**The history of mule mail**

**Mule mail in Switzerland**

Writings by ancient authors illustrate the important role played by mules in Roman transport and postal services. An archaeological find was made in the Roman settlement of Salodurum (Solothurn), mainly comprising mule carcasses and associated with an exchange station for horses and mules.

The year 1849 marks the foundation of the Swiss Post. It had a nationwide network of post offices, stagecoaches and postmen. Around the middle of the 19th century, shortly before the start of railway construction, the system of stagecoaches was the most widespread within the newly founded Swiss Post. In winter, sledges were used instead of coaches in the mountains.

In addition, some postmen used mules, dogs and cattle in the mountains. In most cases, the post office did not own the animals itself; they were kept by contractually bound concessionaires and individual postal workers.

Mules were used for postal transport in Ticino, in certain Graubünden valleys, in central Switzerland and above all in Valais.

Between 1906 and 1961, postal routes and tours using horses and other working animals were gradually replaced by motorised mail. In 1961, the last horse-drawn mail service in Switzerland was discontinued on the Avers-Juf line.

**Field post service**

The border occupation in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 revealed the lack of an organised field post, as the civilian post and the improvised field post were overstretched. In 1880, the Federal Council therefore created the post of field post director, making the field post part of the army. The field post service, which was introduced in 1889, organised the postal service for Swiss military personnel and, during the Second World War, included both the postal service for Swiss troops and for interned foreign soldiers.

Until 1992, the field post was under the control of the PTT General Directorate. After the PTT was split up, it was assigned to today's Swiss Post. Private letters and parcels weighing up to 5 kg sent to members of the armed forces on duty are still postage-free today.

The first Swiss soldier stamps without an imprinted tax value appeared during the First World War and were issued by individual troop units. Each unit was able to design its own stamp with its own subject, resulting in historically valuable little works of art.

**The mule post in the Saas Valley**

Before 1849, records of post delivery in the Saas Valley were inaccurate. In the first four decades of the 19th century there was no postal traffic; a foot messenger collected the mail from Visp every week.

From 1849, the Saas Valley belonged to the post office in Visp and the post depot in Stalden, where the foot messenger collected and distributed the mail twice a week. Parcels had to be collected from Stalden by the recipients themselves.

In 1856, the messenger service was extended to three weekly courses, but letter traffic was still rare. In the entire Saas Valley, only 5 to 6 people subscribed to a newspaper, including the local priest and the mayor.

In 1871, Saas-Fee was given a post office, and from 1883 there was a daily mule mail service between Visp and Saas-Fee, which ran in two stages: Visp - Huteggen and Huteggen - Saas-Fee. The goods were reloaded at the Hotel Huteggen. The maximum load per mule was 125 kilograms and the cost was 14 francs per day. In winter, a pedestrian messenger continued to be used.

From 1890, there was also a mule route between Stalden and Saas-Fee every Saturday during the winter. Transport to the Mattertal valley was provided by the Zermatt Kronig and Perren until the opening of the Visp-Zermatt railway in 1929.

On 25 June 1894, the Saas Valley finally introduced the daily mule post. In winter, a mule was usually sufficient, but sometimes the mail was also transported on skis.

The shortest route between Saas-Grund and Saas-Fee was served by the mule post until 1948, when the Saas Valley road was completed in 1949-1951.

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

**Mule mail outside Switzerland**

In various parts of the world, mules were once used to deliver mail. In many places, they have now been replaced by motorised vehicles. However, mule mail does not seem to have disappeared completely.

In the Grand Canyon, the US Postal Service has been using mules since the 1930s and they are still responsible for delivering mail to the Havasupai tribe today. Six days a week, 10 to 22 mules transport mail and other goods along a 14.5 kilometre trail down to the village at the bottom of the canyon. This trip takes about three hours, while the return journey takes five hours.

For the post office in Supai Village, which lies at the foot of the canyon, the US Postal Service has designed a special postmark for the mule train.

This route is believed to be the last official mule mail route in the United States and one of the last of its kind in the world.