

# Towns Afraid Of Losing Holiday Postmarks

BY RICK CALLAHAN  
Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, Ind. — Each December, a sleepy one-man post office in rural Indiana roars to life as thousands of holiday greeting cards arrive from around the world, each seeking the outpost's unique red-linked imprint that pays homage to the hamlet's biblical name.

Postmaster John Cable stamps each by hand, some with a simple postmark cachet that carries the phrase "Star of Bethlehem" above a five-pointed star. Others get a stamp depicting the three camel-riding wise men following the star of Bethlehem.

"My brother in California, my son in South Bend, my daughter — they really look forward to that stamp on their letters. They expect it every Christmas," said retiree Mike King of Scottsburg, Ind., who made a 30-mile trip to the post office this week so his holiday batch of mail could keep a two-decade tradition of carrying the festive flair.

This could be the last year for his trip: Those distinctive stamps offered for more than five decades by the tiny post office could soon be a ghost of Christmas past.

The Bethlehem post office is one of more than half a dozen with winter-themed names that are on a list of about 3,700 post offices nationwide the U.S. Postal Service has proposed shuttering to help slash costs. The postmarks from Snow, Okla., Antler, N.D., and Chestnut, Ill., might also fade away.

The agency will begin deciding the fate of those post offices early next year unless Congress intervenes, said Postal Service spokesman Victor Dubina.

There are other places that will still offer a holiday postmark. North Pole postmarks will still be available in Alaska and New York. Six other states have a Bethlehem. But the proposed closures mean that it could be the last time these rural outposts get to take pride in the purpose their postmark brings each holiday.

Some years, Antler Postmaster Sharon Tennyson stamps 1,000 letters with a special stamp sporting a reindeer in red or black ink. The tradition in the North Dakota town of about 35 just south of the Canadian border dates from the 1950s.

"People say it's neat to have their letters or Christmas cards postmarked with Antler on them," Tennyson said. "They come from all over."

Bethlehem's heyday as a bustling 19th century river town is far behind it. There's not much left beyond a few dozen homes for the 100 or so residents, a church, an old schoolhouse and a view of the Ohio River's swirling waters framed by bluffs in adjacent Kentucky. Its first post office opened in March 1816, and has moved several times over the past two centuries, now housed in a modular trailer.

During the year, the office handles only about 120 pieces of mail each week. But come the six-week Christmas card crush, it surges to about 16,000 overall.

Much of that mail arrives in packages filled with bundles of letters, postage already affixed, from as far away as Germany, France and Great Britain. Other cards are delivered in person to the postmaster, often from people whose families have sent cards with the postmark for years.

Like other postal outlets targeted to close, the mail has slowed down here over the years. As Cable, the postmaster, wielded a rubber stamp encrusted in glitter from sparkly holiday envelopes, he noted that he handled 25,000 postmarks the first year on the job in 2001. He isn't optimistic about the tiny office's fate.

"We're just going to have to wait and see," Cable said.

Snow, Okla., also might lose its mark. Though the town about 140 miles southeast of Oklahoma City offers only a standard postmark with the date of cancellation and "Snow, OK" within a circle, people still travel to get the postmark, Postmaster Frances Creel said.

"We're the only Snow in the United States," she said. "I had a lady drive from Missouri just to have her Christmas cards postmarked."

Finding another holiday postmark may just take a little research. In Indiana, there's another option. Those seeking a nod from the jolly old elf can send mail to Santa Claus, Ind., a Christmas-themed town about 100 miles west of Bethlehem that boasts a Santa Claus Museum and a December festival toasting St. Nick.

Santa Claus postmaster Marian Balbach said the post office, which isn't on the closure list, handled about 400,000 pieces of mail in last year's holiday surge. The town's post office has been stamping letters with a red postmark of Santa's image since 1983.

"It's a lot of work," Balbach said. "But it's the joy of it — it really adds to a lot of people's holiday spirit."

# Judge Says Branstad Veto Was Unconstitutional

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A Polk County judge ruled Thursday that Gov. Terry Branstad's line-item veto of a bill that closed 36 unemployment offices in the state was unconstitutional.

Branstad in July vetoed portions of a bill that would have prohibited the closure of the offices. He argued it would have prevented Iowa Workforce Development from developing a more efficient system for helping the unemployed.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and six House and Senate Democrats filed a lawsuit in August, contending a governor can't redirect money struck through a line-item veto.

The *Des Moines Register* reported that Judge Brad McCall ruled that Branstad's veto can't be valid unless he also vetoes the allocation.

"The governor has the authority to line-item veto legislation, but he can't then keep the money," Sen. Daryl Beall, a plaintiff in the lawsuit, said in a statement. "This is a political and policy issue that affects the lives of Iowans, but it's also a constitutional issue."

Tim Albrecht, a spokesman for Branstad, said the governor disagreed with the ruling and was considering how to respond. Albrecht noted that questions about line-item vetoes typically are decided by the Iowa Supreme Court.

"This is a first step," Albrecht said. Albrecht said the unemployment offices would remain closed.

The dispute stems from legislation passed by lawmakers in the 2011 Legislature that used \$3 million left over from a business incentive program to run the unemployment offices.

Branstad vetoed language that defined what an unemployment field office is, which included staff and a physical location. He also vetoed language that said Iowa Workforce Development could not reduce the number of field offices below the number the state had on Jan. 1, 2009.

Instead of the offices, the state has installed nearly 400 kiosk-like computer sta-

tions in places like libraries where Iowans can access online training, assistance in preparing for interviews and other job application services. Workforce Development director Teresa Wahlert has said more people used the services in September and October than during the same period last year, and that the agency planned to offer up to 500 access points by the end of the year.

Beall, of Fort Dodge, and Waterloo Sen. Bill Dotzler, also a plaintiff in the lawsuit, said they wanted to work with Branstad to reopen the offices.

"This is a huge victory for Iowans hoping to find a job," Dotzler said.

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