

Elisabeth MASSAT, “The evolution of mail distribution in the province of Couserans from 1840 to the present” (“L'évolution de la distribution postale dans le Couserans de 1840 à nos jours”), Master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Agnès Fine, Toulouse-Le-Mirail, 1999, 130 p. + appendices.

This three-part study has allowed us to highlight several features of mail distribution in high and mid-range mountain areas and to follow its evolution over several centuries.

Our case study of postal service in the Couserans region of Gascony is the result of lengthy research using written source material found in the departmental archives of the Ariège. Our goal was to reveal the historical characteristics of the creation of a network for distributing mail in the Couserans province over time. We did a detailed examination of nearly seventy dossiers from towns in the Couserans that dealt closely or more broadly with the process of setting up this network.

We learned from the various case studies examined that mail distribution in the Couseran was slowly organized. Financial problems account for most of the delays as well as the specific situation in the region that led to multiple reconsiderations of mail carriers’ delivery routes. Despite these problems, from 1900 onward mail delivery to towns in the Couserans was conducted properly. Since 1864, the official date when the organization of mail distribution to all rural areas in France was completed, all towns and villages in the Couserans, including the most remote, were visited by the mail carrier, albeit at a late hour in some cases. Inconsistencies that persisted after this period were due to the speed of service or the existence or not of a post office in the community.

We also used oral interviews that related the history of mail carriers in the Couserans to us, realizing that their differences from other mail carriers are minimal. Nonetheless, this area seems to have preserved a nearly intact image of the traditional mail carrier, a man or woman who was prepared to brave all the elements in performing his or her duties. Our archival research reveals that at least until 1945 the mail carriers in the region were often born there and, like so many other natives of the region, had been forced to look elsewhere for work. The job of rural mail carrier allowed them to return to their native region and live there definitively, whereas many other young people left the area never to return. Because of strenuous working conditions, the integration of women into the work force began late in the Couserans. In the 1960s motorized mail routes helped to reduce these differences. Our interviewees’ accounts of perilous delivery routes reveal the deeply human face of these employees behind their uniforms.

How did the Couserans mail carrier withstand the recent changes to the post office? This part of our study reveals the social dimension of the rural mail carrier. He often provided services that were different from or went beyond simply delivering the mail. With his daily visit, he was often the only human contact that elderly or isolated persons had for weeks. He or she would often bring medications or keep an eye on vacation homes. This was of course going beyond the call of duty but it was done on a regular basis. We then tried to collect different postal workers’ opinions culled during the changes within the post office, many of whom were worried about their future. The fact that some were poorly informed about the reforms explains their concern. But one also wonders if these fears were not somewhat founded, as we note in the general conclusion of the study.

Each of the local studies had its own characteristics, as revealed by the analysis of the changes to how mail distribution in the Couserans was organized. We witnessed how an administration gradually adapted itself to a place that was identifiably marked by its terrain, climate, and population. From this point of view the postal administration is perhaps one of the best areas of study. The density of its network meant that it permeated the region. This administration was often the last bastion of officialdom in the least important villages as well as the least prosperous towns; when this was not the case, its services were still perpetuated through the maintenance of postal agencies. Moreover, the postal administration remained a living symbol of communication for a long time, in part because of its connection with telecommunications. By studying the establishment of post offices in the region, we have been able to measure the importance to local towns and villages of receiving this distinction. The need was sometimes so great that the town council would sometimes take the initiative of presenting the administration with the keys to an office.

Besides being a presence in nearly half of all the towns and villages in France, the post office is the only service that can boast of being in daily contact with every household. In town this contact is limited to one's mailbox, but in the country or the mountains, the situation is different. The postal carrier is known in the homes he services. One of the mail carriers we interviewed even went so far as to say he was part of the furniture! Such close contact decidedly leads mail carriers in the mountains to perform services that are different from normal mail distribution as well as minor financial services. The social role of the mail carrier in the Couserans is quite real and becoming less officious, and the post office cannot ignore this aspect of its image. In fact there has been noticeable effort in areas like the Couserans in past years to affirm this social dimension of the job. In the future, local municipalities must become involved. No longer simply a normal approach on the carrier's part, it is an official and healthy approach that results from the relationship between local municipalities and the postal administration. Otherwise it is true that the typical image of the rural mail carrier is disappearing. On the other hand, these efforts could succeed in restoring an aura to the post office that it seems to have lost since the 1960s. But would this new social mission be enough to maintain the aura in areas where it positively cannot balance its accounts?

The outlook for the year 2000 and the overture of growing European competition (which will be complete from 2009 onward) seems to pose the risk of definitively overturning an already unstable monopoly. If that happens, the network that has gradually been built since the end of the 19th century will have lost its *raison d'être*.