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In the year's-end rush to publish all the statistics for 1997 and be free to gather more for the coming year, a small blurb by the Commerce Department mentioned that the Postal Service dropped 37 percent in volume. Been so long ago, I don't remember the period of time, but I think it covered three years of decline. Federal Express and United Parcel had taken away a lot of the volume. Also, e-mail and fax machines must have cut deep into cancellations.

In the early 80s, I became a good customer by using postcards to contact my family and friends while on trips. Sitting around terminals and waiting in hotels, I dashed off cards before I forgot the subject at hand. Out at the ranch, I kept stamps and a book of cards on the kitchen table to cover the current scene.

At first only a few answered. Then I realized modern man no longer recognized personal mail. Tons of catalogues

and mountains of solicitations hit his box, but rarely does he ever receive more than a birthday card or a wedding invitation in the line of social contact.

A few became steady correspondents, especially the ones I met on trips. The cards to foreign countries required 90 cents' worth of postage; domestic rates reached 20 cents. Books of postcards ran 30 cents apiece for books of 30 cards. However, by writing on the blank side of the back and front covers, I was able to reduce my cost eight percent, or two cents a card, which was nowhere near the expense of long distance telephone rates before the recent price wars. Yet quite a number of my pen pals went back to the days of penny postcards, so I added reminders that the cards came post-paid to be reused as colorful book markers, or pictures for their grandkids' scrapbooks.

One fellow in the antique business in West Plains, Missouri wrote all the time off a stash of postcards his

grandfather bought in the days the family ran a big hardware store. He placed the stamp over the space saying: "Requires one cent postage." The Post Office in West Plains put an electronic tape over the bottom part and covered the last two sentences and his signature. His grandfather's taste ranged from such shots as the U.S. Cavalry in full review at Fort Bliss in El Paso on up to the roosting of the bats at the mouth of the Carlsbad Cavern and a wide-angle of the flag pole in front of the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City. I keep the cards, as old postcards showing church houses in Waco and two-lane highways lined with bluebonnets at Kerrville are already bringing 25 cents apiece in Austin. In another 10 years, I bet the ones of the highest hill at Clayton, Georgia and the tabernacle on River Street in Tulsa will be worth twice as much.

Not all of the correspondence started in the 80; a few go way back. For several of his terms of office in the State

Senate, I stayed in contact with an old friend, hoping he'd come across an appointment suitable to my talents, like, say, a rail and steamship director's position for inland commerce off the rail lines and far away from the coast and rivers. But he had learned to sidestep his needy friends through his previous experience working for the neediest group in the state, The Texas Sheep and Goat Herder's Association.

After his retirement, I continued writing him, but not with the same enthusiasm once held when he was among the most influential men in state government. I speak of the past when he was certainly the most effective leader agriculture ever fielded in Austin, not to overlook the feats he pulled off in the big carnival sideshow and multi-ring circus on the Potomac as a lobbyist for the Sheep and Goat Herders.

But last week at lunch, talking at a phrase per second, he suddenly said to the table: "My wife Sue has to read Monte's post cards, as I can't decipher his handwriting." What a break having a wife reading your material out loud. The Barrymores playing Shakespeare never gripped an audience the way a wife's voice commands the attention of her spouse. Works surer than the digital control on a TV set. I ignore all the stuff about whisperers breaking outlawed horses. No need to honor a whisperer when I know of 90-pound wives who can raise one finger and make their old man do toe dances so high flung, the sight of such would cause a puppeteer to think his strings were tangled and make a ballet teacher switch to teaching tap dancing.

I just regret I didn't type out my requests in his Senate days. Probably some kid of a secretary from San Marcos who talked through her nose did the translations and ruined the effect of my appeals ...