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C. Pratt

# Florida's Barefoot Mailman

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By Theodore Pratt



**EDITOR'S NOTE:**  
Novelist and historian Theodore Pratt has specialized in Florida. Of the 34 books he has written, 14 have been laid entirely in his adopted state. Mr. Pratt, author of the best-selling novel and movie, "The Barefoot Mailman," lives in Delray Beach in the piney woods near the Everglades.

The barefoot mailman reaches Palm Beach where the postmaster stamps his letters. It took three days for the carriers to walk between Miami and the Palm Beaches.

The most unique mail carriers of all time were the barefoot mailmen of Florida who once walked the mail along the southeast coast. The reason for their existence was very simple.

Back in the early Eighties if someone in the pioneer settlement of what is now Palm Beach wanted to send a letter to the trading post settlement of Miami 66 miles away the letter first went to the lighthouse community of Jupiter 22 miles up the coast. It got there erratically by someone who happened to be sailing up Lake Worth and then going the rest of the way on foot, or all the way outside on the ocean by occasional schooner.

From Jupiter the letter then went by Indian River boat to the railroad at Titusville. From

there it went by train to New York, from which it was sent by steamer to Cuba. From Cuba it was sent by a trading schooner to Miami.

This tortuous route worked the other way, too, starting from Miami, and sometimes took up to 6 weeks, even two months, travelling about an even 3,000 miles to get less than 100.

To fill the gap and give more express service than this the Postoffice Department started the famous barefoot mailman route, cutting the time down to three days.

During the first period of the route it operated between Jupiter and Miami, 88 miles, and this took four days. The only road then in existence was of course the ocean beach and along this the mail carrier walked.





He passed the figurehead of a wrecked ship along the beach. These are the Steven Dohanos murals in the West Palm Beach Postoffice. The mailmen carried matches, a small fry pan, and their shoes, in addition to the mail.

He walked barefoot because walking barefoot on slipping sand is easier than with shoes. Additionally, the hardest part of the beach, making the best and most rapid walking, is down where the surf washes the sand, hardening it, so he took off his shoes and slung them over his shoulder in order not to get them wet. He rolled up his pants.

There was not just one barefoot mailman, but quite a number — no one knows exactly how many — over the dozen or so years the mail was carried in this manner. The Postoffice Department has no record of its own barefoot mailmen. Three requests to find such finally elicited the information that it had never even heard of the barefoot mailman and that its records must

have been lost or destroyed. Its only record today is a copy the author sent to it of his novel of that name.

The Postoffice Department made contracts with the men, remembered by pioneers, but none of which has been preserved even locally. Their pay during the first part of the period was \$300 per year, later raised to double that.

It took the carriers three days each way to walk the 66 miles between the Palm Beaches and Miami. They walked nearly 7,000 miles each year, in less than four years the equivalent of clear around the earth at the equator. They walked under broiling sun, sometimes in cold rain, occasionally through hurricanes.





# MAILMAN / *part 1 of 2*

They carried matches and a small fry pan with them in which they cooked potatoes, salt pork, gills, and a few other things they took along. Mostly they lived off the land, finding turtle eggs in season, gathering oysters profuse in those days and still good to eat and not contaminated by sewage as they are now. They picked wild fruit and husked coconuts for their drinking milk and meat.

For fresh water, needed in quantity during hot humid summers, there were a number of sources. Ponds, fed by rain and the shallow water level, lay not far back from the beach. A few lakes, such as that at Boca Raton, were handy, though sometimes, when a hurricane opened an inlet to it, the water became salt.

In Elseyne Bay, across which the mailman at one time sailed a skiff to deliver the mail, there was a curious source of fresh water. Here, for the use of mainlanders beating across to the beach, was erected an odd structure. A wooden platform was suspended on three pilings and on it was a brass-hooped barrel connected with a pipe that led down into the salt water. The liquid in the barrel, however, was fresh, fed

by a spring on the bottom of the bay which had been tapped.

The mailmen caught pan fish with their bare hands in tidal pools on the beach rocks. One place they did this was at the Jap Rocks just south of Delray Beach, and this can still be done today.

Sometimes they caught more fish than they could eat at the time, so they carried the extra in the mail sack strapped to their back. In those days complaints about mail delivery were based upon letters stinking of fish.

When he came to rivers and inlets the mailman had a skiff cached in the dense jungle growth in existence on their banks at that time, in which he rowed across. When he reached Miami Beach he rowed or sailed across the bay to the south point of the Miami River at Brickel Point where the Brickel family had a general store housing the postoffice. When the mailmen arrived here a conch shell was blown to inform the community. Here he stayed overnight before starting back the next day.

Occasionally people at either end accompanied the mailman on his route. They were called "foot passengers" and at first paid him three, then five, dollars, which included the passenger's food on the way, such as it was. The bed provided



He rows his skiff across an inlet where James Hamilton, a real barefoot mailman, may have been killed by the alligators. Hamilton disappeared near Pompano Beach in 1887.

was the softer dry sand on the higher part of the beach. On some night's stops were made at the houses of refuge the Federal Government built along the beach which acted as weather observation stations and whose crews also rescued and fed wrecked sailors.

One of these is still preserved at Stuart and can be visited. Another was located at what is now Delray Beach and was called "The Orange Grove House of Refuge" because an abandoned wild orange grove was located in back of it. A third was at Ft. Lauderdale and a fourth at Miami Beach.

The curious, rather exact technique of walking the beach was explained to the present author by one of the real barefoot mailmen, the late Dan McCarley of Lantana, before he, the last of them, died in the late Thirties.

McCarley demonstrated the special way of this to keep the legs springy and prevent them from tiring. It came from the fact that there is, of course, a slant to the beach, and walking on a slant is tiring. So the mailman, when walking south, made his stride on the right leg, the higher part of the beach, just a little quicker than the left, so that the steps were equalized. When going north he reversed the process.

When a carrier or a foot passenger had mastered this technique he was called a good "beach walkist."

Virtually nothing could stop these exceptional mailmen. One thing that did was a Spanish wine-ship being wrecked on the coast. When the wine casks were washed ashore the entire population, including the mailman, sampled them so enthusiastically that the mail didn't get through that trip.

One barefoot mailman had trouble once when one of his foot passengers became disgruntled at the rigors of the three-day beach walking trip, and the food and bed provided, and blamed the mailman for these.

After arriving in Miami he decided to get back at the mailman by mailing three heavy coconuts with him. Later he evinced an interest in geology and mailed some heavy rocks. Finally he attempted to mail a small tree, but at this the mailman revolted and refused to take it.

When reported to Washington an edict was passed that no packages of any weight were to be carried on the route.



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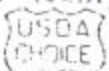
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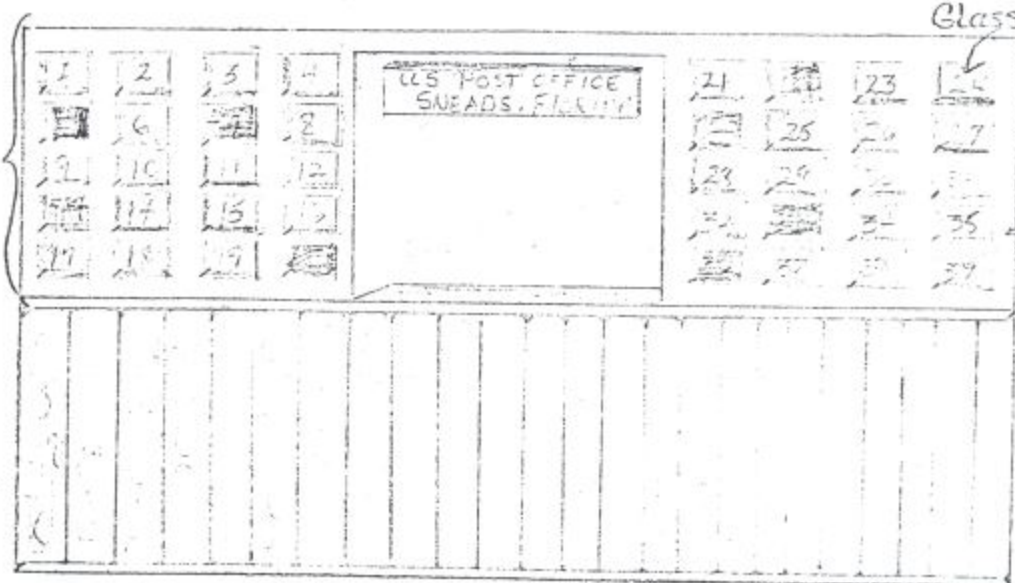
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