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## IN THIS ISSUE:

	page
MILITARY POST OFFICES OF ALASKA DURING WORLD WAR II .....	2
VIRGINIA CITY: QUEEN OF THE COMSTOCK .....	16
SUBJECT INDEX FOR LA POSTA VOLS. I & II .....	19
EDITOR'S COMMENTS .....	20

## MILITARY POST OFFICES IN ALASKA DURING WW II

by Richard Helbock

Military installations in Alaska on the eve of World War II were largely non-existent. A furious program of construction throughout late 1940 and 1941 succeeded in providing facilities for some 21,500 American troops by the time the United States declared war on Japan in December, 1941. It is the purpose of this study to examine the postal history of military post offices in Alaska prior to and during the Second World War.

### Naval Air Stations

**SITKA NAVAL AIR STATION.** The United States Navy began construction of a large air base on Japonski Island near Sitka in 1938 to touch-off the pre-war military construction boom. This facility was first served by a branch of the Sitka post office known as "Fleet Air Base." (fig. 1). The Fleet Air Base Branch was established during July 1938. In January 1940, the name of the branch was changed to "Naval Air Station," and a steel hand-cancel postmark reflected the name change. (fig. 2)



fig. 1

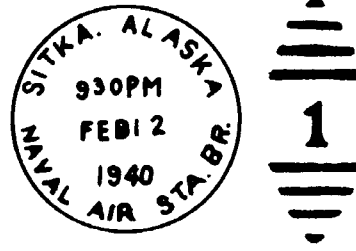
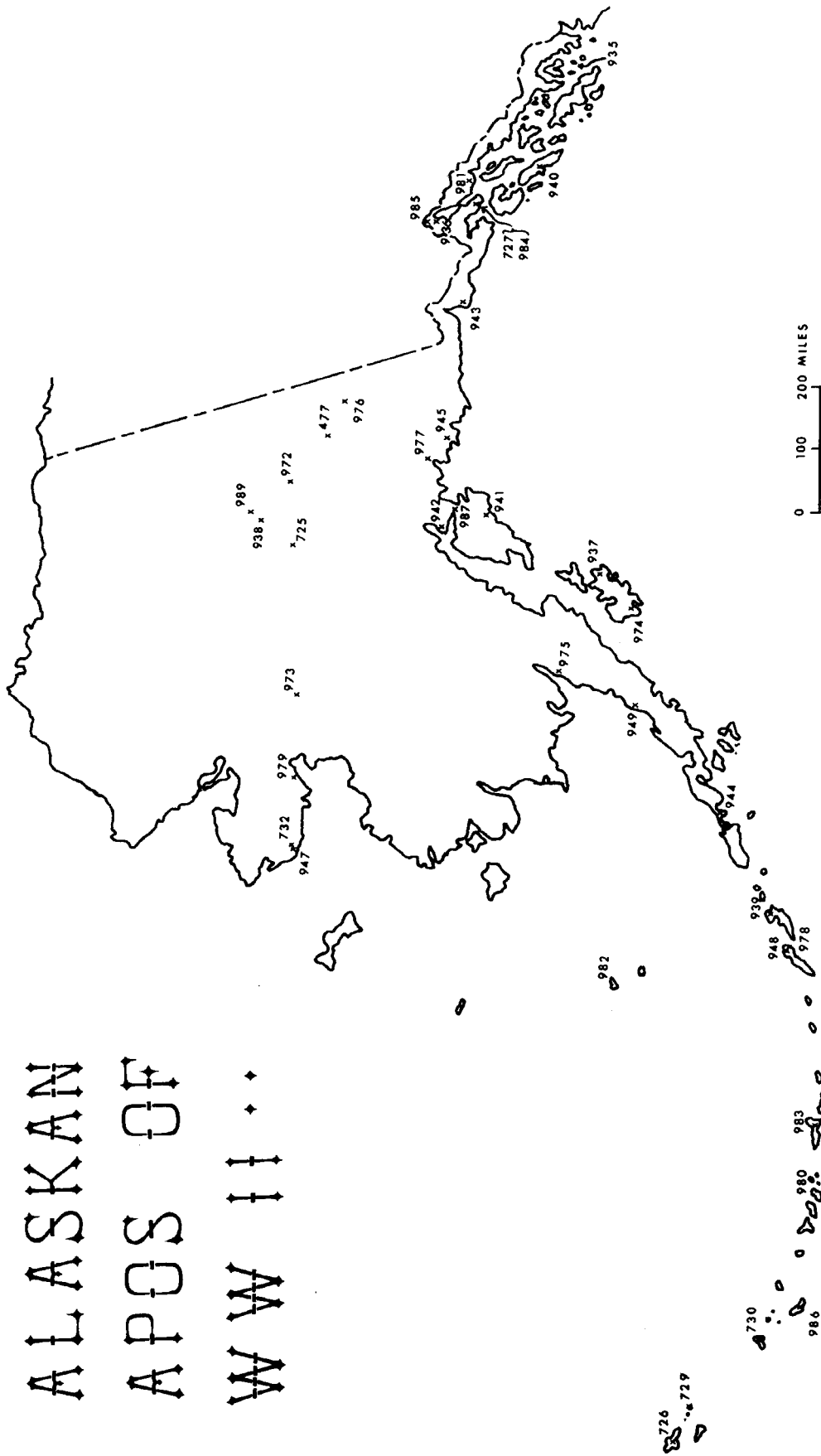


fig. 2

After the outbreak of fighting in the Pacific, military branch post offices were reorganized as branches of the Seattle post office. On December 31, 1942, the Naval Air Station Branch of the Sitka office was transferred to Seattle, Washington. Figure 3 shows the Sitka Naval Air Station Branch postmark as it appeared on its last day of use. The geographic designation was blanked out for reasons which were apparently concerned with security. This postmark was replaced by a four-bar rubber hand stamp reading "Seattle, Wash." "Nav. Air Sta. Sitka Alaska Br." (fig. 4) It is difficult for a layman to comprehend how security was served by transferring the branch to Seattle when the geographic designation was retained as part of the postmark. The Sitka Naval Air Station continued to be served as a branch of the Seattle post office until about October, 1944, when the branch was discontinued. Postmarks of the type shown in figure 4 have been seen with both 1943 and 1944 year dates.

ALASKAN  
APOS OF  
WW II ♦♦



Locations Approximate

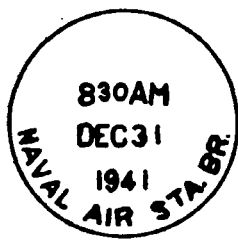


fig. 3



fig. 4

KODIAK NAVAL AIR STATION. The Navy began construction of an air base south of the town of Kodiak in 1939. A branch of the Kodiak post office was established during June 1940 to serve the new installation. (fig. 5) This branch was transferred to the Seattle post office during August 1941, where it remained until about 1948. (fig. 6)



fig. 5



fig. 6

DUTCH HARBOR NAVAL AIR STATION. In 1940 construction began on a third naval air facility at Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island in the Aleutians. A civil post office had been established at Dutch Harbor on August 18, 1936, and this facility initially served the naval air station. (fig. 7) On December 31, 1941, the Dutch Harbor office was discontinued, and mail began to be handled through the Naval Air Station Dutch Harbor Alaska Branch of the Seattle post office. (fig. 8)

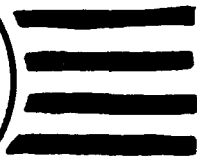
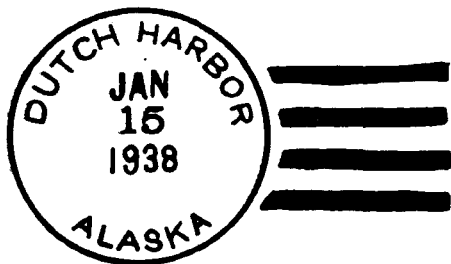


fig. 7



fig. 8

Dutch Harbor became one of the primary focal points of U. S. Navy activity in Alaska during the war. On June 3 and 4, 1942, Japanese bombers raided the military facilities at "Dutch." The raids resulted in the deaths of some 45 men, and caused slight damage to some of the buildings. Besides causing death and destruction, the Japanese raids greatly aroused the fears of American citizens who saw for the first time the importance of Alaska as a line of defense in case of attack from the west or north. After the raids all natives were removed from the Aleutian Islands and placed in camps on the mainland. The Navy quickly began to enlarge their facilities at Dutch Harbor with the construction of a submarine base along with ship docking and repair facilities. Postal installations at Dutch Harbor were similarly expanded for the Navy during the war. The Navy 151 Branch of the Seattle post office was established about March 1943, and, while it is difficult to identify the geographic origin of Navy mail, postmark types shown in figures 9 and 10 have been observed on covers bearing Navy 151 return addresses.

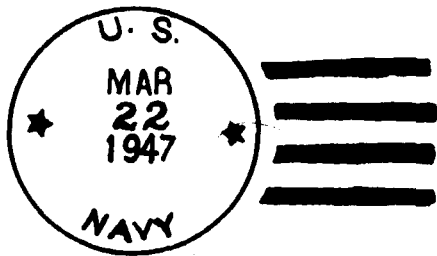


fig. 9

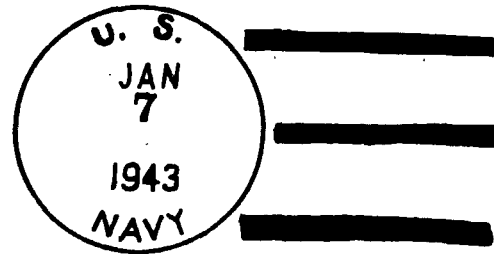


fig. 10

The Navy 151 Branch served Dutch Harbor throughout the war. It was discontinued about January 1948. After the war, naval facilities at Dutch Harbor were deactivated, and the natives were returned to their homes. The Naval Air Station Branch of the Seattle post office was discontinued about July 1948.

#### Pre-war Army Installations

The United States Army's pre-war construction program began June 8, 1940, when ground was broken in the building of Fort Richardson near Anchorage. On June 27th the first troop compliment of 21 officers and 732 enlisted men arrived to occupy the embryonic post. A Fort Richardson Branch of the Anchorage post office was established April 1, 1941. (fig. 11) This branch served the fort until the spring of 1942. On April 14, 1942, APO 942 was established to provide mail handling service for Fort Richardson.

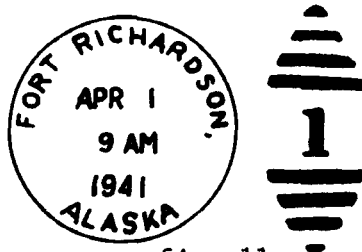


fig. 11

John H. Engel's A.P.O. Cover Catalog of 1947 lists eleven different postmark types used at APO 942 during World War II. Of that total 5 are hand cancels and 6 are machine cancels. Figures 12 - 14 illustrate three of the APO 942 postmark types.



fig. 12

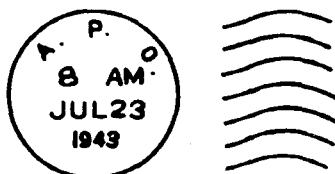


fig. 13



fig. 14

ANNETTE ISLAND LANDING FIELD. On September 19, 1940, the Army began to build an airfield at Annette Island south of Ketchikan. A branch of the Ketchikan post office known as "Annette Island Landing Field" was established in August 1941 to serve the facility. (fig. 15) The Postal Guide of December 1943 has the earliest listing of this branch as discontinued, but it seems likely that it was actually closed at an earlier date for on May 26, 1942, APO 935 was established to serve the Annette Island air field. (fig. 16) The date on which APO 935 was discontinued is not known, but on July 16, 1947, the civil post office named Annette was established to serve the same community.



fig. 15



fig. 16

LADD FIELD. In addition to the airfield at Annette, the Army began construction of three other Alaskan air bases in late 1940. They were named Elmendorf, Ladd, and Yakutat. On February 23, 1941 the first combat aircraft in all Alaska arrived at the recently completed Elmendorf Field near Anchorage. Postal service for Elmendorf Field was apparently handled by the Anchorage post office throughout the war. No special branches were established prior to or during the war, and no APO was authorized for Elmendorf.

Ladd Field at Fairbanks became operational in mid-1941, and was served after April 1942 by APO 938. (figs. 17 and 18) A second APO was established to serve Ladd Field on December 10, 1945. It was assigned the number 731. The Ladd Field Branch of the Fairbanks post office was opened

after the war, and continued to function until 1959.



fig. 17

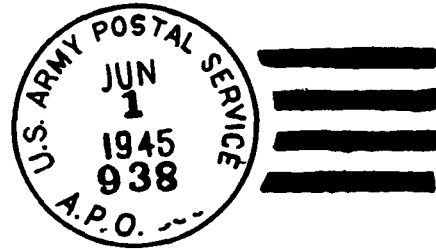


fig. 18

YAKUTAT AIR FIELD. The fourth of the Army's pre-war air fields was located at Yakutat (see map), and it too became operational in late 1941. Yakutat was served throughout the war by a civil post office (fig. 19), and after April 1942 by APO 943.



fig. 19

Three other Army posts were authorized for Alaska in addition to Fort Richardson and the air fields during the immediate pre-war period. They were Fort Greely at Kodiak, Fort Ray at Sitka, and Fort Mears at Dutch Harbor. Construction of all three posts was begun during the first two months of 1941. It was, of course, no accident that each of these installations was located in close proximity to one of the Navy's air stations. In July 1941, troop compliments for each of the three new posts reached the following levels:

Fort Ray	70 officers	1950 enlisted men
Fort Greely	235 officers	5600 enlisted men
Fort Mears	225 officers	5200 enlisted men

The Postal Guide of February 1942 lists the establishment of Fort Greely and Fort Mears branches of the Seattle post office. In the March 1944 issue of the Guide, both branches are listed as being discontinued. No examples of the postmarks of either branch have been seen by this author. Army Post Offices were established for each fort during the spring of 1942. Dates of establishment and APO numbers were as follows:

Fort Greely--June 23, 1942--APO 937  
 Fort Mears---April 17, 1942--APO 939  
 Fort Ray --- May 26, 1942 --APO 940

On May 15, 1946, APO 937 was discontinued. It was subsequently re-opened, and moved to Eielson Air Base near Fairbanks.

Figures 20 through 23 illustrate some of the World War II postmark types used by APO 937, 939 and 940.

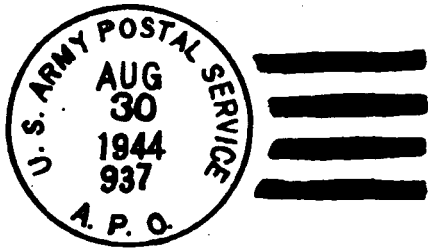


fig. 20

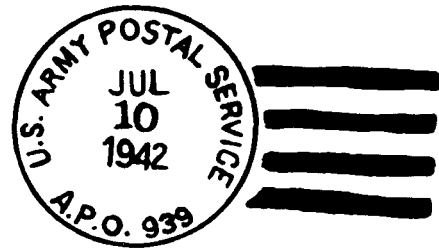


fig. 21



fig. 22

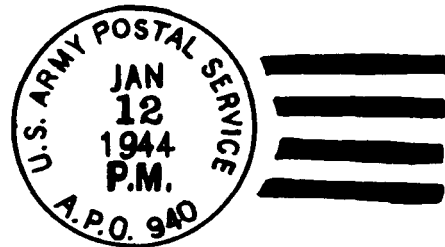


fig. 23

The Build-Up of Early 1942

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. Four days later the United States Congress, now at war, authorized what was first known as the "Umnak Island Project." During January of 1942, Army Engineers braved the Aleutian winter to begin construction of the "Project," and the February 1942 issue of the Postal Guide listed a new Seattle branch named the "Umnak Island Project Branch." This branch remained on POD lists until March 1944, but this author has seen no examples of its postmarks. By April 1, 1942, the Umnak Island Project became habitable, and in June the installation, now known as Fort Glenn, housed some 4000 American troops. APO 948 was established May 16, 1942 to serve the soldiers who found themselves stationed at what was then America's first line of defense in the Aleutians. Figures 24 and 25 illustrate two of the postmark types used at APO 948 during the war.

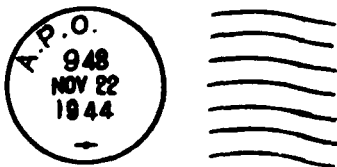


fig. 24



fig. 25



Fort Glenn was not the only new military installation to be constructed in Alaska during the first few feverish months of 1942. Army posts both large and small sprang-up all over the map of Alaska. Between December 1941 and April 1942, the number of Army troops in Alaska increased from 21,500 to 40,424. Among the more important installations to be established or re-inforced during this period were: Fort Randall at Cold Bay, Fort Raymond at Seward, and Fort Morrow at Port Heiden. With the increase in the number of troops, came a corresponding increase in the need for Army mail service. The following table provides some basic information for those APOs not already mentioned that were established during the first six months of 1942.

APO No.	Location	Date of Establishment
936	Chilkoot Barracks, Haines	April 25, 1942
941	Fort Raymond, Seward	May 21, 1942
944	Fort Randall, Cold Bay	June 30, 1942
945	Cordova	April 1942
947	Fort Spencer, Nome	April 25, 1942
949	Fort Morrow, Port Heiden	April 1942
989	Fox	June 1942

Postmark types from some of these APOs are illustrated in figures 26 through 29.



fig. 26



fig. 27

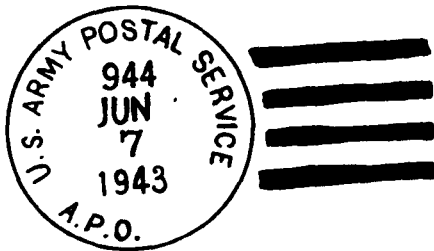


fig. 28

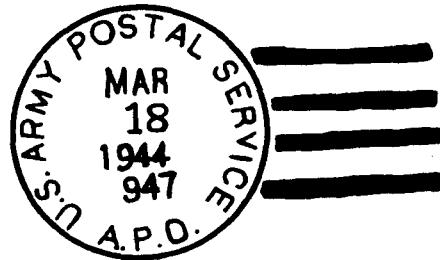


fig. 29

## War in the Aleutians

Following their June 3-4 bombing raids on Dutch Harbor, the Japanese landed 1200 troops on Attu Island June 7, 1942. The following day a Japanese force occupied Kiska Island (see Aleutian map). Attu and Kiska are rocky Aleutian islands located at the extreme western end of the chain, much nearer Japan than the continental United States.

Occupation of the two islands and the bombing raid on "Dutch" spurred the U. S. military build-up in Alaska during the summer of 1942. The number of American troops in Alaska was stimated at 71,500 by the end of August. Nome, for example, which had previously been garrisoned by a single infantry company, was re-inforced on June 21st by some 2000 men.

During late August, 1942, Americans began to establish military outposts in the western Aleutians. On August 30th, 4500 troops were landed on Adak Island. Mail service for these men was provided by APO 980, which had been authorized August 3, 1942. (see figures 30 and 31)

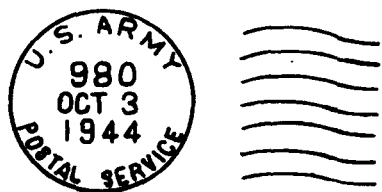


fig. 30

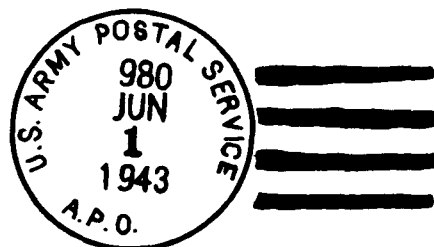


fig. 31

Atka Island was occupied by 800 American troops on September 16th, and APO 983 (fig. 32) was established about the same time to provide mail service for the new garrison. An additional detachment of 800 men were stationed on Saint Paul Island in the Pribilofs on September 19th. The Army Post Office serving the Saint Paul group was assigned number 982. Construction of an airfield on Amchitka Island, some 200 miles west of Adak, completed the American build-up in the Aleutians. A force of 2000 men was landed on the barren shore of Amchitka January 12, 1943. By February 16th, the airfield was operational. APO 986 was established to provide mail service for the troops on Amchitka Island. (see fig. 33)

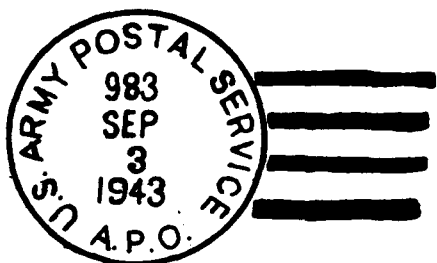
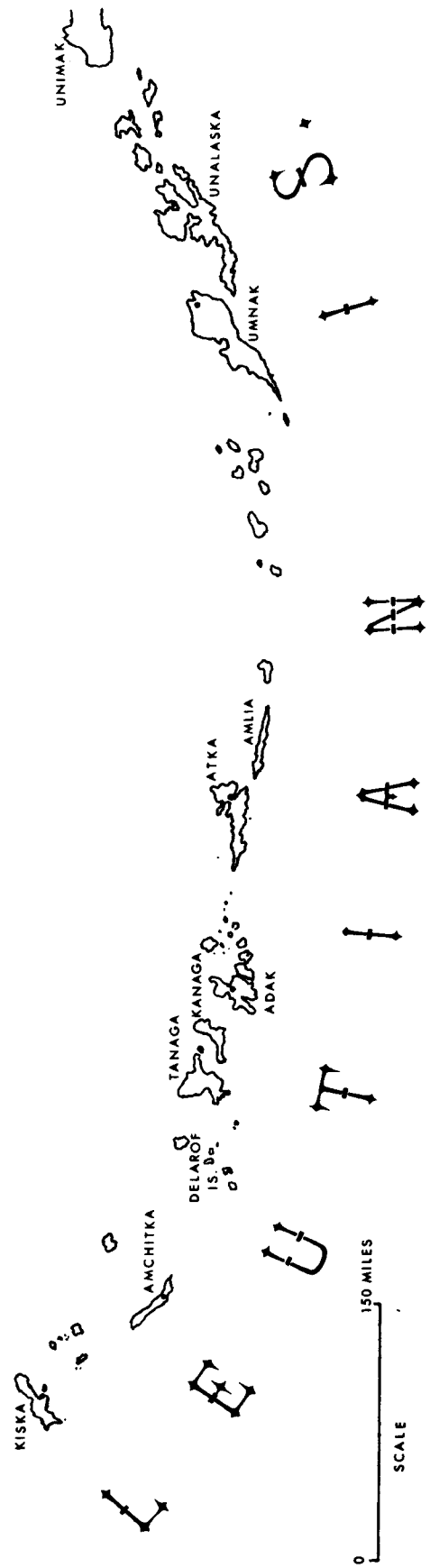
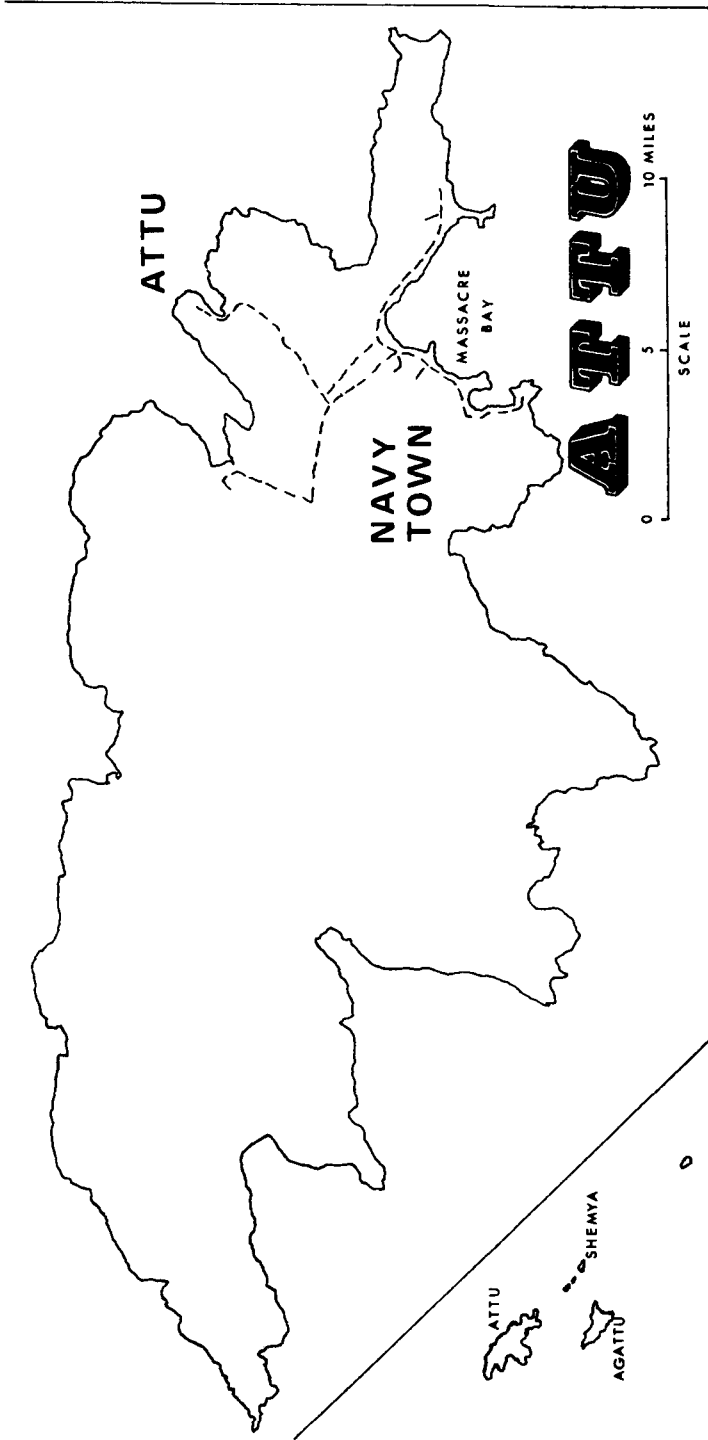


fig. 32



fig. 33



Japanese forces in the Aleutians were estimated at approximately 4000 on Kiska and 1000 on Attu at the end of 1942. The early months of 1943 saw careful planning by American strategists for an invasion of the Japanese held Attu Island. Weather conditions presents some major problems and caused numerous delays, but the invasion was finally launched and a landing made May 11th. Some 15,000 American troops took part in the invasion of Attu, and, although Japanese resistance was scattered, there was some bloody fighting before the island was finally secured on May 30, 1943. Losses were relatively heavy on both sides. The U. S. lost 549 killed in action, 1148 wounded, and some 2100 victims of the weather. Japanese dead were placed at 2350, and 29 prisoners were taken. On May 15th, before the island was completely secure, APO 726 was established at Massacre Bay to provide mail facilities for American forces on Attu. Figures 34 through 36 illustrate three of the postmark types used at the Massacre Bay APO.

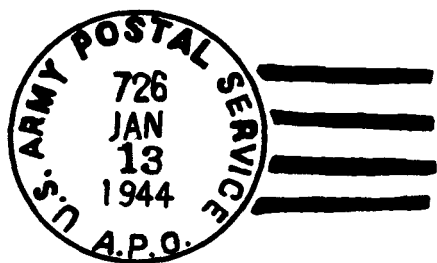


fig. 34



fig. 35



fig. 36

The capture of Attu was but the first step in what was believed to be the much harder task of clearing the Japanese from Kiska Island. On May 30, 1943, a detachment of Army engineers and troops were landed on Shemya Island, located between Attu and Kiska. The engineers immediately began work on an airfield from which air cover could be provided for an assault on Kiska. The troops on Shemya were served by APO 729, which was established June 30th. (see figures 37 and 38)

Airfields at both Attu and Shemya were completed by the end of June, and in July 34,000 troops were assembled on Adak and Amchitka for the big assault on Kiska. The initial vanguard landed on Kiska August 15, 1943, and found to the surprise of American planners that the island was deserted. It was later learned that the Japanese had evacuated the island July 28th. American

forces occupied Kiska from the time of the invasion, and the troops mail service was handled by APO 730 which had been authorized August 3, 1943. (see fig. 39)



fig. 37

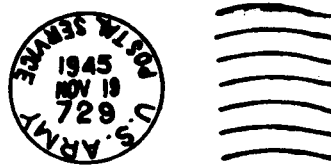


fig. 38

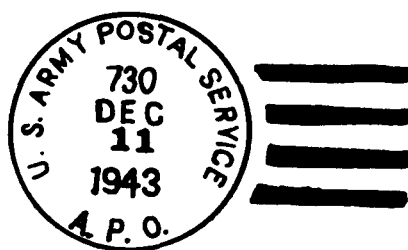


fig. 39

The invasion of Kiska marked the anti-climax of military operations in Alaska and the Aleutians during the war. In August, 1943, there were an estimated 144,000 American and Canadian troops stationed in the area. After that time, the number of soldiers steadily declined throughout the rest of the war. There were about 113,000 men left in Alaska in December, 1943, and one year later there were only 50,000. The troop reductions which characterized Alaska after the summer of 1943 were symbolized by the establishment of APO 981 in September 1942. This APO served the Juneau Sub-Port of Embarkation, a personnel handling facility for shipment of men to other parts of the world. (see fig. 40)



fig. 40

Other World War II Military Installations in Alaska

The later months of 1942 saw the development of many other military posts in Alaska. There were inland troop concentrations, such as Big Delta (APO 972) and Nenana (APO 725); coastal bases such as Excursion Inlet (APO 727 & APO 984) and Moses Point (APO 979); and special function installations such as the Alaska Communication System post at Tanacross (APO 477). All of the APOs established in Alaska during the war are listed in tabular form below in numerical order. Approximate dates of establishment and closure are given where known, and the APOs are keyed to figures illustrating postmark types in this study. Figures 41 through 44 illustrate some additional postmarks from APOs not already discussed.



fig. 41



fig. 42



fig. 43

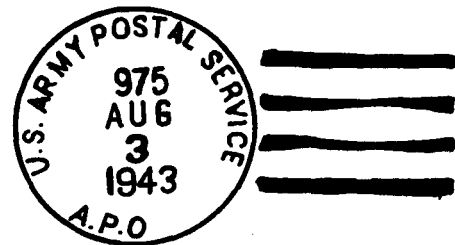


fig. 44

Summary

World War II brought large scale construction of military facilities in Alaska. Although the period of actual combat was restricted geographically to the western Aleutians, and limited to a few months in 1942, the military occupation of Alaska continued in force throughout the war, and, in fact, represents an extremely important part of the Alaskan economy today. The collecting and research of military postmarks from Alaska during the war is a challenging field and rich in interest for those interested in either military, Alaskan or territorial postal history.

WORLD WAR II APOS IN ALASKA

APO No.	Location	(Operating Dates)	figure
477	Tanacross	(February 19, 1943 - May 15, 1946)	41
725	Nenana	(November 1942 - October 1945)	-
726	Massacre Bay, Attu Island	(May 15, 1943 - January 1948)	34-36
727	Excursion Inlet	(June 11, 1943 - June 15, 1944)	42
729	Shemya Island	(June 10, 1943 -	37-38
730	Kiska Island	(August 3, 1943 - October 1945)	39
732	Nome	(May 1943 -	-
935	Annette Island	(May 26, 1942 -	16
936	Chilkoot Barracks, Haines	(April 25, 1942 - June 30, 1945)	26
937	Fort Greely, Kodiak Island	(June 23, 1942 - May 15, 1946)	20
938	Ladd Field, Fairbanks	(April 1942 -	17-18
939	Fort Mears, Dutch Harbor	(April 17, 1942 -	21-22
940	Fort Ray, Sitka	(May 26, 1942 -	23
941	Fort Raymond, Seward	(May 21, 1942 - October 1945)	27
942	Fort Richardson, Anchorage	(April 14, 1942 -	12-14
943	Yakutat	(April 1942 -	-
944	Fort Randall, Cold Bay	(June 30, 1942 -	28
945	Cordova	(April 1942 - October 1945)	-
947	Fort Spencer, Nome	(April 25, 1942 - February 1944)	29
948	Fort Glenn, Umnak Island	(May 16, 1942 -	24-25
949	Fort Morrow, Port Heiden	(April 1942 -	-
972	Big Delta	(August 16, 1942 - May 15, 1946)	43
973	Galena	(July 1942 - February 1944)	-
974	Lazy Bay	(August 1942 -	-
975	Naknek	(July 29, 1942 - May 15, 1946)	44
976	Northway	(July 1942 - February 1944)	-
977	Valdez	(July 1942 - October 1945)	-
978	Tulik	(July 1942 - October 1945)	-
979	Moses Point	(July 1942 - October 1945)	-
980	Adak Island	(August 3, 1942 - February 1947)	30-31
981	Juneau Sub-Port of Embarkation	(September 1942 - May 15, 1946)	40
982	Saint Paul Island	(August 1942 - October 1945)	-
983	Atka Island	(October 1942 - May 15, 1946)	32
984	Excursion Inlet	(August 1942 - October 1945)	-
985	Skagway	(August 1942 - October 1945)	-
986	Amchitka Island	(August 1942 -	33
987	Whittier	(August 1942 -	-
989	Fox	(June 1942 - February 1944)	-

Note: Where only the month and year are given the date refers to the earliest issue of the Postal Guide listing the establishment or closure of the facility.

## VIRGINIA CITY: QUEEN OF THE COMSTOCK

By Richard Ore

Virginia City was born during the spring of 1858 in the Sierra Nevada foothills at the far western edge of what was then Utah Territory. Peter O'Riley, Patrick McLaughlin and Henry Comstock were primarily responsible for the discovery of the rich vein of gold and silver which breathed life into the new community. Word of the find spread rapidly to the mining camps of nearby Nevada County, California, and by the summer of 1859 hundreds of miners had made the trip eastward through the Sierra passes to try the new "Comstock diggings."

The camp sprung up in a random fashion around the original find, known as the Ophir Mine. Many different names were applied to the camp itself, but in November 1859, it was decided to call it Virginia City. Selection of this name is attributed to a story about James "Old Virginny" Finney, one of the more colorful residents of the camp. It seems that "Old Virginny" was out on a drunk one night with the boys, when he fell and broke his bottle. As he picked himself up from the dirt he said, "I baptize this ground Virginia." And so it came to be.

On December 3, 1859, S. McFadden was appointed the first postmaster of Virginia City, Utah Territory. The winter of 1859-60 caught the new community with few substantial buildings. Most of the miners lived in shanties or tents, which offered slight protection from the rigors of a Nevada winter. In fact, many miners had re-crossed the mountains in the fall so they could spend the winter in California. Winter was exceptionally severe that year. Snows fell to a depth of 5 or 6 feet. Travel became difficult, if not impossible, and many of the horses and cattle died of starvation. Food was rationed among the miners.

The nature of mining in the Comstock deserves special note. There were some placer gold deposits, but for the most part the wealth of the region was silver, and it could only be released through quartz mining. Quartz mining required extensive capital and knowledge of mining technology. Most of the early miners were placer miners. Their experience was in the use of rockers and sluices on the streams of California's Mother Lode. They lacked both the capital and the technical knowledge for quartz mining. The result was predictable. Comstock, O'Riley, McLaughlin, and the other original miners sold out to California financiers such as George Hearst and Judge Walsh.<sup>1</sup>

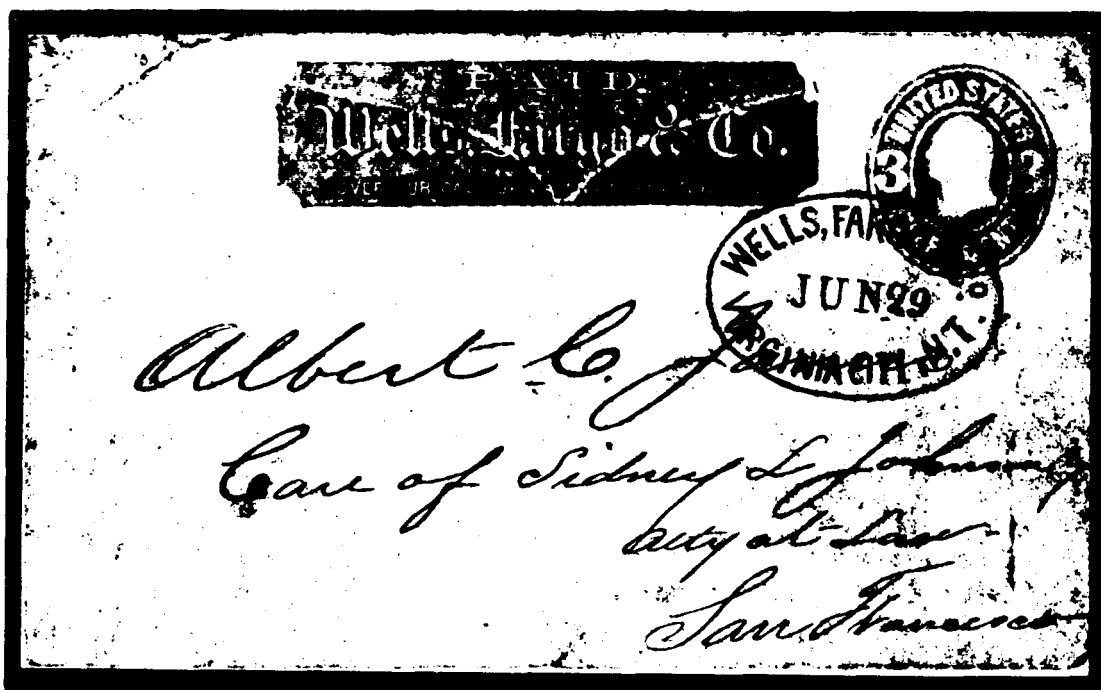
With the arrival of substantial capital from California, Virginia City was transformed from a rough camp into a solid town. New buildings were constructed along the three major streets, named A, B and C, which ran for a mile along the Comstock Lode. It is said that 10,000 people came to Virginia City in 1860 and 1861.

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<sup>1</sup>It is sad to relate that Comstock, O'Riley and McLaughlin all died in poverty.



Trade and services in the new town began modestly. In March 1860, several wagons loaded with food, drink, blankets, and other supplies were brought in to meet the growing demands of newcomers. A large tent was erected to serve as a combination saloon and dormitory. Virginia City had a new postmaster when Isaac B. Wallard received his appointment on May 5th. Through the spring and early summer, new shop-keepers, saloon proprietors, craftsmen, and professionals of various kinds arrived in the bustling town. By late summer the miners were drinking their liquor off mahogany bars. The stage and freighting companies worked hard to improve the roads into the Comstock from Placerville and Nevada City in California. Better road transportation was critical both for getting supplies in and getting ore out of Virginia City. As the winter of 1860-61 arrived, Virginia City could claim an impressive business district which included: 2 quartz mills, 8 hotels, 9 restaurants, 10 livery stables, 38 saloons, 25 stores, several blacksmith shops, offices, warehouses, and scattered private residences.



A Cover Carried by the Wells Fargo Express from Virginia City, Nevada Territory to San Francisco about 1863. (cancel strengthened)

Virginia City and the Comstock weathered another rough winter in 1860-1861. That winter featured financial overspeculation, a violent blizzard, and a flood, but the arrival of spring once again brought happy times. On March 2, 1861, the United States Congress created Nevada Territory, and Virginia City became the commercial and cultural hub of its own empire.

The first boom lasted throughout 1861, 1862 and 1863. There were some serious mine disasters and a dreadful fire which consumed half of the business district in 1863, but, in general, these were prosperous years for the Comstock. On October 31, 1863, Nevada was admitted to the Union.

In 1864 the first boom ended. The great Comstock mines began, one by one, to close. They had exhausted the visible ore reserves, and their closing brought a depression and the first of Virginia City's busts.

Many citizens packed their belongings and left. Others stayed on to try to eek out a living, but by 1869 Virginia City was a mere skeleton of her former self. William Sharon and Adolph Sutro were two individuals who believed in the future of the Comstock. Working at odds with each other, they succeeded in renewing an interest in Comstock mining activity which precipitated Virginia City's second boom.

The second boom began in 1870, and reached its peak 5 years later with the discovery of the Big Bonanza Mine. Big Bonanza was a vein of silver 54 feet wide, which eventually produced some \$190 million for its owners. Life returned to Virginia City bigger and brighter than ever before. The business district sported a wide range of new establishments and counted, at its peak, 50 dry goods stores, 18 barbers, 150 saloons and "red lights", 20 laundries, 4 banks, 8 dairies, 2 pawn shops, 20 insurance agents, and 35 doctors. In 1878, the year before the bottom fell out, Virginia City boasted 6 churches.

Early in 1878, it became apparent that the rich veins were becoming exhausted. During the boom years, mining stocks had once again become badly over-specified. The result was a financial panic in January 1877, when rumors of the depletion were first circulated. By 1878, the rumors had become reality, and, by July of that year, Virginia City had begun its second decline. The road down was very steep. In 1880 the town's population was drastically reduced from its peak of about 30,000, and the mills were silent and shuttered. The 1890 Census listed 8,511 inhabitants of Virginia City. Decline continued through the early decades of the 20th century, but with the advent of increased travel by private auto Virginia City has witnessed a third boom of sorts. The heart of this boom lies not in the minerals of the Comstock, but in the living history preserved in the sites and stories and structures of the old mining town.

#### POSTMASTERS OF VIRGINIA CITY TO 1930:

S. McFadden, December 3, 1859  
Isaac B. Wallard, May 5, 1860  
Lyman B. Roe, June 19, 1861  
John Church, September 13, 1863  
Charles C. Warner, March 23, 1865  
David O. Adkison, April 5, 1869  
Miles Goodman, March 30, 1886  
John S. Orndorff, July 29, 1890  
Nora Webber, August 2, 1894  
Amelia E. Roth, March 1, 1901  
T. W. O'Connor, July 18, 1912  
Michael E. Nevin, June 27, 1916  
Katie O'Connor, January 14, 1925

SUBJECT INDEX FOR LA POSTA VOLS. I & II

ALASKA:

Akulurak, letters describing mail service from, (II,2), p.1-3  
Cape Fanshaw, history of post office, (II,6), p. 13  
Dog Team Mail, routes mentioned, (II,4), p.7  
Four Bar Cancels of 1950 classified, (II,1), p.3-11  
Rural Branches and Stations now operating, (I,4), p.4 & 16

ARIZONA:

Cochise County, post offices and history, (II,2), p.8-19  
Pah-Ute County, history and postal history of the "lost" county, (I,4),  
p.5-15

COLORADO:

First post office in, (II,5), p.2-4  
Post Office name changes, 1859-1969, (II,3), p.1-19

DAKOTA TERRITORY:

Black Hills Mining Camps, pre-post office history, (II,4), p.10-16  
Black Hills Mining Camps, territorial post offices in, (II,6), p.14-18

MAPS:

Arizona, Cochise County post offices, (II,2), p. 17  
Arizona-Nevada border changes, 1864-1964, (I,4), p.12  
Arizona, Pah-Ute County, 1865-1871, (I,4), p.7  
Arizona Territory boundaries, 1860-1863, (II, 6), p.3  
Central Overland Express Route, (II,5), p.21  
Colorado, 1880, (I,3), p.16; (II,3),p.19  
Dakota Territory, Black Hills in 1875, (II,4), p.12  
Dakota Territory, Black Hills in 1890, (II,6),p.15  
New Mexico, Dona Ana County, 1852-1860, (II,4),p.3  
New Mexico, Dona Ana County in the 1860's, (II,6), p.9  
New Mexico, Lincoln County: 1880, (I,5),p.16  
New Mexico, Lincoln County discontinued post offices, (I,3),p.12  
New Mexico, Railway Mail Routes, 1890, (II,2), p.7  
New Mexico Territory, south-central portion, 1875, (I,2),p.2  
Oregon, Crook County 1892, (I,6),p.11  
Oregon, Union County post offices, (II,5), p.15  
Oregon, Wallowa County post offices, (I,5), p.8  
Utah and New Mexico in 1855, (I,2), p.9

MONTANA:

Dillon, postal history of, (I,6), p.1-2

NEVADA:

Early Mail Routes, history of, (II,5), p.18-24

NEW MEXICO:

Dona Ana County, postal history of, (II,4),p.2-6; (II,6),p.2-11  
Fort Cummings, postmarks and postal history of, (I,6), p.4-7

NEW MEXICO: (cont.)

Fort Stanton, postal history and postmarks of, (I,2),p.1-4  
Lincoln County Centennial, (I,3), p.1  
Lincoln County, discontinued post offices of, (I,3),p.2-12  
Lincoln County War, postal history of, (I,5), p.11-16  
Post Offices, Postmasters and Salaries in 1856, (I,2),p.7-8  
Railroad Post Offices, operating during the 1880's, (II,2),p.4-7  
Railroad Post Offices, postmarks of, (II,4),p.8-9; (II)p.12  
Rough and Ready, history of, (I,4),p.3  
San Juan County, postal history of, (I,2),p.5-6; (I,4),p.1-2;(I,5),  
p.17; (II,5),p.16-17  
Sulphur Springs, petition for a post office at, (II,1),p.12-13

OREGON:

Crook County, 19th century post offices of, (I,6),p.8-15  
Forest Grove, postal history of, (II,4),p.17-19  
Santeam City, O.T., postmark discovered from, (II,1),p.1-2  
Union County, 19th century post offices of, (II,5),p.5-15  
Wallowa County, 19th century post offices of, (I,5),p.1-8

RESEARCH TECHNIQUES:

Literature Search, sources for, (I,2),p.10-11  
Records and Documents of the U.S. Government, (I,3),p.13-15; (I,5),  
p.17-19

UTAH:

Post Offices, Postmaster & Salaries 1856, (I,2),p.9

WASHINGTON:

Rural Stations and Branches, information needed on, (II,1),p.2

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

The above index to Volumes I & II of La Posta is offered in response to a number of requests from new member, and with the hope that it may provide some assistance to all. It also serves to high-light the areas of emphasis and neglect in postal history writings on our pages. Conspicuous by their absense are articles dealing with the postal history of Idaho, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Other states have also been slighted. Your editor has prepared a comprehensive listing of all Wyoming territorial post offices which will be featured in the next issue of La Posta. What about some of you who collect Idaho and Washington, or Montana, or Arizona??

We are off to our third year, and running late. The next issue will follow this by only a few weeks. In order to avoid this kind of delay, or worse, for next year, let us really try to build membership to over 100 in 1971. If everyone of us can enlist just one additional person, we will reach 100. Please DO try....A subscription of \$5 per year is not a great hardship.

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