

Little America, Antarctica, Post Office

America's first Post Office in Antarctica was officially established on October 6, 1933. The Post Office went with Admiral Richard E. Byrd and his crew when they left Norfolk, Virginia, for the Little America base camp, located on the Ross Ice Shelf, Antarctica.

This expedition was Byrd's second of five to the Antarctic and the only one to have a Post Office. The Post Office itself was part of a philatelic project supported by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, an avid stamp collector. In a conversation between Admiral Byrd and President Roosevelt, the President mentioned that it would be nice if stamp collectors around the world could have a commemorative cancellation from a United States Post Office set up at the Little America camp in Antarctica during Byrd's upcoming expedition . . . and it would be nice if there was a special postage stamp for use only on Little America mail. President Roosevelt himself suggested the stamp design, a striking vertical, navy blue and white stamp that featured a large globe showing several Byrd flights, including those proposed for this expedition.

The 3-cent Byrd Antarctic Expedition II commemorative stamp was issued October 9, 1933. It was intended solely for philatelic use on mail sent to Little America. To offset the cost of transportation, which could only be provided by the expedition, a 50-cent surcharge was added to the price of the stamp. The cost did not discourage sales, however, as an estimated 240,000 letters went through the Little America Post Office.

Much of the mail set sail with the expedition in October 1933. Another large batch went by regular steamer to Dunedin, New Zealand, where it caught up with the expedition before it left for Little America. Mail continued to be forwarded to Dunedin until approximately November 1, 1934, the latest date it could reach the relief ship before its departure for Little America.

Dr. John Oliver LaGorce, vice president of the National Geographic Society, was appointed honorary postmaster of the Little America Post Office. Assistant Postmaster Leroy Clarke, a member of the Byrd expedition, was in charge of actual postal operations. As it turned out, the job proved to be too much for Clarke, and the expedition had to turn to the Post Office Department for help.

The Post Office Department sent Charles F. Anderson, a 43-year postal veteran and "traveling mechanic" who specialized in canceling first-day covers. Anderson set off on November 7, 1934, and arrived at Little America the following January, along with an additional 40,000 letters, canceling machines, assorted postmarking stamps, inks, glues, and a large supply of indelible pencils, in case the inks froze. Then, in one continuous stretch from January 19 through February 4, 1935, Anderson canceled most of the covers that had arrived with Clarke a year earlier and all those he had brought as well. Anderson and the mail returned with the expedition in March 1935. The post office was officially discontinued on May 31, 1935.

The Little America Post Office is long gone and communications now reach the Antarctic much faster than by steamship. However, weather still remains a factor in getting mail to and from the crews of scientific expeditions stationed in the Antarctic, for whom the mail is still a very important link to home. For example, on Christmas Eve 2003, a C-130 transport plane carrying cargo and mail was turned back from the United States research facility at McMurdo Station, Antarctica, because of extreme weather. A lot of people were disappointed. The same plane made it back in the wee hours of Christmas Day. The postal-contract employees at the McMurdo contract post office were



Admiral Byrd was one of the few living Americans honored with a commemorative stamp. The 50-cent surcharge added to the cost of the stamp helped fund his expedition.



Charles Anderson canceling the mail at the Little America Post Office, 1935.

supposed to have the day off like everyone else, but they went to the post office, sorted 7,000 pounds of letters and packages, and opened up long enough for everyone to collect their mail. As an employee working at McMurdo wrote, "A lot of time when you get any mail here it is like getting a present, and when they opened the Post Office for package and mail pick up on Christmas it really was something special."

For further information on Antarctic postal history, visit the Antarctic Philatelic Home Page at www.south-pole.com.

