

Marianne DEWYNTER, “The Hiring of Postal Employees in the Pas-de-Calais 1890-1920” (“Le recrutement des employés de la Poste dans le Pas-de-Calais entre 1890 et 1920”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Eric Bussi re, Universit  d’Artois, 1997.

The period from 1870-1920 was marked by a significant increase in the number of civil servants (+ 59%). The *R publique* has just been instated and it was important that it be well established so as not to disappoint voters. To do so, the new r gime had to take on certain assignments. Thus the government of the Third Republic saw to the education of the population by making schooling free, secular, and mandatory, by unifying the surface area of France, and by developing the Post, Telegraph, and Telecommunications services.

At the beginning of the 19th century, only the major cities in France had daily home mail delivery, and many smaller municipalities had no postal service at all. Distribution service was extended to all rural municipalities only from 1830 onward. And so the rural mail carrier was born, representing an evolution of country life as the mail deliverer became a part of daily life for those living in rural areas.

But for the Pas-de-Calais this change did nothing the remedy a situation where postal service was under-represented. The department was historically poorly served in its distribution of the mail. From 1789 to 1870 only 46 new post offices were opened, but the population was on a steady rise. This is why we have chosen to devote time to the problem of postal service in a departmental that sorely lacked post offices.

We first study the development of postal service from a material point of view, noting that there was growth in the number of post offices and mailboxes. This tells us that the administration was able to meet the challenge of an increasing amount of correspondence. But we must remember that numerous problems were encountered when these new postal infrastructures were installed. Moreover the question of the wartime period and its aftermath must be addressed in order to describe how service was organized during that time, especially since the Pas-de-Calais was very affected by the war.

We then turn to a study of those who worked for the post office. The organization of employees was complex and carried out according to several different criteria (there were agents and sub-agents, tenured staff and on-call assistants). Guidelines for hiring and promotion were not identical and sometimes influenced by those in power. Women were among these participants, and their professional life was different from their male colleagues. In some positions they were under compensated for work that was often similar to that done by men. The hiring of women was often arbitrary and their private lives were closely monitored: they were required to request permission from their superiors before marrying.

Finally we present selected aspects of the mail carriers’ daily life in order to show what a hard life they led. Salaries were minimal but tended to improve over time; while their means of transportation on their routes also evolved, the carriers’ work always required perfect physical health. The mail carrier had to fight for weekly time off and union rights.

During the Third Republic, the Pas-de-Calais saw many changes and the department received better and better service. But there was an imbalance between the east and the southwest. The administration was strongly represented in the districts of Arras and Béthune, but less so in Saint-Omer and Boulogne, and to an even lesser degree in the districts of Montreuil-sur-mer and Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise.

During the war postal employees displayed notable dedication and efficiency, adapting their duties to bombings and invasions and always quickly restoring order to the postal service.