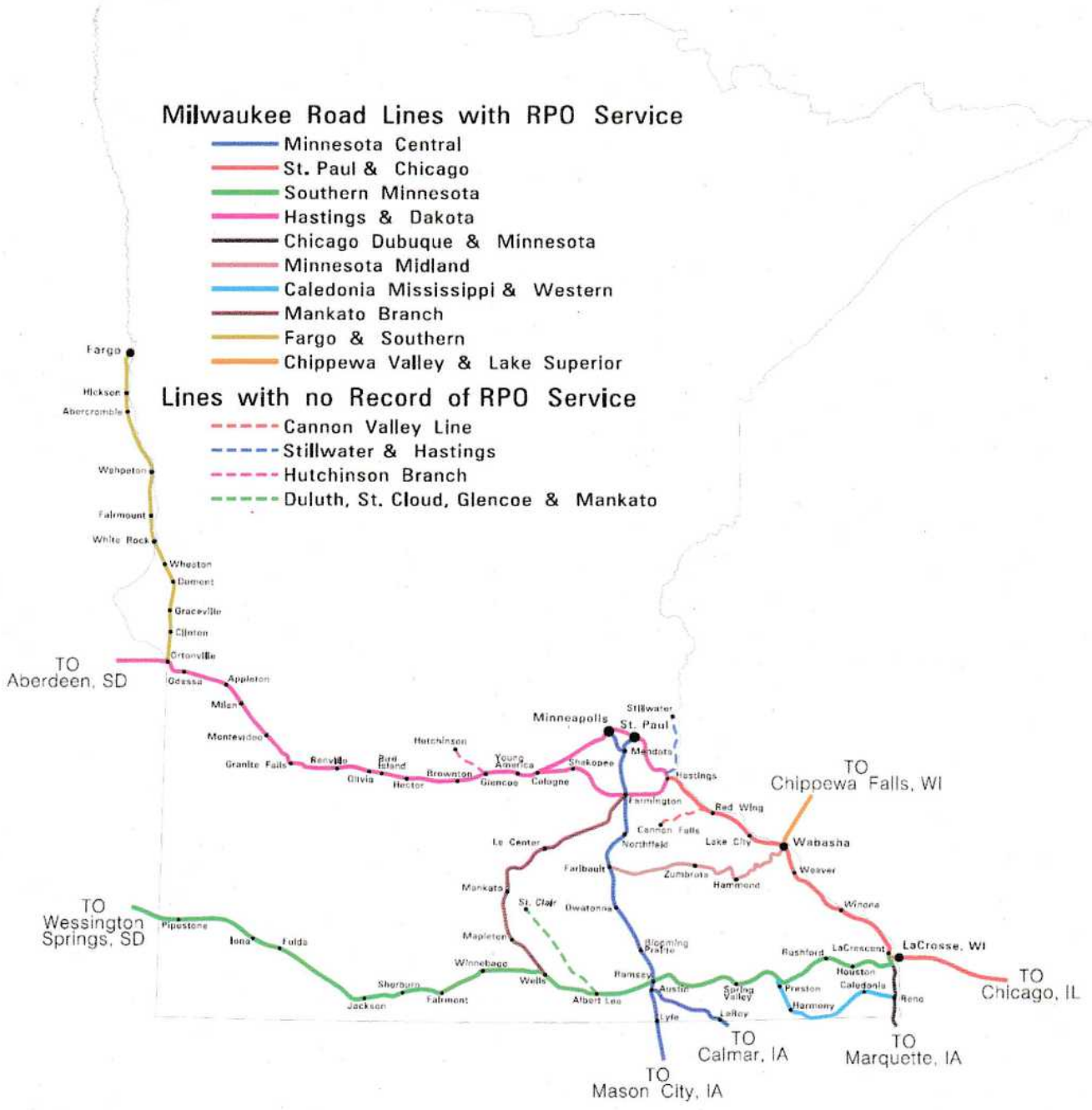


MILWAUKEE ROAD RAILWAY POST OFFICE SERVICE IN MINNESOTA

The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad, commonly known as the "Milwaukee Road," built and operated several railroad lines in Minnesota dating back to the late 1850s. Most of these lines carried passenger trains which included Railway Post Office (RPO) cars as part of their consist. This exhibit presents the RPO history of the major Milwaukee Road lines in Minnesota and displays RPO markings from each.



GUIDE TO RPO HISTORY TABLES:

RPO or AGT Route designation
Route shown in this exhibit
Route shown with previously unknown examples
Route with no known examples
Route from different railroad

SYNOPSIS

Milwaukee Road Railway Post Office Service in Minnesota

PURPOSE AND SCOPE:

The purpose of this exhibit is to present the history of Railway Post Office (RPO) service on Milwaukee Road lines in Minnesota. This is done primarily through covers that display the various RPO postmarks from these lines, supplemented by maps, brief histories and RPO "family trees" that show how the designations on each line changed over the years. The scope of these markings ranges from the 1870s, when route agents picked up, escorted and delivered bundles of mail to post offices along the route, to the full RPO cars that sorted and processed mail *en route* and which were eventually discontinued on the Milwaukee Road in 1970.

BACKGROUND:

The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad ("Milwaukee Road") was a midwestern Class 1 railroad, headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It eventually grew to serve 12 states, including a transcontinental line that extended to Seattle and Tacoma, Washington. Its many innovations included high-speed locomotives and passenger cars that were designed and built in their own Milwaukee shops, as well as their 1909 Pacific extension. The latter included 645 miles of electrified trackage in Montana, Idaho and Washington, a costly but efficient method for moving tonnage and passengers over the mountains.

The Milwaukee Road was a major carrier in Minnesota with 14 main and secondary lines in the state. Like most railroads, the Milwaukee Road had a contract with the U.S. Post Office to sort and deliver mail in Railway Post Office (RPO) cars. Of the 14 lines in Minnesota, 10 carried passenger trains with RPO service.

TREATMENT AND ORGANIZATION:

The title page of this exhibit presents a map of Minnesota with the various Milwaukee Road lines shown in different colors. There are 10 chapters following the map, each devoted to one of the lines that had RPO service.

Each chapter presents a detailed map of one particular line, a brief description of the line and its history, and a "family tree" showing the designations of the Route Agent and RPO markings as they changed over the years from initial establishment to final discontinuance. Several covers from the line are then presented in roughly chronological order. Each cover has a brief description stating where and when the piece was carried, along with any special significance. For the most part, I've tried to show covers that were actually carried in the state of Minnesota.

IMPORTANCE:

In the United States, before there was a reliable network of roads and long before airplanes, the railroads were the only effective means of moving people and goods across the country. Contracting with the railroads, the Railway Mail Service was the primary means of distributing mail in the United States from its inception in 1864 until final discontinuance in 1977. The importance of this service in the development of the United States, especially with the growth of the industrial age and rapid westward expansion, cannot be overstated. This exhibit presents one small slice of the vast network of railway post offices that helped to build this nation.

KNOWLEDGE, STUDY AND RESEARCH:

As an amateur railroad historian with an interest in midwestern roads, along with a prior interest in philately, the study of RPOs and their postmarks is a natural combination of these two subjects for me. I have been a member of the Mobile Post Office Society (MPOS) and several regional railroad historical societies for over 40 years. Much of my research on Milwaukee Road RPO service in Minnesota was through publications of the MPOS, as noted in the "References" section below.

CHALLENGE:

RPO postmarks are relatively scarce when compared to other forms of postal history. Although the bulk of mail in the U.S. was handled and sorted by the clerks working in the RPO cars, most pieces of mail received postmarks at their originating post offices. Letters that were picked up at station platform mailboxes, handed to RPO clerks at station stops, or were found to be missing postmarks during the sorting process received RPO postmarks which showed the route, date and train number or direction. As a result, a tiny fraction of postal history bears these markings.

Many of the more common RPO markings can be found on postcards produced during the "Golden Age" of the early 1900s. Antique shops and postcard shows are a good source for these, but since the RPO markings are so scarce, and very few postcard dealers sort them separately, one can spend many hours searching through postcard boxes looking for these elusive markings. Earlier material, especially 19th century postmarks, can be found through postal history auctions and dealers. eBay has also become a good source for these covers.

For some of the earlier route designations that lasted only a short time, particularly on smaller branch lines, RPO markings have never been found, although this exhibit contains a few covers that were previously unreported. It is also possible that postmarking hammers for the new routes were never made, and clerks continued using the old hammers after the change.

VALUATION:

Like most postal history, the values of the covers are highly dependent on the age and duration of the marking, as well as the overall condition of the piece. The MPOS catalogs assign a subjective value to the various markings, ranging from 1 (most common) to 10 (one of a kind). Most of the pieces presented here have valuations of 1-3 along with a few 4-6 ratings, mostly on 19th century material.

OTHER NOTES:

The Mobile Post Office Society publications have assigned catalog numbers to all known RPO postmarks. To keep this exhibit focused on the operation and evolution of RPO service on the Milwaukee Road, and to avoid cluttering it with minutia, I have not listed these catalog numbers in the exhibit.

EXHIBIT HISTORY:

This exhibit was previously submitted to the NOJEX show in October 2018 and the Minnesota Stamp Expo in July 2019. It has been greatly expanded since then, due to acquisition of new material. It now takes up 5 frames instead of the original 3.

REFERENCES:

The Mobile Post Office Society (APS affiliate 64) has produced many catalogs and reference works that are invaluable for the study and collection of RPO markings. MPOS and other publications used in the preparation of this exhibit are:

John Kay, "Directory of Railway Post Offices," MPOS, 1997.

John Kay, "Directory of U.S. Route Agent Lines," MPOS, 2000

John Kay & Fred MacDonald, "Mail Travel Guide: State Guide to Agent and RPO Routes," MPOS, published serially 1992-2007

Will Keller, "United States Highway Post Office Catalog," MPOS, 1987.

John Luecke, "Dreams, Disasters and Demise: The Milwaukee Road in Minnesota," Grenadier Publications, 1988.

"The Milwaukee Railroader," quarterly journal of the Milwaukee Road Historical Association, various issues.

Minneapolis City Directory, various years. Searchable via <https://ama.nmtvault.com/>

Frank Scheer, curator of the Railway Mail Service Library in Boyce, VA, personal correspondence.

William Schwietz, "Minnesota Railroads," Northstar Chapter NRHS, 1985.

Charles Towle & Fred MacDonald, "The United States Railway Post Office Postmark Catalog, 1864 to 1977," Volumes I – IV, MPOS, 2001.

Charles Towle, "U.S. Route and Station Agent Postmarks," MPOS, 1986

U.S. Post Office Department, "Daily Postal Bulletin," various dates. Many of these have been digitized and are in a searchable database at <http://www.uspostalbulletins.com/>.