

The PhilateliKid

The newsletter for Stamp Collecting Clubs for Kids (SCCFK)

Collect Stamps (The Most Educational Hobby)

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Owney and the Railways Mail - by Larry Oliver

A Border Terrier, an orphan and abandoned, of uncertain age, wandered into a post office in Albany, New York in 1888. It was cold and he soon settled into a comfortable position on some mail bags. He was scruffy and had obviously been on the streets for some time, and this may have been the first warm bed in a long time.



Most people love a dog, and this one immediately won the affection of the mail clerks in the office. He was mild-mannered and loved the affection - and the food - that the clerks gave him. His love of the mail bags as a bed was endearing, and led to some long-term and widespread adventures.

The Albany Post Office daily carried mail to the railway stations, and the dog accompanied them on the trips. By this time, he had acquired the name of "Owney". How that name was chosen is a subject of myth, with numerous speculations in the various literature that surrounds the dog. It is clear

that the clerks in Albany named him, for they had a collar and name tag for him with that name on it.

And it was a good thing Owney had that collar and name tag because his introduction to the Railway Mail Service set a pattern that made him a legend. Owney had "adopted" the railroads as his home away from Albany, and was soon hopping rides in the mail cars. The railway mail clerks took to Owney just as the Albany clerks had, and fed him, gave him water, and loved him and his companionship on their trips while sorting the mail. Owney always slept on the mail bags, with the clerks gently moving him when they needed to open a bag.

It was not long before his travels, first around New York, then far afield around the entire US, gathered attention and adoration. People - not just postal clerks - began adding trinkets to his collar to indicate where he had traveled. A sort of postal charm bracelet! His travels extended to almost every state in the US, and as his collar became too laden with trinkets, the postal clerks would remove some and mail them back to Albany for safekeeping.

John Wanamaker was Postmaster General at the time, and he had a special harness made for Owey to hold the trinkets to relieve the load on his collar.

Owey literally traveled around the world in 1895. In Tacoma, Washington, he boarded a steamship bound for the Orient. He visited China and Japan, collecting trinkets along the way. He even acquired a special postal classification called "Registered Dog Package". The round-the-world tour took 132 days, going from west to east.

Owey traveled over 140,000 miles during his sojourn as a Railway mail mascot. He visited several thousand cities and accumulated over 1,000 trinkets and medals. He was greeted by crowds at most places in the last 6-7 years of his life - his fame had spread widely.

There are several anecdotes that persist about his life and experiences. The most credible of which include his jumping off a train when a mail bag fell off as it was leaving a station and staying with the bag until it was retrieved. He was given a passport when he arrived in Japan.

That he was loved is not in question. Such an experience could not be duplicated today for a variety of reasons, notwithstanding the multiple restrictive regulations under which the USPS operates.



He was honored with a US stamp, Scott 4547 in 2011.

He died in 1897 while on a trip to Toledo, Ohio. His body was collected and is now preserved, along with his harness and the medals, in the Smithsonian Postal Museum in Washington, DC. All dog lovers should see it.

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