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Wayne Fuller

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Dr. Wayne Fuller
INTERVIEWER: _____
PROJECT: Speech
DATE OF INTERVIEW: December 12, 1969
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Professor of History at UTEP.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Speech made to the Westerners Club on the history of the U. S. Postal Service during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Speech by Dr. Wayne Fuller to the Westerners Club on December 12, 1969.

It occurs to me that this is a very poor time to talk about postal history or about the post office if you are angry at the post office because you've been waiting in long lines, and all of you know that the last letter you mailed didn't get there and the package won't be there till after Christmas. So I know it's a bad time to talk about the mail. But then I find that almost any time is a bad time to talk about the mail. And if you think that you're in a class by yourselves, it might be of some interest to you to know that I find almost continually to the Nineteenth Century that people were always complaining about the mails. I don't know why that is exactly. It's something like the women. I think people know a good bit about the mails and they always know somebody who didn't get a letter who lives down the street, and they can always complain. In a way I think it's good therapy, however; if the mail service hasn't done much else, it has at least let people work off a good bit of steam. Nevertheless, the mails are in the news a good bit now and some of you may have noticed LIFE magazine, a couple of weeks ago, had a fairly long article on the mail and what we were going to do with the post office. Everybody wondered what we were going to do with the post office and the President set up a commission, you know, to find out; and nothing has happened. I doubt that anything will happen. But the LIFE article was rather interesting; I didn't like it much, because all it talked about was how long it took a letter to go from New York to San Rafael, California or some place, and that's odd. It's a peculiarity I've noticed in the mail from Herodotus' time on down to our own: People will wait for weeks before they write a letter; it isn't too important. But the minute they put it in a mail box, they want it to go with all possible speed, when really it doesn't often matter whether it gets there the next day or maybe a week. Now, in some cases, of course, it is important. There's something psychological, I suppose, about the mail that makes people want to get their letters

there in a hurry. We had a big argument in our family (my wife and I did) about this problem, but I maintain that it really doesn't make much difference most of the time; but I lost the argument. Everybody who depends on the post office is going to lose an argument. One of the things, as Bert said (and I'm sort of a defender of the post office), that I think is true is this: You have to decide what you want the post office to do. Traditionally, from the very beginning of our post office, it's always been used for a variety of things. I'm just now engaged in writing a book for the Chicago University Press on this whole problem of the postal service, mainly during the Nineteenth Century. One of the chapters I've written already, and it's been looked at by the editors, so I think I can talk about it. And that's what I want to talk about tonight--this chapter which I call "A Bond of Union." This is one of the things the post office was supposed to be, a bond of union. In order to appreciate this, you have to appreciate what the United States was like in 1789 when the Constitution first went into effect. In that year there were 75 post offices and they were spread out all along the east coast from Maine down to Savannah, 2500 miles. That's all the miles of post road we had and that's all the post offices. None of them went any farther west than Pittsburgh and most of the territories; Tennessee, then a territory, and Kentucky had no mail service at all. When the nation began, there was a theory among many people, and even George Washington held to it; but all literate people who thought much about it wondered and speculated whether or not 13 states could really hold together in a union. The idea of the theory was, and I think that they got this from the French philosopher, Montesquieu, that a republic could not extend over such a vast territory as the United States possessed. It simply was impossible, it had never been done. There was a theory that there would be too many interests and that it would all break down, and that there was no way to hold it together. One thing that gave them some reason to believe this was the poor communication--

75 post offices, 2500 miles of post road. And 10 years later, 1798, they still didn't have much better communication. By then they had over 500 post offices and they had some 5000 or so post roads. In 1798 it took 40 days to send mail from Portland, Maine, down to Savannah, Georgia, and get it back again. It took 32 days to go from Philadelphia to Lexington, Kentucky, and back, and it took 40 days to go from Philadelphia to Nashville, Tennessee, and back. Acutally, somebody did some statistics on this and decided that it was really closer in point of time to send one from Philadelphia to London than it was to send one from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. The point is that the country was bad; and if people speculated that really you couldn't have a republic extending over such a wide territory, and republics were new in that time anyway, you can understand how they were feeling about this. And you can also understand why time after time, whenever they debated the postal service in Congress, they always talked about it as a bond of union; that is, the postal service was the thing that was going to hold this little republic (or this big republic) together--13 individual, what had been sovereign countries, really all banded together now under a constitution nobody knew would work and many people felt wouldn't. And here we've got a post office and that's the job they assigned it, to hold it together. It did a pretty good job from the earliest day in 1792 when they first passed the major Postal Bill. From that time on, the network of post roads and post offices spread rapidly, and it's been hardly on the argument that it's going to be a bond of union. It's terribly expensive, though it was paying its way for the most part. By 1830 there were over 8000 post offices and there were roughly 100,000 miles of post roads. So you can see that it was, at least insofar as its mechanism was concerned, holding the union together. But there were some subtle ways it was holding the union together, and this is what I've been basically interested in. First of all, if you lived out in the wilderness, in order to get a post road and a mailman

to come by your house, you had to apply to Congress. Now, in this day that was something, because you had to petition Congress, and some of the earliest petitions we have are those that came from pioneers back to Congress to demand a post road. Their congressmen took it up and presented it to Congress, and rarely did they fail. But the point was that the people in a widely separated community had to look to the national government; they had to look to Washington. Now, they didn't have to look to Washington for many things, and that was one of the difficulties. That's why, you see, they could be states' rights conscious. Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury, had wanted to create a huge national debt; and he did, mainly, to get people to look to the national government to pay that debt so that this would hold the union together. They did the same thing with the post office. From that time on, every time they wanted a post road, they looked to this national government. This helped to strengthen the national government, and in that way it was a bond of union. Also, there were some other peculiar things. The post office was a kind of symbol of the United States, and the mail carrier was also a symbol of the United States. Now, this comes as a shock to you, living in modern America, but in the Nineteenth Century, Americans rarely saw their government--that is, their national government. There were no tax collectors--you didn't have any income taxes until 1913--and the revenue agent you rarely saw. The only person you really saw who was representative of the national government in these little communities scattered all through the United States was the mail carrier. My thesis here is that this very symbol of the United States--the post office--had much to do with holding the union together. Another interesting thing was that Americans learned very quickly that money spent in one part of the United States was going to have to be used in another part of the United States in order to keep the postal system going. There were some mail routes that always paid their way; that is, they always got enough letters and newspapers to pay more

than it cost to send these letters through the mails. But there were many places in the United States where it didn't pay its way. So the national government simply took this money that it got from these paying routes and put it where the routes didn't pay, and so continued to get the mail going. Many people didn't like this. This is one of the first indications of sectionalism in the post office. For example, there was a debate about 1813 or so in which a Pennsylvania Congressman was complaining because the Southerners again used these mail routes and they didn't pay their way. This taught them a lesson, anyway, that there are some areas that are backward and they have to be helped. And money taken from one part can be used in another part; it doesn't all have to be used in the state itself. Furthermore, by about 1830--and this will suggest, I think, how rapidly the mails were being used--up to 1830 there were perhaps fewer than one letter per each inhabitant of the United States. There were fewer letters going through than would amount to one per person. Between 1830 and 1850, the population doubled. In that time, the amount of mail--that is, the number of pieces of mail--was more than five times what it had been in 1830, so that for every man, woman, and child (and this included the slave population), by 1850 they were getting about three pieces of mail per person, which suggests this great exchange of information going on in the United States. And I would suggest that it would indicate that the mails were acting as a kind of bond of union. In this earlier period, there was another problem about the mails, and one could argue in this earlier period that the mails were really a cause of disunion rather than a bond of union.

It came about in this way: Mail is like the TV medium. The media have as their business sending newspapers through their mail or through city news. Now, this is fine as long as everybody agrees on the news coming through. But as we can see in our own time where we've got a controversy over the TV, and you may well imagine that in the early Nineteenth Century they were bound to have some

difficulty over the news that was going through the mail, particularly when you consider that half the nation was a slave section and half free. In 1831, a man named William Lloyd Garrison edited a newspaper. The first issue was called the Liberator, and in the first issue he said this: "I shall condemn for the immediate enfranchisement of the negro race. On this question I do not wish to think, to speak, or to write with moderation. I am earnest. I will not equivocate, I will not argue, and I will not retreat. And I will be heard." The Liberator now set off a chain of events that had a rather happy ending. As quickly as he began his anti-slavery crusade, a number of anti-slavery societies (at least two) were formed. These people now began to issue a great amount of propaganda, anti-slavery tracts. They put them in the mail and sent them down South. If you had been living in Charleston, South Carolina, and all of this stuff came down, what would you think? You'd be upset. And they were in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1835, a whole wagon load of this appeared in Charleston. A man who had formerly been a United States Senator named Haines went out and with a number of people from Charleston went into the post office, took that stuff out, and burned it. This was a first class crisis, because, after all, there was a law. You couldn't really burn United States mail, presumably. It happened that President Jackson was President and his Postmaster General was a man named Kendall. So what should they do about this? Kendall sympathized with the South and so did Jackson. They really didn't want to do anything about it though it was against the law, of course, to interrupt Uncle Sam's mail. In 1836, the very next year, Congress passed a law saying that it was illegal to disturb the mail. But that's one law that was never obeyed. From that time on, from 1836 on, the mails that carried any anti-slavery literature were simply excluded from the South. They set up their own censor board and they just threw this mail out. The North protested but it never did them any good. I claim that this established what I call a "Cotton

Curtain" between the whole new Ohio River. The South really never got any more anti-slavery literature. Now a peculiar thing happened, and that's this: From 1836 on, the South got a tremendous amount of new post roads and they got a great number of post offices. This was done at Northern expense because the Southern mails never paid for themselves. All of these new facilities they were getting in the South caused a great deal of circulation of mail, but it was Southern mail. Whenever newspapers traveled through the South, it was a Southern newspaper. The Southern Literary Messenger traveled through the South, but this is Southern opinion. What happened then was a peculiar thing which didn't make the mails much of a bond of union: Southern opinion was solidified. That is, Southerners just read their own stuff and they all began to think alike. And Northerners at the same time were reading their own stuff, an anti-slavery literature. As a matter of fact, John C. Calhoun said at one time that he really wasn't worried about the South, they'd take care of themselves. What worried him was the anti-slavery literature going through the Northern mail. But it went in great numbers. This was the situation, then, in the 1830s, and it lasted throughout the period up to the Civil War. In 1850, the United States had just gotten through with the Mexican War and California came in and a great debate occurred over what they were going to do with California, whether they were going to permit slaves in or not. The Union came very near to breaking up over this question. Finally they settled it by the Compromise of 1850. Immediately after that, 1851, there was a huge Postal Reform Bill. When you look through the debate on this reform bill, you find them frequently saying, "Use the mails as a bond of union." Again they come back to it. Immediately they poured a great number of post offices in the South, gave the South everything they could, as though this one thing could maybe save the Union. It didn't work out that way because in the latter part of the 1850s they got involved in a transcontinental route. The route that they

finally decided on, the overland mail, actually came through El Paso. It's the Butterfield Route. Behind that was a great story. Everybody knew that whenever that Butterfield Trail ran, or wherever that overland mail ran, a railroad would be sure to follow; so both Northerners and Southerners wanted it. Finally a man named Butterfield bid on the route. He bid to make the route come through New Mexico. After that, most of the cabinet members and the President, Buchanan, were oriented towards the South. A cabinet meeting was held. Out of it came a very strong persuasion on the part of the Postmaster General--a Southerner from Tennessee--to give Butterfield the route if he would move it down and go from St. Louis, Memphis down to Ft. Arkansas, and down around this way through El Paso. It was 900 miles longer and out of the way. But Southerners got it done mainly because they knew or felt that this would be the precursor of the railroad. This ended unhappily in a way. The next year, 1859, after the Butterfield began, the Northerners began to demand that they go back and live up to the contract, which in fact they hadn't, and put that mail route back up in the New Mexico area. They didn't do it immediately, but actually they did. That was the first time the bitterness was so great in a Congress at that time. That is the first and only time I know of where Congress adjourned without appropriating money for the post office. That's how badly the post office had divided the nation. As a matter of fact, there is one historian, a man named Doyle Nickleson, who said that the post office was not the least of the reasons for the beginning of the Civil War. The War came, and immediately, of course, the mails stopped in the South. One of the interesting things about the Confederate period is this: The Postmaster General, a man named Montgomery Blaire, Lincoln's postmaster, kept the mails going as long as he could, knowing that this was the only way they could communicate with the South and get them possibly to give up what they were doing. Finally the Southerners insisted they get out, and so they closed or suspended all the post offices

in the South, ended all the post roads, and so got out. One little interesting thing, and that's this: Northerners could not send their letters down to the South. Whenever mail came into the post office headed South, it ended up in a dead letter office. I calculated at one time about 100,000 letters ended up there. I don't know whether all of this communication would have helped solve the problem if they had been allowed to go through, but it might have.

Another interesting thing, and that's this: The Southerners set up their own post offices, and not much has been done on it. We don't know a great deal about it. A Texan was the Confederate Postmaster General. But one interesting thing about it, the Southerners had decided that the post office had never paid its way in the pre-war period, and that's about true. After 1845, it never paid its way and Southerners always wanted it to pay its way, although it was their area, really, that never did pay its way. In their Confederate constitution, they wrote under the postal section that the post office must pay its way. Reagan, who began the postal service, didn't know much about it, really, and as a matter of fact, what he did was to go to Washington and get all of the Southern boys out of the Washington post office--and there were a great number of them--and they took with them all of the forms that they had worked out over the years, and took them down to the South; and there he set up a little school and trained these people in how to conduct a post office. He is always given great credit for the post office he set up because it paid its way. But it didn't go anyplace. He set up these few routes and he couldn't, of course, extend them where they didn't pay for themselves; every route had to pay for itself. He couldn't extend them very far with mail being what it was in the South. Then when the Yankees came in and cut off many of the routes, by the end of the Civil War he didn't have a mail service, really.

That brings me to a few remarks about the post-Civil War period. When the

war was over, the mails were once again organized as a bond of union that would hold this Union together and restore the Union; and I think it did a pretty good job of this. In 1865, as quickly as the war ended, the Postmaster General sent inspectors down to the South and immediately they started up the old postal service. They said, "Open as many routes as you can and get it started." One can see something of the poverty, I think, of the South and what happened to the desolation in the Civil War. After one year's time, they had been able to open about 2,700 post offices out of the 9,000 that the South at one time had. It took them more than a decade, almost 13 years, before they were able to get back to the service they had had in 1860 when the war began. By 1880, they were well on the road to getting more service. By 1880 the Congress of the United States was divided. The Democrats got hold of the house. Since the Democrats were mainly Southerners, they began to pump money into the postal service in the South. In one decade they raised the number of post offices from about 11,000 to 19,000. They had more than 85,000 miles of post roads and they were rapidly developing the railway postal service at about 35,000 miles of this by 1880. They were extending the mails tremendously in the South; a great amount of mail was going through. I once made a calculation of just one Free Delivery office in the state of Georgia in 1891. In that one office, which wasn't a very large one at that, some 50 million pieces of mail flowed through there in one year, which suggests the flow now between the North and the South. When you consider that we were working on a national economy--that is, the old small economies centered around each community were breaking up; we were getting national products like Armour's Baking Powder and so forth--these things were being advertised in the South. And that's such a little thing, but it did help to pull the North and South together to remind Southerners that they were, after all, a part of the Union. Furthermore, in 1891, the Postmaster General ordered that the

American flag fly over the post offices. This was a period of great nationalism and the flag was flying everywhere. There was a great spirit of nationalism in the 1890s for some reason. I maintain that the flag flying over the post office helped in this bond of union.

In 1892, too, another thing occurred, and that was the people began to talk about delivering the mail free to the farmer, the RFD. The Southerners had been slow to make innovations. In Congress they did nothing much but talk about states rights, and this is true throughout the war. Indeed, of the two political parties in the 1880s and '90s, the Republican Party was much more flexible, much more willing to use the national government. After all, the Civil War had been fought, in a way, to strengthen the national government. The Democrats were still talking about states rights. But one thing they got excited about, and Southerners in particular, in 1893, was Rural Free Delivery of mail. A man named Tom Watson from Georgia, sometimes called the father of this--though there are a number of fathers, now--supported this, and most Southerners did. In 1896 it was tried as an experiment. Eventually, it was made a permanent part of the postal system in 1902. I maintain that nothing the United States government did in the post-Civil War period brought the South so close to the North as the Rural Free Delivery of mail. Every little farm road now became a post road. Over it went a mail carrier, and he's now the new symbol of the United States' presence in the South, and a mail box setting up alongside of the road. It's a little thing, but everybody who looked at it could say, "Well, there is the United States government." This was still the day when the United States government's presence was very rarely known in the South, or in the North, for that matter. The mails that now came into the Southern homes were out of all imagination of what people had thought a few years earlier. They could now take the daily paper for the first time, and they did. They could take magazines, and they took them. In this rather

prosaic way, the South was united back with the North. A book called The Road to Reunion never mentioned the mail service in the early 1900s, but it had a tendency to lure the South away from the states rights concept to the idea that maybe the national government could do some things for the South. One of the things it could do was build roads. Here is a peculiar thing. The United States government, according to the Constitution, has the right to establish post offices and post roads. But back in 1816, somebody said--Mr. Calhoun, a Southerner, as a matter of fact--"Why don't we take money from the national treasury and help the states build roads and canals?" A number of people, particularly President Madison, said, "No, it's unconstitutional. You can't do it," though it seemed that if you could build post offices, you could build roads. From 1816 to 1819, the federal government never did this. By 1860 they were thinking about it, however, because of Rural Free Delivery of mail. Every road over which a rural mailman ran was a post road. Now the Southerners were arguing, because they needed roads badly, that if the government can establish post offices--that means post roads, too -- the federal government ought to help the states build their local farm-to-market roads. Out of that came the Act of 1916, which put the federal government in the business of matching funds with states and buildings and repairing post roads or farm-to-market roads. Indicative of how far the Southerners had come was this interesting fact: On that Post Road Bill that was passed in 1916, only two Southerners out of the whole group in the Senate voted against it, and they were from Texas and New Jersey.