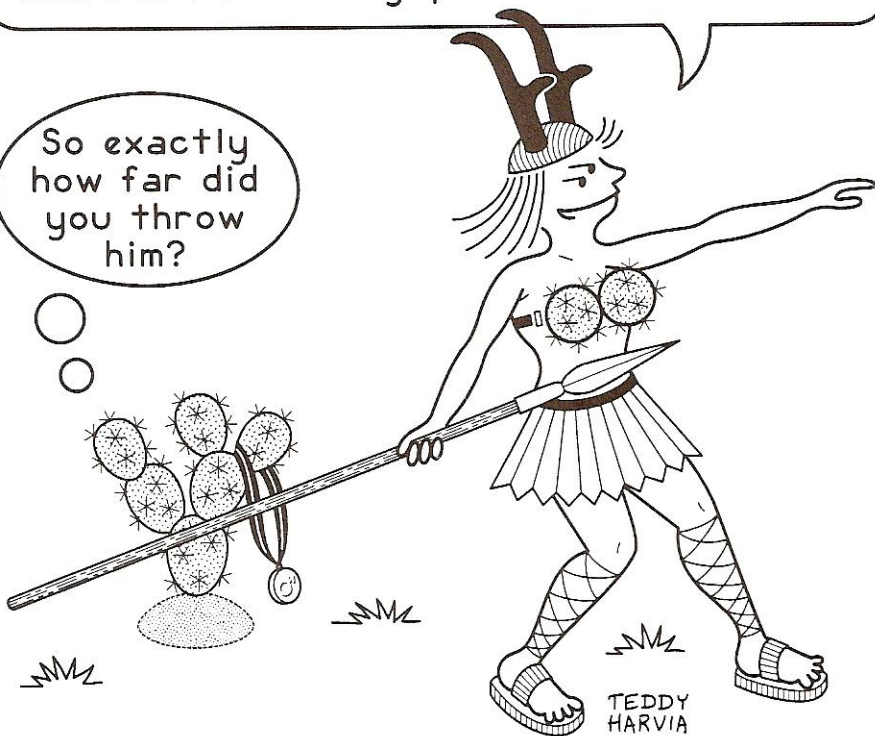


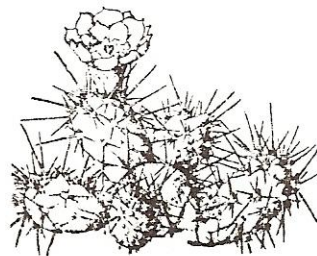
OPUNTIA

48

He scoffed at me being able to throw anything very far, especially a spear, but I showed him. I broke the Olympic record for a man.

So exactly how far did you throw him?





[Editor's
remarks
in square
brackets]

ISSN 1183-2703

OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

FROM: Milt Stevens
6325 Keystone Street
Simi Valley, California 93063

2001-02-01

[Re: unusual parcels] At a crime analysis meeting years ago, I heard a criminalist for the California Department of Justice describe a unusual use. A badly deteriorated body with a bullet hole in the back of the head had been discovered in Baja California. Since there were a few wisps of blond hair still attached to the skull, the Mexican authorities figured it had been an American and asked for assistance from across the border.

The criminalist got a call from their agent in Mexico describing the crime scene. He asked the agent to send him a dental profile for identification. The agent informed him that there weren't any forensic dentists in Mexico.

COVER ART CREDIT: Teddy Harvia, 12341 Band Box Place, Dallas, Texas 75244-7001

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Robert Lichtman, Sheryl Birkhead, Teddy Harvia, Sue Mason, Bruce Pelz, Ginger Mason, Russ Forster, Susan Poe, John Held Jr

This left only one other possibility. The agent had to mail the head to the criminalist in Sacramento. He received the head in the mail, an event which cleared his office out for the afternoon.

[My immediate thought is about the Customs officer who inspected the parcel in the mails. Was a proper C-1 form attached to the parcel? Presumably it was listed as "no commercial value". And would a head go as first-class, surface, or sample mail? Registered and/or insured?]

I disagree with Robert Sawyer's statement that to survive, SF will have to move away from far future stories and must assert itself as contemporary literature. If you want contemporary literature, why not read contemporary literature? I want stories in the far future with incredible inventions and exotic aliens. Guys in space ships doin' stuff. I want sensawunda!

I really don't need SF for extrapolations of the stuff I can read in my daily newspaper. I can do extrapolations for myself. There are always some fairly likely trends, but it is the unobvious possibilities that make SF. For instance, when the automobile was introduced, people foresaw many future developments, but nobody figured it would change our sexual practices. It's the sort of development that SF should be looking for.

FROM: Joseph Nicholas 2001-01-04
15 Jansons Road
Tottenham, London N15 4JU, England

I don't really go along with Robert Sawyer's call for the SF genre to re-invent itself to cope with the 21st Century, largely because I don't think that as a genre it can wholly escape from the particular socio-economic moment from which it arose. To wit, the emergence into popular consciousness during the 1920s and 1930s of science and scientific endeavour as liberating and emancipating forces, and the technocratic details which flowed therefrom.

I label SF as the literature of a failed technocracy. Despite its claims to have a skeptical view of technological progress, it is nevertheless firmly founded on a faith that such progress is *per se* beneficial, and that only thus can society be properly organized and controlled. It might have been thought that WW2 and the Holocaust would have knocked many of these ideas on the head, but they are still around. SF may appear to have re-invented itself on several occasions since the 1930s, from John W. Campbell to feminism and cyberpunk, and whatever writers have been getting up to during the 1990s, but these are only surface transformations. SF's core beliefs are unchanged, and it probably couldn't alter or abandon them without ceasing to be SF altogether.

THE HISTORY OF BLOTTING PAPER

by Dale Speirs

I am possibly of the last class of schoolchildren who used fountain pens and nibs. In the rural Red Deer (Alberta) schools, as late as 1963, we sat in desks that had holes drilled in a corner to hold an inkwell. What's more, we used them. I remember the handwriting drills on how to hold a pen nib at the correct angle to form the letters. I remember the trouble with blobs of ink suddenly appearing on one's calligraphic masterpiece because too much ink had been taken up on the nib on the last dip into the inkwell. Every schoolteacher could expect as a matter of course that the kids would spatter each other with ink. The ballpoint pen had been heard of and was often sold in the big city (that is, Red Deer, population 20,000) but was viewed as a crutch, in the same manner that a decade later, pocket calculators were not permitted in schools because they made students intellectually lazy and forgetful of their math.

Every local businessman had on his desk a large blotter. He used a fountain pen as a prestige symbol the way laptops and palmtops are today. If you were respectable, you wore a three-piece business suit, drove a mid-priced sedan, attended the church of your choice, and carried a big gold fountain pen that often as not was a graduation gift from Mom and Dad and thus of great

sentimental value. Not a few businesses in the 1960s used advertising on small pads of blotters as giveaways; in fact, I still have an old batch from a Red Deer insurance agency to dry postage stamps after soaking them off envelopes.

Modern Times, Modern Standards.

In my researches, I stumbled across the quality standards for blotting paper [5], issued by the Canadian General Standards Board. Strangely enough, Canada imported all its blotting paper until 1924, despite being one of the world's major paper manufacturers [18].

For many people, technical standards are about as exciting as reading an out-of-town telephone directory for its literary qualities. I got the habit of reading them with enjoyment at work, where it was amusing to note the variances between the official standards and what actually happens out in the field. I was not too startled to learn that there are official standards for blotting paper. In passing I noticed the same volume contained standards for spirit duplicators and paper clips.

The standards begin by defining their definitions: "*This specification applies to blotting paper used for absorption of excess ink from fresh writing, and for desk blotters.*". I know

desk blotters are still common enough these days, albeit 99.9% of the time they are used for scribbling down telephone messages because the Post-It notepad is never found when wanted.

The next paragraph was obviously inserted by order of the legal department: *“This specification may require the use of materials and/or equipment that could be hazardous. This document does not purport to address all the safety aspects associated with its use. Anyone using this specification has the responsibility to consult the appropriate authorities and to establish appropriate health and safety practices in conjunction with any existing applicable regulatory requirements prior to its use.”* Glancing ahead at the rest of the standards, I can see no real hazard save that the composition of blotting paper must include pulpwood. Pulp and paper mills can be dangerous places but this specification is aimed at the final product. One would expect that the actual production methods would be covered under other laws. The legal boilerplate is very likely the usual cover-your-ass mode that any reasonably paranoid person uses, much in the same way as the doors into the University of Calgary Education Building bear large signs *“Do Not Enter Building When Fire Alarm Is Sounding”*. Offhand, the only hazards I could think of with blotting paper is not to let cigarette ashes drop on them.

We next learn that blotting paper is supplied in only two grades, which rather surprised me, as I supposed the stationery industry

would have at least a half-dozen types. Grade A is white, not less than 25% rag content, and free from unbleached or groundwood pulp. Grade B is green and need only be free from groundwood pulp. Both grades have a grammage (weight) of 300 grammes per square metre, $\pm 5\%$. Grade A blotting paper is to be .46 mm thick, Grade B .53 mm thick, both ± 0.025 mm. I have this vision of a grizzled shop foreman and his spotty-faced apprentice in a paper mill carefully setting the tolerances of the machinery. The one fellow with a pair of calipers (*“Nope, still too thick by point zero five.”*), and the other twisting knobs on the mill roller adjustment mechanism (*“Okay, how’s that now?”*).

Bursting strength for Grade A blotting paper must be a minimum of 70 kiloPascals, and for Grade B not least than 97. What really sounds fascinating is the absorption time for 1 ml of ink. Grade A must absorb that amount of ink in 75 seconds maximum, while Grade B lives up to its name by taking 150 seconds. Watching ink dry is like watching the grass grow, or to use a more modern comparison, like waiting for a Website to download. Nonetheless there is a detailed methodology specified as follows.

“Place a sample of paper on a 4 mesh wire screen and fill a pipette graduated in 0.01 ml with a good commercial writing ink having a temperature of 23 ± 2 degrees Celsius. With the pipette at an angle of about 30 degrees with the horizontal, and the tip

nearly in contact with the paper, allow a measured amount of ink to flow onto the paper near its centre. While the ink is flowing, keep the tip in the drop of ink until delivery of the 1 ml of ink is completed. Measure with a stop watch the rate of absorption in seconds from the start of flow of ink until the last drop of ink is completely absorbed as indicated by no further reflection of light from it when viewed at an angle. An equal number of tests shall be made on each side of the paper. An average of at least 10 tests shall be reported."

The apprentice carries a batch of blotting paper over to the paper mill laboratory, where the white-coated technician calmly takes the bundle and commences the testing. Setting the sample on the lab bench, he scrunches sideways, holding a pipette with one hand at the correct angle and a stopwatch in the other hand. He keeps one eye on the pipette, one eye on the stopwatch, and with his third eye tries to catch the last glint of the ink as it fades into the paper. Since three-eyed lab technicians are not normally found outside nuclear plants with sloppy safety procedures, perhaps it is better to assume that two technicians will actually test the paper. "Mark!", shouts one technician, as the ink sinks into the paper. "78 seconds", replies the other technician. Moments later, a sarcastic telephone call is made over to the production shop; "Your Grade A is three seconds out of spec.". At the other end of the line is heard something unprintable (Grizzled answered the phone), and soon enough an emergency meeting is called on the

mill floor to address the problem.

After all, the customer remembers quality long after the price is forgotten.

A Digression About The History Of Paper.

Before the idea of blotting paper arose there had to be the ordinary kind of paper. Clay tablets were the standard medium from 1850 B.C. to 1 B.C., except in Egypt where papyrus was used. Hahn [17] writes: "*The early Romans used wax tablets (tabellae) as their writing medium, although 'letter writing' as we know it came in around 1 B.C. with the introduction of Egyptian papyrus. ...*"

"Parchment, scraped animal hides, or vellum (made from the skin of unborn lambs, kids, and calves) had been used at an early age, but it did not become popular until around 197 - 185 B.C. through its use for the Pergamum library, whose King Eumenes II was refused the use of papyrus by the Egyptians. As a general rule, vellum began to replace papyrus sheets as the key medium around 100 A.D. because it was both more readily corrected and easier to make into books or codices. Nevertheless, the tabellae continued in use for letters, particularly intimate ones such as love notes, until a much later date. We have few examples of this wax letter form from later periods because of its perishable nature."

“The fifth, and current, major writing medium was paper. It began as a writing medium in China at least as far back as the 2nd century B.C., but came westward into the Muslim world as a result of the battle of Samarkand (751 A.D.), when a number of paper makers were captured. As a result, paper-making became an Arab tradition. The Chinese had used cotton to make their paper; however, the Muslims began with flax and shifted to linen rags. This is reflected by the fact that the references are to “rag paper” by Peter of Cluny (1122 - 1150 A.D.) and “cloth parchment” in 1263 A.D.”

“Paper was actually known as early as 1102 A.D. in Europe, for King Roger of Sicily signed a deed written on paper that year. Paper was introduced into Spain by the Moors, and into the Byzantine Empire around 1200 A.D. if not earlier.”

Pounce.

As long as paper was valuable and hard to come by, the preferred method of soaking up excess ink was a fine powder called pounce. Pounce was originally used to smooth or de-grease vellum. When paper became more common, pounce was employed to stop the ink soaking into the coarse fibres. Finally, as the quality of paper improved, pounce was used to blot the ink sitting on the paper's surface and stop smearing [16]. A citation dated 1706 [4] defines pounce as: “ ... a sort of powder strew'd upon paper to bear ink,

or to soak up a blot.” The word ‘pounce’ comes from the French word for pumice, from which much pounce was made. It could be of different compositions, though. An 1853 source [1] says that a fine silver sand was used for drying ink.

Depending on the composition of the pounce, it may not have been used to absorb ink but to lessen absorption by the paper and thus provide a finer, cleaner line of writing. An 1839 account [7] says: *“Writing masters are in the habit of rubbing the powder of scuttlefish, or of gum sandarach, upon writing paper, in order to make it less absorptive of the ink. This gives a sharp, precise, and determinate character to the writing. For those who are curious in the art of the pen, pounce is very useful in concealing errors which have been scratched out with a penknife. The action of the latter upon paper is to remove the size and to allow the ink to diffuse itself into an ugly blot. This, however, is altogether prevented by the application of pounce.”*

Pounce and blotting paper co-existed for centuries. Circa 1656, a Latin reference remarked (in translation [13]): *“We dry a writing with blotting paper, or, Calis-sand out of a sandbox.”*

Pounce was frowned upon because it damaged books. In 1675, it was written [2]: *“Let the dusting or sanding of presidents in books be avoided, rather using fine brown paper to prevent blotting, if*

the time of the ink's drying cannot be allowed; for the sand takes away the good colour of the ink, and getting into the backs of books makes them break their binding." When used for letter writing, it was an annoyance for the recipient to get a small shower of sand over his desk on opening the letter.

By the 1850s, pounce was declining in use [1], being displaced by blotting paper. In 1866 it was remarked [6]: "*The pounce box, for dusting pounce over writing to dry it, has ben superseded almost in the present generation by the use of blotting paper, at least in England, though it is still employed on the Continent.*" This was mostly true. In England, there were still a few old-fashioned solicitors who used pounce, not to mention sealing their letters with wax instead of using envelopes [10]. Circa 1888, blotting paper was seldom in use in Italy. A coarse sand was provided at desks, which, while soaking up the excess ink, managed to make everything gritty and dirty [11]. At the same time, pounce sand was regularly used in northern Germany [9] and the Netherlands [8].

The sole legacy of pounce is that it may have generated the word 'poncy', a slang term for male homosexuals, likely because some of the latter use powder on their cheeks. The Oxford English Dictionary is not entirely certain of this however, and as this etymology is off the subject of blotting paper, we hastily leave it for the safer ground of the pulp and paper industry.

Early Mentions Of Blotting Paper.

The Oxford English Dictionary cites two early mentions of blotting paper [3]. One citation from 1519 mentions " ... *Blottyng papyr serveth to drye weete wryttinge lest there be made blottis or blurris.*". A 1602 reference [15] said in passing while commenting on another subject: "*Our shields and swords are of blotting paper, not of steele.*", which indicates it was common enough that an author could expect a reader to know what it was. From 1612 is the quote that: " ... *Each to have a blotting paper to keep their books from soyling, or marring under their hands.*" [3]. It was used in the 1600s often enough: " ... *I have seen pieces of blotting paper among [manuscripts] of the time of Charles I ... In an "Account of Stationery supplied to the Receipt of the Exchequer and the Treasury 1666-1668", occur several entries of "one quire of blotting-paper", "two quires of blotting", ...*" [1].

One account says that blotting paper was invented circa 1800 at the Ford paper mill in England [18]. A foreman forgot to add sizing to the mix and produced a batch of soft paper useless for writing. The owner of the mill discovered that it worked as a blotter, and all turned out well in the end. I have my doubts on the veracity of this anecdote. Firstly, the idea of unsized paper to blot ink was around a long time beforehand, and is a reasonably

obvious idea. Secondly, if any unsized paper had been produced by accident, it would have been thrown back into the raw pulp and recycled, not kept around on the off chance that someone might find a use for it. Thirdly, no factory worker would have owned up to such a costly mistake, but would have quietly disposed of the paper.

Other Usage.

A Spanish reference circa 1618 mentions that blotting paper was not just used to soak up ink. It was placed under the writing hand of the scribe so as not to dirty the paper being written on [13]. This is understandable, given the combination of the high price of quality paper in those days and the laxer hygiene of the populace.

Blotting Paper And Espionage.

A sheet of blotting paper necessarily takes up a mirror image of the writing in question. For that reason, any spy infiltrating an office would naturally rummage through the waste basket and the inkstand for used blotting paper. Government offices used roller blotters for secrecy for that reason. Those who did use flat sheets had to be certain to destroy them afterwards [12]. There was also use of black blotting paper [14] but this was not too successful. The British government used black blotters in the India Office and

the Foreign Office. It was found that the ink dried grey on the black paper and thus the writing could still be read.

The decline and fall of the blotting pad did not seriously disrupt spies. It was matched by the rise of the memo pad, usually next to the telephone. Anyone who has watched enough detective movies knows that when you see a blank memo pad on the suspect's desk, take the top sheet with you, since it will have an impression of the previous sheet on it. Nowadays, however, one simply copies floppy disks off the suspect's computer, but that is off the subject.

Blotting Paper In Science.

If blotting paper is no longer in use for drying ink, it is still common for paper chromatography, used to separate mixtures into their individual components. If a piece of blotting paper is used as a wick for a sample of a liquid mixture, different components will travel at different speeds across the paper, producing a spectrum of substances. The paper can then be cut apart into the individual blots and the substances purified further by other means. Precursors to paper chromatography date from the period 1850 to 1861, but mass use as a standard laboratory technique didn't occur until after World War Two [19].

Blotting paper is also used in various forms as filters, both in the laboratory and outside. Stamp collectors still rely on it to dry stamps they soak off paper.

References.

- 1] Anonymous (1853) Blotting paper. NOTES AND QUERIES 8:185
- 2] Cooper, C.H. (1853) Blotting paper. NOTES AND QUERIES 8:185
- 3] Oxford English Dictionary (1989) Blotting paper. OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, 2nd Edition, 2:314
- 4] Oxford English Dictionary (1989) Pounce. OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, 2nd Edition, 12:242
- 5] Canadian General Standards Board (1988) Paper, blotting. CGSB Standard 53.34M. 3 pages.
- 6] Piesse, S. (1866) Pouncet box and pomander. NOTES AND QUERIES 3rd Series 9:392
- 7] Anonymous (1839) On writing materials. SATURDAY MAGAZINE 14:120
- 8] Anonymous (as St. Swithin) (1888) Writing on sand. NOTES AND QUERIES 7th Series, 6:236
- 9] Busk, R.H. (1888) Writing on sand. NOTES AND QUERIES 7th Series, 6:310

- 10] Anonymous (as W.C.B.) (1888) Writing on sand. NOTES AND QUERIES 7th Series, 6:310
- 11] Trollope, T.A. (1888) Writing on sand. NOTES AND QUERIES 7th Series, 6:310
- 12] Anonymous (as D.) (1898) Black blotting paper. NOTES AND QUERIES 9th Series, 2:537
- 13] Deedes, C. (1899) Blotting paper. NOTES AND QUERIES 9th Series, 3:336-337
- 14] Anonymous (as T.V.L.) (1899) Black blotting paper. NOTES AND QUERIES 9th Series, 3:72
- 15] Thornton, R.H. (1899) Blotting paper. NOTES AND QUERIES 9th Series, 3:136
- 16] Whalley, J.I. (1975) Writing implements and accessories. Published by Gale Research Co., Detroit, Michigan, pages 90-92
- 17] Hahn, C.M. (1999) The intertwining of philatelic and social history. Part VI. POSTAL HISTORY JOURNAL 114:45-51
- 18] Shuttleworth, J.K. (1937) The careless workman and the industrious wasp. CANADIAN BANKER 45:89-90
- 19] Briathwaite, A., and F.J. Smith (1985) CHROMATOGRAPHIC METHODS. Published by Chapman and Hall, London. Pages 1 to 10

THE MAILS VERSUS ANIMALS

by Dale Speirs

The mail doesn't always get through as it is transported. Anything being transported is subject to the possibility of wreck or crashing. Wreck mail is usually thought of as caused by storms, mechanical failures, or human error. One interesting type of wreck mail is that caused by untoward interaction with animals. This article is a compilation of some incidents where animals were the cause of the mails coming to grief.

By Land: The Lion Sleeps Tonight, Unless There Is A Mail Carrier In The Vicinity.

Perhaps the most spectacular incident of the mails interrupted by animals happened on October 20, 1816. The Exeter mail coach was inbound to London when it ran into trouble at Winterslowhutt near Salisbury. The November 1816 issue of GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE tells the story [1].

"At the moment when the coachman pulled up to deliver his bags, one of the leaders [front coach horse] was suddenly seized by a ferocious animal, which was perceived by the coachman and the guard, by the light of the lamps, to be a huge lioness. The horses kicked and plunged violently, and it was with difficulty the coachman could prevent the carriage from being overturned. A

large mastiff dog came up, and attacked her fiercely, on which she quitted the horse, and turned upon him. The dog fled, but was pursued and killed by the lioness within about 40 yards of the place."

"It appears that the beast had escaped from a caravan that was standing on the road side, belonging to the proprietors of a menagerie, on their way to Salisbury Fair. An alarm being given, the keepers pursued and hunted the lioness into a hovel under a granary; and secured her so effectively, by barricading the place, as to prevent her escape. The horse, when first attacked, fought with great spirit, and, if at liberty, would probably have beaten down his antagonist with his fore feet, but in plunging he embarrassed himself in the harness."

"The lioness had attacked him in front, and springing at his throat, had fastened the talons of her fore feet on each side of his neck, close to the head, while the talons of her hind feet were forced into his chest. In this situation she hung, while the blood was seen flying, as if a vein had been opened by a lancet."

"The expression of agony in the tears and moans of the horse was most piteous and affecting. He was the off leader, and as the mail drew up, stood exactly abreast of the caravan from which the lioness made the assault. Had the carriage been a little more

advanced, she would probably have darted upon the coachman or guard. The coachman at first proposed to alight and stab the lioness with a knife, but was prevented by the remonstrance of the guard, who observed that he would expose himself to certain destruction, as the animal, feeling herself attacked, would turn upon him and tear him to pieces. The prudence of the advice has been clearly proved in the fate of the dog. It was the engagement between him and the lioness that offered time for the keepers to rally. But for that interference, the mischief at the mail would have been more considerable."

Lions are more logical as an interruption to the mails in Africa. An interesting report from 1949 by the postmaster of Kirriemuir, Southern Rhodesia, discusses the problems of native lettercarriers travelling on foot or more commonly by bicycle [17]. Strangely, the lions seem to have improved service, as in the case of an habitually late mail carrier named Jailos: "*Only once in that period was he ever on time ... when an old lion strolled on to the road. Jailos became airborne and is believed not to have touched down for a mile or so. At any rate he covered ten miles in about half an hour.*"

By Land: Man's Best Friend, Supposedly.

Mischief to the mails from man's best friend occurred in February 1820 when the London-bound mails from Portsmouth were

attacked by dogs [2]. The coach was travelling along the edge of a cliff known as the Devil's Punch Bowl, between Petersfield and Mousehill when the leading horses were: "*... suddenly seized by three bulldogs belonging to two men with a fish cart. The leaders, by their violent struggles, broke their harness, and disengaged themselves from the coach; one of them fell over the bank, and the ferocious dogs with him. One of the men succeeded in getting the horse up. The horses are both very much injured; one of them so much that it is feared he cannot recover; and the harness is broken all to pieces. The guard was obliged to drive the coach, with a pair only, to Mousehill, and the coachman to walk with the injured leaders.*"

Dogs versus lettercarriers are an old, old story, of course. They may be the cause of delayed mail, as in most postal services around the world, the lettercarriers have the right to refuse service where dangerous animals put the postie at risk. As far as actual damaged or delayed mail is concerned, an early account is the London, England, lettercarrier plagued in 1885 by a greyhound. The dog would follow at a distance, then try to get at the mail box where the postie dropped newspapers. If successful, the dog grabbed the newspaper and ran off to a place unknown [13]. One can imagine that trying to chase a greyhound on foot through crowded streets would not be easy.

By Air.

The earliest airmail crash due to an animal listed in the AMERICAN AIR MAIL CATALOGUE (AAMC) was on February 4, 1926, when a plane landing at Des Moines, Iowa, collided with a horse [5]. The mails were part of a Chicago to San Francisco flight and were forwarded by a relief plane. It is not stated if there was a relief horse, as presumably the original animal got the worst of the impact.

There is another 1926 report of a mail plane making a crash landing near Elko, Nevada, after colliding with a golden eagle [4]. The eagle was killed on impact but got its revenge in death by taking out the front wing strut, forcing the aircraft down. This incident is not listed in AAMC nor could I find it reported in the NEW YORK TIMES.

By Sea.

Mosquitos in 1907 were so bad along the Delaware Bay coast that postal service was disrupted. They were apparently attracted to the white mail wagons. Both the letter carriers and the horses would plunge into the salt water to get some relief from the mosquitos [7]. Mail delays lasted over a period of several weeks.

Runaway Animals.

A more common disruption to the mails was runaway horses, a hazard to those days as fender-benders are to our modern automobile traffic. An example was an 1842 incident in London, where the southbound mails were about to depart Queen's Head Inn [3]. One of the horses was rubbing its head against the pole when it caught the harness in it, tightened the reins, and caused the entire team to take off at full speed, as if it were an automobile with a jammed accelerator.

"The coachman, with the reins in hand, was just about to mount, and one of the stable boys had hold of the leaders. The latter was dragged a short distance, but succeeded in extricating himself; but the coachman hung on by the reins, and succeeded in keeping pace with, and directing the course of the horses down Pilgrim Street, thus avoiding Mosley Street, and the precipitous hill of Dean Street. When opposite the Fox and Lamb, the mail came in contact with an unyoked cart, which it threw over, but immediately afterwards its career was fortunately stopped by a large waggon, which was completely whirled about by the force of the concussion. ... The passengers then alighted, and another coach having been procured, the luggage was transferred, and the mail proceeded."

Not quite as exciting for passersby, but certainly for the posties, were two strayed horses in Brooklyn, New York, on December 20, 1933. The Post Office had hired horses and wagons to help deliver the Christmas mails. In unrelated incidents, one horse wandered off while the lettercarrier was inside a building making a delivery out of the Midwood postal station. Elsewhere, almost at the same time, under identical circumstances, a lettercarrier out of Station L had his horse disappear. The first horse was located after a two-hour search by police. It was quietly grazing by a roadside near its home stables. The second horse was found after a short search around the corner. It had been rented from a laundry, and presumably decided to take its regular delivery route rather than the one the postie was using. The mail wagons were checked and nothing was missing [9]. All's well that ends well. What fascinated me most about this story was that horse delivery was still being used in New York City as late as 1933. I can believe that horses were used for rural mails even until the 1940s, but I thought that the big cities would have dispensed with them by then.

A runaway camel resulted in the European mails to Baghdad, expected July 20, 1906, being lost forever [6]. The letter carrier was sleeping when the camel made its escape, and was lost in the desert, taking with it the mails.

Letter Box Critters.

One of the earliest instances of mails damaged and delayed by animals is also related to the earliest use of letter boxes. France tried out street letter boxes in 1685, but the experiment was eventually abandoned, one reason being that the letters were eaten by mice [10].

Rodents turned out to be an ongoing story over the next three centuries. In Hamilton, Ontario, in 1892, a lettercarrier said that he had indeed delivered letters claimed to be missing. Further investigation showed that the homeowner's letterbox had a mouse nest at the bottom, and the mice were happy to use the letters as nesting material [19]. In 1986, the Leavittsburg, Ohio, posties went to empty a street box and discovered a rat had eaten or shredded 60 pieces of mail. The white rat must have been deposited by some vandal; it was captured and later photographed among the remains of the letters [11].

When you stop and think about it, letter boxes are ideally shaped for bee hives, so it is not surprising that swarms would settle in them from time to time. In September 1871, near Acton, England, one such swarm congregated in a wall-mounted letter box [18]. When the mail collector opened up to get the letters, he was badly stung about the hands. The bees were finally hived the next day

by a local apiarist. There is no word if any “Delayed by bee swarm” markings were applied to the envelopes.

The Cwmpengraig mails in South Wales fell victim in early 1960 to ravenous snails [15]. The Newcastle Emlyn Rural Council protested to the Post Office that the snails were eating the letters. In one case, a cheque in a letter was half destroyed. The British Post Office replied that the problem was that the letter box was attached to a stone wall, but they would install another one on a post. One wonders if they put snail guards on the post to stop the pesky invertebrates from shinnying up the pole.

In 1935, a young Boston lad decided to mail the family cat to Santa Claus as a Christmas gift and deposited it into a street box [12]. The mail tag was uninformative, but one of the postal workers was able to trace its home. The account does not mention any damaged mail, but I am suspicious since the cat must have done something or other while trapped in the confines of the box. Likewise a repetition of this incident in 1951, when someone dropped a cat, complete with stamps and address label tied around its middle, into a Colorado Springs letterbox [14]. The postmaster refused to deliver the cat, and it was eventually adopted out under the name “Third Class”. Depending on how long the cat was in the letterbox, there probably was mail damaged.

Bigger than a letter box are the giant mail processing plants used by modern postal agencies. One such sprawling building, with its multiple loading bays is in Mississauga, Ontario. Canada Post was plagued by squirrels sneaking inside the building, not a difficult task given the number of overhead doors constantly being left open. The squirrels were sniffing out packages containing food, with a particular preference for chocolate and, of course, nuts. They then ripped open the parcels to get at the food [16]. Management set out traps and poison bait, but no squirrel would bother with bait if better smelling things were about. Trying to catch a squirrel scurrying underneath all those sorting and cancelling machines would be impossible.

Turnabout Is Fair Play.

Too good to not mention is the story of an U.S. Marine airmail pilot in Nicaragua in September 1932. One detachment of Marines received their mail via airplane, but because there was no airstrip, the mails were simply chucked out of the plane into a nearby pasture. An unfortunate bull grazing in the wrong place at the wrong time was hit squarely between the eyes by a copy of the NEW YORK TIMES, and knocked unconscious by the impact [8]. Must have been the Sunday edition.

- 1] Anonymous (1816) Country news. GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE 86(2):455-456
- 2] Anonymous (1820-02-14) Extraordinary attack. THE TIMES (London), page 2, column e
- 3] Anonymous (1842) Accident to the Royal Mail. ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS 1:202
- 4] Anonymous (1926) Memorabilia. NOTES AND QUERIES 151:254
- 5] Eisendrath, J.L., R. Cole, and E.D. Fletcher (1974) Interrupted flights covers, familiarly known as crash covers. AMERICAN AIR MAIL CATALOGUE, 5th Edition, 1:317-389
- 6] Anonymous (1906-10-20) [untitled] THE CALGARY EYE OPENER, page 1
- 7] Anonymous (1907-08-14) Mosquitos hold up mail. NEW YORK TIMES, page 1
- 8] Anonymous (1932-09-18) Copy of TIMES fells a bullock as Marine pilot drops mails. NEW YORK TIMES, page 8
- 9] Anonymous (1933-12-21) Two horses wander with holiday mail. NEW YORK TIMES, page 14
- 10] Attwell, H. (1889) Pillar post letter boxes. NOTES AND QUERIES, 7th Series, 8:441-442
- 11] Anonymous (1986-01-15) Post Office rat. GLOBE AND MAIL, page A3
- 12] Anonymous (1935-12-19) Mails cat to Santa Claus. NEW YORK TIMES, page 2
- 13] Anonymous (1885 June) Notes. TORONTO PHILATELIC JOURNAL 1(4):14
- 14] Fisher, E.M. (1951-05-11) Now they send mail in a pickle jar. PHILATELIC MAGAZINE 59:383
- 15] Anonymous (1960-02-12) Victory for snails. PHILATELIC MAGAZINE 68:127
- 16] Ferry, Jon (1979-05-12) Squirrel hunt. GLOBE AND MAIL, page 5
- 17] Nodder, W.G. (1950-01-14) Some facts, humorous and otherwise, concerning the postal services of Rhodesia. STAMP COLLECTING 73:535, 541
- 18] Anonymous (1871-09-15) New postal grievance. THE TIMES (London), page 4
- 19] Smythies, E.A. (1966-10-07) How letters disappear. STAMP COLLECTING 107:245