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Higher Rates But Not Better Service?

PROBABLY most inflation-weary Americans would make little fuss about first class postage going to 22 cents if mail service is maintained. It may be too much to expect improvement.

What mail users complain about is that every time the postage rate goes up it seems to add another day to the time required to get a letter from there to here. Sometimes it now takes a week to 10 days to get a letter from Stillwater to Oklahoma City. Will the new rates make that two weeks?

For centuries people seemed to get along pretty well without mail delivery but we certainly depend upon it nowadays. Before the first organized postal service was set up in Nuremberg, Bavaria (Germany) in 1570, letter writers had to arrange for delivery by any means they could find available.

It was not until 1680 that the "Penny Post" was set up in London and letters were prepaid and

stamped showing where they were posted and the time they were sent out. That was a help to mail users but dating also shows the speed or lack of speed at which the postal service operates.

The U.S. Post Office Department was established by the Second Continental Congress, and congressmen have been sending out franked (free postage) mail ever since. Benjamin Franklin was this country's first postmaster general.

Postage was high in colonial days and usually was paid by people receiving the mail. In 1794 postage was 6 cents up to 30 miles; 15 cents to 200 miles; and 25 cents more than 400 miles. In 1925 it was 2 cents to anywhere.

As this country grew, communications became more important and difficult. In 1858 stagecoach service and mail delivery was begun between San Francisco and St. Louis.

Two years later the Pony Express was set up to provide fast overland mail service between St. Joseph, Mo.

and Sacramento, Calif., 1,900 miles away. It was discontinued when the transcontinental telegraph was completed about a year later.

Before 1873 folks had to go to the post office to get their mail. Then free delivery of mail was provided in cities more than 20,000 population, then to other places, and in 1896 rural free delivery was established.

All of these and many other changes were made to transport mail in minimum time at low rates.

In 1970 the National Postal Service was set up as an "independent" agency to speed up service and cut costs. Its record is not much different from the Post Office Department. It almost broke even in 1973 and showed more income than costs in 1979. All other years have run in the red.

Predictions have been made that first class postage will keep on climbing, probably to more than 50 cents per stamp. It might. Just 20 years ago it only took a 5-cent stamp to get your letter delivered, quite often the next day.