

Christophe SAULIERE, “The development of 19th-c. postal infrastructures in the Dordogne” (“Le développement des infrastructures postales en Dordogne au XIX^e siècle”), master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Christophe Bouneau, Bordeaux 3, 2000, 129 p.

This study of the development of postal infrastructures in the Dordogne is clearly to be considered within the context of a broader study of networks in general. The Post Office was an important means of communication in the 19th century whose structure was rapidly expanding throughout France. Its presence in rural areas became more important for three reasons: first of all, because the inhabited areas were widely spread apart (the Dordogne is a large department with many communities occupying a large surface area); because the population itself was widely dispersed (many inhabitants lived isolated lives on small farms or in hamlets); and finally, because of the weakness or inexistence of other competitive means of communication.

At the beginning of the 19th century the postal network was stretched thin in the Dordogne. A few foot messengers who were not employed by the Post Office but by the local prefectural organization crisscrossed the countryside in the service of important local politicians, but there was no genuine mail distribution on a broad scale as there was throughout France at the time. Post offices were few in number and far from each other (in 1830 there were only 24 such offices in the Dordogne). The routing of mail by post-coach was painfully slow and sometimes unpredictable, since the most important postal routes avoided the Dordogne. All these elements led to a significant delay in setting up postal infrastructures in the region, a very weak flow of mail, and definite isolation.

1830, the year that marks the beginning of our inquiry, is a significant date in the postal history of rural areas, signaling the enforcement of the Sapey law of June 1829. This law provided for mailboxes to be set up in all towns and villages of France on a ratio of one per county center and mandated postal service for all communities, followed by an increase in the number of distribution offices to rebalance the network. The Sapey law was soon complemented by the 1832 law that provided for daily mail delivery. 1900, the year we chose to end our study, marks the moment when the installation of these infrastructures had been relatively completed. By that time most of the network was already in place.

Three axes of inquiry support our study. We consider the importance of the postal administration on two levels: as a catalyst for development through the implementation of its laws and its implications for the opening up of isolated rural areas, but also as a braking force due to its budgetary restrictions and sheer bulk. The last two aspects directly influenced the development and continuity of the network. We also underscore the importance of elected local officials because of their energetic requests and awareness of the importance of the Post Office to rural areas. These officials also increasingly served to crystalize public opinion in towns and villages.

In the second part of our thesis we look at the development of the network itself. First we do a quantitative analysis of the evolution of the number of post offices and mailboxes, mainly using statistics from the *Annuaire des Postes* (postal yearbooks). Then we do a qualitative analysis of improvements to the routing and delivery of the mail.

Finally we divide our study of postal personnel in the Dordogne into three sections: personnel as a social group based on their origins and identifying characteristics; a study of their respective occupations based on salary and administrative oversight; and finally, the role of postal employees in their social environment.

We were able to draw several conclusions. First of all, the evolution of the interconnections between post offices and mailboxes is significant, as indicated by the four tables found in the appendices of our thesis. Their number grew from 24 in 1839 to 125 in 1900. This evolution was irregular and depended on different factors, such as the budget allocated by the Post Office first of all. The budget was usually strict and allowed for only a few if any new offices to be set up annually. The second factor that had an effect on regularity was the sudden and transient awareness of the weakness of the network in rural areas. This was especially true in 1830 but also during the 1870s when there were enormous blocks imposed on the budget. Regularity was also affected by innovations to the postal environment, for instance, the appearance of mail carriers/postmasters at the end of the century and their prevalence in the Dordogne.

There were also major changes in the quality of service. The time it took to deliver the mail slowly decreased during the period in question until delivery was made on a daily basis. We use the date 1863 as a marker of the actual implementation of this necessary advancement. Technological progress was the main contributor to routing the mail faster, aided by itinerant offices and moveable mailboxes. In earlier years the Dordogne had been poorly serviced by the equestrian mail. The major role played by private message companies in the area with the best service should also be emphasized. Finally the rate reform that imposed equal postage on letters exchanged throughout France balanced the flow of mail and contributed to the overall improvement of the postal situation. The other one is new.

We have defined three models concerning the hiring of personnel. Mail carriers were men native to the department under 30 years of age who most likely were former soldiers. Despite some changes in hiring methods, this model was constantly upheld in the period. The model for managers and postmasters changed over time. More and more women joined the profession during this period, especially during the Third Republic when women from the petty élite of the department joined the ranks. They were worked hard and under paid, especially rural mail carriers, but this phenomenon was also true at the national level. There was significant pressure exerted by the administrative hierarchy; personnel was strictly monitored for the simple reason that postal personnel in the Dordogne was highly important on the local level: for many isolated hamlets, the mail carrier represented a link with the outside world. As members of the local élite, managers carried significant weight, especially on political issues, in their communities.

A few concluding points must still be made. The department maintained its characteristic features. The development of postal infrastructures did not cause any significant turnover in any other areas besides postal service that was any different from the changes observed in other rural departments. The evolution of postal infrastructures merits further examination and is part of a larger comparative study involving other rural departments.

In order to put this study of the department of the Dordogne into a proper perspective, it should be compared with the postal situation in other departments, especially those bordering on the

Dordogne, like the Corrèze or the Charente; one could also include it in a broader study of the Aquitaine, a predominantly rural region. In many regards and especially from the point of view of a study of networks, this region was dominated by the metropolitan area of Bordeaux.

In the 19th century the Post Office was a fundamental means of communication, but it also depended to a large extent on communication channels such as roads and the railway. In these two areas the Dordogne already had a definite numbers of gaps by the 19th century. The Lyon-Bordeaux line had always received poor service. A projected highway had just begun to be built and there was no TGV line on this route. Inadequate communications networks and the significant isolation that resulted from this lack ensured that the Dordogne never received high quality postal service. Nonetheless, the Post Office has always been a significant presence in the Dordogne. It was a first rate tool that contributed to opening up the region to the outside world, even if it was not completely successful. This is true even today, although “la Poste” currently has a tendency to pull back from postal establishments at the local level, particularly through certain financial services.