

Really *Fundamentally* Different

By Aaron Underwood · Long Grove Historical Society

Why do Long Grove postal addresses use RFD?

A question pondered by many area residents. The most common “urban legend” answer is “it’s to preserve privacy”, since you don’t have to give out your street name when providing an address. There might have been a moment in history where there was some truth to that, but the real answer has to do with how postal services evolved over time.



Long Grove resident and Beans & Leaves coffee shop owner Ethel Berger retrieves her mail.

The first settlers of Long Grove in 1830’s registered themselves at a post office of their choice (typically Half Day) and got their mail addressed using only their name and the post office name. They visited the post office periodically to pick up their mail. When commerce sprouted in Long Grove, a local German merchant, Charles Sigwalt, filed the appropriate paperwork in 1847 and christened our little crossroads, “Muttersholtz, IL”. Muttersholtz was his hometown in Alsace. Two months later, he lost or gave up the job of postmaster to a Yankee immigrant from Pennsylvania named George Ruth and the name changed to the more English friendly Long Grove.



The post office in this era wasn't a dedicated building like we would think of today, but rather was typically "co-located" in the business owned by the postmaster. Having a post office located in your business was a way of getting area farmers into your store on a regular basis, so most business districts wanted a post office. Businessmen would then work the political system to try and control whose store it was in. In Long Grove's case, one store was run by a republican, and the other a democrat, and the location of the post office flipped back and forth between the two as the political winds shifted.

By the turn of the century (1900), farmers started lobbying for delivery of mail, which city folk had been enjoying for years. The number of post offices in the country had exploded to more than 75,000. In 1902, a new system, coined "rural free delivery (RFD)", and advertised as "a post office on wheels" was established with the intent to provide better service and also eliminate many of the small rural post offices. Both the Long Grove and the Half Day post offices were decommissioned and their rural routes were served out of Prairie View (which had a train station). With this change, mail to people living in Long Grove had to be addressed something like "Name, Rural Route 2, Prairie View". The farmers loved this new level of service, though the merchants perhaps weren't so happy. The number of post offices today is less than half of what it was in 1902. With only two exceptions, the number of post offices has declined every single year since then.

In 1960, as the area around Prairie View grew, it was proposed that Long Grove's rural mail service be switched to Lake Zurich. Over 90 percent of those in Long Grove objected. As a compromise, Long Grove was switched over to the Lake Zurich post office, but given a physical postal sub-station in the crossroads, and allowed to use Long Grove again as a recognized mailing address (e.g. "Name, Rural Route 2, Long Grove"). Mel Towner was the sub-station manager and it was located at Mel's Gas Station. A few years later, the sub-station was moved to the Farmside Country Store.

In the 1970's, as Long Grove became more suburban and less farm country, attempts were made to change the mail service from "rural free delivery" to "city carrier". The post office met stiff resistance from Long Grove residents, who objected to the "downgrade" in service – they didn't want to have to drive to the post office to buy stamps or mail a package, for example. The compromise this time was that residents were allowed to continue to use rural addressing, but required to use a house number as well (e.g. "name, 3110 RFD, Long Grove").

In the late 1990's the Long Grove sub-station was closed, reportedly due to a lack of parking and the lack of handicap accessibility.

Rural free delivery or RFD, was an entirely separate service from city delivery and it remains that way today, although it's a bit less obvious. RFD carriers deliver from vehicles, not by foot. They don't have uniforms and often use their own vehicles. RFD carriers have a different union and different pay scale than city carriers. You can buy stamps and money orders and send and receive parcels via your RFD carrier – city carrier's don't offer these services. Today in our 60047 post office, most of Lake Zurich is served by city carriers and rural carriers serve everyone else.

I suspect that more than one of you is saying at this point, "What? Unlike less fortunate city dwelling neighbors, I can buy stamps from my carrier? How do I do that?". There's a form you fill out, along with payment, and you leave that in your mailbox to be collected by your carrier. The next day, the carrier will deposit the stamps in your mailbox. You can purchase money orders the same way. Residents of Long Grove, Kildeer, and Hawthorn Woods can do that, but residents of Lake Zurich can't. Such are the privileges of the rural delivery lifestyle.

*Why do some homes have a driveway mailbox,
while others share one at the subdivision entrance?*

The general rule for post office rural routes is that they must be public roads and that a branch of a route must serve at least one family per mile. When a new subdivision is created, the post master works with the developer to decide how mail will be delivered. If the subdivision has public roads (e.g. Country Club Estates), then the houses will probably have individual mailboxes. If the subdivision has private roads (e.g. Herons Landing), then they tend to have a common mailbox arrangement. There are exceptions as, in the end, it's a case by case decision by the postmaster and the political mood at the time.

Being different is not without cost. As various systems got automated at the beginning of this century (2000), Long Grove frequently felt the “not supported” sting of technology. One year the state didn't send out license plate renewals to Long Grove residents because their addresses weren't considered valid. One year a new 911 system didn't support Long Grove because it didn't recognize RFD numbers.

Sometime, I think in the 1990's, this notion of privacy being the reason for using RFD got started. At the various points in history where decisions were made, I don't find any evidence of that being a factor. Certainly, some people may have seen it as a benefit, though, the internet negated that. Perhaps it's just another example of how Long Grove's character evolved to be quirky, unique, and Really, Fundamentally Different.