

Maultier Bote 2025-2

Editorial

We live in a time when mail still arrives in the form of analog letters in our physical mailboxes and as emails in our digital mailboxes. We are hardly aware of how time-consuming letter delivery used to be.

As a child, I once did the following experiment: I folded a piece of yellow blotting paper from my school notebook, wrote my own address on the outside, scribbled a few words on the inside, and dropped this "letter" in the nearest mailbox, without a stamp, of course. I was 90% sure it would never arrive; the mail carrier would surely realize it was a prank. But lo and behold, a few days later my "letter" had arrived. Wow!

After finishing high-school, I worked in the mail sorting section at the Sihlpost in Zurich (the big main post office). I was amazed at the effort that went into delivering even the most exotic items of mail. I had always wondered why letters with the strangest addresses ended up in our mailbox.

And it's not just an insufficient address that can be an obstacle on the way from the sender to the recipient, but also the route itself. With this issue, I would like to remember all the postmen and, above all, their mules, who kept the mail delivery going in all weathers, and pay tribute to them.

News Summer 2025

Hemmer exhibition Ballenberg

A visit to the Hemmer exhibition in the house of Erstfeld is well worth it. Further information can be found on the website of the FLM Ballenberg

Mule Museum Törbel

The Mule Museum is integrated into the tours of the Urchigs Terbil Museum. Guided tours can be booked via their website. Not only are all the buildings inside visited, but those on the Törbelbach stream also demonstrate how the facilities are powered by water.

The Mule Museum can also be visited separately.

For more information and to register, visit the Urchigs Terbil website.

New exhibition space at the Törbel Mule Museum

The old, unused storage room has been renovated and now serves as an additional exhibition space with a spacious display case. From now on, a new temporary exhibition will be presented each year. The aim is to explore topics from the permanent exhibition in greater depth while also providing a variety of impressions. Temporary exhibitions help to make the museum more attractive and appeal to new target groups.

"Mule Mail" exhibition at the Mule Museum in Törbel

From June 22 until the end of the season, the first temporary exhibition will complement the permanent collection. The theme of "Mule Mail" offers a fascinating insight into the history of this postal service in Switzerland, particularly in the canton of Valais, where it was still in operation until the mid-20th century.

The exhibition was conceived and designed by Luzius Heinen and Josefine Jacksch.

Founders' meeting 2026

The next founders' meeting will take place on January 24, 2026, in Visp, at the Gentinetta breeding and riding stable, Grosseye. For more information, please contact Stefanie Gentinetta at +41 79 563 54 35.

Details of all events

More detailed information on all the activities of the Swiss Mule Museum can be found in the agenda: <https://maultier-museum.ch/agenda>

Object of the month – The mailbag

As part of the first display case exhibition at the Mule Museum in Törbel on the current theme of “Mule Post,” the MMS has acquired two historical mailbags. These can be seen in numerous depictions and were commonly used as containers for transporting mail.

Robust companions for the postal service

The requirements for mailbags were high, as they had to meet various criteria in order to be considered suitable containers for letters, newspapers, and parcels. They had to be lightweight, flexible, and at the same time extremely sturdy. Even when heavily filled, they had to be secure and easy to tie. In addition, these bags had to withstand tens of thousands of uses. The first models were made of sackcloth – a coarse fabric made of jute or linen that was often used for sacks and packaging in the past. The closure consisted of a leather strap with a metal buckle. A rope was sewn into the hem to secure the opening during filling.

Variety in design

The design of mailbags varied depending on when they were manufactured, the type of goods to be transported, the means of transport, and the destination. Each country had its own mailbags, which were designed in different colors and patterns, making it easier to identify the type of contents in postal traffic. In the 1980s and 1990s, colored bags made of synthetic materials were added.

Farewell to classic mailbags

The era of traditional mailbags is now over. To increase efficiency and protect shipments, they were gradually replaced at the turn of the century by stackable and robust transport containers made of plastic or metal. These containers have side handles for easier handling and some are equipped with wheels to facilitate transport within sorting centers.

A second life for mailbags

Despite having served their purpose, older mailbags can find a second life. The MMS collection includes a belly strap for a pack saddle made from a mailbag. The fabric was folded diagonally several times and triple-stitched to create a wide belt.

The stylish, handmade products from the Törbel-based company Karlen Swiss are very much up to date. In addition to disused army wool blankets, the company also processes old mailbags into fashionable bags and other accessories.

The topic – The mule mail

Can you hear the rhythmic clatter of horseshoes echoing through the alley? Now a strong voice calls out: “Mail for you, Bertha (or Kari, Rosa, Werner...)!” Outside stands a weather-beaten man wearing a PTT (Post) hat and a coarse smock, next to him a mule waits patiently, heavily laden with large boxes, baskets, and mailbags.

This scene from the past could almost be taken from a nostalgic film – and yet it was not so long ago that this was part of everyday life. Nowadays, animals are hardly ever used for mail delivery. Historically, however, various animal species such as horses, mules, donkeys, dogs, oxen, and camels were used worldwide to transport mail. Pigeons were mainly used in a military context for fast and secret communication—they were not only quiet, but could also cover remarkable distances.

Animals at Swiss Post

Ancient writings impressively document the important role mules played in Roman transport and postal services. An archaeological find was made in the Roman settlement of Salodurum (now Solothurn), indicating the existence of a changing station for horses and mules.

The year 1849 marked a turning point in Swiss communications with the founding of the Swiss Post. It established an extensive network of post offices, stagecoaches, and postmen. In the mid-19th century, shortly before the era of railway construction, the stagecoach system was the main player in the newly organized postal service. When winter set in, sleds were used in the mountains instead of carriages.

In addition, some postmen in the mountains used mules, dogs, and cattle, as these were more suitable for the terrain than carriages. In most cases, however, these animals did not belong to the postal service itself; they were kept by contractually bound concessionaires or individual postal staff. Mules were used as postmen particularly in Ticino, certain valleys in Graubünden, central Switzerland, and above all in Valais.

With the advancement of technology and motorization, the gradual replacement of postal routes carried out with horses and other working animals began in the first half of the 20th century. In 1961, Switzerland's last horse-drawn mail service, on the Avers-Juf line in Graubünden, was finally retired.

Field postal service

A wide variety of animals were used for postal delivery in the army. During the occupation of the border in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, the lack of a structured field postal service became apparent, as the civilian postal service and the improvised field postal service were overwhelmed by the situation. To remedy this situation, the Federal Council established the office of Field Post Director in 1880, making the field post an official part of the army. The field post service, which was launched in 1889, took over the organization of postal services for the Swiss troops. In rough terrain where delivery by cart was not possible, mules were used to maintain communication and provide soldiers with important messages.

The mule mail service in Valais and the [Saas Valley](#)

When the first post bus traveled from [Saas-Grund](#) to [Saas-Fee](#) on July 8, 1951, and a mule train passed by the festive crowd at the afternoon celebration as the final act, with the driver swinging his whip for the last time and cracking the lash, the mule trains through the Saas Valley were finally a thing of the past. The village breathed a sigh of relief, for now the last hardships and dangers of the mule track – especially in winter – had been overcome.

The history of the mule post in the Saas Valley is particularly well documented, and many documents from this era still exist.

Before 1849, however, records of mail delivery in the Saas Valley were still inaccurate. In the first four decades of the 19th century, there was no postal service; a foot messenger from the valley collected the mail in [Visp](#) once a week.

From 1849, the Saas Valley belonged to the post office in Visp and the postal depot in [Stalden](#), where a foot messenger from Saas-Grund collected and distributed the mail twice a week. However, recipients had to collect parcels themselves in Stalden.

In 1856, the mail service was expanded to three times a week, but correspondence was rare. Receiving a letter was a special event, and only five or six people in the entire Saas Valley had a newspaper subscription, including the local priest and the mayor. At that time, not everyone was literate.

In 1871, Saas-Fee received a post office, and from 1883 there was finally a daily mule mail service between Visp and Saas-Fee, but only during the summer months between June 15 and September 15. The mail delivery took place in two stages: from Visp to [Huteggen](#) and from Huteggen to Saas-Fee. At the Hotel Huteggen, the goods were transferred to other mules. The maximum load per pack animal was 125 kilograms and the cost was 14 francs per day. In winter, however, a foot courier continued to be used.

From 1890, there was also a mule service between Stalden and Saas-Fee every Saturday during the winter.

On June 25, 1894, the Saas Valley finally introduced daily mule mail service. In winter, one mule was usually sufficient, as mail delivery was not as important during the winter months. Sometimes avalanches blocked the valley road and mule mail service was suspended for days. In such cases, a courier on skis was used.

Transport to the neighbouring [Mattertal](#) valley was handled by Kronig and Perren from Zermatt until the opening of the Visp-Zermatt railway in 1929. With the start of winter operations on the railway in the same year, the mule mail service was completely discontinued.

The connection from Saas-Grund to Saas-Fee was still served by mule post until 1951, when the Saastal road was finally completed. This old mule track is now signposted as the "[Maultierweg](#)" (mule trail) and is a popular hiking trail for tourists.

At its peak, the mule post in the Saas Valley comprised up to 120 animals, which shows its great importance before the expansion of the roads.

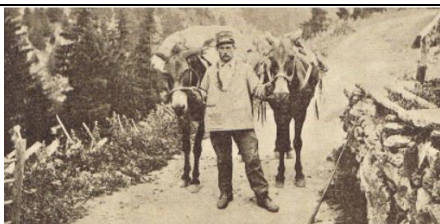
Mule mail in Supai

In other parts of the world, mules were once indispensable helpers in mail delivery, but over time they were increasingly replaced by motorized vehicles. However, the legendary mule mail has not completely disappeared! In the Grand Canyon, the US Postal Service has been using mules since the 1930s to deliver letters and packages to the Havasupai tribe.

Six days a week, 10 to 22 mules traverse a challenging 9-mile route down to Supai, the village at the bottom of the canyon. This tour takes about three hours, while the return trip, steeply uphill, takes up to five hours.

The US Postal Service has even designed a special stamp for this mule train for the post office in Supai Village.

This route is the last official connection in the US that relies on mules and is likely to be one of the last of its kind in the world.



The post office in [Maderanertal](#), Canton Uri. It is transported by mules, as the road is not accessible to carts. Neither buses, cars, nor bicycles can reach this remote high valley. Photographed for "Schweizerfamilie" by N. Hinder, Lucerne. From the magazine: Schweizerfamilie, 1904.



From the [Lötschental](#) valley in Valais: Mules carry mail from the village of Blatten to the Goppenstein station on the Lötschberg railway. Photograph by A. Ryffel, photographer, Stäfa. From: Die Schweizer-Familie, September 30, 1922.



Mule mail

A prolonged interruption in the operation of the [Mürren](#) railway forced the PTT to resort to a primitive means of transport: mule mail. Now that the Mürren railway is back in operation, the last letters for mule mail are being delivered. The mules had to cover a two-hour journey from Lauterbrunnen to Mürren. From: Bieler Tagblatt 05.11.1949

916	0.0	...	10 00	16 30	Blatten (Lötschen) 466d	14 00	19 45	...
	3.5	...	11 15	18 00	Fafleralp	12 45	18 30	...
Vom 1. VI.—30. IX.; übrige Zeit eingestellt								
Mautdienst								
i vom 1. VII.—31. VIII.								

Timetable for the mule mail between [Blatten](#) (Lötschen) and Fafleralp. Date and source unknown.

Gruben in the [Turtman Valley](#).

The influx of summer visitors is increasing rapidly here every year. The newly enlarged Hotel Schwarzhorn (Jäger brothers) has been fully booked for some time now. In addition, some tourists are content to stay in alpine huts and barns due to a lack of rooms. The mule post also arrives daily, heavily laden. This is proof that the climate here is pleasant, the natural beauty abundant, and the hospitality good. From: Walliser Bote 13.08.1904

The Postjosi (nickname for Post-Joseph)

By Ludwig Imesch

Foreword

Nowadays, when there are plans to erect a stone monument to the Valais mule somewhere on the Planta in Sion, the following story is particularly relevant. The story appeared in the "Schweizerischer Beobachter" newspaper, in the series: We tell stories about originals. It was written in memory of the many well-known and unknown "muleteers" and mule drivers, but also in memory of the faithful, willing, and patient four-legged animals that once navigated the steepest mountain paths and narrowest passages with the confidence of tightrope walkers.

He was one of those hard-working, loyal mule drivers who used to be found everywhere in Valais before the stench of gasoline and the noise of engines took over the roads. He got his nickname because he carried the mail from the valley village up to [Eggen](#) (village) year after year. The most important thing to him was his Lisa. This was by no means his wife, as he remained unmarried. For a dozen years, Lisa was his companion on his lonely daily mail route, the good mule with intelligent eyes and strong legs that carried the mail parcels and other loads up to the village. There are many stories circulating about our Postjosi. Here are a few examples:

"We'll soon be in the forest, then we'll be in the shade," he consoled the animal in summer. "Soon we'll have solid ground under our feet again," he whispered in Lisa's ear in winter as he led her across the icy patches. "Now we're already at the barn, it's not far to the church, and then just a little further and you'll be in the stable. Lisa!" The animal pricked up its ears at these words and nodded eagerly, as if it understood what was being said.

Halfway up the mountain, the path led steeply uphill. Before this climb, Josi stopped, and the mule waited without being told to. The driver unloaded one of the heavy mailbags from the animal and threw it over his shoulders. "Come on, Lisa! It'll be easier now." The mule whinnied and nimbly climbed the steep slope, while Josi panted behind with his load.

When the path levelled out, Lisa stood still and looked back at her driver. He secured the mailbag back on the bast. "Good, good, Lisa! Now it's over. Hey!"

Many people smiled at this touching love for animals, but Josi paid no attention to the ridicule. "Animals are also God's creatures," he used to say, "and not the worst ones. There are people with less character than my Lisa." If Postjosi saw anywhere that an animal was being tormented or overworked, he would fly into a rage. More than one boy's cheek has felt the force of his powerful hand when frogs were tortured, birds were pelted with stones, dogs were chased, or any other animal was tormented.

Once, so the story goes, he encountered another cart driver who was driving his overloaded mule up the aforementioned steep path with curses and lashes of his whip. Josi snatched the leather whip from the brutal man, gave him a few hard blows, and then forced him to take some of the load off the animal. The punished cart driver is said to have never overworked an animal again.

On a foggy winter day, two vagabonds lay in wait in a hidden spot for the mail, or rather the mailbags, in which they suspected there was a large sum of money. Josi never said much about the incident, but the fact was that he overpowered the two villains, tied them up, and bound them to the mule with ropes. He then brought them up to the village. There were never any more reports of attacks.

In later years, there were plans to build a road to Eggen. Josi was one of the few opponents of the project, not only because he would lose his income as postmaster, but also because he rightly feared that the road would cause the old, simple life in the mountain village to disappear and be replaced by noisy activity and many unsuitable influences. But when construction of the road began, tools, carts, and construction machinery often disappeared during the night, so that the workers had to search for a long time the next day before they could continue. Josi and his Lisa were soon suspected of committing the nightly misdeeds, but he was never caught and nothing could be proven against him. Of course, the road was completed.

The day came when the first post bus, which would henceforth do Josi and Lisa's work, drove into the village, honking and kicking up dust. The postman Josi and his mule no longer heard the loud sounds of the new era. Brown Lisa lay stretched out in the stable – dead. The master had given her the coup de grâce, thus saving her from the butcher. Josi himself, who had been shaking with fever for days, was on his last legs. ...

As the arrival of the post bus was celebrated in the community hall with many speeches and even more Fendant wine, the death bell tolled. Everyone knew immediately who the last call was for. The festive gathering rose from their seats! They knew that with the Postjosi, the good old days were being laid to rest, and that made them sad in the midst of the festive celebrations.

From: Walliser Bote, March 6, 1964

...and the bright sound of the post horn echoes down from the mountain

Some notes on the history of the postal service and its development in the [Vispental](#) valley and the rest of Valais

By Karl Lehner, Zermatt

(...) When [Zermatt](#) had around 1,000 guests, all of whom had to wait for the telephone and telegrams, and all those who did not receive any mail because the avalanches had blocked everything and torn down the wires, it was anything but pleasant. These interruptions sometimes lasted up to ten days. And so the writer often skied through the valley with his postilions Kronig Theodor, Perren Viktor, and the postmen Perren Hubert and Perren Walter, carrying a rucksack full of telegrams and letters, all of which brought news to snowbound Zermatt.

On February 28, 1928, we hiked to Visp and sorted the mail there during the night, making bags weighing 15-20 kg. The next day, we took the train to Stalden and, with a dozen men, carried this correspondence on foot to [St. Niklaus](#).

We rode a mule to [Herbriggen](#) and carried all the mail on its back to [Randa](#). The people of [Täsch](#) and Zermatt had partially cleared the road, so Kronig Theodor and I transported the mail to Zermatt on an old mule. But the "Lüegelwang," an avalanche below Zermatt, had not been cleared, so around midnight we traveled with the mule, sled, and mail over this 300-meter-wide avalanche. We often sank up to our hips in the snow. It was a miracle that we brought the mule back to Zermatt alive.

After many adventures, we finally arrived in Zermatt at around one o'clock in the morning, where we were eagerly awaited. Mrs. Lehner promptly distributed the mail to the compartments. The porters immediately took the mail to the hotels, where the guests, dressed only in pajamas or nightgowns, hurried to receive their letters and hear at least some news from the outside world. The only news we received from outside at that time came from my radio, which I had owned since 1924. Such were the times back then, and the whole of Zermatt breathed a sigh of relief when the telegraph and telephone lines were finally laid entirely in cable. (...)

From: Walliser Bote, May 25, 1956