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SWITZERLAND'S postal history in the days before the country became unified in 1848 is extremely complicated. There were, from 1291 to 1531, only 13 cantons – Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Lucerne, Zurich, Berne, Glarus, Zug, Fribourg, Solothurn, Basle, Schaffhausen and Appenzell, which comprised the Old Confederation or the "Thirteen Ancient Places", together with a number of subject or adherent areas.

Each canton had its own currency – at one time there were some 250 or more different ones – which must have caused much confusion. Zurich, for instance, used Rappen, Schillings and Florins, while Geneva used Sols and Francs.

Mail at first was mostly between cantonal administrations or large merchant houses who used the cantonal messengers, set up in the fifteenth century, who travelled on foot, then by mule or horse.

Men of the highest integrity, they wore costumes of the cantonal colours and carried their letters in cylinders of wood or metal. As protected persons they had to be allowed to travel freely throughout the country and on occasions as far as Lyon in France or to southern Germany. To harm or kill them could lead to diplomatic incidents.

There were no official postal markings since there was no central postal system. Geneva, however, had many links with France which, being a kingdom, had a good postal system, and gradually western Switzerland began to adopt the French method of marking letters with the town of despatch, from which the charges for delivery, payable by the recipient, could be calculated.

Somehow a method was created whereby letters going outside Switzerland were assessed so that each country through which the letters passed received its share of the final cost due for transit.

The first known postmarks, dating from around the beginning of the eighteenth century, were simple straight-line town names

(for internal post) or if going to another country "Suisse" or "De Suisse", then with town names until around 1807 by which time the French Revolution had broken out.

In 1798 Geneva and other territories adjacent to France were annexed, such as Geneva which became part of the "Département 99" as did Bienne, Porrentruy and others.

Consequently mail from these areas, even up to 1815, bore what were actually French postmarks and are much sought after by both Swiss and French collectors. The country as a whole was under French occupation for the five years 1798-1803 and known as the Helvetic Republic.

A circular of November 15, 1798, first mentions the use of engraved postmarks giving an indication of posting times.

Private posting does not appear to have been prolific during the Helvetic Republic and the period is better known for the elaborate headings to the letters, the revolutionary form of address, "Au citoyen . . .", and the cachets from the various authorities, often of a pseudo-patriotic nature such

as a female figure – France – with outstretched arms welcoming the young Switzerland shown as a child.

When Napoleon was defeated further chaos resulted, but with the Act of Mediation in 1803 the cantons under a governor known as "Le Landamann de la Suisse" were given some measure of sovereignty, including the right to run their own postal services.

In the large towns this continued to develop along the lines already in existence, but a number of private or semi-private postal services, including the famous Fischer Post of Berne and to some extent those of Thurn and Taxis, were also in operation.

Then in 1815 the Congress of Vienna took place – the famous "Dancing Congress" as it was called because of the magnificent balls among which it was held. At the Congress much of Europe was divided up, while Switzerland regained its old status, with the addition of recently added cantons making up the 22 which lasted until 1978 when Jura broke away from Berne to become the 23rd canton.

The only benefit that

Switzerland derived from the period of occupation was the gradual introduction of a more comprehensive postal system, and after 1815 things began to settle down.

In 1828/29 France made five treaties with Switzerland covering postal matters with Basle, Berne, Vaud, Zurich and Neuchâtel, with responsibility for other areas being shared between them.

Neuchâtel, however, because of its allegiance to the Kingdom of Prussia, which retained some authority, does not seem to have cooperated to the same extent as the other cantons.

Under these treaties a system of Exchange Offices – Bureaux d'Échange – was set up at points along the frontiers of France and Switzerland, from Basle to Geneva, through which mail would be routed to and from both countries. The sending country was required to indicate the distances that letters travelled so that the amount of charge for the journey could be calculated in Kreuzer, this having been agreed upon as a uniform measure of currency.

A series of "transit" marks then

The origins of the Swiss post

By E.J. Rawnsley

came into use, at first large framed often three-lined marks, i.e. "Suisse/par/Ferney" or "Suisse/par/Belfort" – this being the only exchange office to be situated some considerable distance from the border.

Later came smaller straight-line marks such as "L.G.8 K." or "L.Z. 10 Kr." – (Lettre Bernois 8 Kreuzer or Lettre Zürichoise 10 Kr.") and so on, the figures being increased in steps of two Kreuzer according to distance.

These were eventually simplified to "T Z" or "T B" – "Transit Zurich" or "Transit Berne". Part of the great interest in collecting early covers lies in the study of the various postal and ancillary markings which were used.

For mail within Switzerland, where the postal needs were also expanding, a facility of "Route Marks" appeared. Mail from small towns and villages without a post office was carried by messengers, first on foot, then by horse and

even handed to a passing diligence for conveyance to the nearest post office and there franked with the town cancel and the route, i.e. "Route de Sumiswald", "Route de Payerne" or "Birwil Route", again providing a means of assessing the charges.

Large circular postmarks, already adopted by the French post office, came into use in Switzerland in 1833, when, according to the records, the Postal Department of Berne ordered 28 dated cancellers from a Paris engraver at a cost of 20 gold francs each, an exceedingly high price at that time.

They were quite decorative, having a cantonal coat-of-arms and a posthorn or other ornamental design at the base. Although in use for a number of years they were found to be too expensive and were gradually replaced by smaller modified types.

Some were simplified to the extent of omitting the year

altogether, which can pose puzzles unless the inside of the folded sheet shows the date on which the letter was written.

Envelopes had not yet come into use to any great extent as they added weight.

Swiss accountancy marks were generally applied at main towns or at the Swiss exchange offices, while France added a figure, usually in red but occasionally in black, of '2' or '3' decimes, being the amount refundable to Switzerland for conveyance to the exchange points.

The Federal Constitution was formed in 1848 and all private posts were then taken over, which took time, so that there is a tremendous amount of overlapping in the types of postmarks and the period of their use. Ticino, for example, continued to use "stampless" as opposed to "pre-stamp" covers well into the late 1870s, long after the use of adhesive stamps was legally required.

The postal service was by then

developing fast and regulations were not always observed. At the end of 1850, when the use of adhesive stamps became compulsory, there were more than 1,000 post offices and over three times as many so-called postmarks of all types and sizes, with hitherto unknown ones still coming to light when old collections come onto the market.

Even after 1850 the newly established postal administration tried out several more types of cancellations before a more or less uniform system was instituted.

It is no wonder that the task of trying to arrange these covers in any sort of logical sequence is extremely difficult, but therein lies the fascination of collecting postal history.

Mrs E.J. Rawnsley is an eminent postal historian and founder member of the Helvetia Philatelic Society. She gave a talk on Swiss postal history to the Helvetic Society in London on May 3.

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