

Synopsis

E-COM and its Forerunners Expediting U.S. Domestic Mail Electronically

Beginning in 1960, the United States Post Office Department and successor Postal Service tested several mailing systems that combined electronic transmission of written messages and graphic images by facsimile and telegraphy with postal delivery. Some of these systems briefly served the special needs of small groups of customers, but none achieved widespread success. Most ended in failure, and none survive today.

The most ambitious of these programs, *Electronic Computer Originated Mail (E-COM)*, launched in 1982 was also the most elaborate, with rates and services designed as incentives to business mailers. Its failure in 1985 was a huge disappointment to its advocates, who had failed to anticipate the pace of technology that rendered each new development obsolete within a few years of its birth.

Collectible artifacts of these experiments, particularly the forerunners of E-COM, are seldom seen. Even scarcer are collections of these remnants sufficient to document the course of their ephemeral history.

This exhibit illustrates each successive attempt to expedite mail electronically with surviving postal paraphernalia and mail. It differs from a postal history display in several aspects: Postal rates for these services were sometimes unpublished, and never appeared on mail. Messages were routed electronically, being printed as hard copy and inserted into envelopes only at their destination cities. In most cases identifying markings were nonexistent because the absence of cancellations was an intentional element of each system's efficiency. The distinctive traits are stationery items emblazoned with the name of the service, and contents that display its technology.

This is the sequence of the exhibit:

Speed Mail, a government mail experiment that began in October 1960 and discontinued in February 1961, employed electronic facsimile and dedicated short-wave radio frequencies to transmit messages between Washington, D.C., Chicago, Illinois, and Battle Creek, Michigan. An original message, written, drawn, or typed on an official postal form, was mailed to a Speed Mail Section, where it was opened, copied electronically on a scanner drum, and transmitted by fax to the office of delivery. The destination office printed the message form, enclosed it in an envelope, and delivered it. This exhibit includes one of two known examples of Speed Mail in collector hands.

Facsimile Mail Service tested same-day mail service posted by members of the public at six post offices in New York City and three post offices in Washington in 1971 and 1972, transmitted over telephone lines between the two cities by fax. Senders specified either lobby pick-up service at the destination post office, or special delivery carrier service to the addressee. Postally used examples are unknown; this exhibit includes one of two known Facsimile Mail Service form envelopes.

Western Union Mailgram service was a business partnership between Western Union, a private firm, and the U.S. Postal Service. It began in 1972 and continued until 1997. Senders provided text to a Western Union computer center, which formatted and transmitted copies to any number of domestic destinations simultaneously, where they were printed on Mailgram forms, enclosed in Mailgram envelopes, and delivered normally. It was the most

efficient system of quantity first-class mail distribution ever devised. This exhibit includes an example of the seldom-seen original 1972 Mailgram envelope, the only one that states the postal share of the sender's cost.

In April 1974, USPS and Western Union launched the Westar communications satellite to expedite Mailgram transmissions, an event recorded by cacheted souvenir covers. The first Mailgram transmitted by satellite was sent in September 1974. Both of those items are included, along with examples of commercial Mailgrams transmitted earlier by land-based links and later by satellite.

In 1997, the USPS Postal Rate commission recommended that Mailgram Service be dropped from the Domestic Mail Manual Classification Schedule, and the USPS Board of Governors approved the recommendation. Mailgram service continues to exist as a variety of permit imprint mail provided to businesses by Western Union, but it no longer enjoys any privileged or exclusive contractual arrangement for expedited postal processing and delivery.

Building upon these predecessors, postal officials proposed in 1978 that USPS itself acquire the necessary technology to operate a transmission and delivery system of computer-originated volume mail. Using this equipment, mailers were invited to send their copy digitally to the nearest of 25 serving post offices (SPOs), which forwarded the texts digitally by Western Union to destination SPOs, where they were printed out, enclosed in envelopes, and delivered.

Electronic Computer Originated Mail (E-COM) was launched with great fanfare in 1982.

The system accepted messages comprising up to two pages of text in three different formats:

- Variable messages that have a unique text for each address.
- Common messages that have the same text for a list of addresses.
- Personalized messages that have a common text for a list of addresses with a unique text inserted in each printed message.

The postage rate for each message was 26¢ for one page and 5¢ for a second page, with a minimum charge for 200 messages.

This exhibit includes a scarce sample E-COM form envelope and lettersheet from the early development period, a first day E-COM letter, and commercially used examples of the two envelope styles used during the short history of the service.

References:

“Facsimile Mail Service Now Available” in the June 1972 issue of the *United States Specialist* and “Mailgrams and Philately” in the July 1972 issue profile those services. “Postal Service Perspectives” in the October 1972 issue followed up on both.

The best philatelic summary of E-COM is found in Stuart Gitlow's “Contemporary Postal History” column in the July 1984 *United States Specialist*, with a concluding follow-up in the November 1985 issue.

An excellent summary is “E-COM service had forerunners – and one survivor” by Fred Baumann in the January 13, 2003, *Stamp Collector*. (Based on the exhibitors' web site.)