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C1 The Honorable Wright Patman
House of Representatives

R Dear Mr. Patman:

By letter dated March 23, 1973, you requested information about inquiries (we are making) into Postal Service efficiency. You also inquired about the possibility of our making a study of the Postal Service in the Gulf Southwest States of Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. You stated that if this study were not feasible you would like to have detailed information pertinent to the complaint you received from Mr. W. B. Turner, publisher of the Citizens Journal of Atlanta, Texas, concerning the deterioration of second-class mail service in the Texarkana sectional center.

We advised you on April 17, 1973, that we were gathering information on postal activities in certain States and major cities throughout the country and that we would prefer not to undertake a separate study of the Gulf Southwest because the results would probably only confirm our tentative finding that there is a nationwide pattern to postal operation problems. We did, however, examine the activities of the Texarkana sectional center.

We concluded that delivery of Mr. Turner's publication has been delayed occasionally, but we could not pinpoint any particular deficiencies which would cause his subscribers to continually complain of late delivery.

The Texarkana center processes approximately 450,000 pieces of mail a day for the city of Texarkana and 65 associate post offices. Twenty-three of these associate post offices are in Texas and have been served by the Texarkana center for many years. The other 42 offices are in Arkansas and were served by the Hope, Arkansas, sectional center until May 1972, when all mail processing was consolidated at the Texarkana center. The farthest offices are about 50 miles from Texarkana.

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From June 24, 1972, to May 25, 1973, the Texarkana center received 106 complaints of delayed publications. These delays appeared to be the result of several different causes.

We talked to nine newspaper publishers in the area about mail service. These publishers, located in Texarkana, Linden, Naples, and Atlanta, Texas; and Ashdown, De Queen, Dierks, Nashville, and Hope, Arkansas, distribute about 40,000 newspapers a week through the Texarkana center.

Only one publisher indicated he had had no problems with the Postal Service. Five publishers reported that they had had delivery problems, but that service is now generally acceptable. Three publishers, including Mr. Turner, were dissatisfied with service and one of them termed service "undependable." In the few instances these publishers complained to the Postal Service, their problems were generally resolved.

Mr. Turner's publication enters the postal system at the Atlanta, Texas, Post Office and, according to the Postmaster, is expeditiously processed. The Postmaster said, however, that the Sunday edition of the Citizens Journal, which is received at the Atlanta Post Office on Saturday, does not always arrive in time for Saturday dispatch. Consequently, the Sunday edition could be delivered 1 day late.

We identified other problems, including mislabeling of mail pouches by the post office or the publisher and inadequate surface transportation, which can affect timely delivery of Mr. Turner's publication. Mislabeled pouches are sent to the wrong destination. Surface transportation is particularly important to second-class mail which normally does not travel by air. An example of inadequate surface transportation is the truck routing schedule between Texarkana and Hot Springs, Arkansas. A mail truck leaving Texarkana for Hot Springs is scheduled to arrive at Little Rock, Arkansas, at 1:20 a.m. and connect with another truck departing for Hot Springs at 1:25 a.m. An official at the Texarkana center agreed that, because of the tight schedule, the connection at Little Rock could be missed, resulting in a 1-day delay in mail delivery to Hot Springs.

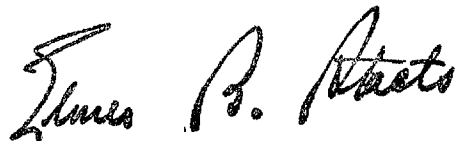
A hiring freeze during most of calendar year 1972, an early retirement program, and an outdated canceling machine have also hindered all mail service at the Texarkana center. Substitute help from the associate post offices has been used to partially alleviate the personnel shortage, but the outdated mail-canceling machine and inadequate surface transportation have continued to cause mail processing delays.

Equipment and personnel problems cause delays only when an occasional overload occurs at the Texarkana center. These problems and transportation problems cause only a 1- or 2-day delay in delivery. These delays did not result in many complaints about service at the Texarkana center; most of the complaints we reviewed involved failure to deliver and lengthy delays in delivery.

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Mail service largely depends on the processing at major postal facilities. We recently reported to Senator Lloyd M. Bentsen on the mail service at certain major postal facilities in Texas. We are enclosing a copy of that report. In addition, at the request of the Chairman, House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, we are gathering information on postal activities in 13 major cities throughout the country. This work is substantially completed and we will provide you with a copy of our report when it is issued.

As you requested, we have not asked the Postal Service to review or formally comment on this report.

Sincerely yours,



Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosure