

Cécile Pensiot, “Rural mail home delivery: from the national perspective to local reality” (“La distribution rurale à domicile : perspective nationale et réalité locale”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Catherine Bertho-Lavenir, Clermont-Ferrand 2, 2001, 189 p.

Deputy Sapey’s report, a study of the viability of home mail delivery in rural areas, concluded that the development of business and the democratization of means of communication would be decisive factor in its adoption. During the debates in the Chamber of Deputies, those in favor of the project insisted on the many advantages it promised for the country. In their opinion, the measure would advance the progress of national literacy: making correspondence easier would motivate the illiterate either to learn to read or at least to send their children to school. Their argument was countered by those who feared the consequences of making unmonitored information available to the uninitiated. These parliamentarians would have preferred that the masses of French peasants remain uneducated, a condition the politicians felt was more conducive to preserving order. But the project was accepted by note for the opposite reason: extending mail distribution to the countryside was perceived as a way of facilitating channels of communication between the government and the entire French population.

Moreover, the parliamentarians felt that the project would be beneficial to the image of the State. Rural home delivery became a daily service in 1832 in the towns and villages where it was necessary. By studying the correspondence that was generated by this law, we have a better understanding of the issues surrounding the new service. It would be at least ten years before the rural communities in the area of Puy-de-Dôme would take note. The correlation between the development of business and the local communities’ desire to receive daily mail service leads us to believe that its future beneficiaries mainly saw it as an economic advantage. Adjacent communities made their request simultaneously, with some using the pretext that a neighboring town had already received service to justify their request. This process based on imitation seems to imply that getting mail service was an enviable advantage. To the extent that daily service was allocated to communities where it was deemed necessary, receiving it meant that the town belonged to a group of economically thriving communities. The parliamentarians’ vow to integrate rural areas into the national community by extending mail service to the countryside was fulfilled, at least for a portion of the country.

During the debates in the Chamber, some parliamentarians expressed concern over the consequences of opening the rural world to the national community. The fear was real, although it was not strong enough to counter the affirmative vote. The persistence of this concern is revealed in the qualifications that were demanded of rural mail carriers. On the ethical level, only men whose political opinions were not hostile to the current government were selected. The parameters of the rural mail carrier’s job meant that he was allowed to distribute political pamphlets and propagate opinions that might be deemed subversive if they did not accord with governmental policy. To restrict any behavior that did not conform to the government standard, the carrier’s rights and duties were strictly defined: a postal bulletin specified that although mail carriers were allowed to have their own political opinions, they were expected not to reveal them. When it was indispensable to its agenda, however, the government required rural mail carriers’ assistance in spreading other political information. The mail carrier was expected to play a political role on the State’s behalf. Administrative regulations defined the position of the

rural mail carrier who was supposed to inspire confidence in his administration as well as his customers. The mail carrier's interactions with the working class highlight the closeness that existed between the mail carrier and postal customers, whereas his interactions with higher classes of the population make him seem more simple-minded and do not hesitate to interpret the sale of almanacs as a form of begging. The perseverance, boldness, and social link symbolized by the mail carrier are all qualities associated with the image of the rural carrier.