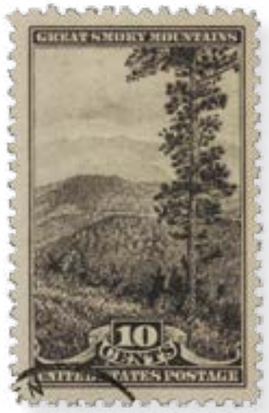
—A PHOTO ESSAY—

# NEITHER SNOW, NOR RAIN ...

The post offices and mail carriers in North Carolina work tirelessly to bring information to our door. Delivery may be cut to five days a week, but our greatest national organization and its workers still retain the spirit that has carried them through for more than 200 years.

photography by emily chaplin

Buzzy Hartman has been delivering mail for 25 years, many of those at his current post office in Lincolnton.




**Often, carriers like Kent Parsons in Troy are required to keep track of how many times they back out of a parking space or lot. It's always safer to keep moving forward, supervisors tell carriers.**

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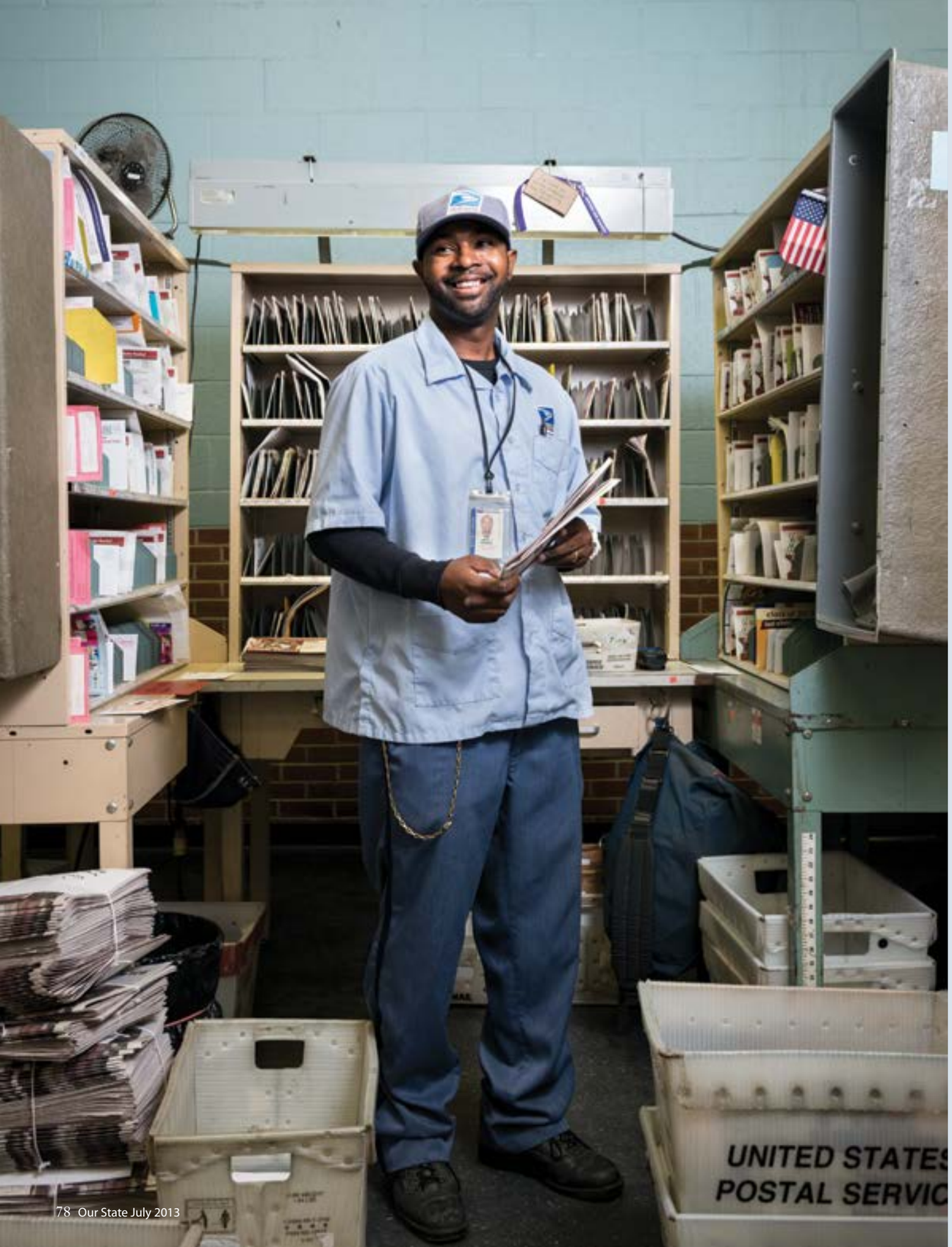


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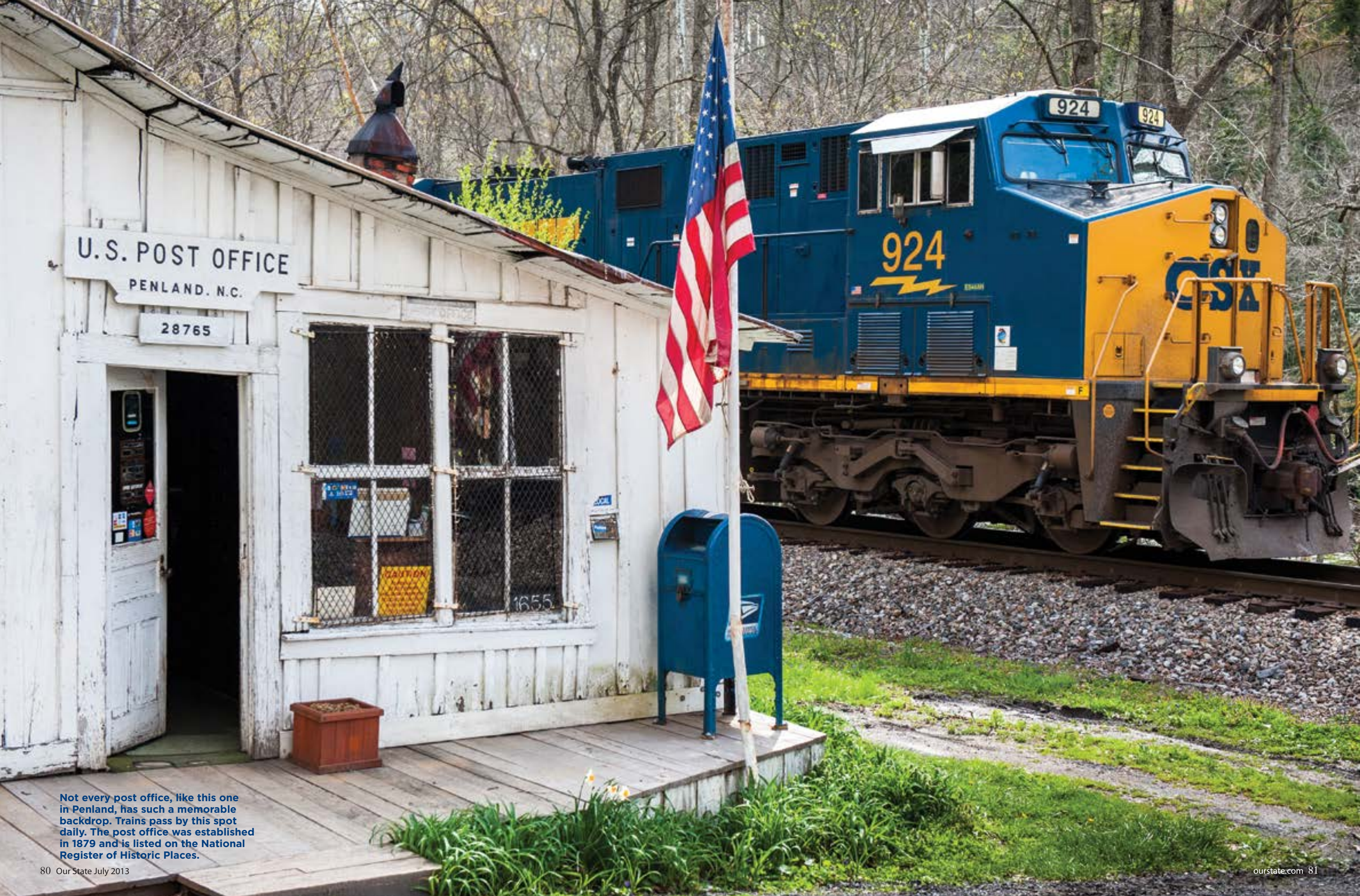
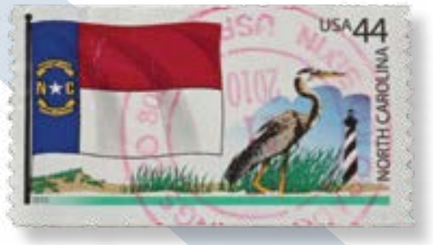
**City carriers are recognized by their blue uniforms. For many carriers like James Newman in Roxboro, these uniforms are just another part of their routine. And like the parts on their mail trucks, the shirts and pants wear out. No worries: the post office gives carriers a monthly allowance for clothing and shoes.**




**Not every post office, like this one in Penland, has such a memorable backdrop. Trains pass by this spot daily. The post office was established in 1879 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.**




**The people who enjoy gathering at the post office and catching up on neighborhood news have a limited time to gossip in McFarlan. This post office is only open from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.**

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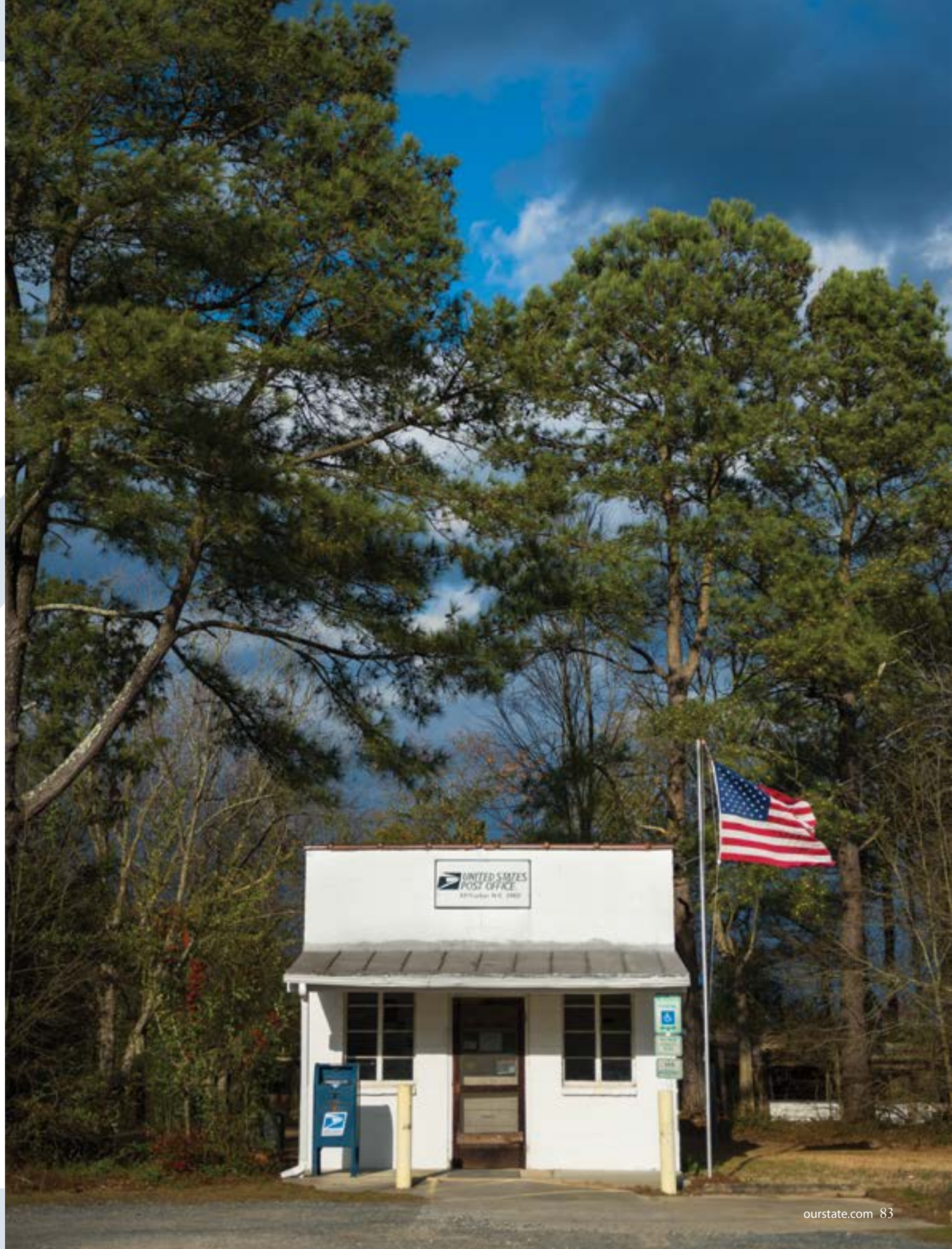

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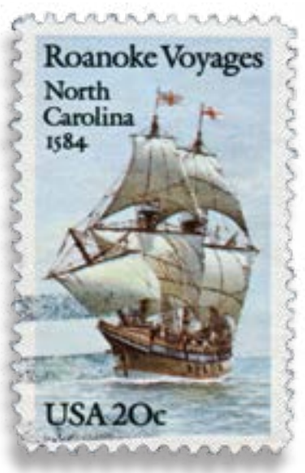
**Scott Bennett enjoys taking a morning walk after he picks up his letters from his mailbox in Relief. Often, he walks to the former general store and post office and reads his mail on the front steps.**




**Old and new collide at the Valle Crucis Post Office, located inside the Mast General Store. John Cooper, owner of the general store, checks his mail in one of the combination-lock mailboxes here every day. Sometimes, he ships packages, too.**

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**In the Chapel Hill post office on Franklin Street, you can't see mail carriers hustling to gather the morning mail. Instead, you just see a sleek exterior with a mural and small windows where you mail your package and catch up with the clerks.**

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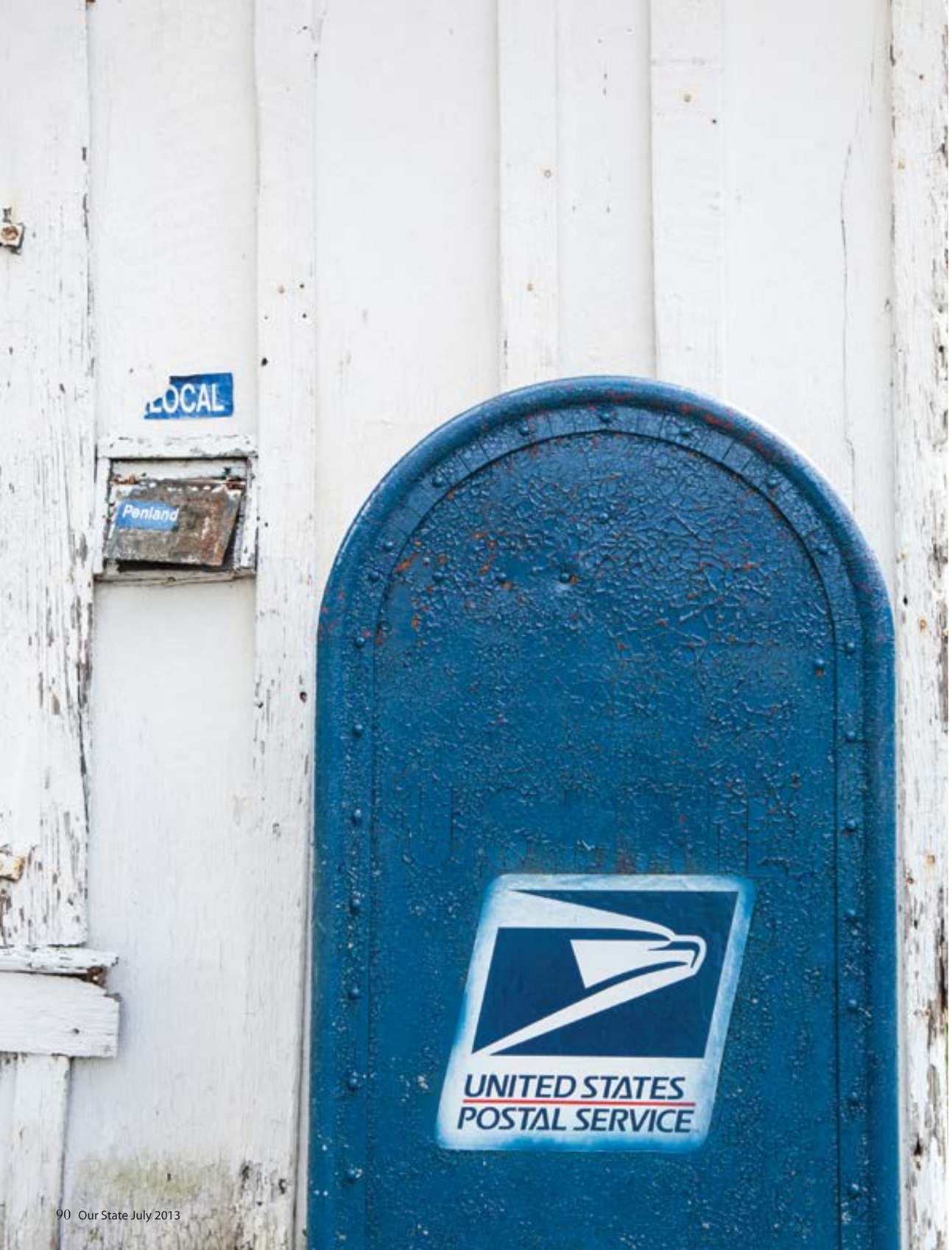



# DELIVER US THE WORLD

A mail carrier's job is famously monotonous. But follow him — or her — around long enough, and understand the joy in a carrier's day is bringing excitement to others.

The day begins with a bowl of Cream of Wheat, a piece of wheat toast doused with sorghum, and a prayer. "Lord, guide your hand upon us, keep us safe, and watch over us throughout the day," the man says. "Amen."

When he's finished eating, the man walks to the garage with his lunch box. His feet crunch in the gravel as he slides the orange light atop the dusty Buick, the one with 121,000 miles.

He backs out of his garage, watching for Harriet, the black Lab, and Scruff, the three-legged cat. He drives seven miles to the Speedway, pumps his gas — $28.98 — walks inside and pays, and picks up one last cup of coffee.

He once made the mistake of pumping only $20, and his car broke down. He didn't realize that the price of gas had risen so high, and his tank was dry. His mechanic laughed him out of the garage after he towed that old Buick home.

After he pays, he drives a few hundred yards to the tawny-bricked building and parks in the back lot. Caked dirt flies from the wheels as he presses the brakes and shifts into park.

It's the first of the month, which means the man has a hard day's work ahead.

Before he goes inside, he reaches into the backseat and places the sign in his back window: U.S. Mail.

Mail carriers are ruled by numbers. Every day, they wake up at the same time, arrive at the post office at the same time, work a numbered route, deliver a certain number of letters into numbered boxes, and may even drive a vehicle identified by a specific number.

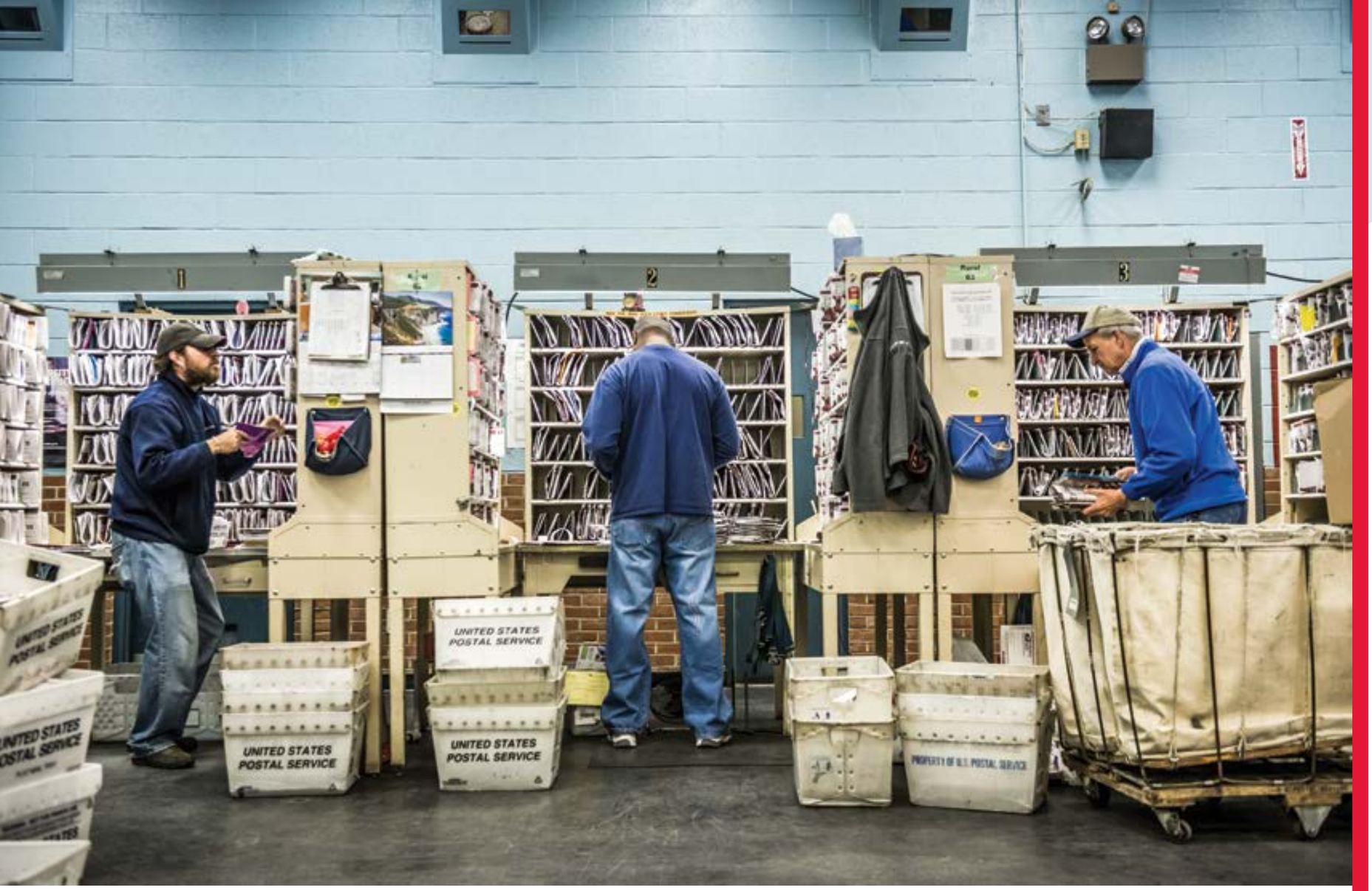
This routine has been in place for many, many decades.

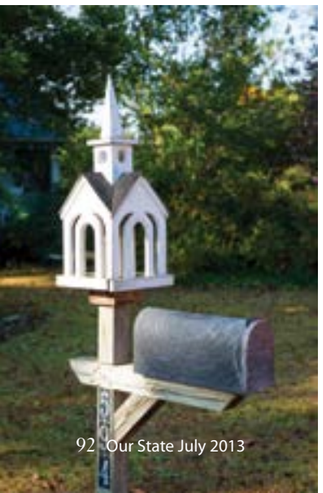
Benjamin Franklin was appointed the first postmaster general in July 1775. For more than two centuries, we have depended upon this routine — and these men and women — to deliver us the world. It is up to our mail carrier to hand-deliver to us cards, certified letters, and packages that announce birthdays, divorces, deaths, lawsuits, thank-you notes, graduations, Mother's Day.

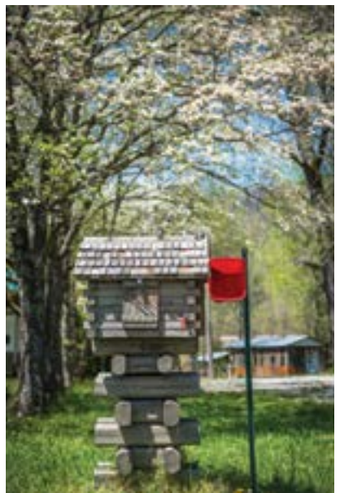
There is probably no other government service we rely on as much or as frequently as we do the United States Postal Service, and no government employee more than the mail carrier. We receive mail six days a week. The country's most valued communication lines are divided into routes — thousands of miles of asphalt and dirt roads cutting through cities, winding up mountains, diving into valleys, forging over streams and rivers. The most reliable messengers are clad in blue uniforms. "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

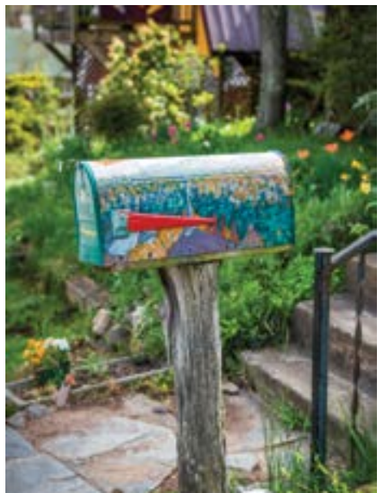
The Pony Express may be the most legendary mail service, delivering the news of war and death on their sturdy stallions. Even now, the legend of the mail carrier is alive — in real life and in fiction. The USPS created the Million Mile club to honor the men and women who have logged these miles without an accident. Even in pop culture, unscrupulous Newman from "Seinfeld" wears an aura of dependability and authority when he's sitting in his mail truck. The writers of "Cheers" devoted an entire episode to the sanctity of delivery in "The Mail Goes to Jail." When mailman Cliff Clavin asks Norm

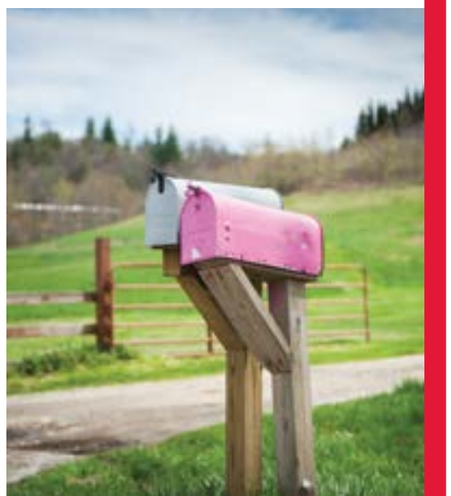
WRITTEN BY SARAH PERRY











**A routine is closely followed at post offices across the United States, and the carriers in Roxboro are willing participants in the tradition. They arrive early, wait for the mail trucks, sort their mail, and bring surprises to hundreds of families every day. On their route, they'll sometimes see customers who like to add personality to the mailboxes. Birdhouses, churches, and painted scenes are common. But a plain old box still does the job.**

to finish the rest of the route for him when he's sick, he says, "Just remember in those envelopes are the dreams, hopes, and fears of a nation."

My father always instilled in me a deep love and appreciation for the mail. For 30 years, he has been a rural carrier in Kentucky. He is a member of the esteemed Million Mile Club. I spent my childhood summers writing letters to my teachers and friends, keeping in touch with them while I read books and they vacationed in Florida. I wrote so many letters that my father began locking up his stamps, giving them to me only upon request, after a good explanation. It is a practice he still adheres to today, and when my mother has a card to send me, she has to say, "Donnie, go get me a stamp, you crazy man."

Over the years, my letter writing continued. I have written hundreds of letters to my friends, boyfriends, mentors, bosses, and colleagues. The words on the page, sent through the oldest form of communication available to me, is my way of holding on to the people I can never bear to let go of.

This year, I rode with my father on his route. I walked the streets of Kernersville with a city carrier. I developed a new appreciation and understanding of the mail. I learned the most important lesson about our ancient, beautiful system. The mail keeps us together.

My father's post office is located in a small, brick building. It shares the structure with the county clerk's office. There's one clerk on duty most days, and few people here in this town rent a box. Those who do are considered a step above the rest of the city residents.

Inside, it smells of glue and paper. Fluorescent lights cast a yellow glow over the office. Scattered about the floor are large, cloth hampers filled with packages.

The mail truck has arrived from Charleston, West Virginia. My father stands in his workstation, a cubicle-like structure with three metal walls that are separated into hundreds of two-inch slits. The processing center has already sorted most of his mail — what they call delivery point sequence mail (DPS) — and he throws it into the slots that are organized by streets and numbers. Each letter clicks against the metal wall. Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

Scanners beep. Boxes hit the bins. The phone rings. It's the first of the month, and across the floor, the eight carriers mimic the voice they know is on the other end of that line. They sound out in a chorus: "Did my check come today? Did my check come today?"




**Rhonda Phelps celebrated her 25th year with the post office in April. She's worked all over the Triad, but her current route in downtown Kernersville is her favorite. Over the years, she's learned her customers well, even down to the owners of the house with the pear tree who let her pick up the fresh fruit in the late summer months for a treat.**

All the carriers here are rural route veterans, so they are not dressed in the blue uniforms of city carriers. I've never known my father to wear anything but Rustler jeans, a cotton, plaid button-down tucked into a brown leather belt, and lace-up work boots. His uniform is as dependable as those government checks.

Next to my father, Becky Puckett stacks her sorted mail into bins and prepares to leave for the day. Her route is filled with twisting, gravel roads and ornery old men. She's dreading today. "I'm going to get cussed," she says. "The checks didn't come."

Last August, a man threatened to climb into her car and get his check himself. "Go ahead," she told him. "It's not here."

"You sure do learn people when you deliver their mail," she says.

Today, my father and I are on route two, a 120.7-mile trek across the foothills on mostly gravel roads. There are no gas stations. No cell phone service. We've got two gallons of water and some toilet paper. When we return home, our nails will be gritty with dirt, and our hair will be laced with white dust.

There are 484 boxes, 482 families, 444 stops. Two hardship boxes that are attached to porches or parts of homes.

After 30 years, my father has this route down to a science. But, I will learn, this is only a quarter of the numbers he has memorized. He has 2,172 addresses stamped in his head, 368 miles of country back roads mapped into his brain.

For every carrier in the tiny post office where my father works, there are three more at the Kernersville Post Office on Mountain Street. The rural, city, and relief carriers here — 48 total — split 12 city routes and 21 rural routes. Not one carrier drives his own vehicle. Those miniature mail trucks we see darting in and out of city blocks are a staple here on Mountain Street. The post office refers to these trucks as LLVs — long-life vehicles — and each carrier has his own.

Rhonda Phelps's truck is number 0212418. This morning, Phelps loads her parcels and bins in the back and slides into the driver's seat on the right side of the truck. Today marks her 25th year with the postal service.

She carries city route nine. When Phelps started as a carrier in Winston-Salem, she worked the 27104 zip code. But she likes route nine better, the four miles of tree-lined streets, the Bog Garden. "It's like going on a walk in the park and getting paid for it," she says.

She drives only five miles on the route, through some residential and commercial areas in Kernersville. She carries West and East Mountain Street, North and South Main Street, and Broad Street. She prepares for each day with a gallon of water, sunscreen, sunglasses, and apple slices with natural peanut butter. If it rains, she wears a poncho and a plastic hat.

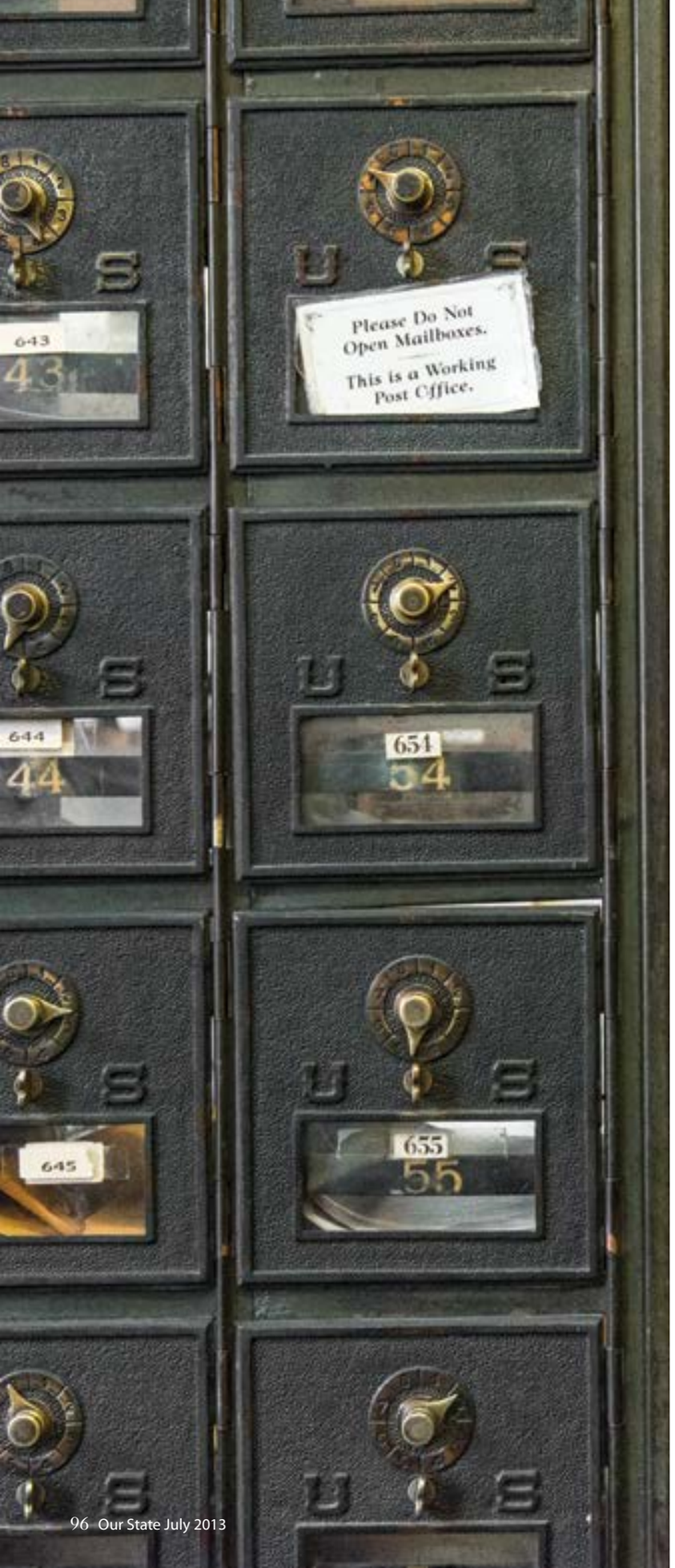
But today, Phelps is wearing a cloth hat — a sign of predicted sunshine. As she pulls into the parking lot of a closed gas station, she curbs her wheel, grabs the mail, sets her hand brake, and locks the truck, a routine she must follow every time she parks the truck. We walk up and down the streets, weave in and out of coffee shops and banks and clothing stores. She points out the stores she enjoys: the oil and vinegar specialty store, the Foxy Lady Boutique, where she sees a dress and requests the owner put it on hold until she finishes the route. As she opens a mailbox, Phelps scans something that resembles a UPC code. It's a scan point, something the post office uses to clock carriers' times and keep track of where they are on the route. A tracking service for its employees. Phelps has 15 scan points, and she's hit six by noon.

These are the things she never thought of when she took the Civil Service exam years ago at the suggestion of a friend. She was in college, wasn't sure she wanted to finish, and thought she would try this. In the beginning, learning the routes and the quirks of the customers was daunting, and Phelps says she wasn't sure she'd make it. But as the months passed by and she grew to know whose mail slots were where and which businesses wanted their mail brought inside, she settled into the routine. "To be honest with you, I'd as soon as be at work as at home," she says. "At home I have to do housework. This is pleasant."

When she was pregnant with her second son, she worked up to the day she delivered her baby. Her contractions weren't too close together, and she knew she'd have time. When she clocked out at the post office, she just went on to the hospital and gave birth.

We walk into an office building and Phelps stops to pet a small, brown dog. "Hi, Piper," she says, patting the dog on the head. She turns around and whispers to me as she slides the mail on the counter: This is the chiropractor's dog. "He's young, and he's single," she says, winking.

The things Phelps deals with on the city route are different. If her truck breaks down, the postmaster sends mechanics, and she can just walk on and finish the route. Another carrier may help her. She doesn't have to worry about the gravel roads.




The relationships, though, are just as rewarding. In Winston-Salem, Phelps befriended an elderly woman who seemed to have few friends. Phelps gave her stamps for Christmas so she could send out cards. She brought the woman hot meals during the holidays.

Two years ago, Phelps's left foot began to swell. Plantar fasciitis had developed into two torn tendons. She was out 10 weeks. Always health conscious, she began researching the foods she could eat that would naturally help the inflammation. At lunch, she pulls out a green drink made from kale, spinach, avocado, cucumber, kiwi, strawberries, and chia seeds. She eats apples and peanut butter and rye bread. And at night she takes a concoction of vitamin D, plant-based calcium, vitamins K and K2, and turmeric.

Ten weeks after her surgery, she returned to work. She transitioned from a riding route back to city route nine, the route only Phelps wants because there's so much walking.

In the afternoon, the route is mostly riding. I follow behind and watch her curb the wheels and lock her truck. As she walks up to the buildings, her keys hang on her left wrist. The customers can hear them jingling before they notice the door has opened and the mail is on the counter, and Phelps is already walking on, delivering to the next stop on her route.

My father's mail car — a 13-year-old Buick with a duct-taped steering wheel and 30 layers of dust — is the newest vehicle he's ever owned. Its 121,000 miles signal a young life for my father. Sent to my neighbor's junkyard in a last noble gesture of life are: a gold Pontiac Phoenix that had fake leather seats and wood paneling; a silver Phoenix — nicknamed the Silver Bullet — with floors so rotted out that our mechanic had to install metal beams beneath the carriage just so my father wouldn't run over himself while driving down the road; and Ole Whitie, a white Phoenix with brown interior and a stash of Phil Collins and Creedence Clearwater Revival cassettes in the glove box.

My father, loyal to a vehicle that carries him through his dusty miles, will never give up on General Motors. The last vehicle he bought was a Buick Century that retired at 296,000 miles. My dad says he will never buy another model. His fellow carriers are the same. Log that many miles on a vehicle, understand its consistencies and grumbles and quirks, and you know it like your own child. A rural carrier's vehicle is equivalent to a butcher's knife or a surgeon's scalpel.

He's learned not to kick up dirt on people on roads that skirt through these low-lying mountains. He's learned to love the taste of dirt, the grit of it that sticks between his teeth as it flies up into his face.

The roll, stop, roll, stop routine means brake changes every two months. Tires twice a year. Axles, bearings, radiators. Breakdowns along the route and rescues from other carriers and kindly strangers. "It never stops," my father says.

After we slip out into town into the dew-filled morning, our first stop is at a pharmacy. My dad pulls to the shoulder, keeps his foot on the brake, rolls down the passenger's side window, leans across the seat, opens the mailboxes, and stuffs in the letters. The car doesn't come to a complete stop at this row of boxes. Just a gentle roll.

We speed on down the highway and head into the foothills and up and down dirt roads with scary names. Rollercoaster Hill, Dead Man's Curve, Smokey Road. There are broken-down trailers a half-mile from massive brick homes with well-manicured lawns. Homes with flags, mailboxes built from cast-off wood, and rusted play sets.

Over the years, my father has learned his route and his customers. He's learned not to kick up dirt on people on roads that skirt through these low-lying mountains. He's learned to love the taste of dirt, the grit of it that sticks between his teeth as it flies up into his face. He's learned the dogs that bite, and he knows who leaves him fudge or chocolate-covered cherries at Christmas. He's learned to love the freedom he feels when he dangles his arm out the window, learned to appreciate that permanent white mark on his left wrist, the place his watchband covers.

By noon, my stomach has twisted itself up into my throat. I take steady, calm breaths as the Buick flies over the rutted-out roads. I wince when I see another mailbox — another stop, another jerk forward, another family for whom my father delivers a surprise each day.

"Do you deliver Ashley Carper's mail?" I ask my dad. Ashley Carper is an old high school friend who lives somewhere in Carter City.

"Carper?"

"Well, Ashley Pence now."

"Oh yes," Dad says. "55 Halfway Branch."

For the next few hours, my dad points out other homes of people I've known over the years. He can't identify the people by their faces — he refers to them in streets and numbers — but he knows other details that reveal facets of their lives. The retired vocational school principal prefers *Sports Illustrated*; the elderly man from our church takes a special medication delivered on a certain day each month; a former teacher receives more cards than Santa Claus at Christmas.

By 4 p.m. we've delivered the last piece of mail on my father's route to a redbrick home with neatly trimmed hedges. Our fingernails resemble schoolchildren's who've just made mud pies. Our hair is partially white. Gritty pastes have formed in our mouths. We are covered in sweat. With the windows down, we lean forward in our seats and feel the breeze pass behind our backs. We drive on.

My dad's workday ends the same every day. At the end of his 120.7-mile route, when he's finished delivering the world to 482 families, he drives back to the tawny-bricked building. He walks to the back dock and through the giant metal doors where the mail truck unloads each morning. He carries the incoming mail in a blueberry-colored, canvas duffel bag. He unloads the letters and packages in a plastic tub, then takes out a white card from a drawer in his metal workstation and records his time out.

Then he drives the seven miles home to the little gray house on top of the hill on Rose Ridge. He walks through the kitchen door, carrying in his arms the mail, his empty lunch box, his denim coat, and his Igloo water cooler. He stomps the dirt from his boots on the rug, and unfailingly, says the same words to my mother: "Hey, Faye. It's been a rough one." He pauses. "What's to eat?"

He sits at the head of the table in the kitchen. At one time, my mother sat at the other end, and I was to the right of my mother. But now, she sits next to Dad and the rest of the table is empty. They'll hold hands, and over a bowl of soup beans and cornbread, or a plate of green beans and turkey, or a bowl of chicken salad, they'll say a prayer of thanks.

When he's finished eating, my dad walks to his chair in the living room and reclines. In his lap is a bundle of letters bound together by a rubber band. He slips that band off, and piece by piece, my dad, the mailman, reads his mail.

*Sarah Perry is an associate editor at* Our State. *Her most recent story was "The Simplest Flying Machine" (May 2013).*