

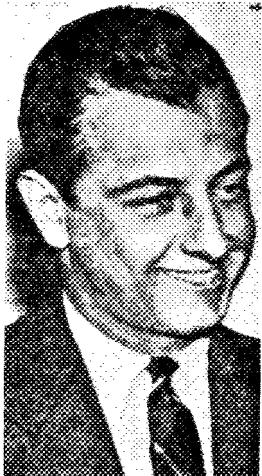
# OASIS



Commissioner Sends Holiday Wishes  
Flying Aid Across the Border  
Employees Bring Cheer to Others  
You Can Give Gift of Life

Their number came up, and fame (fleeting) followed

# The card's golden anniversary



John Sweeney, Jr., our first cardholder.

It was autumn in New York, 1936. At the Princeton Club, reporters from several newspapers clamored at the door for John David Sweeney, Jr. to appear and make a statement.

The 23-year-old said later that he considered slipping out the club's back door. But he didn't, and on December 2 the New York Times and other papers carried his picture and life story, giving him his first and only taste of national prominence.

By chance, young John Sweeney of New Rochelle had become the first person in the United States to be issued a Social Security number-005-09-0001.

There were some ironies in John's receipt of the first card. The Social Security Act that had been passed in Congress a year earlier had been designed to assuage the poverty that so many older Americans either faced or feared. The Social Security Act was

heralded above all for providing a floor of income once a worker in covered employment reached age 65.

John Sweeney was the son of a wealthy factory owner, and had grown up in a 15-room suburban home staffed with servants. It seemed unlikely that he would ever need a Government pension. But when he faced the reporters outside the Princeton Club that day, he said that he fully supported the fledgling program.

Many years later, when John Sweeney reached retirement age, SSA's Office of Public Affairs tried to contact him. We found that he had died without ever receiving any benefits from the program. But his widow, who did receive benefits based on his work, enclosed with her Letter her husband's SSN card signed by him.

\* \* \*

John Sweeney got his application for the SSN from his employer (dad), who had received it from the United States Post Office. The Social Security Board had had to wrestle with the question of how to quickly and efficiently enumerate the millions of workers who would be required to have a Social Security number.

They decided to ask the Post Office to

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## Altmeyer Building has box you can't open

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the issuance of the first Social Security number, and SSA has taken steps to assure that such small pieces of our history will be noticed and thought about by those who come after us-if only briefly.

Every major construction project includes the laying of a cornerstone. And the same was true with SSA's headquarters. If you visit Woodlawn today and stand at the northwest corner of the Altmeyer Building, you can look at this heavy granite cornerstone with an inscription that reads

*United States of America  
Dwight D. Eisenhower  
President  
1957*

What you can't see, and what not many people know, is that underneath that cornerstone are two metal boxes, one inside the other. The first is a grey metal box about the size of a video display terminal. It contains paper documents---a replica of an SSN,

SSA's Statement of Objectives, punchcards, a copy of the January 1959 OASIS--and a smaller box.

The second box is stainless steel and about the size of a compact toaster. Inside this box are motion picture film, audio tapes and microfilm of documents and personal stories that give highlights of the Social Security programs and SSA history up to that time.

This smaller box, which was welded shut, also contains inert gases that will help to prolong the life of the contents.

And just what does the box contain! A partial list would include the following:

- a picture and story about the assignment of the lowest Social Security number, No. 001-01-0001;
- a picture and story about the assignment of the first Social Security number;
- motion picture film of President Franklin D. Roosevelt signing the original Social Security Act;
- a photograph and biographical sketch of our first Commissioner, Arthur Altmeyer;
- pictures of Social Security district offices;

help. The 'Post Office had 45,000 offices scattered across the country, and on November 16, 1936 thousands of postal carriers lurched out of their workstations carrying heavy bags full of SSN applications. They delivered the applications to employers both large and small, who in turn gave them to employees for completion.

The system worked well, and when the first batch of 1,000 SSN applications were assembled in Baltimore for processing, John Sweeney's lay on top.

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While John Sweeney got the first SSN, the distinction of having the lowest SSN went to Grace Owen of Concord, NH. Her number was 001-01-0001.

The reason why the first and the lowest SSNs aren't the same is a procedural one. As most employees know, the first three digits indicate a State or area, the next two break the area into convenient groupings, and the last four are a straight numerical series.

New Hampshire was accorded the honor of being assigned the lowest number because the first Chairman of the Social Security Board was John G. Winant. He had previously served as governor of the State.

In fact, Mr. Winant was himself offered the lowest SSN, but declined. He said to

"set the wheels in motion and see who gets it."

Thus, Grace Owen, unemployed at the time, filed her application in Concord on November 24 and earned a small niche in history. She at one time appeared as a guest on a popular television game show-"I've Got A Secret."

Such "moments of fame" continued for a few years as milestones were reached. In 1940, for example, many newspapers carried a photo of an 18-year-old high school graduate named Albert Bassett from Upper Darby, PA. Albert had received the 50 millionth SSN issued.

But the novelty factor quickly wore off. Today, with more than 250 million SSNs issued, these numbers are as familiar to each of us as our home phone numbers. It is unlikely that the person to receive the 500,000,000th card sometime in the next century will get any national attention.

Still, it is worth noting that the very next person to receive an SSN will have a number as individual as those that were given to John Sweeney, Grace Owen and Albert Bassett. □

- a copy of the original Social Security Act;
- photographs and stories about milestone beneficiaries-our first, 1 millionth, 5 millionth, and 10 millionth;
- the recorded memories of five centenarians from different walks of life.

When can you actually view these safe-boxed mementos from the past! The likelihood is that you will never be able to see them, and neither, perhaps, will your children. The box beneath the cornerstone is not really a time capsule in the sense that it is to be opened in 2009 or 2059 or any other preselected point in time. Copies of the contents can, of course, be seen in the SSA History Room.

The box is to be opened only when these massive buildings at headquarters have served their purpose, fallen victim to time, and are ready to be demolished and replaced. That's not expected to happen for many, many years to come. And while you won't be around for that occasion, you can imagine just how quaint and historically interesting that box will be by then, □



Contents of the "time capsule" beneath the cornerstone of the Altmeyer Building.