

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

The Road to First-Class — Rancho Mirage's post office

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Some 2,500 years ago, the Greek historian Herodotus observed the diligence and industriousness of the letter carriers during the Persian War: "Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these courageous couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

In 1896, Mitchell Kendal of the prestigious architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, in a display of erudition, engraved the words of Herodotus around the frieze of the nascent New York City General Post Office, and the idea has been associated with the postal service ever since.

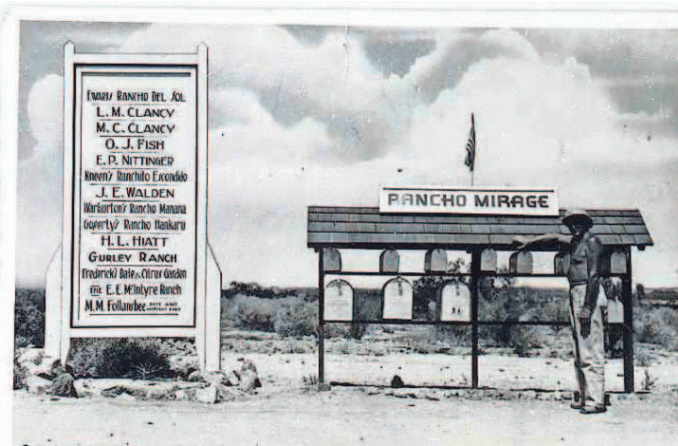
"Heat" has often been replaced with "sleet" in the modern tellings of the quote, but when it comes to the desert, Herodotus had it right. The presence of a post office in the most remote parts of the country meant civilization itself. And by the middle of the 20th century, the little housing development of Rancho Mirage was poised to be connected to the rest of the country and the world.

In August of 1950, Rancho Mirage was rightly proud of the addition of a post office, and The Desert Sun covered the story. "One of the oldest Palm Springs area subdivisions, located 13 miles southeast of the Village on Highway 111, will have its own post office in operation November 1, it was learned yesterday. The new post office will be located just east of the present Rancho Mirage tract office."

"Notice that the post office will be opened November 1 is posted in the offices of the tract office ... an old timer in the area has filed the first application for position as postmaster. He plans to erect a building just east of the Tract office which will be operated as a grocery store and an Indian relic shop where souvenirs and handiwork manufactured by the (Indians) will be sold."

Hale and hearty Rancho Mirage residents had previously been obliged to travel to Indio to pick up their mail, or receive it by RFD, Rural Free Delivery, in a roadside array of mailboxes.

Rural Free Delivery was initiated in



1930s Rural Free Delivery mailboxes in Rancho Mirage. COURTESY TRACY CONRAD, GAIL B. THOMPSON COLLECTION

the late 19th century to deliver mail directly to the most remote areas of the country. Postmaster General John Wanamaker, owner of the eponymous department store, was ardently in favor of RFD, so that the store could connect with customers far and wide inexpensively. Politicians also liked the idea as they could reach their voters by post.

The "biggest and most expensive endeavor" ever instituted by the U.S. Postal Service was the law of the land by 1904, and by 1910 in order to implement it, 40,997 carriers were employed at the cost of almost \$37 million dollars. Millions of families were served by RFD, and this was especially true in California. The next step towards civilization was a bona fide post office.

"Palm Springs Postmaster R.M. (Pop) Gorham said he has not received notice as yet of the plan to open the post office at Rancho Mirage but when it does it no doubt will be one of fourth class. He said that mail to Rancho Mirage is presently being routed through Indio and distributed via RFD to residents in that area. J.F. Smith, postal inspector, San Bernardino, recently inspected the site of the new office and placed his stamp of approval on the

federal project, it was reported."

Just a few short months after the announcement on Feb. 1, 1951, the new post office was open for business in Rancho Mirage. "J.S. Smith, San Bernardino post office inspector swore in Postmaster Sidney Greenleaf at 8 a.m. yesterday and Rancho Mirage's new post office opened its doors to the public, ready for its first day's business. The fourth-class federal agency is in a \$3,000 wing of the Rancho Mirage Tract office and was completed by California Building and Supply Co. in November. The new office will furnish all regular post office services, keep full time hours and is ready to rent 300 boxes."

The quiet beauty of the desert and the presence of a post office was trumpeted in advertisements for Rancho Mirage. "America's most distinctive desert community stands high on the desert sheltered by majestic mountains. Its exclusiveness has been maintained by its residents who enjoy its discreet proximity to fabulous desert entertainment and sports centers. They find Rancho Mirage's luxurious, casual atmosphere is the perfect environment for their relaxation, their play, and if they desire, their quiet leisure. It

is in this atmosphere that Rancho Mirage residents have found their contentment in the quiet beauty of the desert. Controlled development has made a select number of homes available at Rancho Mirage ..."

Those select number of homes produced a lot of mail back and forth to the rest of the country and the world. By February 1959, Postmaster Sidney Greenleaf and staff in observing the eighth anniversary of the Rancho Mirage post office, noted it had been "established as Fourth Class it is now Second Class with an increase of about 600 per cent." And he reported that "increasing revenue will put the Rancho Mirage Post Office into First Class soon."

Total receipts in 1951 were \$5,222.48 and in 1959 were up to \$37,480.54, showing an increase of 41% over 1958 alone. More than a quarter of a million, 254,600 pieces of mail were handled by the Rancho Mirage post office in 1959 for a population for a population nearing 2000 people and "a winter population that goes up as far as 4,000 persons."

During the season, those winter visitors tramped to the post office to send letters and packages of dates home to the rest of the country. The sweet treat fueled the prodigious increase in mail that would allow for actual delivery service to individual mailboxes at individual homes by the latter part of 1960, indicating civilization had come to Rancho Mirage, in the form of the post office and its courageous couriers who would endure the desert heat in their appointed rounds.

In August 1964, Postmaster Greenleaf was rightly proud of the transformation of the postal service in Rancho Mirage in a little over a decade from a row of mailboxes under a sheltering roof to a genuine first-class offering. He noted for the newspaper that in the 13 years of service of the office, not a single written complaint had been lodged.

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