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.



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.

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 mechanician" 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 have. For example, on Obsistance Five 2003, a C 130 trans

POST OFFICE A

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

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

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.

BYRD ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION II

OFFICE IN BUILDING 39 STOREROOM IN BUILDING 79 TELEPHONE: CHARLESTOWN 1400—EXT. 142

ADDRESS:

BYRD ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION II

U. S. NAVY YARD

BOSTON, MASS.

Suite 587-89, The Waldorf-Astoria, New York, September 30,1933.

IN REPLY PLEASE GIVE DATE
OF OUR LETTER

Mr. Clinton L. Eilenberger, Third Assistant Postmaster General, United States Post Office, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr, Eilenberger:

In regard to the appointment of a Postmaster (Honorary) for Little America Post Office, I am pleased to advise you that Mr. John La Gorce, of the National Geographic Society, has accepted Admiral Byrd's invitation to act in this capacity.

You can get Mr.La Gorce's full name and title from their office in Washington. Please permit me to suggest that you have your Publicity man go and get as interesting a story on Mr. La Gorce as possible.

The man who will actually do the work on the expedition is Leroy Clarke. Would he have to officially appointed and sworn in? His address is Byrd Antarctic Expedition II, United States Navy Yard, Boston, Mass.

I want to thank you again for the marvelous reception you accorded us yesterday. It was really an unusually pleasant experience.

With kindest personal regards,

Very sincerely yours,

R. E. Byrd, Commanding
Byrd Antarctic Expedition II.

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Letter from Admiral Byrd advising the Post Office Department that John La Gorce has accepted invitation to be honorary postmaster of Little America Post Office, with actual work to be performed by Leroy Clarke.