

As part of the presentation of *Travail et intimité, Les PTT au féminin*,¹ Josette Le Naour, an award winner in the autobiographical competition on the topic of “Les PTT au féminin” answered questions from Muriel Le Roux, research scholar at the CNRS and academic representative of the Comité pour l’histoire de La Poste, and Sylvie Schweitzer, professor of contemporary history at the university of Lyon II.

You are from a working-class background of tradespeople. You and your parents hoped that you would have a career as a teacher, which would have been a step up the social ladder for you. But spent your entire professional life with the Post Office, starting out in distribution before moving to window and then financial service. Do you see your career as upwardly mobile?

“Having a career has never been one of my goals in life. My career at the post office has been a way for me to reintegrate myself into a life as a salaried worker. At 38, it was the chance of a lifetime. I did it so that I could earn a living and no longer be dependent on someone else. I soon realized that this was the perfect job for me: contact with the public ,performing a public service, and working outdoors. Then little by little I was given the possibility of advancing through the ranks and competing for positions, first as a mail carrier and then as an AEXDA. It was like a game, a challenge to prove to myself and others that even a break of twenty years from being a salaried worker was not a handicap. It was a little like jumping on a trampoline and catapulting myself into the working world. Is that a career? I don’t know. For me it was an adventure, but for my parents it was definitely a regression.”

At the beginning of your narrative, you emphasize that as a youngster you were an outdoor sports enthusiast. Having you found any similarities between being a mail carrier and doing a sport, since I recall you explored different means of transport – car, bicycle, on foot – for delivering mail? Do you think that women are physically disadvantaged as mail carriers?

“Let’s just say that being a female mail carrier is a sport! It’s very physical and you have to deal with the physical stress of the job every day. Heavy loads to carry, getting in and out of the car all the time, sometimes up to 200-300 times a day, dealing with bad weather, rain, snow, frost, and heat waves, too... I couldn’t ever count much on my male colleagues. We always heard “Equal pay for equal work”, “Why are women trying to do a man’s job?”, “we don’t want any ‘little women’ delivering the mail”. We often had to knuckle down and hold back our tears. I felt especially sorry for my younger co-workers who were pregnant. But if you like to walk or ride a bicycle, and work outdoors without supervision, it’s great! At least up to age 50, because the last few years are the hardest.”

After leaving communal surroundings that were like a family, you laugh when you say that “after I had been hired by the Post Office for fifteen days...by chance or fate, as an accident or act of God..., I stayed for 23 years.” Do you mean that you found a family with the Post Office from the time you began in the early 1970s until your retirement in 1993? Would you briefly describe to us the life you found within the profession, the assistance you received, etc.?

¹ The book may be ordered at the price of 14 euros (payable by check to La Poste) from the Comité pour l’histoire de La Poste, 44 boulevard de Vaugirard, CP F 502, 75757 Paris Cedex 15. Please remember to include your name and address.

“When I arrived in Provins, a network of friends and support quickly took shape: I had an assistant to help me with my route the first few days, and I was offered help in finding a place to live and buying furniture. I often got invitations to do things on the week-end so that I wouldn’t be alone. Gatherings for us “exiles” were organized; we had come there from the four corners of France and even overseas. In my work, especially when I switched to window work, a lot of people were very patient as they taught me how to use the cash drawer and then the computer! There was a lot of support when I was ill; I had many visits and calls from colleagues. And the familial ties were not cut when work came to an end. Many retired couples, former colleagues and friends came to visit me for a few days on vacation and we couldn’t stop reminiscing about our work. But we also felt we were living what was happening at the Post Office today.”

At the beginning of the third millennium, people often lament the demise of the connection between the mail carrier and their customers, especially in large urban areas. You were a rural and urban mail carrier until the mid-1980s; did you notice that this rapport was deteriorating even then? Was there a difference between the city and the country? On the other hand, do you think this depreciation of public service, as it was perceived on a daily basis, is because the lives of city dwellers have become even more individualist and because the mail carrier’s job in urban areas has become more precarious?

“The link between the mail carrier and the customer was very important in the rural setting. Once the client had “accepted” me, I soon became a friend and a confidant. I delivered letters but I also brought news. The mailman knows all about a client’s private life. At the time we also delivered retirement checks, scholarships, and family allocations. Over the months, that creates close ties. We were expected to be very discreet and professional privacy was assured. Although I never worked in the apartment complexes in the suburbs of a large city, a tall building or group of buildings in Provins, for instance, was like a village. Everyone, but especially the women, or those who were unemployed, would meet at the bottom of the staircase in front of the mailboxes. Now I’m the customer and the client and I admit I’m surprised when I hear a voice on the intercom saying “You have a registered letter...come down...” After a quick “good day” the mail carrier leaves, and I often think she seems stressed. Is this a deterioration of a social contact or not? I don’t know. Yes, certainly it reflects a change or a transformation, especially since we don’t know our mail carriers as well as we used to, and turn-over is so high for that occupation.”

You began working in postal service at the beginning of the 1970s when jobs were officially opened to women by competition - you were tenured in 1977 and ultimately recognized as a full-time public servant. Would you describe for us the feminist movement you participated in – its hesitations, context, victories, and your customers’ opinions?

“The movement was progressive. In 1971 in Andelot we were two women and nine men. At the beginning of 1976 in Provins there were three middle-aged women and twenty-five men, before the arrival of three young women ages 18-22.

There was a lot of mistrust among mail carriers early on. We had to prove ourselves through our work and stamina. For five or six years in the beginning, we women were only “replacements” who never did the same job for very long, while the men held onto their rounds like their eye teeth! When we became tenured (and we often did better on the tests than the men!), we were admitted to full-time service. The petty jealousies and mistrust faded away. Ultimately I think it was essentially the work that we women were able to do on a par with the men that was the key



factor in integrating women into the workforce – the same tasks, from unloading mailbags (that were often quite heavy) from the trucks to our output in relation to financial planning. As for our relationship with customers, after the initial misgiving (‘Will she be a good mailman?’) we were quickly accepted and adopted, before being treated as a friend and confidant.”

Mail carrier, financial representative, window clerk – you performed the three most symbolic postal occupations. Was there anything you saw as you performed these duties on a daily basis that would diminish or contradict the unified image of the Post Office?

“With the exception of a few instances, I never encountered any competitiveness or animosity among these different occupations. However, I have noticed that today a mail carrier’s job is more individualist: their rounds, their customers, and their calendar. We used to say that when we mail carriers left the post office at 9 in the morning, we were our own master’s, with no boss or co-workers breathing down our necks, and our hours were not too strictly set. But at the window, in general service, or behind the scenes, duties tend to overlap. I think that in order to be run effectively, the Post Office needs its three main occupations – distribution, window service, and financial services. I think they complement each other, and that is how unity is created.”



The Role of Women in the History of the French Post Office

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Introduction

The baccalaureate degree was first awarded to a woman in 1861; in 1900 the first French woman was admitted to the bar; and 1947 saw the appointment of our first woman cabinet minister.² These are but a few of the landmarks in women's professional victories. One might also ask when the first woman mail carrier joined the postal service and what were the reasons and context for the arrival of women in this workforce. It is difficult to give a precise answer to the first question for the simple reason that we cannot say in exactly what year the first woman actually worked for the Post Office. How can we attempt to answer this question based on factual information?

Plainly few studies have been done to date on the history of women in the postal service. In general the post office is mentioned in major works of women's history as the locus of the earliest stages of a professional feminization.³ At best, in a study of the young ladies who handled postal checks, women were seen in the context of the union history of this branch of postal service.⁴ Otherwise, women are considered as only one part of a study of the entire corpus of postal occupations.⁵ When will there be a history of women in postal service based on "gender?"⁶

For now we must still turn to primary sources for an understanding of women in postal service. In his report on the Post and Telegraph budget in 1897, Félix Vogeli announced to gallery in the National Assembly that "it has been approximately twenty years since women were introduced into Post and Telegraph service."⁷ According to this report, women's entry into the P&T would have coincided with the merger of Post and Telegraph and the creation of its ministry, around 1878-1879. But this was not the case. It has been shown that the deputy was speaking in a judicial and legal context: this date corresponds more or less to the moment when the P&T officially recognized the collective entry of the "demoiselles des Postes" into postal service.

It would be more appropriate to recall the title of Sylvie Schweitzer's study, *Les femmes ont toujours travaillé*, published in 2002, to advance the thesis that women have "almost always worked for the Post Office."⁸ The unsanctioned yet enduring and accepted feminization⁹ of

² "La Poste au féminin," in *Références*, n.7, September 1984, p. 19.

³ Georges Duby, Michèle Perrot (eds.), *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, Paris, Plon, 1991-1992.

⁴ Sylviane Mangiapane, *Les filles des chèques postaux. Contribution à l'histoire du syndicalisme PTT, 1945-1978*, Le temps des cerises, Pantin, 2003, 319 p.

⁵ Odile Join-Lambert, *Le receveur des Postes, entre l'Etat et l'usager (1944-1973)*, Paris, Belin, 2001, 317 p; Marie Cartier, *Les facteurs et leurs tournées. Un service public au quotidien*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, 329 p.

⁶ Christine Bard, Christian Baudelot, Janine Mossuz-Lavau (eds.), *Quand les femmes s'en mêlent. Genre et pouvoir*, Paris, Editions de La Martinière, 2004, pp. 44-63.

⁷ *Rapport au budget des P&T*, 1897, (Vogeli), p. 17.

⁸ Sylvie Schweitzer, *Les femmes ont toujours travaillé. Une histoire du travail des femmes aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2002, 329 p.

⁹ According to Odile Join-Lambert, the term "feminization" only appears in 1892 when women were placed at the service windows of large urban post offices. Cf. O. Join-Lambert, *op. cit.*, p. 24.



postal occupations dates historically from much earlier than the last third of the 19th century. Furthermore, the status of women in postal history may be divided into four major stages.

“Pioneers”

This period ranges from the end of the 16th to the 18th century, from Henri IV to the Revolution, a time in which a few rare women performed the main occupations that represented the Post Office at that time: “post master,” postal manager, and official mail carrier. Their presence was already visible to such an extent that it is already possible to speak of a “feminized” workforce. The acceptance of women in these position is was sanctioned by a medieval custom that was still in effect allowing a widow either to take her husband’s former position or a mother to act as surrogate for a son who was a minor when the public office had been acquired by the family (either by right of inheritance or descendant).¹⁰

Several accounts and sources occasionally refer to a postmistress (who held the rights to a relay station), a female postal director (who managed a post office) and a woman mail carrier (responsible for collecting and distributing the mail in a town). An inquiry made on 2 brumaire year XII (October 1804) show that 101 out of 1,415 post offices (or 7%) were managed by women; 75% of these women were exercising their window’s privilege.

“Useful women”

This second period runs from the beginning of the 19th century to the onset of the Republic of opportunists. During this time a woman’s position evolved from that of “a husband’s replacement” to one of “valuable appointed employee in certain situations”: thanks to or because of this statute, women saw a marked increase in their presence in postal service where they soon monopolized specific occupations.

17 vendémiaire year XIII (1805) was an important date for the administrative recognition of women’s usefulness: the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had decimated the male population and a newly revised consideration recognized the value of employing women as mail distributors or post office managers in the provinces. This political and governmental decision not only authorized the practice of priority and contingent recruitment of the widows of former civil or military servants, but it also launched an enormous wave of feminization at the helm of the smallest post offices.

Beginning with the July Monarchy when the postal administration decided to employ them, these women were given control of small post offices (a restricted use distribution office), despite their difficult family situation: in 1841 there were 953 women directors in a total of 1,563 post offices in this category, and a grand total of 2,600 postal establishments (6%).¹¹

Appointed en masse to these positions, these women often found themselves overwhelmed by an ever-increasing workload with no assistants to help provide window service. As managers or postmistresses (1864), they would then be given the possibility of seeking postal assistants. As a member of this almost exclusively female body of “postal servants,” the assistant was responsible for postal as well as household tasks in the service of her postmaster or mistress. Assistants received no salary but were sometimes given room and board in the home of a postmistress or else paid by them. Many were young women who eagerly sought such unskilled

¹⁰ Jeanne Bouvier, *Histoire des dames employées dans les Postes, Télégraphes et Téléphones de 1714 à 1929*, Paris, PUF, 1930, 357 p.

¹¹ *La Poste*, January 1982.

employment as helpers, hoping to use their training in the future by applying for an official position as postmistress.

Two main aspects characterize this period. First there were the regulations aimed specifically at female postal employees regarding salary, professional and personal supervision or private life. The main thrust of this developmental phase concerned the financial aspect of these “useful women.” The postal administration definitely benefited from this type of recruiting to broaden its activities and expand its workforce at less cost. In 1897 Vogeli announced that “by replacing a larger number of ancillary agents with female employees, the administration has found a way of reducing staffing and personnel expenses to a minimum.”¹² Postmistresses were systematically less well paid than men who managed the same type of post office, and their assistants were undeniably exploited.

“Recognition”

The longest phase in this history ran from the last twenty years of the 19th century to the end of the 1960s, spanning global conflicts, the struggling feminist movement, and administrative decisions that gradually recognized the value of women’s work in various postal occupations. This was certainly due to their adaptability to many different tasks, but the phenomenon is also explained by the PTT’s relentless inclination to pay women less than men.

A ministerial decree of 27 April 18877 allowed for women to be admitted to PTT service by official examination, although it preserved the distinction between men and women (there were no co-ed examinations). This factor only served to prolong the existing inequality in the workplace. The ministerial decree introduced the title of “lady-employee;” by 1903 their numbers widely surpassed the number of postmistresses.¹³ These women were responsible for all the postal duties incumbent on window service at the time, including telegraph service, savings bank transactions, money orders, and registered letters.

At the same time, the development of financial services (the National Savings Bank in 1881, followed by postal check accounts in 1918) created several new administrative jobs that administrators and representatives’ comments found entirely appropriate for women who in turn showed their appreciation for these new positions. When placed in multiple-function post offices that offered both post and telegraph service, these women were plainly of value to the administration.

It has already been mentioned that wartime gave women employment opportunities at the post office. Once again during a time of armed conflict, women proved themselves useful, this time by performing physical work that was hardly “feminine.” There had been women mail carriers in the workforce for some time, but their presence was sporadic; now they were fully recognized as auxiliaries or occasional employees. A woman’s recognition was enhanced by her willingness to ride a bicycle, a professional mode of carrying the mail that was strictly reserved for men in 1911. In the same year, women were granted two months paid maternity leave; women teachers had obtained it the previous year.¹⁴

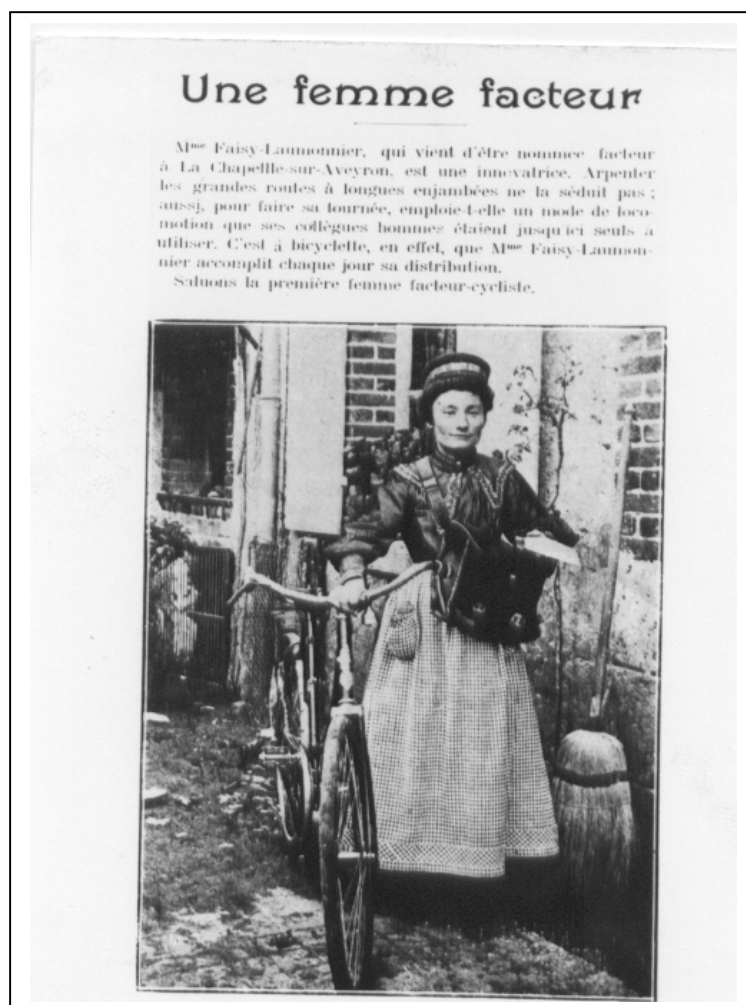
¹² *Rapport au budget des P&T*, 1897, (Vogeli), p. 17.

¹³ “La femme dans le service des PTT en France et à l’étranger”, in *Le Conseil des Femmes*, n.7, 15 April 1903, pp. 209-216.

¹⁴ “La Poste au féminin”, in *Références*, n.7, September 1984, p. 17.



A female mail carrier in 1911 (Photo Archive of the Musée de La Poste de Paris)



With these milestones in place, women were performing the most representative PTT occupations in the aftermath of World War II. They also worked in accounting in CNE offices and in postal check centers where women accounted for nearly 80% of the staff in 1960,¹⁵ or else as rural mail carriers or postmistresses. But some women also still worked in some capacities doing handiwork that was more in accord with their traditional (and reactionary) image: in workshops on the boulevard Brune in Paris, women were also making and mending mailbags.

“Equals” at last!

This period begins in the 1960s. From then on, the principle of equality of the sexes was duly recorded in the general statute of workers and improved upon in 1959, 1975 and 1982. This led to co-ed employment examinations and theoretically put women on a par with men. The law of 10 July 1975 insisted there be no sexual discrimination in recruiting for all civil positions; at that time the examinations were open to men and women. The first and most symbolic of these tests

¹⁵ Sylviane Mangiapane, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

in 1975 opened the corps of mail carriers to women who could finally abandon the lowly status of “rouleur” (“stand-in” or “sub”) and become the official carrier on a designated route.¹⁶ In 1961 6,000 women (out of 65,000 carriers) were working in mail distribution, but only 680 were considered “titulaires” (“tenured” employees).¹⁷ The long phase of giving tenure to women began during the 1970s. The image from 1984 of this female mail carrier, who is certainly a “titulaire” and no longer a “rouleur,” doing her route in a car attests to this new authorization. But this “equal opportunity” feminization also conceals disparities that make the word “equal” seem inappropriate for three reasons. Quotas calculated by sector of activity are stable until the beginning of the 1980s,¹⁸ allowing women the possibility of performing nearly every job, even the ones they were most excluded from (sorting centers, routing parcels, transportation). But this also led to the forming of niches where men were almost invisible, such as financial service centers and at the service windows at the post office itself.¹⁹

¹⁶ La Poste au féminin,” in *Références*, n.7, September 1984, p. 19.

¹⁷ *Bulletin d'information des Postes et Télécommunications*, October 1961.

¹⁸ *PTT Info*, n.526, May 1981.

¹⁹ A group responsible for check verification should also be included. See *Travailler au féminin, La Poste*, May 1979.



Women in a postal check center, early 1950s. (Photo Archive of the Musée de la Poste de Paris)

Furthermore, despite the ostensible equality of position, occupation, and rank, women suffered from sizeable disparities in salary. Women were also a minority of those in managerial positions.

110 Years of Feminization at the Post Office

Year	1892	1911	1978	2002
All agents	57 828	110 462	442 950	325 000*
Women PTT workers	4 526	25 200	137 000	160 000
Percentage	8 %	23 %	37 %	49 %

Sources : *Messages*, n. 286, November 1979, p. 5; *Tract CGT PTT*, 25 February 2004.

* Post Office only

Conclusion

Looking at over a century of administrative statistics, women have increased their presence in postal service more than six fold, rising from 8% of all agents in 1892 to nearly 50% today. Their longstanding presence is centuries old, at first without title and merely tolerated, before women rose in the ranks to make a contribution that was not only recognized and appreciated, but ultimately sanctioned legally and officially and sought after.

This feminization took place in four successive waves: first, the wave of pioneers that lasted until the Revolution; then a utilitarian movement during the first two-thirds of the 19th century, followed by institutionalized activity that brought simultaneous recognition for women up to 1880; and finally a wave of equality during the 1970s. The feminization took place in specific sectors until the middle of the 20th century, before becoming more wide spread and generalized. The executive level still remains a male bastion where women are conspicuously absent, with only one exception, from the “Top Ten” in the business.