

Blues on Wheels

by Jess Stoner

A writer becomes a carrier for the United States Postal Service out of a long-held love for the mail. What she discovers are screams, threats, lies, labor violations, and dog attacks.



Post office at the Alamo, 1972, Charles O'Rear, courtesy [the U.S. National Archives](#).

I was hired at \$15.30 an hour, a winning wage considering the president of a local branch of the National Association of Letter Carriers union revealed that without the collective bargaining process, the USPS would be paying us \$10 an hour. During our 40 hours of in-classroom training, which included a well-taught defensive driving course, we learned that leaves are as slick as ice, no one goes “postal” anymore (they go, as my trainer said, “‘high school,’ like Columbine” instead), and, although, this was Texas, we had to “leave the Glock at home.” We were also told that we should never ask for a day off. Our trainer bragged that he had shown up for work when he was sick as a dog, and it wasn’t until he had thrown up on his supervisor’s shoes that he was forcibly sent home. Another CCA-in-training, a veteran of Afghanistan I sat next to for a few days, would quit a few months in; his

After taking a personality test online and another exam consisting mostly of questions evaluating the sharpness of my memory, I was granted a five-minute interview and hired as a city carrier assistant (CCA) for the United States Postal Service.

The CCA position, akin to a contract letter-carrier, was created in 2013 to save the USPS money and shift higher-paid transitional employees (TEs) into lower-paying jobs. Or, as one district supervisor screamed at me: “YOU EXIST TO REDUCE OVERTIME.” TEs, who were making over \$20 an hour—with no benefits, no retirement, and no path to becoming a “regular”—had a short window to either take a \$5 per hour pay cut and become a CCA, with the promise of making regular in the vaguely defined near future, or quit.

wife and young child had been in a car accident and were taken by ambulance to the hospital. His supervisor told him he could visit them, but he had to return to deliver the mail. He had already worked more than 14 days in a row.

Once you leave the classroom, you head to the station you're assigned to for three days of shadowing. My first day on the job, I clocked in at the beginning of my shift and was immediately reprimanded by my supervisor, who told me, "You don't clock in until I tell you to clock in." But the shadowing went well; I worked with two regular carriers I quickly adored, who showed me the ropes, including which convenience stores would let you use their bathroom. And then I was on my own.

It's hard to articulate what it's like, the first time you're behind the wheel of your Long Life Vehicle (LLV), the mail truck you're still nervous to drive, when you haven't yet developed a system to remember where the 50 packages you loaded into the truck need to be delivered; when you don't really know where you're going, and your boss tells you to use the map on your phone, and even then you have no idea where to park to deliver each "loop" of mail.

Another carrier told me to never, ever show them what they do to you.

My first day alone on the streets, a little girl and her littler brother met me at their fence. She told me it was her fifth birthday and then asked me if I had a brother. I said I did. She asked me if I had a mom, and I said I did. Then she told me that her mom had died. I handed the little girl her mail, asked if she could help me by taking it to the house, and then cried as I walked through her lawn to the next house. It was an emotional, slow-going, and still exhilarating first day, until my phone rang, and my boss screamed, "WHY AREN'T YOU BACK AT THE STATION!" I tried to rush, got clumsy, slowed down even more, and then a miracle happened: Another carrier, already on her way home and off the clock, stopped to help me with the last apartments on my route.

I cried once more, a few weeks in. The mail was heavy, and I was covering a route with a number of apartments whose mailboxes were old, often wouldn't budge, and even when they did, residents so rarely checked their mail that I had to painstakingly fold and squish letters to fit them in. Then I dropped my scanner and it broke. I called the station to tell them I was running late. My supervisor screamed, "YOU'RE HORRIBLE," and I said, "I'm doing my best," and I meant it. When an assistant supervisor showed up to help 20 minutes later, the strap on my satchel also broke. I thanked the supervisor for her help, although even she couldn't get the mailbox closed, and turned away so she couldn't see my face. I drove to my next loop and sobbed aloud as I tried to shove thick magazines through thin, razor-sharp mail slots that made my fingers bleed. I kept crying, from exhaustion and frustration, as I walked through hedges and tree branches. When I finished and arrived at the station, my supervisor asked if I had been crying. I told her my allergies were terrible. Another carrier had already told me to never, ever show them what they do to you.

I wanted to be a letter carrier because I have always loved checking the mail. It has been one of the highlights of my day since I was a kid, when my favorite aunt, who lived more than 1,000 miles away, would send me letters and packages. I had also been underemployed,

temping and volunteering for the last six months. I wanted to work outside, to tire out my body and my mind. I wanted a paycheck.

Everyone I knew was happy for me when I was hired; many said that delivering the mail was their secret dream job. They told me about the letter carriers they grew up with, whose names they knew.

I was so excited during training, I took notes as if I was in graduate school and didn't sleep the night before my LLV driver exam. I joined the NALC, even though Texas is a Right to Work state, and I didn't have to join the union, because they were supposed to defend me even if I didn't pay dues. I wanted to be good at my job, to do more than not screw up. I wanted to be the best, even before I knew that the history of the Post Office parallels the history of America, in all its glorious achievements and shameful transgressions.

Before the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, it named Benjamin Franklin the not-yet-a-country's first postmaster, though his job at that point was mostly to ensure that General George Washington and others would have a dependable system to deliver military intelligence. In 1788, the Constitution was finally ratified, and within its Article 1 is the establishment of the Post Office. A few years later, in 1792, Congress passed the Postal Act, which declared the "sanctity" of the mail, a kind of throwback middle finger to the English, who would spy on the colonists by opening their letters. During the Civil War, free delivery arrived in cities—you used to have to pay to *receive* a letter, not send it—and by the close of the century, a letter could make a 1,000-mile journey by horse, steamboat, or rail.

The 20th century saw mail by plane (Charles Lindbergh was an early airmail pilot) and public contempt for the postal worker by congresses, presidents, and postmasters general. President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Gag Order in 1902, which prevented postal workers from advocating for themselves, including the railroad clerks who were dying by the dozens in dangerous working conditions. Though the order was finally lifted a decade later, postal employees' wages and benefits were still at the whim of Congress until 1970, when 200,000 postal workers went on strike and postal unions earned collective bargaining rights.

Which would be a fine end to the story, except the contempt continues. In 2006, Congress passed the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act, which pillaged the USPS, forcing it to pre-fund 75 years of employee health benefits, an annual \$5 billion payment that no other federal agency is required to provide.

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This contempt is also instilled in the management.

I'm a Type-A person who grew up as a member of the lower middle class; I've always been driven to work hard, no matter where I was employed: the warehouses, convenience stores and restaurants before and during college, and after graduating, the nonprofits, the universities where I taught. But something inside me changed after working at the Post Office. I didn't run between houses to deliver the mail as fast as I could to prove I could do it and do it well. (I shouldn't have, anyway; so many of your lawns have hidden holes and sprinkler heads, I bit it, hard, numerous times.) I ran because I didn't want to be screamed at. The only proof

that I had done well was if, when my boss called toward the end of the day, screaming “WHERE ARE YOU?” I could say, “On my way back to the station.”

In my short three months on the job, I developed a strength I hated: staying silent. I did not contradict my supervisor when she told my coworkers and union steward that I smoked in my vehicle (I never did); I kept quiet when she screamed at a clerk standing next to me that CCAs shouldn't be allowed to complain about her to the union (I never did, but it was my right to do so); I raged quietly when an assistant supervisor told my fellow carriers that I said I had finished earlier than they did because they went out to lunch (I said no such thing).

The veteran carriers told me they were used to it, to ignore it and just say, “Yes, ma'am.” A mentor of sorts, a union steward for four decades in West Texas, told me, “Until your supervisor writes you up, she's got nothing on you.” Those were his words of encouragement, along with, “If you're new, have a good attitude, and are friendly with the regulars, they hate that.”

I lost 17 pounds during my first six weeks delivering the mail. At my station, each route, as long as 12 miles, was configured to take around six hours, which was supposed to include two 10-minute paid breaks and an unpaid 30-minute lunch, which comes out of your paycheck whether you take it or not. I was delivering the mail six days a week and Amazon packages on Sundays. I never once took a lunch. The union steward from West Texas chastised me, told me I had to take those breaks, because the union had fought hard for them. But I finally wasn't doing terribly: I was mostly finishing my routes under time and taking auxiliary routes (working 30 minutes to two hours on another route after finishing the first); I was still getting screamed at most days.

I constantly reminded myself: *You have chosen to work for the USPS. You can quit. Sure, you earn a paycheck of about \$1,000 every two weeks for sometimes dangerous, almost always back-and-knee-and-shoulder-tweaking work. Sure, other carriers told you to keep track of every minute you worked, because supervisors would override hours to prevent you from earning overtime. Sure, you would find out later that the local branch of the NALC reported that they were dealing with numerous complaints from CCAs who said the hours listed on their paychecks did not match their punch-in times. Sure, another carrier told you to always keep your timecard with you, because supervisors would punch you out before you were even back to the station. Sure, a district supervisor threatened that if you didn't work off the clock, you might not be worth keeping. Sure, that's absolutely a violation of the law, and there would be others.*

But I had the privilege of walking away, something my husband begged me to do on a daily basis. We are a childless couple; we could survive a few months of my unemployment. So many of my fellow CCAs didn't have that luxury. Like the veteran of the first Gulf War I worked with, who fed her children breakfast each morning, put them on the school bus, and then arrived at work early to cry in her car, 50 yards from the entrance to the station where our angry bosses awaited us.

Sundays were, by far, the least stressful. Although Congress had decreed in 1912 that post offices would be closed on Sundays, in 2013 the USPS and Amazon teamed up to have CCAs deliver packages to Prime customers on our one day off. We now spent that day making sure you got that thing you ordered that you absolutely needed to have delivered while you were sleeping in, at church, or at brunch. The facial expressions on folks surprised to see a mail truck on a Sunday were hilarious. I watched more than one person look at me, pull out his

phone to check the date, and then quizzically look again, because, no, he wasn't confused: It was Sunday. It's less funny when you get your paper towels and dog food delivered on holidays; CCAs can't take them off and don't earn holiday pay.

At first, we were delivering the packages by route, just as we would during the week, and we were relaxing in our backyards by 3 p.m. Then we were told that we had to follow a set of turn-by-turn directions, that we couldn't use our by-now-photographic memory of the streets, and we were out until dinnertime. I often delivered in my own neighborhood, and if I had followed the directions perfectly, I would've driven my vehicle over a footbridge, a curb, and through a gate on a dead-end street. A CCA I emailed with who works on the West Coast told me that due to the "fatigue and unhappiness" of never having a day off, his "performance has dipped," and he wished the USPS would consider the mental health of its employees. The highest number of consecutive days I worked in a row was 12. That was nothing compared to many other CCAs. But it still left me frayed at the edges, having trouble remembering what day it was, or when I had delivered a package or last been on a certain route, or even at a certain station.

Here's how a typical day works: You arrive at the station at the required time, say, 9 a.m.; some days you clock in, load up your mail and parcels, and you're on your way. Some days you're told to wait, unpaid, because your mail isn't ready, so you read the newspaper or play Candy Crush for as long as two hours before you can get started. Other days, you're eating breakfast when your boss calls and tells you to report to a different station. You arrive there at the required time, and a supervisor greets you with, "We didn't need you," but a few hours later, finds a route for you, and you can finally get on the clock. It wasn't until I was writing this article that I learned, from a union leader in San Antonio, that those hours we CCAs were forced to sit and wait? We should've been paid for them. This is how it was possible for me to work seven days a week and not earn overtime. The USPS is committing wage theft.

Another CCA I spoke with, who works on the East Coast, emailed me that he knows "time manipulation happens, especially to the brand newbies." He told me a recent story about a new CCA, second day on the job, who was out delivering mail after 7 p.m. That's a no-no for any carrier (they say it's for your safety; they don't want to pay you overtime). At his station and many others, supervisors have to justify why anyone is out that late. When the carrier asked his boss what was going to happen, he explained that his supervisor "calmly said, 'She doesn't have a badge yet; she's been off the street for 20 minutes.'" The CCA couldn't yet clock herself in and out so her supervisor did it for her. These are not stories unique to one station. There are dozens of online forums, where postal employees' complaints log thousands and thousands of pages. These things happened to me, and continue to happen to my former colleagues.

The USPS did not respond to my request for comment regarding managerial training and labor violations.

But, you might say, those CCAs can make regular, become grossly overpaid (with a maximum base annual salary of less than \$60,000) and retire to a life of leisure. Except, there's no guarantee that it won't take years and years to become a regular. Another CCA told me that with new mandatory retirement deductions and the shift to force employees to take on a higher percentage of their healthcare costs, a CCA he knew "made regular and actually took home

less money... Seven years as a TE and then CCA—he made regular and after a month, he quit.”

A few months into the job, I got bitten by a dog. I was an hour ahead on my route and since I was delivering near my house, I giddily thought: *I'm going to be able to go to the bathroom and take my first lunch break.* I had just delivered to one house and was preparing the mail for the next when I saw the owner, a man I knew from my neighborhood listserv. I waved and said hello, walking through his grass as I put his mail in my hand. Then his unleashed dog, who was hidden in the unfenced front yard, bolted toward me. I pivoted to use my satchel to block her, but the dog was shorter than its reach. In less than a few seconds, I had politely greeted a customer and his dog had taken a chunk out of my calf. The owner and his wife, who had rushed out, were horrified. They asked if I was OK, and I thought, *I'm OK*, and then noticed the blood running down my leg. The dog now safely inside, I sat down in their driveway, still holding their mail, while the wife helped me clean the wound. I told her I was going to have to call my boss; I was, after all, hurt while at work. When my assistant supervisor answered, she asked if I could keep delivering the mail, and I said I could, so I did. All bandaged up, I finished my route, without that dreamed-of lunch, and then did an hour on another.

After I arrived at the station, I sought out my head supervisor and asked if she had heard the news. “You’re probably going to get fired,” she said. Surprised by her reaction, I did the unthinkable and didn’t stay silent. I asked her if she was telling me I shouldn’t have reported my injury; she backed down, said she would fight for me, but that probably wouldn’t be enough. I had arrived for work 10 hours ago, delivered the mail for eight hours, and earned 7.5 hours’ pay (for that half-hour lunch I didn’t take). Now I had to go to Urgent Care and get a tetanus shot. And I was going to be fired.

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Two days later, one of my favorite carriers called me over to her station and whispered angrily, “What the hell did you do?” For the next several weeks, carriers from stations throughout the city told me that I shouldn’t have reported the injury, that drawing attention to myself was the worst possible thing I could do. At my disciplinary hearing—I had a disciplinary hearing because an unleashed dog in an unfenced yard bit me—I was asked if I owned a dog. When I said yes, my supervisor said, “That’s your problem. You’re not afraid of dogs.” She asked me to repeat what I had learned during my training, and, feeling a little salty, I answered honestly: Don’t get bit. Finally she asked me, “Who is responsible for your safety?” That’s a question I knew the correct answer to: I was.

According to the NALC, 10 letter carriers suffer dog-related injuries every delivery day. Google “dog kills letter carrier” and you’ll find that it happens every year. A week after my bite, a woman in a tony neighborhood scolded me, told me I needed to “get over it,” when I refused to walk closer to hand her the mail while her snarling bulldog barked next to her. I once jumped from the ground to the hood of a car to escape a charging dog, and when its owner came to retrieve it so I could get down and continue my day, he promised his dog wouldn’t have hurt me and told me I had overreacted.

I never heard anything from my supervisors about my bite. A few weeks later, I got tangled in my laptop computer cord in the middle of the night and broke my big toe. The next morning, I realized I couldn’t safely drive, let alone walk a 14-mile route. After a tense phone conversation with my supervisor, my husband drove me to an Urgent Care clinic, where X-rays confirmed the injury. We drove to the station so I could give my supervisor the note from my doctor, which said I would need to be out for three weeks. I told her what happened; she said nothing. I left, unsure if I’d have a job to come back to.

Three weeks later, I returned, lucky to still be employed. On my first day back, I learned that a district supervisor had temporarily taken over. When I approached him to say good morning, he introduced himself as “Mr. Green” (names have been changed throughout this article) the same way, other carriers told me, he had introduced himself to my former supervisor, who had worked for the Post Office for more than three decades. I let myself have one angry moment where I thought, *Then you should called me Dr. Stoner, asshole*, but my PhD wasn’t something I ever mentioned at the station—and why would I have, when I worked with a number of veterans who deserved far more respect than my academic credentials had earned me? So, as usual, I just nodded as my skin crawled.

In the following weeks, Mr. Green would go on to scream at me, “ALL YOU ARE IS A LIABILITY,” “YOU EXIST ONLY TO REDUCE OVERTIME,” and to enforce a rule no one ever explained to me: We had to be off the clock by 5 p.m. Before I broke my toe, the rule was you had to be off the street and back at the station by 6.

But things had changed. While I was out, the USPS had delivered its annual fiscal report and made national news. The organization had announced that it was, yet again, way in the red, due in no small part to that \$5 billion payment required by the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act.

I tried to explain to Mr. Green, who strictly enforced the 5 p.m. deadline, that most days I wasn’t able to leave the station until after 10 a.m., often with more than eight hours’ worth of mail to deliver. When you factor in travel times to auxiliary routes, I could not finish by 5 p.m., even running between houses and never eating lunch. His response? “You’ll have to work off the clock.” If I weren’t willing to do this, he explained, I might not be worth having around. He offered another alternative: Get the routes done faster than required or every morning admit to him that I wasn’t capable of doing my job. An often-toxic work environment had become untenable. Mr. Green didn’t behave this way just to CCAs; I watched him dress down carriers who had worked for the Post Office for decades.

I quit a few weeks later, after I ended up in the emergency room. High on an IV drip of Dilaudid after a back injury I thought was just a kidney stone, one I was too worn down to file a workers’ comp claim for, I had a moment of clarity: There is no “It gets better” for the people who work for the Post Office. And since I’ve quit, the conversations I’ve had with the employees at my former station only confirm my depressing conclusion. One CCA I recently

talked with had just finished his 17th consecutive workday. Another told me she got into a small fender bender in her LLV. The owners of the other vehicle weren't hurt or upset, and the cops who came to take the report told her everything was going to be fine. When the supervisor arrived, she verbally abused the CCA so badly the cop stepped in to tell the supervisor to get herself together, to not speak to her employee that way.

You might think, after my experience, I'd be all for cutting Saturday delivery and privatizing the Post Office. You'd be wrong.

Although the screaming and the hostile work environment had gotten so bad I started illegally recording conversations with my supervisors in the event that I was unjustly fired, I loved my job. Little kids in their pajamas followed me on Saturday mornings, sometimes for so long that I had to walk them back home. An old man who lived on a route I often carried would walk with me and tell me jokes. When I once remarked that the weather was perfect that morning, he quipped, "Don't tell Congress. They'll find a way to mess it up." I loved delivering birthday cards addressed to grandparents in their grandchildren's handwriting. Customers left sticky notes in their mailboxes saying, "Thank you for your hard work." People were sometimes so excited to see me at the door with their package they would give me high-fives. Even when they were only wearing towels.

I respected and adored the carriers I worked with: the one who gave me a belt when my borrowed-from-the-union shorts got too big; the one nicknamed Bullet who nicknamed me Little Girl II (an inside joke); the carrier in his late sixties who was incredibly kind and patient and once, when I was carrying his route on his day off, stopped by to help me organize the mail in the pouring rain; the carrier who would try and pad my routes by a few minutes so I wouldn't have to run.

I would never support any action against the Post Office that would harm the employees I looked forward to seeing every day. Who would ask me how my day was, even when the question inspired my boss to scream, "I'M NOT PAYING YOU TO HAVE A CONVERSATION."

The problem with the USPS isn't the carriers. When I watch videos of them tossing packages into a river, I think: *Anyone who delivers your mail has dreamed of doing that.* Not because they're lazy or vindictive. But because many have no days off, no job security, and an unhealthy work environment where they are constantly forced to work in violation of labor laws.

Your carrier isn't the problem. Her boss, and her bosses, all the way up the postmaster general, are the problem. Sometimes the union is as well, when it caves to contracts, like forcing TEs to take pay cuts to become CCAs.

If you think this could be fixed by privatizing the Post Office, you're kidding yourselves. FedEx is dealing with numerous wage-theft lawsuits, and UPS has been accused of similar violations, as well as racial discrimination and charging customers higher-than-advertised rates.

In 2013, Senator Bernie Sanders proposed the forward-thinking [Post Office Protection Act](#), which would make some much-needed changes. Some are simple, like allowing the USPS to ship wine and beer; others are more of a throwback to the earlier times, when the USPS had non-postal responsibilities, like offering banking and notary services. More recently, the USPS inspector general, with support from Senator Elizabeth Warren, has proposed that the agency [provide fair payday loans](#).

While we wait to see what happens, here's my advice to you, receiver of mail: Continue giving your letter carriers a Christmas bonus; they won't share it with the CCA who covers their route each week on their days off, but still, do it. Leave waters and Gatorades and homemade cookies (a burst of sugar at the end of the route can go a long way) near your mailbox. If you live in an apartment complex, for God's sake, check your mail every day. Keep waving at the people in the LLVs; it was one of the highlights of my day, some of the only positive reinforcement I ever got. Keep your dogs leashed, and do not ever lecture your letter carrier about why she should be less afraid of dogs. Assume she's been bitten, and been treated like shit by her bosses because your lovable dog can be a real jerk. If you have a mail slot in your door, practice putting things through it yourself. If you cut your fingers, know that it cuts our fingers every day, and fix it. The United States Post Office provides a public service, one that desperately needs reform, but it shouldn't be done on the backs of the hard-working employees who deliver your mail through snow, rain, heat, gloom of night, screaming bosses, and dog bites.

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