



No. 95 Autumn 2021

The Prexie Era

Publication of the USSS 1938 Presidential-Era Committee

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Ghost of Christmas Past

by Albert "Chip" Briggs



Time travel is a recurring theme in the realm of science fiction. There is one place on Earth where it is possible to advance one day into the future or past, the International Date Line. The International Date Line, or IDL, is an imaginary line connecting the North and South poles and demarcates the point where time changes from one calendar day to the next. It is located near 180 degrees longitude, approximately half way around the world from Greenwich, England, location of the prime meridian. It follows a somewhat irregular course zigzagging around various islands and

island chains in the Pacific. When crossing the IDL in an east to west direction, one gains 24 hours and conversely, anyone traveling west to east loses 24 hours when crossing this line. The IDL, located where it is, has important chronological implications for a number of American possessions.

If someone wanted to vanquish a day from the calendar, I doubt Christmas Day would be one of the top choices. That is exactly what happened to the crew of USS *Trinity* in December, 1939. Launched in 1920, the ship

was a fleet oiler almost 500 feet in length. She was in active service for a very brief time, being decommissioned in December, 1923. The vessel spent the years between wars at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Recommissioned in 1938, she was transferred to the Pacific Fleet in early 1939. She made a number of trans-Pacific voyages between west coast ports of the United States and the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines. It was during one of these trips in December, 1939 when the USS *Trinity* “time traveled” and missed Christmas.

The cover illustrated is a testament to that fact. Bearing five 2-cent Prexies, it is addressed to Mr. R. C. Gibson, Secretary, Charleston Lodge #44, Agana, Guam. It is endorsed air mail. The sender of was Marlow C. Madson, Chief Machinists Mate on board the *Trinity*. Madson had been in the Navy over four years at this time having enlisted June 16, 1936 in San Diego. The addressee was secretary of the Charleston Lodge # 44 of the Free and Accepted Masons. This lodge, granted its dispensation in 1918 from the Grand Lodge of the Philippines, is still active today.

This particular cover was franked for the unpublished 10 cents per half ounce air mail rate via Pan Am Clipper between Wake Island and Guam. It was postmarked on board the USS *Trinity* near midnight on Christmas Eve as the ship steamed westward. As it crossed the International Date Line near midnight on December 24, 1939 she emerged at daybreak on December 26, 1939, having gained 24 hours during the west bound crossing of the IDL. Thus the ships postmark: DATELINE; NO XMAS. The cover was placed in the mail upon calling at Wake Island, the first American Possession the vessel would have encountered in that direction, and flown to Guam.

While not published in the Postal Bulletins or Post Office Guides, other evidence and examples of this rate have been reported, most recently in *The United States Specialist* in the July, 2017 issue. In that report, a post card was shown franked with a single 10 cent John Tyler stamp of the Prexies and had been mailed from Wake Island to Guam in 1940. This ten cent inter-island air mail rate represents one of the more seldom seen trans-Pacific air mail rates.

Newsletter Moving to Electronic Format Only

This issue of *The Prexie Era* is the last to be published in hard copy format. Beginning with the Winter 2022 issue (No. 96), publication will be in electronic format, only. Most subscribers already receive their quarterly newsletters via email. Hard copy subscribers who wish to switch to the electronic format should send your editor (lfiset@outlook.com) an email message with your name and email address. The online version will continue to be published quarterly and sent with no subscription fee. A complete run of the newsletter, through the current issue, may be found on the USSS website.

by Richard D. Martorelli



Figure 1

Over the course of time, the US Post Office Department and its successor, the U.S. Postal Service, have issued several different types of special-purpose stamps for use by postal patrons. The first were newspaper stamps, (Scott PR1-4) issued in 1865. This was followed by stamps for special delivery (E) in 1885, registration (F) in 1911, parcel post (Q) in 1913, airmail (C) in 1918, special handling (QE) in 1925, combined airmail & special delivery (CE) in 1934, certified mail (FA) in 1955 and (stretching the definition of a “postage stamp”) Postal Insurance (QI) in 1965.

Semipostal stamps (B), first issued by the USPS

in 1998, provide the same service as regular postage stamps, so I am not considering them a “special purpose” stamp. Also excluded, because they were intended to service official Post Office business functions, are official (O, in 1873), postage due (J, in 1875), parcel post postage due (JQ, in 1913) postal notes (PN, in 1945) and all revenue-related stamps. Interestingly, none of the special purpose stamps noted above, for either customer or post office use, are in service today.

When the Post Office first put these special stamps into service, they adopted a “one way” policy. They were accepted for payment of

the designated service only, not for regular postage or payment of other fees. This practice was most frequently encountered with airmail stamps. Notices to postmasters and the public were published, such as the following in *U.S. Postal Bulletin* #14473 (August 29, 1927):

There seems to be considerable misunderstanding concerning the use of air-mail stamps...Air-mail stamps are designed for use on air mail only.... the use of air-mail stamps in payment of...other than air mail is exceedingly objectionable and not approved.

On the other hand, all regularly issued postage stamps were accepted for payment of any special service or other fees, in addition to regular postage.

In 1885, the U.S. Post Office implemented a domestic service for speedier delivery of mail for an extra fee. The USPOD/USPS had a monopoly on this service until 1979, when the Postal Service adopted new rules permitting private firms to deliver letters classified as extremely urgent. With introduction of express mail and priority mail, as well as increasing competition from private companies (FedEx, UPS, DHL et al), special delivery as a service was discontinued by the US Postal Service in 1997.

Twenty-three specific stamps, in seven different designs and cataloged by Scott's with the prefix "E", were issued from 1885 to 1971 to pay the special delivery fee. Initially, the service was limited to post offices that operated in cities with populations of 4,000 or more. The first special delivery stamp bears the words "Secures immediate delivery at a special delivery office." In 1886 Congress extended Special Delivery service to all U.S. post offices and for all classes of mail. The next version of the stamp, issued in 1888 with the same design of a running messenger, bore the revised

statement "Secures immediate delivery at any post office." To be valid, a Special Delivery stamp had to be affixed to the envelope along with all other postage and could not be used to prepay regular, or later airmail, postage. Regular postage stamps, however, could be used to pay the special delivery fee.

The scope of this article is to look at examples where stamps of the 1938 Presidential Series ("Prexies") were unmistakably used to pay all or part of special delivery fees.

Figure 1 above shows two typical examples of Prexies and special delivery. The envelope tells the story of a not-so-Special Delivery. It was purchased from a flight-insurance vending machine at an airport, with a 3-cent Prexie paying first class and a 15-cent special delivery (Exx) stamp. As noted by the sender it was "mailed" on April 18, 1951, but not postmarked until April 23 and delivered April 24. A reasonable explanation is that the envelope was put in the vending machine mail collection box but not collected by the insurance company for the five days between mailing and postmarking.

The illustrated postcard in Figure 1, on the other hand, appears to have only spent a few hours in transit. Franked with a 2-cent Prexie and 20-cent special delivery stamp (E19), this 1953 postcard was mailed from Cleveland, Ohio to the nearby suburb of Cleveland Heights, to arrange a meeting between friends on the next day. As noted above, on both of these covers the special delivery fee was paid by a special delivery stamp.

Figure 2 shows two examples of "all-Prexie" uses for postage and special delivery in 1939. The envelope is franked with 13 cents paying 3 cents first class postage and 10 cents special delivery fee. The Jefferson stamps all have a perfin, reading in two lines, "CRR/NJ". Given the addressee is an employee of the Central Railroad of New Jersey, this is an appropriate



and authorized usage of the “perforated initials” stamps. In use mainly from 1908 until the 1950’s, perfins were used to discourage theft or personal use of stamps by company employees. Wide spread use of postage meters and permit indicia beginning in the 1940’s virtually brought an end to perfin use.

The postcard in Figure 2 is franked with more stamps than the envelope. The 16 cents pays 6 cents airmail postage and the 10c special delivery fee.

The basic special delivery fee was 10 cents from 1885 to 1944, when it was increased to 13 cents. The rate went to 15 cents in 1949, 20 cents in 1952, and after the end of the Prexie era to 30 cents in 1957.

Figure 3 shows four covers from this 13-year span illustrating various special delivery rates and stamps. The top two display Prexie-only uses paying the special delivery fee. The first bears a 13-cent Prexie at the 1944 rate; the second, a 20-cent Prexie at the 1952 rate. The bottom two covers display uses of Prexies in combination with other stamps to pay the special delivery fee. One is franked with a 17-cent E18 stamp with a 3-cent Prexie to pay the 1952 20-cent rate. The other shows a pair of 16-cent Prexies with a pair of Wheatland (home

of Lincoln’s predecessor, James Buchanan) commemorative paying the 30 cent special delivery rate and two ounces of first class in 1958.

It is unusual to see the E18 stamp on a first class or airmail envelope. This stamp was issued in 1944 when the rates were changed. As noted above, since the expansion of the service in 1886, special delivery service was available for all classes of mail. In 1925, POD created separate rates based on the weight of the mailed item. In 1928, POD went one step further and created higher special delivery rates for other than first class mail. The E18 stamp of October 1944 was to pay the new 17-cent rate for non-1st class mail weighing less than or equal to 2 pounds, while E17, issued at the same time, was to pay the new 13-cent rate for first class mail of the same weight.

Figure 4 shows two less-common usages of the first class mail matter rate. First is a #10 envelope mailed from Washington, DC to Quantico, VA. The addressee was a gun shop owned by retired USMC Gen. George Van Orden and his wife, Flora. She taught over 2,000 FBI agents how to shoot and designed the Smith & Wesson K-38, a six-shot double-action revolver used by the military and police departments for 50 years. This envelope was sent from the Embassy of



Figure 3

Nicaragua in 1956. The marking “Diplomatic Mail/FREE” applied to the basic first class postage. However, additional services such as special delivery still required postage to be paid. This letter falls under the category of “personal and business correspondence of the diplomatic personnel,” the most frequently seen use in the philatelic marketplace. This is distinct from “mail between a government and its embassies, consulates, legations abroad” and “official business correspondence from diplomatic posts to persons or businesses in the mother country,

the country where the post is located or a third country.” Treaties between countries can allow foreign diplomats to send mail free within the host country. Overall, diplomatic mail is a very complicated matter and outside the scope of this article.

Figure 5 illustrates international special delivery mail. The Universal Postal Union first allowed for this type of expedited delivery service in 1885, the same year the US implemented it domestically. This cover was mailed from



Figure 4



Figure 5

Casablanca. Morocco to the United States in 1952. It bears Moroccan postage of 55 francs, the basic 30f surface mail rate and an airmail surcharge of 20f for a 5-gram (less than 0.2 ounces) letter. Starting in 1932, letters from countries with no special delivery service could be mailed to the US with US special delivery postage affixed in addition to the originating country postage and be given special delivery service in the US. This envelope, in addition to the Moroccan postage, bears a 20-cent Prexie

and manuscript marking "Special Delivery" in accordance with international procedures. The stamps have a March 24, 1952 postmark on the front and a receiver circular date stamp of March 29, 1952 on the back.

As noted above, starting in 1928 separate special delivery rates were created for other than first class mail. Figures 6 and 7 show four examples of Prexies used either as partial or whole payment of special delivery fees. The



Figure 6

two parcel post items in Figure 6 both bear the 13-cent special delivery stamp (E17) paying the 1944 rate. The large part-front piece also has three 9-cent Prexies with perfin of the state of Illinois. The piece has three auxiliary markings that help explain the postage. The first reads “Speciail Del” (*sic*), complimented by “Fee paid 25 cents,” identifying this 1945 mailing as being weighing between 2 and 10 pounds.

The last marking reads “Due 8 cents/Chicago Ill.”, indicating the total postage should have been 48 cents. Of the 40 cents total postage affixed, 25 cents was for special delivery, with 15 cents left for postage. Based on the origin and destination, this Zone 5 package required 23 cents postage in addition to the special delivery fee. At the 1945 rates, this accounts for a three-pound package as follows: Zone 5,



Figure 7

1st lb @ \$0.11 plus 2 lbs @ \$0.053 = \$0.22 plus \$0.01 for surcharge (of 3% or minimum of \$0.01) = \$0.23.

The mailing bag tag, also in Figure 6, has 16 cents from two special delivery stamps and 72 cents Prexie postage. In addition to the total postage of 98 cents, there is a two-line handstamp "Special Delivery/Fee Paid 35 cents." The special delivery rate of 35 cents for other than first class was for packages over 10 lbs between 1928 and 1948, for packages between 2 and 10 pounds between 1949 and 1952 and for packages less than 2 pounds from 1952 to 1957. On the back is a blurry double-ring mute date cancel on the stamps, showing the partial town name of "...refield, W.Va". On the address side, in a dated double-ring cancel "M....efie.." is readable, with a May 11 19xx date, as is the destination address of Charleston, WV. Looking at a map, the town of Moorefield is 220 miles northeast of Charleston. That would make this mailing a Zone 3 package. Using the parcel post rates from 1928 thru 1957, the average weight of the package calculated to account for the postage minus the stated special delivery fee is always more than 10 pounds. This places the mailing between the end of 1938, when the 50-cent Taft stamp was issued, and the end of 1948, when the >10 pound rate increased to 45 cents.

Figure 7 shows two non-1st class matter items where the entire postage and special delivery fee is paid by Prexies. At the bottom is a small envelope used for postage as part of a package. It is franked with \$0.95 postage, consisting of three 25-cent and one 20-cent Prexies. The envelope bears several markings to help clarify the rate. First is "Special Delivery/Fee Paid 35 cents," whereas the second is "Insured/ No. 2853/Chagrin Fall, Ohio/Jan 12, 1950." This envelope appears to have also been used as a return tag, as on the back are one 3-cent and two 20-cent Prexies along with a double ring cancel from Litiz, PA. of March 9, 1950.

This data allows us to reasonably speculate this as a January 1950 Zone 4 parcel. My best interpretation of the postage is \$0.35 for special delivery, \$0.50 for parcel post of 9 pounds (1st @ \$0.14 plus 8 @ \$0.045) mail and \$0.10 for \$10 of insurance to equal the \$0.95 postage. Other interpretations are possible given different assumptions about the amount paid for postal insurance. My best interpretation of the \$0.43 postage on the reverse side is a 3-pound Zone 4 parcel with \$50 insurance (marked "Insured No. 1549) and no special delivery service indicated.

Lastly, the larger envelope in Figure 7 is a parcel post mailing dated July 1944. It is franked with two 12-cent Prexies and has an auxiliary handstamp, "Special Delivery/ Fee Paid 15 cents." This indicates a non-1st class mailing of up to 2 pounds. From the label we can identify it as a Zone 2 mailing item, with the \$0.24 postage accounted for as 1 pound parcel rate @ \$0.08, \$0.01 for the minimum war surcharge and \$0.15 for special delivery.

Most of my collecting is done from a postal history perspective of how and why the mail was used, rather than from a specialist concentration of one type or mail of stamp. The covers discussed above are united by being Prexie usages, and are part of a larger collection of special delivery covers. With the exception of the Diplomatic Mail cover, none of them meet the accepted definition of "single use" covers. But that is okay. My method of collecting brings enjoyment and education and fun to me, and from my perspective that is what is important. It brings to mind the following quotation from Janet Klug:

You can collect stamps because they are beautiful, historically important, illustrate something that appeals to you, are a connection to the past, or any other reason that strikes your fancy.