy varies inversely as density.” From the collection of the authors.

The special weighing of the mails provided a complementary picture, from the perspective of the post office, rather than over the line of transportation. The 1900 Postmaster General report with all its appendices provides state by state totals for twenty-three “measures” ranging from total revenues, to weights of mail by class, to transportation metrics, to population, to post offices by class, to money orders paid and issues. The signatures of the rank of each state across the range of metrics show a singular strong correlation between rank in revenue and rank in first class mail weights. But all other inter-correlations of these metrics are, at first glance, helter skelter, corroborating the distributive nature of the postal commons.¹

Half of the weight of the mail matter, aside from equipment, was comprised of magazines and newspapers mailed to subscribers outside the county of publication. Such were widely regarded as underpaying by postage whatever were the costs of transportation, let alone the costs of distribution and delivery. Their preponderance in the mail made such Second Class matter a natural target of budgetary concerns, whatever the political, moral or economic excitement.² The conventional arrangements for railway mail pay and postage for Second Class mail matter were both structured by weight. The distributive nature of the postal system was most evident in the anomalies in rank for a state between postal revenue and the weight of Second Class matter: New Jersey declined from 8 to 26; Maine rose from 24 to 8.

Maine provided, at the time and for this paper, a case study of surprises from the 1900 mail weighing: the problem with mail bags, and the problem with costing a public utility.

1899 Weighing of the Mails & the Empty Mail Bags

Mail weighings had been attempted in the past, but had not been sufficient to link costs to revenues. Second Assistant Postmaster General W.S. Shallenberger ordered a more comprehensive “Special Weighing of the Mail October 3 to November 6, 1899.” The data would be collected on dedicated forms, part 1 to determine the weight of the mail by classes, and part 2 to find out how much originated on railroads. The instructions for each part emphasized that the equipment, “the pouches and sacks, etc.” were to be weighed separately.

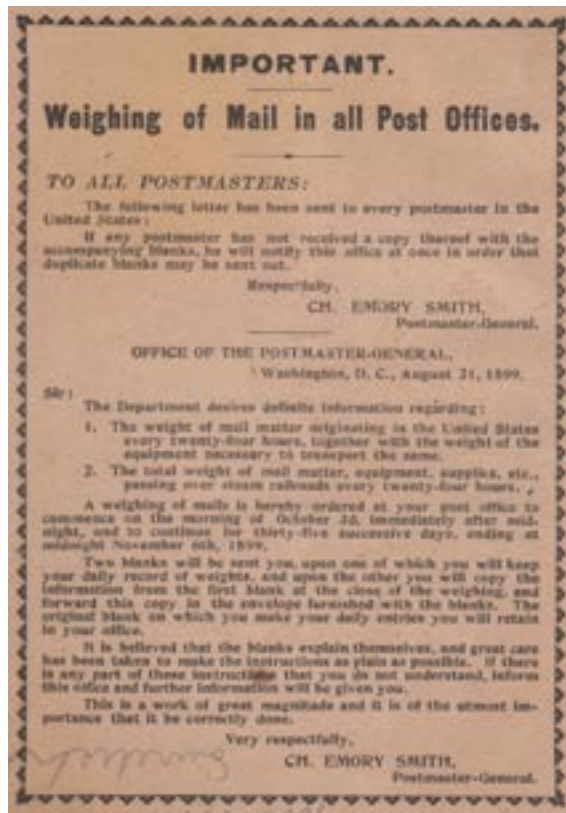


FIGURE 2. An announcement appeared on the back cover of both the September and October 1899 Official Postal Guide to remind postmasters of the responsibility to weigh their mails. From the collection of the authors.

Three areas of concern were addressed: Second Class Mail Paid as distinct from Second Class Mail Free; the weight of mail that originated with carriage by a railroad; and the weight of the empty equipment (which had never before been considered).

FIGURE 3. Copy of Post Office form S-4407, as retained by the postmaster at Town Line, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. Over 30 days, his first class mail totaled 5 pounds 8 ounces, his 3rd & 4th class matter 6 ounces, his government free matter 1 ounce, and every day his office was open he handled 5 pounds 8 ounces worth of mail bags. Town Line was in the Shickshinny Mountains above the Susquehanna River, and not on a railroad. From the collection of David L. Straight.

The two biggest surprises revealed by the mail weight statistics were that 86% of mail originated by rail, and half the weight was equipment (total weight of the empty equipment, 76,866,031 pounds, was more than half of the total weight of all mail matter handled, 150,132,405 pounds).

If equipment – especially as tare weight – dominated the mails, was the design of mail bags at fault? Marshall Cushing, private secretary to Postmaster General John Wanamaker, in 1893 described nine styles of mail bags in up to five sizes.³ The heaviest was an ordinary mail pouch for First Class mail completely in leather (which, at three and a third pounds each, Cushing recommended be redesigned). Also in leather were horse bags for use on star routes and designed to be buckled behind a saddle. A catcher pouch, for exchanges to and from railway cars, was canvas strengthened by leather bindings around the top and bottom and a leather strap around the center. A through Registered Mail pouch was canvas with a leather bottom, with a special lock. But the ‘elephant in the room’ was the jute canvas sack for Second, Third, and Fourth Class matter. New York’s post office used 6,000 catcher pouches a year, but used 9,000 of these jute sacks each day.

Cushing included Maine’s overly-large use of Second Class mail bags in describing the system that collected damaged mail sacks, repaired them, and distributed them from eleven points, noting that it was very hard to balance western and eastern locations.

“Not long ago, 10,000 bags were required for Augusta, Maine. These were mostly for second-class matter, and there could be no compensating advantage, of course in the receipt of Western mail at that point.”



FIGURE 4. Lithograph by [Herman]Bencke & [Harshaw] Scott, NY, on 1876 letterhead of J. Boyle, contractor for mail bags to the Post Office Department. The railway mail catcher bag is given prominent place on top of the display; a horse bag is on the right, a carrier bag on top left beneath another catcher bag display; and the rest of the mail bags are within the vitrine. From the collection of the authors.

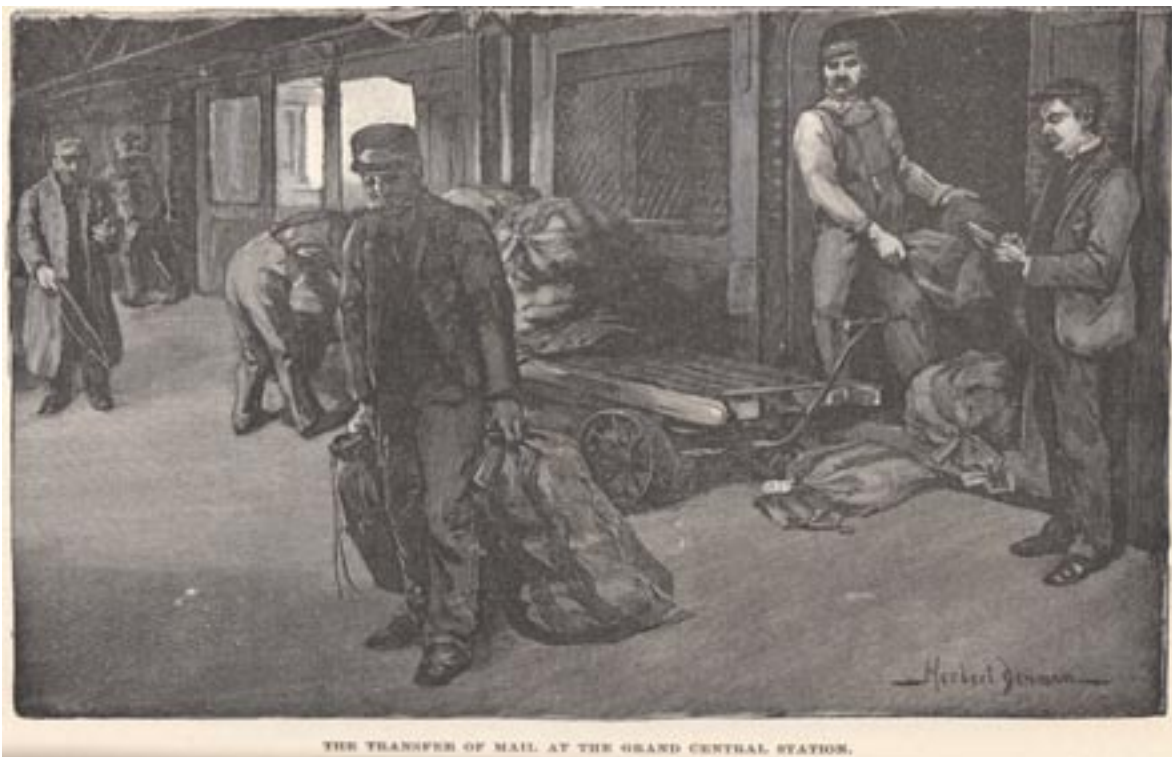


FIGURE 5. Lithograph by Herbert Denman (1855-1903, a New York figure painter), illustration page 55 in Marshall Cushing *The Story of Our Post-Office*, Boston 1893. A railway car is discharging its many Second Class mail bags at New York's Grand Central depot. From the collection of the authors.

After reviewing the statistics collected in 1899, the Post Office Department made two changes that pointed directly to the Second Class mail activities of Augusta. A different mail bag distribution system was set up – to advance thousands of bags to Maine ahead of need, sent at freight rates rather than at mail rates, and the Second Class mail sacks were made lighter (cotton canvas instead of jute).

Augusta sent out:

“over 4,000 tons of printed matter annually, most of which is mailed at the post-office at that place, and to conduct this business it requires 1,000 of our largest mail sacks daily. The average weight of these empty sacks is three and a third pounds each, consequently this department has been charged full mail rates for the transportation of this amount of empty equipment from Boston or New York storehouse to enable the publishing houses to forward their publications. With a view to reducing the cost of carrying this empty equipment and meet the demands of the office in question arrangements have been finally concluded by which a full carload (6,000 No. 1 sacks) will be forwarded weekly hereafter by freight. This will effect a very considerable saving to the Government, which is certainly demanded in view of the postage rates on second-class matter being wholly inadequate to pay the expense for the carriage of such matter.”⁴

Second Class Mail from Augusta, Maine

The Second Class per pound postage rates of the 1870s required that publishers of periodicals had to provide the Post Office Department with proof that their avowed list truly was composed of subscription-paying individuals. E. C. Allen of Augusta is credited with having invented the genre of mail-order journalism. In the years just after the Civil War he started a business selling a formula for a washing soap, and paid handsomely to have it advertised widely in periodicals served by the New York agency of George P. Rowell. To save money, he began his own publication in 1869 – *The People’s Literary Companion* - that primarily served to advertise his formula. But he soon was making his fortune advertising a myriad of other small mail order enterprises, through the medium of the 1870s pound-rate postages. Students have concluded: “all Allen wanted was a list of mailing addresses good enough to satisfy the Post Office Department.”⁵

But these “lists” were, themselves, a new genre of advertising penetration. There was a long tradition of advertising agencies providing lists to businesses so that they could send targeted circulars – mailed at a per piece rate. But mail order journals generated their subscription lists by polling advertisers and combining the several customer records. It was a way for very small manufacturers to reach well beyond their geographic area. And it was a way for innovators like Allen to become very wealthy – not from selling the periodical, but by selling ads.

Allen died in 1892 leaving twelve periodicals with an aggregate circulation of over a million, and a record of having satisfied the post office as to the veracity of his subscription list. Samuel W. Lane bought Allen’s list in 1894, but he pruned the number of publications on “Lanes’s List” to *Golden Moments* (begun 1880), *Sunshine* (1886), *Illustrated Family Herald* (1876), *National Farmer and Home Magazine* (1879) and the original *People’s Literary Companion* (1869).

Lane’s list was, in turn, taken over by William Howard Gannett, who had begun a monthly called *Comfort* in 1888 (founded by Morse & Company, published by Gannett & Morse with W.H. Gannett as editor) to sell a patent medicine called Giant Oxien. By 1892, *Comfort’s* circulation was over a million – the first American periodical to reach so many – more than any other periodical until 1905.

Gannett was an Augustan who had tried businesses away from Maine before returning with the idea of reformulating a Moxie-like nerve beverage in tablet form so it could be sold through the mail. Like Allen before him, Gannett realized that he could profit more if he began his own advertising journal – a family magazine.

At first, Gannett printed his paper at the *Kennebec Journal* press, but in 1890 bought a huge Hoe Press, and two years later upgraded to five-color printing – which would have been the first newspaper in color in the country had Hoe not been late in delivering the press allowing the *New York World* to beat *Comfort* (Gannett sued and got a reduction in price).

In 1895, Gannett boasted on the cover of his December issue that it required twelve railway cars each month or 144 cars each year to take his papers to 6 million readers all over the country.

PRINTERS' INK. 315

The Lock and Key

They Open the Doors
of Eleven Hundred
Thousand Homes.



The Facts and Figures

They Tell Their
Own Story and
Tell it under Oath.

STATE OF MAINE, County of Kennebec. I, William H. Gannett, of Augusta, Maine, do hereby depose and say that I am the owner and publisher of "Comfort," a monthly paper published at said Augusta, that the regular circulation of "Comfort" is OVER ELEVEN HUNDRED THOUSAND COPIES PER MONTH, and that the circulation for the month of August, 1892, was One Million One Hundred and Ten Thousand and Thirty-six (1,110,036) copies. Signed, William H. Gannett.

STATE OF MAINE, County of Kennebec, August 25, 1892. There personally appeared the above-named William H. Gannett, and made oath that the above affidavit by him signed is true. Before me, A. G. Andrews, Judge of the Municipal Court, Augusta, Maine.

The Everyday Results

They Show that
"Comfort" Readers
Buy Everything—

FROM A NEEDLE Chicago, Illinois. C. A. Burton & Co., manufacturers of the Kensington art needle: "Have been advertising extensively in papers that have a national circulation, and we never knew what it was to get replies to our advertisements until we placed in *Comfort*. Total replies received from the advertisement in *Comfort* have exceeded those received from the combined lists of other papers." Washburn, N. J. Corning & Co., pianos and organs: "The fact that we are using *Comfort* every issue, and occasionally use a half page, is a guarantee that we are well pleased with the results from that publication. We will stay with you as long as we advertise in any paper."

TO A PIANO

FROM BOOKS St. Louis and Philadelphia. Scamell & Co., book publishers: "Comfort has paid us as well as any medium we have used during the past five years. None ranks higher." Chicago, Illinois. Casgreen Mfg. Co., hardware specialties: "We consider *Comfort* the best monthly in which our advertisement is run."

TO HARDWARE

FROM SPECIALTIES Indiana. Mineral Springs, Indiana. Sterling Remedy Co., No-to-bac: "The results obtained from *Comfort* justify us in placing orders for one year. We do not go into this transaction blindly, as we keep a detailed record of every advertisement placed, and we find that the columns of *Comfort* produce profit." Boston, Mass. National Typewriter Co.: "We have never found a medium that approximates *Comfort*. We have tried all the first-class mediums and can say without exception the results from *Comfort* have been by far the most satisfactory."

TO TYPEWRITERS

Comfort is represented by all responsible agents. The Gannett & Morse Concern, Publishers, Augusta, Maine. Boston Office, 225 Devonshire Street. New York Office, 23 Park Row.

FIGURE 6. Page 315 advertisement in the trade publication *Printers' Ink*, 1892. Gannett reprints his subscription affidavit and, with a map, emphasizes to potential advertisers that *Comfort* magazine has national coverage (twice as many subscribers in Iowa as Maine, for example). (Googlebooks.)

Frank Luther Mott described "mail-order journals" as having:

"a yearly subscription rate of twenty-five to fifty cents, poor printing (usually in the folio size), cheap serial fiction, and varied but undistinguished household departments."⁶



FIGURE 7. Front cover of the September 1895 issue of *Comfort* magazine. From the collection of the authors.

The September 1895 issue of *Comfort* seems to justify Mott’s unenthusiastic description. The folio-sized cover has some color but it is poorly executed, even if the appeal to an American family is obvious. Inside, billed as “art” there was a paper doll and other games for children. Billed as science was a column on astrology. And there was more than one prominent ad for Oxien. Several ads promoted the magazine itself, with inducements to increase distribution: free to agents, extras available to subscribers, etc. Gannett consistently claimed:

“We could prove that *Comfort* was well edited and contained enough literary and other meritorious matter relating to the arts and sciences to show on the face that the paper was not designed primarily for advertising purposes.”⁷

Such ‘proof’ was necessary to conform to 1879 postal regulations defining Second Class matter:

“It must be originated and published for the dissemination of information of a public character, or devoted to literature, the sciences, arts, or some special industry, and having a legitimate list of subscribers: Provided, however, That nothing herein contained shall be so construed as to admit to the second-class rate regular publications designed primarily for advertising purposes, or for free circulation, or for circulation at nominal rates.”⁸

But advertising dominated *Comfort* in 1895 - promoting household novelties that could be ordered and sent by mail. It is important to note that virtually none of these ads referred to entrepreneurs in the state of Maine.

New Improved PERFECTION FAMILY KNITTER.
 Knits a stocking—heel and toe—in ten minutes; knits all the different sizes of seamless hosiery from the coarsest hemstaple woollen yarn to the finest cotton, linen or silk. **The most simple, durable, rapid Machine** on the market. A child can do the knitting. Satisfaction guaranteed. Write for circular and samples of work. Be sure and address **PERFECTION KNITTING MACHINE COMPANY CLEARFIELD, PA.**

Price \$8.00

Agent, if desired.



DON'T scald your hands, soil your clothing and destroy your temper, washing dishes the old way when you can get a **Model Dishwasher** for \$3.50 or one free if you act as our Agent. Send for circular, 41 Ber Bldg., Model Dishwasher Co., Toledo, Ohio.



WE PAY YOU to distribute ointment, Box Ointment and particulars for Dr. Star Ointment Co., Tyrone, Pa.

My ELECTRIC BELT sent on TRIAL FREE
 DEL JUDD, Detroit, Mich. Want agent.

Módene Removes hair from the face, neck, arms, or any part of the person, without pain or injury to the skin.



SIDE COMBS. These are made of silver type plate—side combs 3/4 in. long by 1 in. wide, very fashionable and great value. Sample sent by mail... 4 cents (postage stamps taken).

Address LYNN & Co., 23 Bond St., New York City.

GET A BIG MAIL.
 DO YOU WANT to receive hundreds of copies of magazines, newspapers, books and other goods? Send for, and we will insert your name in our directory, which will be sent to thousands of publishers, manufacturers, etc., who will send you books, samples and assurances of all kinds. You will be delighted with the result. This ad. includes monthly subscription to our paper, with terms. (We know the publishers and feel certain they will do as they agree. E.S.) Address THE HOME TREASURY, Dept. 18, Augusta, Maine. Please mention Courier when you write.

FIGURE 8. Sample of advertisements in the September 1895 issue of *Comfort* magazine. The mails could deliver a small knitting machine or a box of ointment from Pennsylvania, a dishwasher from Ohio, an electric belt from Michigan, combs from New York City. The bottom ad is for another mail order publishing house, based in Waterville but with an Augusta address through Gannett. From the collection of the authors.

In 1899, Augusta was home to several smaller periodicals and three publishing giants: Gannett with his single periodical (1,253,485), the four Lane List publications (703,793), and four publications begun 1874 of the Vickery & Hill List: *Fireside Visitor*, *Hearth and Home*, *Happy Hours*, and *Good Stories* (1,502,833). P.O. Vickery and Dr. John Fremont Hill (who would become Governor of Maine in 1900) also published postcards. Their statement to Pettingill's directory (though unsupported and therefore given a 4th class status) could stand for all the Augusta mail-order journals: "the largest circulating papers of their kind in the world. It is the best through which to reach the purchasing masses." Another Vickery & Hill publication, the *American Woman* (500,000) was given 3rd class status, as Pettingill had received a detailed statement for a full year. "It circulates exclusively among women and is one of the best advertising mediums in the country."⁹



FIGURE 9. Postcard c.1900 printed by Vickery & Hill, Augusta. From the collection of the authors.

Conclusion

Allowing for the distributive feature of a postal commons, the mail-order journals of Augusta generated mail volume – not just the pound-rate Second Class mailing of the periodicals, but the First Class responses, and the Third Class shipping of merchandise (most of which was designed to be under four pounds so as to benefit from postal service).

The editor of *Art in Advertising* for September 1891 visited Gannett at Augusta despite acknowledging that Comfort was not “his style.”

“It is the acme of Art, Science, and Literature as the sub-title modestly claims. To them it represents the highest achievements of intellectual effort, and has a constituency among the great middle class people in the agricultural districts that would be a credit to any paper.”¹⁰

All these papers had a huge constituency. Their bulk appeared in the 1900 mail weight statistics. But their hegemony over the outreach of urban commerce is more difficult to assess. Trish Loughran noted that as early as 1848, a periodical with a plethora of diverse advertisements was an indication of an emerging “national culture industry and the subsequent fragmentation of that culture into a variegated field of consumption.”¹¹ In 1897, at the Congressional hearings, a publisher concluded:

“the whole method of business has been revolutionized in twenty years, and what is called ‘mail order trade’ – a trade built up by the advertising in papers of general circulation – has put the dweller on the farm where he or she can obtain the same prices and the same goods as at the city store.”¹²

In 1866 a Philadelphia letter carrier wrote: “The post-office department should be, but it is not, a social agent. ... Connect it with commerce, and it assumes the power of a ‘Merlin,’ whose magic wand, raised in the ages of superstition, astonished the world!”¹³

For the intrepid mail-order publishing entrepreneurs of Augusta, the postal service was their Merlin, their partner in commerce, their ticket to wealth and broad appeal. But this could last only as long as the economies of scale that they were maximizing were supported by the Post Office Department.¹⁴

Endnotes

- ¹ Diane DeBlois & Robert Dalton Harris, “Geographic Distributions of the Postal Economy: U.S. in 1900,” *Postal History Journal*, No. 142, February 2009, pages 27-38.
- ² An anti-labor congressman from California, Eugene Francis Loud, helped launch a large-scale investigation into Second Class publications in 1895 (report published in 1898). In his 1899 report to Congress, page 3, Postmaster General Charles Emory Smith was practically apoplectic when he contemplated the abuses. Second Class periodicals, just thinly disguised advertising circulars, were a “fungous growth” and a “flagrant evil.” He described “bogus” journals as “only a collection of advertisements strung together, with a little scissored reading matter to give it the guise of a publication.” See Wayne E. Fuller, *Morality and the Mail in Nineteenth Century America* (University of Illinois Press 2003) for a full discussion of Comstock and mailed advertising content.
- ³ Marshall Cushing, *The Story of Our Post Office*, Boston 1893
- ⁴ PMG report 1900, page 228
- ⁵ Dorothy Sayward Steward, *Comfort Magazine, 1888-1942: a history and critical study*, University of Maine 1960, page 3
- ⁶ F.L. Mott, *History of American Magazines*, Volume IV, Harvard University Press 1930, page 364.
- ⁷ William Howard and Guy Patterson Gannett, *The Gannetts*, Portland ME 1946, quoted in Steward page 15.
- ⁸ Act of March 3, 1879, section 185, page 73, *The Postal Laws and Regulations of the United States of America*, Washington 1879.
- ⁹ *National newspaper directory and gazetteer*, Pettingill & Co. Boston newspaper advertising agents 1900
- ¹⁰ Elisabeth L. Sylvester, *Art in Advertising*, bound volume March 1891 to March 1892, New York Public Library, Google Books. Page 3.
- ¹¹ Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the age of U.S. National Building, 1770-1870*, page 309, referring to Gamaliel Bailey’s *National Era* of October 19, 1848, Washington DC.
- ¹² Senate Report 1517 (54-2) January 16, 1897 “The Loud Bill, Notes on the Hearings before the Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads ...” page 130.
- ¹³ James Rees, *Foot-Prints of a Letter-Carrier*, Philadelphia 1816, page 16.
- ¹⁴ A stricter mail class crackdown in 1907 killed off the Lane List and the Vickery & Hill List publications, leaving *American Woman*, and *Comfort*, and only the latter retained Second Class mailing status. Gannett waged a long and strenuous campaign for Parcel Post, arguing that it would boost revenues to the POD from sources stimulated by his magazine. When it was legislated in 1912, Gannett campaigned for lower rates, and then against zone rates. The squeezing by zone rates introduced for Second Class mail, introduced in 1918, killed off *Comfort* by 1942 – Augusta was just too far away from most of the magazine’s subscribers.