Delivering the Mail

By Don Bell

It was always special when Johnny the mailman stopped at our mailbox. I would run out to meet him and see what he had brought. Usually I was expecting something from one of the radio programs I listened to. Back then, 10 cents and a box top got you a premium from Captain Midnight, Dick Tracy, the Lone Ranger or Tom Mix. Whatever it was, it seemed to take forever to arrive.

One day the mailman asked me, "How would you like to go along with me today and help deliver the mail?" We lived at the end of the only bridge across Penns Creek for several miles, and he passed our house twice each day, so it wouldn't be inconvenient for him.

Starting that day and for years thereafter, I took two-hour rides with him at least once or twice a week. On the front seat between us there was a wooden box with small compartments for each customer's mail. When we got to a mailbox, if it was on the left side, he would handle the exchange and lower the flag; if it was on my side, I would do it. Our system worked very well. It meant less stretching over the wooden box for him and a pleasant ride for me.

He was very entertaining too. Sometimes he would tell me about things that had happened when he first started carrying the mail. He had used a horse then, as there weren't many automobiles. Later, he bought a motorcycle for his route. Still

This is a view of the bridge over Penns Creek and the mailman in his new 1949 Ford. The author's cousin Ellen is watching his arrival.

Good Old Days on Wheels

later, he bought his first car, a Ford. After that, he traded on a new one every few years.

He told me that one time in the fall, he was driving his car on mail delivery when he saw a big pile of leaves at the edge of the road. His first impulse was to accelerate right into the leaves and scatter them. But then he thought there might be a rock or something else in the pile that would damage his car, so he drove around them.

When he had just passed the pile, he looked in his rearview mirror to see a little girl crawl out of the leaves! "I would undoubtedly have killed her had I done what I first thought of doing! What a lesson I learned!" he said. He told me this story more than once; it had made a tremendous impression on him.

He always had a magic trick or riddle for the children on his route. He also could make a face he called his "Popeye face." He somehow was able to pop his false teeth out of place in his mouth and bring his bottom lip up to his nose while closing one eye and wrinkling his face. It looked hilarious, and all the kids on his route loved it. They would come running out to his car, hollering, "Make a Popeye face, Johnny!"

At one place on his route, near Toonerville, where there were only a few houses, there were some woods and a place where he would park his car on the side of the road. Here we would spend 10 or 15 minutes having lunch—a banana or apple, which he shared with me, and always a pack of cupcakes. He would give me one and he would eat the other. How I loved those cupcakes! Then we would continue on to the rest of our stops.

I turned 16 in 1950, and I bought my first car, a 1936 DeSoto, for $100. Soon after, I passed my driving test and received my Pennsylvania driver's license. That was a proud and happy day. But even though I had my independence, I still asked Johnny if he needed a helper now and then.

One day, he asked, "You have a driver's license now, don't you?" When I said I did, he asked, "How would you like to be my driver today?"

Boy, would I! I got to drive a brand-new Ford. After that, I drove whenever I went with him on his deliveries.

Eventually the U.S. Postal Service wanted him to retire. He wanted to keep working, and he was able to do so for several more years, but finally he was forced to retire.

John Van Buskirk has been gone for many years now, but I still have wonderful memories of him and helping him deliver the mail back in the Good Old Days! ❖