

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE POSTAL A's

Although the first formal act to establish the present organization of Model A Mail Truck owners and enthusiasts was a brief Newsletter sent out by Thurston (Koke) Twigg-Smith in February of 1977, it was certainly based on earlier spadework by others. The mailing of that Newsletter was to an initial mailing list, which consisted primarily of a list of owners, and reported owners, which had been compiled by Gary Grebbien earlier. This list started back in about 1971 when Grebbien began the restoration of a 1931 Model A Mail Truck which was destined to become the most well known Mail Truck then in existence. Grebbien's truck was the feature vehicle (and also the month of December) in the 1977 Motorcraft calendar, which featured only Model A's. That photograph (and the other calendar photos that have subsequently been reissued in later years by many other advertisers—generally with deteriorating quality, color reproduction and detail clarity) shows several features which later research found to be incorrect. Recognizing the difficulty of restoring a relatively unknown body style, Grebbien had sought out others (including Frank Graham) who owned such vehicles and initiated an informal self-help group to aid in maintaining or restoring with authenticity. The success of that effort manifested itself with the honors subsequently accorded Grebbien's truck and also that of Frank Graham (Frank's truck earlier had been a winner in 1974 at the Queen Mary MAFCA Nationals in Long Beach). Perhaps a brief aside is in order. In the course of his attempts to determine what a good original Mail Truck looked like, Grebbien journeyed cross country from his home in California to spend several days in, around, under and over a good original unrestored truck on Cape Cod, MA—owned by Richmond Bell.

To quote from Twigg-Smith's February 1977 letter, "*... I am a recent purchaser of a Mail Truck ... and I would like to form an official group, dedicated to the restoration and preservation of A and AA Mail Trucks.*" Twigg-Smith wrote to MAFCA about his idea and due to the lead time in publication, it did not appear in *THE RESTORER* until the May/June issue (Vol. 22, No. 11) in which was a general write-up on Body Style Groups, including a mention of the Postal A's being in the formative stages.

Meanwhile, in the preceding issue of *THE RESTORER* (MAFCA, March/April 1977, Vol. 21, No. 6), appeared two ads in sequence in the WANTED category, both relating to Mail Trucks.

Unknown to each other at the time, the first ad read "*MODEL A & AA MAIL DELIVERY INFORMATION WANTED. Who built the body? How many were made? We have located several owners and are compiling a roster to help us exchange information. Any information or owners names would be appreciated. Rick Black, 122 Elm Ave., San Bruno, CA etc.*" The following ad read, "*1931 MAIL TRUCK. Would like to correspond with anyone having and/or restoring this body style—particularly need plans for wood parts, sources for door hardware, window details, or photos, Govt. plans, etc. Aldie Johnson, 22 Burlington Rd., Bedford, MA etc.*" Naturally it didn't take long to get these two together with Twigg-Smith and the embryonic stages of the Postal A's was underway.

By the end of June 1977, Twigg-Smith had sent out another of his informal newsletters, which listed some new names (Jack Dixon, Hugh Pearson, Gordon Reed, Aldie Johnson and Rick Black) along with Gary Grebbien and his list of 25 addresses. Another interesting quote from that newsletter said, "*The 1978 National Convention of the MAFCA will be in Washington, DC next summer. I would like to throw out the spark today that we all get together, and possibly have an announced seminar of our own!*" Well, the informal get together did occur, but it took another eight years for the Postal A Seminar to take place.

Another brief progress Newsletter in July of 1977 was followed by a return-postcard-questionnaire in September to all known (or reported) Mail Truck owners. Forty-five questionnaires were sent out with a rather phenomenal return rate of 75%! However, of the 34 returned, there were only 23 confirmed owners, 20 of whom belonged to MAFCA and 8 belonged to MARC.

In August 1977 Rick Black set the official wheels in motion by circulating a petition to MAFCA requesting recognition as a Chapter authorized "*to conduct our activities in a world-wide organization of Model A and AA postal vehicles under the name of the Postal A's Chapter*". The required five signers of that petition were T. Twigg-Smith, Rick Black, Aldie Johnson, Richmond Bell and Hugh Pearson. The MAFCA Board of Directors acted favorably on that petition (as well as petitions from three other new chapters) at their October 8, 1977 meeting. Rick Black was officially notified of acceptance by letter

from Ed Christopher, the then Chapter Coordinator, on October 26, 1977. Thus, the Postal A's will soon be celebrating their 25TH anniversary. It was not until the 1991 Annual Meeting of MARC that the Postal A's were recognized as a Region of MARC

The MAFCA January/February 1978 issue of *THE RESTORER* (Vol. 22, No. 5) first listed the Postal A's as a Body Style Chapter

Now that the Postal A's were officially launched, Twigg-Smith continued to put out at his own expense an occasional Newsletter—in February and September of 1978, January, May and November of 1979, and April and September of 1980.

The 1978 National Convention in Washington, DC was the first opportunity for any significant get-together (as had earlier been proposed by Twigg-Smith). Rick Black convened an informal evening meeting in his room at the Sheraton National at which Gary Koser, Don Floyd, Aldie Johnson and Rick Black compared notes. It was particularly good that Gary Koser could come since he had driven his truck to the Convention from Milwaukee. Also, Paul Thomas had been responsible for getting the Baltimore Post Office's 1929 AA Mail Truck to the Convention. Attracted by seeing the two Mail Trucks on display one day, Jim Nickerson came to look and talk about his Mail Truck (which, unfortunately, was back home in New Jersey). Rick Black took advantage of his time on vacation in Washington to spend a couple of days poking through the U.S. National Archives. Probably the most significant find then was a copy of the Invitation To Bid (including the specification) for the last (1931) procurement of ½-ton Mail Truck bodies. This started a chain of research which has been the most significant factor in establishing the who, when, where, how (and even a little bit of why) of the U.S. Post Office's Model A and AA Mail Trucks.

The first appearance of the Postal A's in the MAFCA *RESTORER* Chapter News occurred in the March/April 1981 issue (Vol. 25, No. 6) which reported the results of the first attempt to catalogue who had what. This was a sort-of precursor that fell out of what was to come two issues later.

Based on some discussions with Phil Allin, the then-Editor of *THE RESTORER*, at the 1978 MAFCA National Convention, the Postal A's took the initiative to provide sufficient suitable and useable copy and pictures for Allin to create a

predominantly Mail Truck issue of *THE RESTORER*. What evolved exceeded expectation, and the Vol. 26, No. 2 issue (July/August 1981) of *THE RESTORER* with Frank Graham's 1929 A Mail Truck on the cover has become a classic and a "collector's issue".

Another memorable issue of *THE RESTORER* was in March/April (Vol. 34, No. 6) which pictured Ken Wall's AA Mail Truck in front of the Yosemite National Park Post Office as a "stamp" cancelled in La Habra, CA. In this issue, sometimes called "Mail Trucks Revisited, the majority of articles pertained to Mail Trucks—sort-of an update on Vol. 26, No. 2.

Rick Black's earlier forays in to the National Archives had prompted Dave Zimmerli to try his hand, and his first significant find was printed in the January/February 1982 issue of *THE RESTORER* (Vol. 26, No. 5). It consisted of the Post Office drawings of the "generic" ½-ton size Mail Truck body of 1930. Zimmerli has subsequently found a great deal more of significant records, which have added immeasurably to Model A Mail Truck knowledge.

After about a year and a half hiatus in putting out his Newsletter, Koke Twigg-Smith managed to find time and some new information to issue another of his Newsletters in February of 1982. Along about that time, Aldie Johnson volunteered to take over the editing/publishing chores of the Postal A Newsletter on a little more formal quarterly basis, and that continued for a number of years, culminating with the publication of his book *THE FORD MODEL A MAIL TRUCK* in 1999.

In 1985, the Postal A's submitted to the Joint MAFCA/MARC Judging Standards Committee a Draft Supplement to the Ford Model A Judging Standards to cover the unique aspects of the Mail Trucks. This supplement was reviewed and approved with minor changes by the Judging Standards Committee. The Supplement was further revised in 1997.

As mentioned earlier, the proposed Postal A Seminar (for the 1978 MAFCA National Convention) did not take place at that time. It was not until 1986 at the MAFCA/MARC World Meet that the first Postal A Seminar took place

New trucks, new restorers and new information continue to turn up on a continuing basis—evidence that the growing world of Model A Mail Trucks is still expanding.

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