

2013



Back in the satchel

20 years after becoming a full-time officer, Executive Vice President Gary Mullins returned to Texas to carry his route

When most people think of retirement, they think of spending their days at the beach or in the country, catching up on books they've wanted to read, or simply relaxing. For former Executive Vice President **Gary Mullins**, retiring from the NALC Executive Council meant returning to the small town of Burkburnett, TX, donning his postal uniform once again, picking up his satchel and delivering the mail.

"I'd always said that when I retired from the NALC, I wanted to return to my route," Mullins said. "I just didn't think about being 60 years old and 60 pounds overweight when that happened. A lot of my letter carrier friends thought I was kidding, and the rest tried to talk me out of it. But my mind was made up, so back to the post office I went."

Burkburnett, part of Wichita Falls Branch 1227, has a population of 10,600 and lies along the north central border of Texas, just across the Red River from Oklahoma. Mullins started carrying mail in 1971. One day, not long after, he was "putting up mail at my case, complaining about my working conditions and asking what has the union done for me today, when someone said, 'Why don't you do something about it or shut up?'"

Gary did something, serving as steward for 18 years, then as Branch 1227 president from 1978 to 1990 and Texas State Association president from 1987 to 1990. In 1990, he was elected as Region 10 national business agent, becoming a full-time union officer. In 1998, he was elected NALC director of city delivery and was appointed vice president in 2002 by union President Vincent Sombrotto, serving as the head of the Contract Administration Unit. When Fredric Rolando became NALC president in mid-2009, he appointed Mullins executive vice president. But Mullins didn't run for election in 2010, deciding it was time to leave Washington, DC.

While most national officers retire from both the union and the Postal Service after their time on the NALC Executive Council, Mullins went back to his string of routes as a CC2 technician.

"Wow, what a difference 20 years can make," he said. "When I left my route back in 1990, the carriers cased all their mail and most of us routed our flats out. I would bet most of today's letter carriers would not have a clue what routing out the flats is about."

For those who don't know, routing was the process of casing and then manually putting flats into walk sequence for each individual relay or loop, a normal procedure before the advent of DPS and machinable mail.

Age and weight differences weren't the only shock Mullins got upon returning to his route. "I came back to the coldest winter on record followed by the hottest summer with over 100 days of 100 plus degrees," he said before joking that the challenge of the weather "didn't come close to DPS mail, scanners, scan points, casing flats and letters together with spurs, the electric time clock and six to seven hours on the street."

“My first few months back to work were scenes from a bad movie.”

The mandatory overtime didn't help make it any easier. “I think I made more overtime in 2011 than my W-2 showed in total wages for 1990,” he said laughing. “I was out several days a week after dark delivering mail, and that was with one to two hours' help.”

Mullins explained how a typical day in the 1980s began very differently than one today. “To clock in, you just put your time card in the time clock and pushed down on the lever,” he said. “No codes or extra keys to hit.”

Volume changes are noticeable, too. “Twenty years ago, each route would case up two to three trays. Now, some of the routes in my office get less than 20 letters a day to work up,” he said.

“Can you just imagine what your job today will be like in 20 years?”

Management wasn't sure what to expect of Mullins, either, putting him through three efficiency checks over the last two years. As with most carriers, Mullins' estimates and DOIS rarely lined up.

“My proudest day was when *Mr. DOIS* said the route I was on should be delivered in eight hours and 20 minutes and the efficiency check showed the route at nine hours and 40 minutes and I made office time by 15 minutes. So much for *Mr. DOIS*,” he said with a laugh.

Management may have been better off leaving him alone, especially during the week of route count and inspection. “Every day, the inspection team would come up with a ‘Let's call it a spin on what the *M-39* says about how to conduct a route count and inspection,’” Mullins recalled. “When they would finish, I'd just smile and say, ‘I think you need to give your boss a call. After all, I helped draft that language and I can tell you the USPS Headquarters doesn't agree with your position.’”

“I ended my inspection by busting my office time by one minute on the last day, and the route I was on tested over eight hours with only a handful of mail,” he said. “It doesn't get much better than that.”

While he's been overwhelmed by some of the changes, he's done his best to keep up. “You know, even an old dog can learn new tricks, and slowly I picked up on how to use the scanner, work DPS mail, and I almost have the electric time clock down,” he said.

He attributes his ability to re-learn the day-to-day aspects of the job to help given by the carriers in his station, though the faces have changed from when he left full-time carrying. “When I returned, not one letter carrier was left that I had carried mail with back in 1990,” he said.

After more than two years back on his route, Mullins is finally ready to retire from the Postal Service, leaving at the beginning of August. From his original time carrying the mail, to serving the members as a full-time officer, to returning to

carrying, Mullins' appreciation for letter carriers has never diminished. “Postal employees, especially letter carriers, are a different breed,” he said. “While the years will pass us by, we can always count on being a member of the NALC family.” **PR**

