

DONALD RAYMOND MAGEE
TAPE #1
January 11, 2006
Interviewed by Micheal L. Minthorn
Transcribed by Micheal L. Minthorn

Side A

I: The date is January 11, 2006 and this is an oral history interview that's taking place between myself and Donald Magee. Could you tell me what your full name and birth date is?

DM: Donald Raymond Magee, birthday June 2nd, 1945.

I: So where were you born?

DM: Enterprise, Oregon.

I: Okay. What first brought you to Union County? And uh, we're just doing a brief history, uh, description here but.

DM: Well, I was, um, in the Navy at Lakehurst, New Jersey. And uh, one of my friends took the postal test as we were- we had opportunities for training for transition back into civilian life. And so I decided to go into Philadelphia for a few days and take the postal test. And uh, I missed three answers, so I got a 97. They give me a couple points for being military so it would give me- well actually it give me five so I had a 102 score and they sent that to Portland, Oregon because that was the nearest place they could send it. In Oregon. And uh, I'd been home about three-three or four months and I got a call one day and it said that, "We'd like to interview you for a job, a postal job at La Grande, Oregon." And uh, I wasn't workin' yet so I jumped right on it and came to La Grande for an interview.

I: Did they hire you at that time then?

DM: Yes.

I: And did you work in La Grande at that time in the beginning?

DM: Yes, I um, started in La Grande in January of two- er uh, 1971.

I: What did you do first for the post office?

DM: Uh, I was hired as a uh, clerk-carrier. Which means I do clerk work and I carried mail both. And carried some around town. Uh, we'd leave some of the motor routes and did some foot routes quite a bit. And uh, I leaned towards clerk so I started working the counter at the post office.

I: Here in town?

DM: Yes. And I learned to sort mail, which you have to learn. Practically every route in the post office and what addresses that route covers. Just started sorting mail and eventually worked into a fulltime window clerk job.

I: Now where was the post office then? Was it in the same location as it is now?

DM: Same location it is now.

I: Okay. Now I know it's quite automated these days. So, tell me about sorting mail when you first got started. How did that- kind of an overview of how worked.

DM: Okay, when I started we had the old sorting cases with the pigeon holes. And you sorted actually by hand by route. Um, after I retired here in La Grande they now have uh, what they call carrier route presorted mail and they have a machine where they put the mail in and run it through it and actually sorts it by delivery or by route.

I: So is that essentially an automated version of pigeon-holing it, too? Only a machine takes care of it.

DM: That, that's really what it is.

I: Okay. Now what would be- what would be a route? When we're talking about a route.

DM: A route's a um, an area of town that one carrier delivers to. And the town divided up, I believe it's in seven routes for the city. And then uh, when I retired there were five rurals. I don't know if there still is.

I: So, um, did that mean if there were seven routes there were seven carriers for that? Did they each have their own carrier?

DM: Uh, seven carriers and then uh, so man part-time to relive for days off, sick calls, that kind of thing.

I: And um, how did the mail get- how does the mail work? Uh, in terms of uh, we know we put a stamp on the letter and stick it in the mailbox. What happens to it from there locally here?

DM: Okay locally what they do now is they put it in a bin and that whole bin is shipped to Pendleton. Pendleton has automated equipment where they run it through the automated equipment. It sorts it into um, well routes according to where it's gonna' go. Some of it's gonna' go to Portland and gonna' go by air. Some of it's gonna; be sorted out to deliver to other areas. So it kind of categorizes it to how it needs to be handled. There it's all done by automated machines.

I: Now was it, uh, when you began in the 70's was that the way that they did the mail then?

DM: No. We, we had uh, sorting cases with pigeon holes. We actually sorted it by major cities, and then there were certain groups of zip codes where you'd sort anything going to that group. So we're actually, uh, did a presort on it. And as it processed through the system it would get a finer sort 'til it got to where it was going.

I: So then now with the new automated business that means that- does that mean that all mail in the 978 there, or is it supposed to end up in Pendleton first, even if it originated from La Grande and it's going back to La Grande?

DM: Absolutely. Everything is goes to a central location and it is handled b an automated machine and then shipped back out to where it's gonna' be delivered to.
Well, most, now there is, there is local slots in La Grande where, where they do keep uh, most of the letter mail for La Grande.

I: Is that just a visual look to determine that? To decide whether it goes on? So there still must be some hand sorting then that takes place?

DM: Uh some but very little.

I: Mm-hm. Um, okay. So, um, how long now do you- we've talked about sorting. Uh, you said that you were a clerk and a letter carrier. So, let's talk about carrying letters, uh, as it occurred in the original when you were first hired in the 70's. What was that job about? How did you, how did you carry that out as a letter carrier?

DM: You sorted your mail into a case, your letter mail. Your flat mailing into a case and then you bundled it in groups. So like you'd start our route and you'd, you'd have a bundle that covered your certain amount of the first of our route. Then you'd switch bundles to the next part of your route and so forth. You wanted a bundle that was comfortable to hold onto but not too big that you couldn't handle it. So that's how you kind of sorted it. By how much mail you got per section of your route.

I: So uh, given that general scheme of that organization could it be possible that some people might carry more or less than others? Or.

DM: It was pretty much standard.

I: I see.

DM: Most people could handle you know a fairly decent bundle. Well, you'd have your- we used bags on most, most of the route, you'd put your flat mail and you'd tie any small parcels to it. And then you'd have our bundles of letters.

I: And as a letter carrier did you work from a truck then? A vehicle that you drove?

DM: I did both. I did some foot routes where you delivered what you had when you left the post office and then you'd get to a certain location and there'd be a box for the- that you could open up and get your next part of the route. Somebody would drop those relays off for ya' and then you'd pick those up and do your route that way.

I: That's if you were a foot carrier?

DM: Foot carrier.

I: Uh-huh.

DM: I you're on motorized everything's in our vehicle.

I: Do they still use the carriers in La Grande when you left?

DM: Um, they have some part of downtown I believe that the still do with one of the pushcarts. I think that's it. Everything else is motorized.

I: Um, uh, did you have to like take particular- say some of it was motorized, so uh, were you required to have a government driver's license to operate those vehicles?

DM: No.

I: Or any special training? Tell us about that.

DM: Yes. Well, uh, I thought it was gonna' be difficult because you were drivin' on the opposite side of your car like a European?

I: Right.

DM: But uh, once you do it and uh, you realize that all your deliveries are on the right side it becomes pretty natural pretty fast.

I: Did you take a course in that or were you taught locally?

DM: No pretty much you just uh, went for a little ride with me and said, "Okay, you can do it." And turned me and wrote me out a license and turned me loose.

I: Now is it that way today?

DM: I don't know. When I left uh, there still wasn't a course local. But they did send 'em to Portland for um, and I'm not, I don't know it was uh, a week or two weeks of training where they actually get specialized vehicle training along with uh, the proper methods to do your, to deliver mail and to handle mail. So when you got them back they were other than learning the route were pretty much ready to go.

I: How does a person get trained, uh, how were you trained in, in that in the beginning as opposed to how they do it now to the things that you did?

DM: Well they just put me with somebody for a day or two. Kind of get the feel of it and I was on my own.

I: Is that how they do it today?

DM: No. Today they actually send them for specialized training for one to two weeks.

I: Then um, what was the test about that you took and the postal service test?

DM: The test that I took was pretty much geared towards memorization. Uh, I can't remember for sure but part of it was like they gave you two lists of addresses. You know like one would give you two addresses and then you had to see whether they were alike or different and you had a certain amount of time to go through the list. Another part of it was they put a group of addresses in a box. No, actually it was like four boxes, I believe. Groups of addresses in each. Then they'd give you uh an amount of time to study it then they took it away from ya'. And then they give ya' a list of addresses and you had to put whether in the box A, B, C, or D. And then there was one other part but I don't- I don't even remember what it was about.

I: Okay so we could say that uh, the main theme of the test was our ability to organize and classify or?

DM: You'd have to run through the learned addresses and be able to catch differences in numbers because when you're sorting mail, so often you'll have similar addresses or same numbers with different names. That kind of thing? So you need to be able to do it in a, in a fairly quick amount of time so you don't have a lotta',

- all day to get your mail read to go. So you'd be able to relate your addresses pretty fast.
- I: Do you uh, when you did the letter carrier thing did you have a route of your own or were you doing, um, fill-in for people that were gone?
- DM: Um, I don't recall that I ever really had a route of my own. Um, I subbed on a foot route quite a bit. And um seems like the person that was on it was sick quite a bit so I did it a lot. But I never did ever have a route of, of my own.
- I: Okay. How about these rural routes that we talked about? Are those done differently? Are those b contract or?
- DM: Well those are um, most of them are not contract. They are actually rural carriers and they deliver form the right side same as the postal vehicle. But they have to have their own vehicles and um, some of them buy the right-hand drive. Some of 'em have, you know, pedals. Um, retrofitted where they have pedals on both sides? You can steer with this hand but it's nice to have tour brake and your gas over here on the same side that you're sitting on.
- I: Kind of like the pedal systems the use for um, uh, for teaching people to drive?
- DM: Basically.
- I: Uh-huh. I see. Did you ever work any of the rural routes?
- DM: Uh, no I didn't. Uh, there was a time or two when I lived in the Columbia Gorge and I had a carrier didn't finish his route and I'd go out in my own vehicle and finish. But it was just little uh, generally just the little parts that just need to be finished up or something.
- I: Okay. What's uh, what's the uh, kind of give us an overview of what is a day in the life for a postal carrier at the time that you got started. What would their day be like? How would it kind of break down and work out?
- DM: Well, um, you come in uh, and uh, see if there's anything that you need to clean up from the day before. And then you start pullin' your mail if it's not- sometimes it's already on your carrier case. The have a, a table. You know with your case and with the route on it. And they uh, a lot of times they'll bring your mail over and just put it on your case ledge. And then they pile your flats up so you could just come over and start casin' them. And that generally would take I would guess about three hours of your day. Maybe a tinge bit more. To case your mail, strap it out, load it in your vehicle and be ready to go out on the route.
- I: Now is it done that way today?

DM: No. Today they have a machine that actually sorts it to your route and then sorts it in delivery order. Your letter mail only. So when you get your letters they are already trayed in the deliver- in the order they're gonna' be delivered. So you won't have to do anything with your letters. They're all ready to go. Case up your flats, take care of your packages, and get them in deliver and read to go.

I: Load your truck and go.

DM: So basically less office time and more delivery time. So it doesn't take as many carriers to cover the town.

I: Then um, before we move on to the next part what time would somebody start?

DM: Um, depends on when your mail is scheduled to arrive but I don't know what their schedule is nowadays. Um, I think most of our carriers started around seven-ish.

I: Would that, would that be the time you started in the old days or in the prior?

DM: Yeah, pretty much. Um, you, you can't have your carriers comin' in before you have a certain amount of the mail sorted. So that they do not run out of work. We gotta' keep 'em, why keep the mail there for them to case.

I: Okay, so we've gotten to the point now of then and now where we've got it cased and in the trucks. So then what happens? Then they deliver?

DM: Then they proceed to the first delivery of the route and start delivering mail. Um, the preferred method is uh, what they call a park-and-loop. Where they drive to a certain location. They put that- they have a loop set up that they're gonna' deliver, or a section of the route, you know. It could be like a two block area or whatever. Put the mail and then ____ [230] and then they move to the next spot on the route. Deliver that little section and then they move on to the next section. They just park and loop.

I: It's called park-and-loop?

DM: Yeah.

I: Okay. Then what?

DM: When you're done with the route you come back in, uh, they sort out the mail- the outgoing mail they pick up on the route. The put it where it can be uh, got ready for dispatch. And now there's flats, any parcels.

I: And that would be the end of their day?

- DM: That's pretty much it. Clean up their case, turn in any accountable things they have. They have certified mail, registered mail, express, anything like that they couldn't deliver then the turn that back in so it would be there for a customer come in to pick it up.
- I: Here's another question about then and now. Uh, I'm familiar at least from things that I've tried to do. But could the postal carrier, uh, sell stamps and things like that? Can they do this? I know they did some of that then, but, what about that and can they do that now?
- DM: Some people put their mail, er money with their mail, put it in their mailbox. The preferred method is stamps by mail. Our carriers give out little envelopes and they're, they have printed on one side different items they can purchase. They'll put their money in that, put it in the mailbox, the carrier picks it up and next day delivers their stamps back to them. That's the preferred method.
- I: Um, okay. So we've covered the letter carrier things. What are some of the, what are some of the hazards of uh, that type of work?
- DM: Um, dogs is the biggest hazard I would say. Of course defensive driving because you're driving on the wrong side of the road. On the wrong side of the cars sometimes.
- I: Um, is, has in your experience in this area was that a major problem? Did you have problems with defensive driving, or?
- DM: During my time here I don't recall having, um, a lot of problems with vehicle accidents. We had a few minor things. Um, dog bites were prob'ly much more common than anything else.
- I: Did you ever get bit?
- DM: Me? No. Did I get chased a time or two? Yes.
- I: Uh-huh. What does a postal carrier then or now do about that kind of thing? Uh, is there training in dealing with that?
- DM: Oh there is a certain amount. Um, the thing that, the judgment I use: if I got out of my vehicle and there was a dog approachin' me with his teeth showing I got back in my vehicle and moved on. I didn't deliver mail to them. Or if I needed to the next house or two 'til I was clear of that dog. And the supervisor uh, ___ [284] them out a dog letter to that home. We also notified the uh, animal control or the sheriff's department. So if that's uh, somebody that's allowing their dog to run loose that it could be detrimental not only to the mail carriers but the children goin' to school or whatever. But they can pick 'em up or if that owner uh, ___ like they should be or whatever needs to be done.

- I: What would a dog letter say typically?
- DM: It'd basically say, um, and I don't remember word for word but basically would tell them that they needed to, if they wanted to continue mail service they needed to either chain their dog up or put it in a fenced backyard or whatever so that the mailbox area was cleared for the carrier to get to.
- I: Did everybody cooperate with that?
- DM: Oh for the most part. It's like just like everything else, you got about five percent of the public that no matter what you do, seems like they, they wanna' buck the system or feel like they have rights, too, which, you know, that's their opinion. But, but still, if you are a supervisor or a postmaster your main concern is that that carrier able to do his job safely. And that was part of it.
- I: What uh, what happens to that five percent of the population that doesn't cooperate?
- DM: Well they could get a fine from the county and they could get their dog picked up. And you know that's prob'ly up to animal control. We, we could stop delivery of the mail 'til that dog was brought under control by whatever means. And we had the right to do that. Or we are not going to send somebody to a house where their delivered mail allow their dogs to be out near the mailbox. And that's our right and privilege, but uh, generally they- if they want their mail they'll go and do whatever they need to do to make sure that carrier can safely deliver the mail.
- I: So the postal service has cooperated with other entities if these problems continue?
- DM: Oh yeah. And then also they got the pressure of the neighbors on them if they're not getting mail so.
- I: What other kinds of things can happen then?
- DM: Um, prob'ly the most interesting or the most, well, interesting thing that happened to me was that I had a call one day when I was postmaster of La Grande. And uh, this lady told me that something had been charged to her credit card but she'd never received it. And um, so it was within a week or two I had another caller, too. So I, I called postal inspectors and visit with them and then we, we realized that there prob'ly was a problem within the office. And we started doing some surveillance and uh, found, found out that one of our city carriers was takin' the credit cards out of the mail and when the pin number came along takin' that out of the mail and then using it to purchase items for themselves.
- I: And yet the people are still getting a bill? Or?

DM: Well you would because the credit card company has no idea who's, uh, who's using the card and purchasing the items 'til there's a complaint.

I: What amount of time did that take to- did- how does, well, without giving away the, the uh state secrets, you know? Do you either have to lay in wait to watch that occur or?

DM: Um, I would say that we prob'ly do surveillance prob'ly was able to uh, catch that carrier actually doing something with the mail improperly about two weeks. We already knew or had a real suspicion who it was mainly because of the kinds of things that were purchased. 'Cause we had the- the inspectors can gather information just any, like any other law enforcement. And they went out to these, these, got all these records from the credit card purchases. They knew exactly what was bought and where it was bought. We, we um took those dates of purchases and match it with employees work schedules. It was real obvious real quick who prob'ly was doing it. But then we, then through surveillance we actually caught the person in the act and was able to arrest them and then we- you go to federal court.

I: Then it's a federal crime?

DM: Oh yeah. Then it's up to them what your outcomes going to do.

I: Besides losing their job and.

DM: Number one career.

I: And they could be doing jail time?

DM: Yes. Uh, restitution and probation. There's a lot of things that when something like that happens that, that come about.

I: Right. So um, okay so we see that theft can occur. Any other hazards of the, of the uh, mail carrier, the letter carrier that's out there that could be significant?

DM: Um, well the one typical thing you always worry about in retail is robberies. Uh, we had some, some break-ins to post office boxes and that kind of thing that I had to deal with over time. Uh, but nothin' major.

I: Okay, so uh, moving on to the clerk. Uh, which you said you began doing both letter carrier and clerk. So what's the life of a clerk like then?

DM: Uh, it's coming in early in the morning and sorting the mail.

I: The clerks do the sorting?

- DM: Yeah we sorted all the mail originally. Uh flats, letters, sorted the parcels. Um, and then um, got everything ready for the carriers. Uh, during the day, um, you have the essential like third class, magazines, things like that to sort during the day. You open up your counter and then a certain amount of your, of course you're at the window all day. And relieves for lunch and, and things like that.
- I: It sounds actually like a long day. There's a lot going on before the public ever?
- DM: Oh yeah. It starts earlier when you have an outfit like Pendleton they run 24 hours a day. We close up and I believe it was like seven or eight at night. Your last truck would go out and you'd have- and then during the day that's another thing your clerks are doing- they're keeping the outgoing mail sorted out. Now, nowadays they just put it in bins and ship it out so there isn't nearly the sorting or anything they have to do.
- I: Um, okay, uh, so we talked about uh, how it's pretty much automated in this day and age. How did it work in the 70's before they had the automation then where everything now goes to Pendleton? Did we talk about that?
- DM: Uh we sorted everything we could local and we did sort a lot of the mail going out of town into areas. Some major cities had say their own pigeonhole. Uh, Portland might have a couple. If anyone their zip codes other areas of the country they would have multiple zip codes sorted into one pigeonhole. Then as the mail goes through the system it gets finer sorted 'til it gets to where it's going.
- I: How did you progress from uh, the clerk-carrier into the postmaster, uh position? How does it- that require testing as well? How do you get in?
- DM: Well, I never did an testing per se, but after I'd been there a few ears I realized that I didn't wanna' be a clerk my whole life. That I wanted to do something different or challenging. So um, I talked to the postmaster and I started doing things with the supervisor and, and opted for nay extracurricular work or opportunities to learn things that I could. And um, he did give me quite a- quite an opportunity to learn other things that I, I needed to learn. So it's kind of a self program. There wasn't any set course you could do or anything, you just kinda' like said, "This is what I wanna' do." And do what you could. I did do, um, I take that back I did do a few correspondence courses that would, uh, help me some.
- I: From, from where were these courses from?
- DM: Well from the postal training center. They did have a, a training center. But it wasn't something that they were gonna' pay for you to go to. So you could get courses you could do at home then.
- I: Uh, let's talk more about that, the postal training center. Did that cost money to do that? Was uh, was that something that you, that was available to?

DM: It was available to people who uh, had the motivation to do them and wanted to advance.

I: What kind of coursework could come out of there? What are some of the courses that they might teach?

DM: Oka well they had some writing courses. And one of the major courses I took that prob'ly helped as much as anything was called, I believe it was called um, AM-PM course for postmasters or something like that. And it was basically geared towards how to run small post office and everything you needed to know to do that.

I: So, let's say for example, like uh, Lostine or Pilot Rock or maybe Maupin post office? Uh, small time operations?

DM: Yes. Yes. Right.

I: Mm-hm. Are those operations typically run by one person or is it?

DM: Uh, mainly um, one person was the major person. You might have a part time clerk who was actually a post office employee. You might have a, a non-career employee that you could hire part time. Some offices have routes, some don't. Lostine had a real short rural. In fact it was called a star route. And.

End of Side A

Side B

I: And we're continuing our history interview with Donald Magee. It's still January 11, 2006. So, uh, what does it mean to call something a star route? Is it something that is significant?

DM: Um, not really. A star route basically is a rural route that's contracted. It's, it's not a regular postal employee. Regular rural routes are postal employees. They're basically the same kind of route. But just done by non-career, somebody that contracts the route.

I: Oka. So uh, we've talked about the correspondence coursework. Then how did it take you to become a postmaster?

DM: Um, as close as I can recall about a year to a year and a half from the time I really started working at it and doing courses.

I: Um, before we move into that, you mentioned earlier about supervisor- are there supervisors intermediate between letter carriers and clerks, postmasters?

DM: In, in key post offices like La Grande, Pendleton, Hermiston, Baker City- yes.

I: Did you ever fill any of those positions?

DM: No. Uh, it's preferable. I would have been, it would have been to my benefit to actually have been in one of those positions for a while. But it didn't work out that way. Because generally if you go from a clerk-carrier into a supervisor position you're gonna' go into a larger postmaster position right off. I started it pretty much the lowest there is.

I: So, do these small town postmasters don't often break into the big time? Is that what it takes?

DM: It takes more and it takes longer. Uh, you can't, um; it just depends on how flexible you are for moving for one thing. And then also the opportunities- what offices become vacant. And, and what the rules are concerning moving. You know are they gonna' pay for you to move from a clerk and this size of office? Or is it in your commute area? There's a lot of things that tie into it. I think nowadays it's more restrictive than when I was I became a postmaster.

I: Okay so you became a postmaster and you worked in, uh, several communities. Let's just list those before you came back to La Grande.

DM: Okay, Lostine, Oregon was my first. And while I was at Lostine the postmaster at Enterprise Harold Langley retired. They asked me to go, uh, fill his position on, on a part-time basis 'til they filled the position. Turned out to be a year that I was, uh, um, what they call officer-in-charge. Or acting postmaster at Enterprise. And uh, shortly after I was relieved of that position I was appointed postmaster to uh, Maupin, Oregon. And uh, I was there two to three years when the postmaster at Dufur passed away. And um, that was a little bigger office. It was closer to where I, I spent a lot of time at The Dalles. And uh, it was closer to The Dalles so I asked for it and they uh, give me the office. So I go to Dufur and I was prob'ly there about three years and I, in that time I got married and started havin' kids. Realized I needed a better income so I put in for postmaster at Stevenson, Washington when it came open. And I got that job and uh, we moved over to uh, ___ [050] so I could get to know Prineville but I'm postmaster of Stevenson for about three and a half years. And John Day came open. So I put in for that and, and got that job and we moved to John Day and I was there about seven and a half years. And uh, one day my boss from Portland came by and he said, "Have you ever thought about movin'?" And I said, "Yeah, I have." He said, "You know the postmaster of La Grande just, um, I don't remember whether he quit or retired or what happened. He said, "Would ya' be interested?" And I said, "Yeah, I prob'ly would." And a few days later he called me back and says, "I'm gonna' give you that job. So get ready to move to La Grande." And that's where I finished my career. Where I started.

I: Okay. Did they give you help with moving each time you took these jobs?

DM: Uh, yeah at the post office that's one thing they do do when you get promotions. Help you with your move.

I: Mm-hm. I imagine it's not completely covered but?

DM: Um, never seems like everything's completely covered. But it helped a lot.

I: Mm-hm. Okay. So you came back to La Grande then and you retired in this position as postmaster of La Grande, right? What- what were, what are the duties of the postmaster here in La Grande? I know they're not the same everywhere, but.

DM: The, the postmaster of La Grande has a supervisor underneath you. So you, your supervisor basically deals directly with your clerks, your carriers, your rural carriers, city carriers, custodian if you have one. Your highway contracts. Whatever, whatever you have. And uh, then when it comes to hiring, labor relations, uh, when your supervisor has something they're not sure how to deal with you get into the- you get involved. Uh, you're heavily involved with customer relations: customer complaints, things of that nature. While I was at La Grande I spent a lot of time dealing with the building. Because it's another- it's a postal owned building. So you're responsible for its care, its upkeep. Remodeling

if it needs it. Um, dealing with your uh, uh, building people in Portland who are directly involved with buildings. And uh, so I spent a lot of time with that. We did finish some major projects that needed to be done. We had a, a roof problem. We had to redo the complete roof. So I was involved in the, in the contracting for that roof to be redone. And then monitoring the work and making sure it was done right. And then, then when it was done the building people over me and myself looked it over and signed off on it. We did some- quite a bit of work inside the building. Painting and we upgraded equipment during the time I was there. We went to what they call a POS system where- or a point of sale it's called. Computerized the window services and- and I was also privileged to uh, go around and do some training on different upgrades for equipment and things like that in eastern Oregon. And doing different kind of audits and stuff so, uh, well I wasn't always in my office. We were sometimes out helping smaller offices or doing audits for them and different things.

I: Um, so, you owned your building? Is that not true in every community?

DM: Um, most smaller communities they have a leased building.

I: From the community or from the U. S. Government?

DM: No. From the community. Um, I think that's probably because of community relations. It gets them a little more involved in the communities. And they do want you involved, uh, in the community as much as possible.

I: Um, what sort of involvement did you have with your community as postmaster here? Were there community programs you participated in, or your staff did?

DM: Um, my community- got involved some of the city of La Grande and the tree planting program and things like this and we did that at the post offices. Uh, if you ever take a look there's trees and planted trees on the side that and um, stuff like that. Uh, some communities I've been in I've been involved in city council. And I've been involved with the Civil Air Patrol, and in La Grande and uh, John Day area. And um, doing a public service for them in that, in that respect. Um, and with uh, also was quite a bit involved in some areas with the Boy Scouts.

I: Were you involved with them here as well?

DM: Um, not in, not in La Grande. In John Day I was pretty heavily involved in Boy Scouts. And uh, I did a project in John Day uh with, with instituting the 911 system and I was also a coordinator for the area. For the when they were instituting the 911 system.

I: You mean when it first came into being in that area?

DM: Yes. Yes. I was on the city council in Mt. Vernon and then I became a coordinator in the area for the 911 system. And um, and Civil Air Patrol and Boy Scouts. So I didn't spend too much time at home when I was there.

I: Right. Um, now how many people worked for the post office here in La Grande, uh, at the time that you were, you were postmaster?

DM: Okay, ___ [133] I retired, we had approximately 32.

I: Do you recall is that different- more or less than you had when you began the job?

DM: That's more. Uh, the town has grown and when your town has growth that means you build routes and sometimes you have to add additional routes. I know there's- there was definitely more rurals because the outside of our town receives the bulk of your growth. So the rural routes prob'ly grew the most.

I: How do you, uh, do the- are- how do letter carriers become letter carriers today? Is it still a civil service exam?

DM: Well, they're not civil service nowadays. They got- they're government employees, so they have to take what's called a postal test. Uh, when I was, when I was hired it was a civil service job. Nowadays it's a, uh, FERS, federal employees. Which comes under the Federal Employees Retirement System, so they kind of got away from civil service in that respect.

I: Now, could we describe for our- our readers or, or others what the difference is as we know it between civil service and federal employees. Do we know?

DM: Uh, I think the bulk of the change has been in how they do the retirement system. 'Cause nowadays uh, under the federal employees retirement system you have the option of a 401(k) program. You have the option, you do have to play into social security which I never did during my postal career 'cause I was civil service. And then they pay into a postal retirement. So they have a lot better options along retirement. I don't think it affected much the way you do your job; it didn't affect the way your health insurance was done. Your uh, life insurance or anything like that. The bulk of the change is in the retirement part.

I: So people coming in today don't take a civil service exam. It's called a?

DM: Postal exam.

I: Is it the same test?

DM: I do not know. I, I suspect that it's not. But I think it prob'ly leans a lot in the direction it always has. But nowadays, um, you know so much of your work is

done by machinery and you don't have to learn the things you had to learn the last 30- so memory isn't as big a factor s it was then.

I: Now is there a back-up plan for, in, uh, a potentiality that all the equipment does break down and there's no way- other way to proceed? Could they easily go back to sorting without?

DM: I would tend to say no. (chuckles)

I: Okay.

DM: Um, I don't think that anything's gonna' be down that long. Uh, they have, I think a certain amount of maintenance people that are responsible for maintaining and keeping this equipment going. Excuse me I think the biggest problem might come with a electrical outage.

I: And that's sort of what I was, I was thinking about myself.

DM: And, as you know those don't generally last too long around here. They don't have tornadoes and hurricanes, things like some people deal with. So, you know? You know, if I had a power out and it's out an hour or more here it's- that's a pretty long time.

I: But not.

DM: Might delay routes but it's not gonna' keep 'em from being delivered.

I: It's not a show stopper?

DM: No.

I: Okay. Um.

DM: We have contingency plans for earthquakes, floods. Anything that could happen we have contingency plans that we know what to do if anything like that happened. And we are directly connected to whoever's over that above us and then to, you know, for the government. So, but they have a lot of plans in case things do happen. That they can take care of. I'm sure that that came into play with like Hurricane Katrina. 'Cause so much was wiped out down there they didn't ____, [198] they didn't have homes to deliver to. So you have to have contingency plans so mail keeps coming everyday. From someplace.

I: Okay. Um, so we're uh, it appears uh, that your postmaster in a community is also the first point of uh; we've talked about investigating some of the smaller things that have taken place with that uh, the credit card incident and such. Um, what,

what are the postmasters responsibilities for investigations? Uh, of crime that might possibly take place? There is postal crime, I assume?

DM: Well, oh yeah. Uh postmasters directly responsible for anything like that, but you have a lot of resources.

I: What would they be?

DM: Oh, for crime you got your postal inspectors and that- that's a big item right there. Anything to do with crime concerning mail is their job and they're just the same as any law enforcement agency. They have the authority- just like any other police agency- to do whatever they need to do.

I: Where, where do the postal inspectors come from that serve this area?

DM: Um, well for the most part mine came out of Boise, Idaho. Uh there are postal inspectors in Portland other areas that can help or get involved if they need to. And sometimes I did get a postal inspector out of Portland. Depends on what the problem was. But the bulk of my, my association with postal inspectors was from, uh, from Boise.

I: What kind of problems can bring them into play?

DM: Uh, fraud, theft, uh, mail being stolen out of mailboxes. Um, not damaged mailboxes so much because there's a- we're limited on what we can do. Then also local, uh, police agencies have some responsibility, too. Um, you know, vandalism to postal vehicles, to postal buildings. Um.

I: Any major uh.

DM: Theft. Uh, like I said theft is one. It can be internal, external. Or you could have counterfeit money floating around that they might feel the need to be involved in. Uh, it just depends.

I: Did you experience any major involvement with your postal inspectors during your time?

DM: Um, not a lot. There was times when- there were times when they'd call me and ask me about things. Which- a lot of times I have no clue what they were lookin' for or what was goin' on. It's on a like a need to know basis.

I: Right.

DM: If they thought the local postmaster needed to be involved in something, you'd be involved. And you'd know what was going if it was something that they might be looking at the trends in the area for different things tryin' to see what things were

happening with the mail. Um, they'd call me and ask me questions, but I'd never know really what was goin' on.

I: Were you involved in any big investigations where you did know what was going on?

DM: Just basically the one with the credit card.

I: I see.

DM: Uh most other things that they came in for um, they could do audits. You know, we'd know about those the day they walked in the office. They'd open things up: "We're gonna' audit ya." So you'd open the vault, ____ [260] But uh for the most part, um, nothing major.

I: Did you know when they were coming to audit? Did they have routine audits or they were always surprise?

DM: No. It's like the lottery. Your number comes up. They don't call you they walk in and say, "We're here. We auditing you." Or whatever ____ [265]

I: Where did the auditors come from?

DM: Well they'd be postal inspectors generally.

I: I see.

DM: Could be Portland, could be Boise. We were part of the, we were part of the Portland district but um, a lot of the times the postal inspector we fell under was from Boise because they're closer. Any, they give them just like anybody else. They give them areas that they are responsible for. But also sometimes different things that they're responsible for. So if a certain thing happened, you might get postal inspectors from here. Another thing happened you might get 'em from Portland. It just depends on what was goin' on. What their expertise is. And what they are actually responsible for.

I: What other things related to the post office maybe haven't we focused on or spent any time on that you'd like to share with us that maybe people out there would be interested in hearing?

DM: Oh the thing that always fascinated me was the fact that so many people think that you know delivered mail is not a big deal. You just go to the vehicle, go out and distribute it around town. It is a time-consuming knowledgeable job. You gotta' know what you're doing and ya' gotta' be good at it to be a good mail carrier. That's why I was a clerk. It isn't matter ____ [290] you have to put in a delivery order, your- you have accountables your accounted for. Postage due, certified

- mail, registered mail, express mail. You have to have the knowledge of all these different things and a good knowledge of your route. And where your dogs are at and things like that so you can do a good job of delivering these people's mail for 'em.
- I: Did you find there were people who would come to the job not really able to perform because of that sort of thing?
- DM: UH there's a few that were challenging. Most, most people do a good job. But we had a few that, um, I had one fellow that worked for me uh from the east coast. And he thought we were slave drivers compared to how they did their job back there.
- I: Just what were the differences between here and there?
- DM: Well apparently, apparently they got in an eight-hour day they had a lot less mail they had to deliver to have a fulltime route. Here, what we called a fulltime route he thought was way too big.
- I: Huh. So he didn't last, or did he go back to the east coast?
- DM: He chose to go back. Um-hm. Um-hm.
- I: What else might people wanna' know about the, the postal service?
- DM: Uh, I can't think of a lot of things. Um, I just don't know what we'd do without the postal service. You know other companies could deliver but I think, I think if the post office wasn't there it would cost us a while lot more money to get our correspondence and things than it is, it does now.
- I: Does the post office provide services today that they didn't originally provide when you first got started and?
- DM: I think probably your uh, priority express mails are probably the things I don't remember bein' there when I started.
- I: Are those services very efficient for what the purport to be?
- DM: Yes. I think for the most part they do a really good job. Um, but it's like- you know, any company can say we'll send a letter from New York City to La Grande, Oregon overnight. But I don't know anybody that can really do that. So you have to be realistic, you know when you say I'm getting an express mail or a card they mailed from some place. You gotta' be realistic because we have no major airport in our backyard. But if we was in Portland, we have overnight, even sometimes same day service from certain cities. Because the airline schedules have gotta' be filled. When you live in remote areas of eastern Oregon like we do,

uh, you have to be a little realistic on your expectations of whatever kind of service you're getting.

I: Does any mail come air to La Grande?

DM: No. Uh, some express mail I think does come air into Pendleton.

I: Because there's an airport there.

DM: Yes.

I: Can you explain to us what APO and FPO mean?

DM: Um, APO is mainly for land services like the Army and stuff like- your FPO's are your fleet post offices, mainly, mainly for ships.

I: And uh so I had an APO address over in Germany when I was stationed there during Desert Storm. And it was basically my unit name, APO, and a zip code. And uh, we had a few friends that were the same way but were Naval or Marines that had FPO addresses. So uh, can you explain how it gets to them? How they find- how that mail ever gets to where it's going?

DM: You mean if you're on a ship?

I: Or when they're on a land post. Either APO or FPO.

DM: Well, you have certain um, post offices that are designated, designated military overseas post offices. Your mail will go to those post offices from everywhere in the United States. And they will sort it how it's gonna' be routed. And I can't tell ya' the routes 'cause I'm not familiar with any of them. But they're set up- they have a routing that covers your whole world. Some goes to the west coast, some go to the east coast depending on I assume the zip code just like everything else. And then those offices have to finer sort it for the route that it's gonna' take to get to Japan or Hawaii or Europe. You know? Depending on where in Europe or the Middle East or wherever and then it's like everything else. The closer it gets out to where it's actually going the finer it gets sorted 'til it actual gets to your base or whoever um, is delivering to you. Uh, when I was on a ship in, in the Med all our mail went into the- to Naples, Italy. And they sort it out and then for our ship out- they sent it out to us. Certain mail went into the mail facility at Naples and some they send off to other bases in that area.

I: How does that mail get from Naples to your ship if you are out at sea? Would the fly it in?

DM: Yes. Uh, what, what- not necessarily everyday. But what they'd have to do, they'd have to know where we were gonna' be ported next. And they'd send it to

that port. And if it was- if we were close or had a helicopter in there it would bring the mail back out the ship. And, and sometimes- a lot of times that did happen. We'd get it actually flown out to the ship. Sometimes if we were close to bein' in port they'd leave it at the port and we'd pick it up when we arrived. ____ [409] carriers, aircraft carriers, um they'd get the mail flown out to 'em on a fairly regular basis.

I: Uh, as automated and efficient as it sounds, uh sometimes it would take me three and half weeks to get a letter that was sent today, uh, from my mother. And it turned out to be the same for my brother in-law who just got back from Iraq that we actually preferred to work on cell phones or the internet if possible because it was so up to the minute. How come it takes the mail so long?

DM: I don't know what the processes, the security that the mail goes through to get where it's goin'.

I: But that would have something to do with it?

DM: Uh that and uh, I'd say that's prob'ly the biggest thing.

I: Security?

DM: Prob'ly.

I: Now the post office doesn't take care of their internal security in the military then? They would use their own censors or however the process their mail for security reasons or is that a?

DM: I'd say it's prob'ly a combination especially goin' overseas.

I: What kinds of- what other source of?

DM: It depends on the routing, too, you know? Um, some places they may hold mail 'til we get a certain amount and ship it. And to uh, especially where you're talkin' about war zones. Or hot zones or whatever you wanna' call 'em. I'm sure that they handle things a little bit different there.

I: Um, anything uh new technological-wise or whatever that was coming into play that really, uh, that, that really changed or were amazing sort of thing to help the operation when you were finishing up your career?

DM: I think the biggest thing that came into play at the end of my career was the machines that had the ability to sort our mail to the carrier and then not only sort it to the carrier but actually put that in delivery order for the carrier.

I: In their uh, park-and-loop order do you think?

DM: Actual delivery order. From the first house they deliver to, to the last house. So that the ___ [463] with the first, the end of that mail was the last house. They didn't have to sort it that often.

I: And they didn't have that before?

DM: Absolutely not. You sorted in your case in delivery order. The first thing we had to do was sort it to the routes so we had to sort it out and get it to the routes that the route carrier had to take that mail and put it in the delivery order in his case.

I: And these machines can do both of those?

DM: They do it both.

I: Did that uh, did that have the effect of uh downsizing the operation?

DM: I'm sure it- it yes. Um in anything like that it's going to cut labor.

I: Now is that used in this post office here in La Grande or only over in Pendleton where there?

DM: They have it here now. Since I retired. Well, when I retired it didn't have it yet. We had a certain amount of our- our mail that came in already sorted to the carrier. Even magazines and things. But now all the letter mail gets sorted by, b the machines right here in La Grande. That's letter mail.

I: Okay. When it came form Pendleton with this new technology it was already, uh, was it already sorted to the route?

DM: Some of it.

I: Okay.

DM: They didn't have the ability to do it all, but they did a certain portion of our mail to the route. So we'd get in, we'd get a certain amount of bundled to say city one or city seven. Some of the magazines. Most of your major companies that have big volumes actually sorted down to the route. Even catalogs.

I: Okay so now La Grande has that ability, what about the smaller ones? Lostine? Pilot Rock?

DM: Uh, no they're still doing it the old way. Well it has to be cost effective. Number one. Most of the time when we got new technology or new machines was we wanted it paid back in couple years to three years. So it would be the same with what they're doing now. You gotta.

End of Side B
End of tape #1
Transcription completed on Thursday, November 01, 2007

DONALD RAYMOND MAGEE
TAPE #2
January 11, 2006
Interviewed by Micheal L. Minthorn
Transcribed by Micheal L. Minthorn

Side A

- I: We're continuing our interview with Donald Magee. It is still December, sorry January 11, 2006. And we're talking about automated machines down in the smaller rural post offices and you were telling us it's not cost effective
- DM: Not cost effective. Number one, you gotta' have a timeframe to work with. You gotta' have room for your machinery. And then it's gotta' pay for itself in a reasonable amount of time. Um, there could come a day depending on, you know your operating window when say La Grande would have the automated machinery could automate some of Elgin's or Union's or something like that. But that's still, you gotta' look at a timeframe. And, and also transportation there. Because you'd have to have- bring it in here. Then have it ready to ship back out to the, those offices for delivery that day. You wouldn't wanna' hold your mail to kind of automate and delay it. That wouldn't make sense.
- I: I had a couple of my military friends went to work for the Portland post office when some o f this automation was coming into place down there. And you couldn't have a staple or a paper clip in your envelope. Uh, is that still true?
- DM: Um, that probably is pretty much true if you wanna' send it in a regular envelope. Because of the way your machinery works. You know like our rollers and everything. You get like paper clips and, and staples and they just don't work through those ___ [022] and things. So that your ___ [023] would have a broken machine.
- I: You think that's still true today?
- DM: Yes.

- I: Okay. Um, any other big technological things that came through? How about the internet and computer, uh, operations? How has that made the operation easier or better?
- DM: Well computers have made everything easier. Um, has it affected postal ____ [029] some? Yes. But um, we haven't had ____, [031] and we still seem to deliver lots of mail. So, I don't know its hurt 'em a lot. It's like anything. You might be growing but maybe not as much as you would without that competition or technology.
- I: How about in terms of uh, internal communication with the postal service itself or employees or other places in postal land? Did that, uh, did that make any things easier or quicker?
- DM: Um yes, of course. Um, I got a lot of my reports on the computer and I sent a lot of my reports on the computer. Certain things you'd follow up with a hard copy, of course. Uh, certain correspondence that needed to be signed or whatever, still-you're still gonna' send a hard copy. But, you know, as you said you can do a lot of work with your computer. And my boss sent me a lot of e-mails. He also called me quite often. So, um, we did things by telephone, by computers as well as the mail. I think that's prob'ly pretty much standard with any medium or large business.
- I: An tales of strange things that came through the mail that you might have had involvement with that perhaps people either shouldn't have sent by mail or maybe didn't realize was not supposed to go by mail or any, any uh, interesting tales on that?
- DM: I don't remember a while lot. Um, I know that there were times when you uh, maybe suspected drugs or you'd have a package that was leaking, wasn't sure what was comin' out of the package, so, you know. You got your new rules apply to handling and you have maybe hazardous- we had hazardous rules all along but I think they became a little more important in our time than they were 20 or 30 years ago. So, uh, we did have to make other people aware of things and they had to be checked before they could be handled. And also, I think this prob'ly ties back into the postal inspectors. If you got a envelope that's got a little white powder comin' out of it. You know they are gonna' be involved. But you can't hold the mail, that's one problem. You can't- if I have a suspected piece of mail, I can't put aside and hold it for three days for somebody to come and look at it. It's- it's gonna' be delivered. So if there's a suspect or something goin' on. And I'm sure that was a lot of times postal inspectors would come is because they knew things were goin' on and they were, they know ____ [068] lives at this address or whatever that they were checking on things.
- I: Right. Right. Um, so if they- if you can't hold that mail that, but that could certainly mean somebody's been flagged somewhere for further scrutiny?

DM: Yes. Oh absolutely.

I: Are there things that- are there simple items that perhaps people do in the mail that they should not do, that are maybe quite common things that?

DM: I can believe prob'ly at times there's people who wrap up a pistol and ship it through the mail when it- when really you're supposed to be a gun dealer and have to present it and have the paperwork and the license to ship firearms through the mail. Uh, rifles, we could do that. But we usually always knew what it was. Uh, pistols are another story. I'm sure there were a lot of things going through the mail that were illegal but we don't know.

I: Um-hm. That could be fairly common when sent through the mail that people don't.

DM: Could be.

I: Are there other simple things that people maybe don't realize they shouldn't do with their mail that happens from time to time?

DM: I don't think so. I think people are prob'ly pretty savvy to what- what procedures they need to follow and I – I really can't think of any big problems we had with what people mailed. You know mail and, mail and fruit? Uh, fresh flowers. Different things like that. Uh, require things to be handled a little bit differently. Maybe shipped a little bit different. Um, but most people who ship stuff like that generally say something.

I: Is it illegal for me to put notes to my neighbor in my mailbox or anything like that?

DM: Yes.

I: It is?

DM: Yes.

I: Okay.

DM: Uh, anything put in an official mailbox; a postal government regulated mailbox has to have postage. If they wanna' receive notes they need to put a box underneath their mailbox or something- a slot in their door- not a mail slot.

I: That's not a mail slot? Uh-huh.

DM: Yeah.

- I: Um can I tape coins to my envelope if I don't have enough postage for a letter that I'm mailing?
- DM: Uh people do that, but it's not the preferred method. As I said before, that little- the thing that people don't realize- I have 600 people on my route. And I have my route is designed for an eight-hour day. And that's pretty much puttin' your mail together, delivering your mail, coming back and doing the last things you have to do to go home. They had to have 50 people on their route today decide they're gonna' tape money on their envelopes, it's gonna' take somebody quite a bit of time to take all that money off there, get the stamps, put the stamps on 'em, and put the mail in the system.
- I: So really what you're asking your postal carrier to do is purchase a stamp for you and stamp it in the course of their duties then?
- DM: Yes and there are a number of occasions it's not a big problem, but if a lot people started doin' it, it becomes more of a problem. Uh, that's why we do the stamps by mail and different things so that people would have the stamps and they could do- have their mail ready to go.
- I: Uh, do they do much of the postage due business anymore where they needed 37 cents on their stamp and only 36 cents there. Uh.
- DM: A certain amount, yes.
- I: But they don't really have to do that, though, is it more common they just return it?
- DM: Yeah. If they catch it where it's being mailed from. If it gets into the system they're going to prob'ly not get it back, they're going to try to collect on the other end.
- I: Uh-huh. Who's that penny owed to? The office where it originated or the place where it's being delivered?
- DM: The place where it's being delivered. They're the ones that if it's caught on our end then we put postage due five cents. Um, generally the carrier pays that and then he collects it on the route. But it could be the other way around because on what kind of route it is. It could be the other way around. It could be they're just ___ [132] and they have since returned to the clerk. But you know the accountable clerk could say, "Okay, I've put a penny on that and you need to collect and send the money back to me so I- my accountables are paid. It depends on how, how it's done in your office. That's ___, [137] you know they just pay for it and collect it back from the customer.

I: In this particular area and in your experience in rural areas in general, have you felt that working for the postal service was a safe career?

DM: Yeah.

I: Did you always feel like you were fairly safe? Protected? How about your carriers, those people that work for you when you began uh, leading the, the post offices?

DM: Oh for the most part, yes.

I: Other than of course, dogs and the day to day things.

DM: Right.

I: Well we really appreciate you volunteering to um, uh give us some insight on the postal service. We have a lot of information that people do not know about and uh, I think it's a good topic to talk about and wanna' thank you.

End of Side A

NO Side B

End of tape #2

Transcription completed on Thursday, November 01, 2007