By flipping through an old Chuchin zemstvo stamp catalog, we can get a good sense of how many stamps were produced by each of the local county (uezd) governments, known as zemstvos, in Imperial Russia [1]. The majority of zemstvos were moderate in their output. There were some champions, however, if we go by the highest catalog numbers for individual zemstvos: 95 for Poltava, 122 for Gryazovets, and 150 for Bogorodsk. These local governments took such obvious advantage of the demand for zemstvo stamps that we would be justified in guessing that the services side of their postal operations were perhaps no more than a weak adjunct to the lucrative business of issuing stamps for philatelists.

Certainly there were profits to be made. We know that from the well-documented example of Poltava postmaster Gan’ko’s robust output [2] and from a contemporary writer’s article dripping with sarcasm regarding the many varieties of Bogorodsk postage stamps [3]. But Gryazovets, a city name that can be loosely translated as Mudville, has not attracted much interest or attention from postal researchers despite its impressive array of stamps [4]. I’ve always wondered why the Gryazovets county local government printed so many different stamps and how much actual work their post office did between 1873 and 1913, the years of operation shown in zemstvo stamp catalogs.

A while ago curiosity got the better of me, and with the help of a library specialist I was able to acquire scans of more than 200 pages of Gryazovets county council records from 1870-1914 that are kept at the Russian State Library in Moscow. The information contained in those yearly reports about the ongoing operations of the Gryazovets zemstvo post creates an interesting and surprisingly complex picture of how that county’s postal system grew and evolved. It is the aim of this article to provide a look at how that post developed during the more than 40 years of its existence and to tell a bit about the people involved in its operation. It is a fascinating story that also shows how some counties within the provinces of the Russian empire seized on the self-government opportunities afforded to them by the liberal Zemstvo Reform laws instituted under Emperor Alexander II in 1864.

Sessions of the Gryazovets county council were generally held once a year, opening at the end of September. The council’s job was to apportion the county budget among local government responsibilities, such as veterinary and medical services, including smallpox vaccinations; social aid services; schools; construction and repair of roads and bridges; disaster plans and their mitigation; and any other issues that were of local importance. For the council’s session in the fall of 1870, the zemstvo government staff provided a report regarding a proposal to local county governments by the Vologda provincial council for creating a local zemstvo postal service. County staff studied the proposal and found it disadvantageous because of a number of central government post regulations that would have required local governments to provide
numerous official services at no cost to the users, but at a price to the county. Staff advised against the idea and the council agreed. That was, however, a typical Russian "first no," which generally means "let's think about it."

As a result, ongoing consideration was given to the creation of a local post during most of 1871. By fall, when the county council met again, a very detailed proposal was submitted regarding the organization and operation of a local post and the services that it would provide.

The county staff had prepared well. They contacted the Gryazovets government post office to obtain information on the volume of outgoing and incoming mail at the county level that was handled by that post in Gryazovets. They made cost calculations by estimating the income from ordinary mail deliveries, priced at 3 kopeks apiece, to and between local rural district (volost) administrations. Mail sent outside the county would be charged at the government postal rate plus a 2-kopek zemstvo stamp fee. Deliveries of periodicals were to be at a 50-kopek yearly flat rate, and deliveries of parcels up to a maximum weight of 10 funt (later changed to 20 funt) at 3 kopeks per funt (1 funt = 0.9 lb or 0.41 kg). They concluded that such a zemstvo post would bring the county approximately 400 rubles per year, of which half would go to reimburse rural district administrations for their work.

The post's expenses would include hiring a postmaster at a yearly salary of 300 rubles, two clerks at 100 rubles each, and two postmen who would make one weekly round throughout the rural districts at a salary of 120 rubles each. The printing of various forms, stamps, and other documents was estimated at 75 rubles, and a 100-ruble one-time expense was added for weight scales, postal bags, and other tools of the trade. In sum, subtracting the 400 ruble income from 815 rubles of regular expenses, the projected operating cost of a postal service for the zemstvo
would be approximately 400 rubles per year.

It sounded reasonable, and the county council accepted the proposal to institute its own zemstvo post starting on January 1, 1872. It did ask the county government to make some changes to the proposal, the main one being that the zemstvo post would not be handling any money or registered mail until it gained sufficient experience.

After a one year delay, the Gryazovets zemstvo post began accepting mail for delivery on January 16, 1873. By the time the local zemstvo councilmen conducted their annual meeting, initial results for the new zemstvo post were in: from mid-January through September 1, 2,156 letters were handled through the zemstvo rural district administration offices. There were 647 notifications sent to addresses informing them that money and registered mail for them was waiting to be picked up at the government post office. Additionally, 1,295 periodical publications were delivered, 685 letters were sent from the district administrations to addresses outside the county, and 7,895 pieces of official business mail were for the most part handled at no charge. The sum received through sales of stamps and delivery charges during the first 7-1/2 months came to almost 96 rubles, with another 15 rubles expected to be earned before the end of the year. The startup cost of the Gryazovets zemstvo post actually came in under budget! Of the 800 rubles allocated to it in 1872, only 515 were spent. Expenses were cut by hiring just one postman, Fillip Mikhailov, instead of the two originally proposed. His boss, the postmaster, was Andrei Evgrafovich Volotskoy. Both men would serve the zemstvo for many years to come.

**Gryazovets County and its postal service**

In order to make sense of some of the statistical data contained in the yearly zemstvo council reports, a brief description of the county is in order. It was created in 1780 and covered a territory of just over 3,000 square miles, an area 500 square miles larger than the state of Delaware. The Gryazovets county was named after its county seat, a town of approximately 3,000 inhabitants located in a swampy area -- hence its name, derived from the word "mud." The total county budget expenses for medicine, veterinary services, schools, and local government in 1883 was 45,000 rubles.

In 1885 its total population was less than 100,000. Gryazovets county was heavily agricultural. The peasants cultivated rye, oats, and flax, and raised dairy animals for milk, butter, and cheese. As in many non-industrial areas, quite a few residents traveled to other locations in Russia for seasonal employment and sent remittances home. A telling detail about the character of Gryazovets is found in the 1881 zemstvo council's record: an offer by Russia's Interior Ministry and its post to establish telegraph service in Gryazovets at a cost of 600 rubles was declined by the council. Why? The reason given in the county record is as follows: "Based on the fact that the Gryazovets county has no industrial or factory production, as well as no offices of trade companies, and considering that telegraph communication by inhabitants of the county is exceedingly rare, the Gryazovets county zemstvo has no reason to participate in the Telegraph Department's project." A similar offer in 1889 was also rejected.

In the beginning of the 1870s it was linked to the outside world by the Vologda-Yaroslavl rail line, along which there were imperial government postal stations, including one in Gryazovets. Before the zemstvo post was instituted, local inhabitants had to devise their own ways of picking up their post and mailing letters from that single post office. Considering the distances and the quality of roads in a generally flat area that underwent regular spring thaw floods, maintaining a correspondence was not a convenient or speedy proposition. For one thing, it would take some time to even find out that mail was waiting for an addressee at the post office.

The zemstvo post changed that. Mail was delivered by the zemstvo postman, Fillip Mikhailov. He used horse-drawn wagons and drivers provided on three-year contracts with the county by private companies that serviced all county government transportation needs. The zemstvo mail route connecting the administrations of almost all of the rural districts comprising Gryazovets county would begin and end once a week in the county seat. [5] The zemstvo mailman would pick up notifications of registered and money mail from the government post office in Gryazovets, as well as official and private letters and periodical publications and parcels for individuals living in various parts of the county. He would then deliver them to the appropriate rural district administration offices. The mail carrier also picked up mail from those offices for delivery within the county or to other parts of Russia via the government post. Obviously this was not the home delivery that we are used to these days, but for most
The petition cover shown here was addressed to "His Excellency Mister Governor of Vologda [province]. [From the] Former government peasants of Gryazovets county, the Novo-Nikolsky administrative district, Gredievka [?] village." It bears a 4-kopek Gryazovets stamp postmarked July 24, 1891. The letter was delivered to the government post office in Gryazovets where a 2-kopek stamp was affixed and cancelled on July 25th. Later that day it was delivered to Vologda, as shown by the Vologda post receiver postmark on the back. (Scan of envelope provided courtesy of Arkady Averov)

people it was a shorter and considerably more convenient trip to the district office rather than to the city of Gryazovets. Making arrangements to pick up or send mail became much easier as well.

Stamps

The first Gryazovets stamps were issued in 1873, the year that the zemstvo post began operating. They were of a very plain hand-stamped, 2-kopek design. The stamps were probably made by the clerks in the Gryazovets local post office (Figure 1). You may recall that earlier we mentioned that the charge for delivery of mail inside the zemstvo was three kopeks. Why, then, make 2-kopek stamps? From the documentation available, it becomes apparent that the 3-kopek charge was taken in cash only at the rural district administrations (and as one of the yearly reports informs us, the local officials there were not meticulous about it). Any mail addressed outside the zemstvo needed a 2-kopek zemstvo stamp plus a sufficient additional amount to cover the cost of government postage. It was evidently for this type of mail that the first Gryazovets stamps were issued.

While such hand-printed stamp sheets were in service for six or seven years, the paper they were printed on changed from time to time and so did the ink. In 1880 a new 2-kopek stamp was produced in a professional printing shop (Figure 2). By that time the total number of pieces of mail handled by the zemstvo post was approaching 40,000 per year, and postman Fillip Mikhailov had asked the council for his second salary raise. In his petition to the council Mikhailov said that he spent 208 days every year in a mail wagon, and for that reason could not hold another job in order to earn additional income. As with the first time, in 1878, when he had asked for a 30-ruble raise, his honesty and efforts were found to be laudable, and a 50-ruble raise was granted, bringing his salary to 200 rubles a year. A 60-ruble raise for Mikhailov's chief, postmaster Volotskoy, had been approved by the council a year earlier.

Mikhailov served as the zemstvo's sole postal carrier for a quarter of a century, until 1898, the year when the Zemstvo post was finally authorized to deliver money, insured, and registered mail. This move had consistently been rejected by the zemstvo council because it would entail too much risk. But when the next long-term postman, Mikhail Petrov Benev, established himself in his position and first petitioned the council for a raise, he noted an interesting fact about how his predecessor actually worked. It turns out that Fillip Mikhailov did manage to make a few rubles on the side despite his arguments to the contrary. According to Benev, Mikhailov "made a considerable income by privately carrying money and parcels from various individuals, including village elders, tax collectors, and others." The need for such service clearly existed, and Mikhailov had unofficially filled the void.

During the 1880 zemstvo session, the council made a decision to eliminate the 3-kopek mail
carrying charge, which was not working well because of a lack of accountability. The council voted to double the 2-kopek stamp rate to 4 kopeks and apply it to all ordinary private mail and notifications. That rate held at least until the turn of the century and possibly longer, despite occasional efforts to change it.

As a result, beginning in 1881 all stamp issues were of the 4-kopek denomination. The four issues printed between 1881 and 1887, judging by their plain design, contain nothing but a letterpressed text inside a frame (Figure 3). They were probably meant to satisfy actual postal needs rather than the philatelic market, even though those market forces were already at work. The council report for 1884 shows that 58 rubles were received by the post for sale of stamps to other locations, while 459 rubles were collected from the sale of stamps locally for the delivery of 9,844 letters and 1,647 notifications of secured mail waiting to be picked up at the government post office. The total of those two types of deliveries, 11,491 pieces of mail, multiplied by four kopeks each, adds up to the reported 459 ruble amount. The following year that take was 26 rubles for sales to collectors and 462 rubles for postal needs. Unfortunately, most zemstvo reports only show the total amount received for all stamps sold, so we cannot know for sure how many were bought by stamp dealers and collectors in all of the years, but we can make calculations based on the figures provided in the reports for the total pieces of private mail carried.

In 1889 the Gryazovets postmaster finally saw that stamp sales to collectors could be a significant moneymaker for the post. Perhaps he was pushed in that direction by the comments of one of the council members, Vasilii Mihailovich Vasiliev, who complained at the 1888 council session that the Gryazovets zemstvo post was always in need of funds from the county treasury, while other zemstvo posts like the one in Kadnikov were a source of income for their counties.

Thus between 1889 and 1891 the Gryazovets zemstvo post issued a large set of 4-kopek stamps (Figure 4), all pretty much identical in their plain appearance, but printed in a wide variety of colors and tete-beche arrangements. The market responded enthusiastically. In 1888 total stamp sales were just 474 rubles. In 1889 that figure shot up to 724 rubles, of which 514 rubles can be accounted for by genuine postal use, and 209 rubles were received from the sale of approximately 5,200 stamps to philatelists.

It is important to note that while the Gryazovets zemstvo post began catering to collectors' needs in a very obvious way, it was still doing a growing business in actual mail and parcel deliveries. In 1889, the year when stamp production took on an overtly philatelic dimension, the volume of all types of mail carried by the Gryazovets zemstvo post was 48,685 pieces. That volume kept increasing annually, so that by 1913 it was approaching 220,000 pieces per year.

It was under postmaster Volotskoy's administration that the visually more interesting stamp designs first began to appear. The 1891-92 set moved away from the plain text format to show the county seal. It was printed in various colors which, according to published philatelic research, were determined by the different colors of tea labels that the printer was producing at the same time as the stamps [6]. Those new stamps were quite popular with collectors. The sale of stamps for non-postal use was approximately 160 rubles in 1891 and 140 rubles in 1892 (Figure 5).

But Andrey Evgrafovich Volotskoy, who had been the postmaster since the Gryazovets post's inception, was evidently a man set in his ways. His efforts to generate revenue through the sale of stamps were half-hearted, judging by the generally poor quality and boring appearance of imperforated stamps that were printed on his watch. In any case, he retired in 1893 and the zemstvo council voted to provide him with a 120-ruble pension. (Oddly enough, just two years later that pension was cancelled by the council in a secret-ballot vote. The record provides no reason for such a move.)
The new postmaster, V.A. Illuviev, immediately raised the bar with beautiful new, professionally-produced postal issues. Starting in 1893, all Gryazovets zemstvo stamps were issued with perforations. Two different sets of five 4-kopek stamps each were printed in 1893, and six sets in many combinations came out in 1894 (Figure 6). The market reacted accordingly: approximately 170 rubles were earned from outside stamp sales in 1894, 250 rubles the following year, and approximately 220 rubles in 1896.

One of the 1894 sets warrants a closer look (Figure 7). It shows a man standing with a whip in his left hand and a postal bag in his right. The catalogs identify him as a "yamschik," a coachman. That designation may not be correct – it may actually be a picture of the postman. It is true that the postal carrier and the coach driver worked in tandem, but in Gryazovets the coach driver was not an employee of the zemstvo post, nor was he the one responsible for carrying the mail. The postal bag seems to suggest that it is the postal carrier, rather than the driver, who is depicted on the stamps. The whip in his hand may have been used not to drive the coach but to ward off unfriendly dogs that seemed to have been a staple of village life in rural Russia. If that is the case, the person depicted on the stamps is quite possibly Fillip Mikhailov, because he was the only postal carrier that the Gryazovets zemstvo employed from 1873 to 1897, and the stamps were issued three years before he retired [7].

A full service post office and its budget

After 26 years of deliberations regarding the advisability of having the zemstvo post deliver money mail, a service sorely needed by Gryazovets county's population (and already being partially provided "under the table" by Mikhailov), the zemstvo council finally gave the go-ahead in 1897 to officially institute such a service. But then the government post office balked.

The Gryazovets zemstvo postmaster approached his counterparts in the government post
office and asked for their cooperation in simplifying delivery of special mail. The post office responded by explaining that its rules prohibited a simple transfer of money and registered mail to third parties for delivery to addressees. The only way that could be done was if the addressee provided the government post office an authorization written on a notification form of mail being held, indicating that the Gryazovets postmaster, as proxy, had permission to pick up that specific piece of mail. The authorization needed to be signed by the addressee and his local district administration chief.

The zemstvo post was forced to comply. Its office developed a strictly choreographed system of accountability for handling special mail. (A translation of those amazing rules will be published in one of our future Journals.) They printed 100 copies of the new rules and regulations and sent them to government offices, various officials, some of the local landowners, and the rural district administration offices. In addition to the new zemstvo regulations, an explanation was included on how to authorize the zemstvo post to deliver registered, insured, and money letters. By May 1, 1898, the zemstvo post finally began providing this critically needed service.

Adjustments were also made to the zemstvo postal rates. Plain sealed letters and postal cards still needed a 4-kopek stamp, but the handling of registered letters required six kopeks postage. The service charge for money mail was 0.5 kopeks for every ruble sent, up to a maximum of 300 rubles. On amounts totaling more than 300 rubles, the charge was 0.25 kopeks per ruble. (The inherent unfairness of this charge was eventually realized and a correction was made to have the 0.25 kopek charged on the amount that exceeded 300 rubles.)

The new services resulted in considerably more work for the zemstvo postmaster, his two clerks, the mail carrier, and the local rural district chiefs. A much more detailed registry of mail had to be instituted for the zemstvo post office in Gryazovets and for the district offices. The mailman, Benev, had to personally carry all of the correspondence, no matter what the season. Previously, according to one of Benev's petitions for a raise, his predecessor Mikhailov would simplify his work during mud season by asking the coach driver to take the mail along with him on his other jobs. In addition, the volume of all types of mail continued to increase every year. So salary raises became a regular subject for consideration and approval by the zemstvo council.

The ability to deliver money letters, cater to the philatelic market, and handle a rising volume of mail certainly had a positive effect on the zemstvo post's budget. The proverbial corner was actually turned in 1894, when the post became self-sufficient according to the accounting method that was being used. By 1901 there was even a profit of 408 rubles that was deposited in a bank for any future needs. Ironically, in 1900, council member Vasiliev -- who 12 years earlier had insisted that the zemstvo post should become profitable -- gave a speech to the council in which he declared that the zemstvo post was not intended to be a money-making proposition, and suggested lowering the postage rates.

In the meantime, the production of stamps clearly intended for boosting profits by sales to philatelists continued. In 1897 four sets of stamps (Chuchin #79-102) were printed (Figure 8). There was a lull in 1898 with just one reprint of a earlier stamp, possibly for actual postal use. Then in 1899 the last of the overtly philatelic issues was printed. Its stamps mimicked the designs of well-known foreign stamps. Six of the stamps, like so many before them, were 4-kopek, but the seventh one paid the new 6-kopek registered mail rate (Figure 9).
A question arises regarding the profits from selling stamps to collectors in 1900 and afterwards. The total amount earned from sales of stamps for all needs in 1900 was 1,264 rubles. If we take into account all of the private mail and notifications handled at 4 kopeks each (24,189 pieces) and the 3,143 registered letters mailed at 6 kopeks each, the remainder is just 93 rubles earned from philatelic sales. But it’s hard to say how many of the letters were actually franked with stamps, so the real profit from stamp sales to collectors may have been greater. Odds are that those profits did drop, because in 1902 the Gryazovets zemstvo ordered its next issue of 2-, 4-, and 6-kopek stamps to be printed at the Government Securities Printing Office in St. Petersburg. Most likely they were intended for actual postal use (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Zemstvo stamps produced at the Government Securities Printing Office is St. Petersburg (Ardatov type)

The final years

The giddiness of the zemstvo administration and council over the fact that its post office was effective, efficient, and profitable must have dissipated quickly when a 1,200-ruble deficit was announced in 1908. The reason for that was the establishment of a second weekly delivery, which required hiring and equipping a second postman. That experiment was quickly terminated. But in 1909 there was bad news again, when someone finally noticed the proverbial elephant in the accounting room. Somehow, for the first 36 years of the zemstvo post, the cost of transportation had not been taken into consideration! Probably it was because horses and coaches were the responsibility of a different department, and the zemstvo post made no direct payments for that service. In 1909 it was agreed that the cost of coach and driver should be added to the expense column. The results can be seen in the 1910 financial report: what would have been a 200-ruble profit under the old accounting system became a loss of 1,744 rubles. By then, however, the local post had become a totally indispensable institution in Gryazovets county. One of the council members, V.V. Troitskiy, even called for dropping the postage rates. The post, he exclaimed, was one of the most indispensable cultural necessities of society! The council agreed and lowered the cost of mailing a letter to 3 kopeks. In 1912 there were further cuts: the cost of a registered letter, which earlier had increased from 6 to 7 kopeks, reverted to the 6-kopek price; and postal cards, the rate for which had dropped from 4 kopeks to 3 in 1900, was further lowered to 2 kopeks. The final locally-printed set of zemstvo stamps issued between 1909 and 1913 corresponds to these rates and includes 1-, 3-, 4-, 5-, and 7-kopek stamps. The 2-kopek stamps continued to be produced in St. Petersburg until 1913.

Apparently the Gryazovets zemstvo post did not suddenly discontinue operations when its stamps were no longer being issued. The zemstvo council report from 1914 shows that in the previous year, the local post had handled a total of 206,226 pieces of mail, of which almost one-half were periodical publications. The income from stamp sales was 2,135 rubles, and fees from registered and money letters brought in 890 rubles, for a total of 3,025 rubles.
Operating costs were 2,459 rubles. So the zemstvo post was once again profitable. In August 1914 Russia entered World War I, and during its fall session the zemstvo council decided to provide free postal delivery for mail from soldiers on active duty and for mail to them from family members in Gryazovets county.

Considering that financially the zemstvo post was doing well and that it had made no plans to disband in 1915, we could assume that it remained viable until the Revolution in 1917 but simply stopped issuing stamps. Unfortunately, I do not have the council records for the WWI years that would be needed for a definitive answer.

**Conclusion**

Gryazovets county was one of the lesser developed counties in the European part of the Russian Empire, but it had an active zemstvo council that took its responsibilities seriously, mostly kept its expenses under control, asked its staff to work out the details of any proposals before making recommendations, and was not hasty in making decisions. The council generally supported its postal operation. It was lucky enough to have found employees willing to do a job that was constantly expanding, and postmasters who realized that profits could be made from the philatelic market, capitalizing on that when money was sorely needed, from about 1889 to 1899. But that's ten years out of perhaps 44 years of operation. Was the Gryazovets zemstvo post opportunistic in capitalizing on the stamp collecting market? Of course it was, but it was also a genuinely busy postal operation that was instrumental in improving the local economy (and, indirectly, the local literacy rate) and connecting its citizens to the rest of the world.

An Easter greeting card mailed in April of 1911 from a government post office (the town cancellation has not been deciphered yet) and addressed to "Gryazovets, Vologda Province / via zemstvo post / village Pal'tsevo / Mr. Petr Nikitopomonovich Metevsky". The card is properly franked with a 3-kopek zemstvo stamp and cancelled with a Gryazovets zemstvo postmark. A government post receiver CDS "Gryazovets / (?) 4 11" is located on the left. It is a mystery why that postmark covers the zemstvo stamp. The author thanks Arkady Avrorov for providing an image of this postcard.

**Notes**

3. L. Finik, N. Sorokin, "It Wasn't So Different in the Old Days", *Rossica* #164, p. 62.
4. One brief description of the Gryazovets zemstvo post was published by Yu. Rudnikov, "Новое о земской почте и ее марках" [New Information About the Zemstvo Post and Its Stamps], *Sovetskiy Kollekcioner* #12, Moscow, pp. 52-54.
5. The documents obtained provide very few names of villages that were located along the zemstvo post's scheduled route, but there is a list of the rural districts which were served by the zemstvo post. That list was published in the 1889 Journal of the Regular Gryazovets County Council Meeting. It includes the Avnegskaya, Novo-Nikol'skaya, Ogarkovskaya, Vedrekovskaya, Gavr'il'cevskaya, Panfilovskaya, Stepurinskaya, Rostilovskaya, Zhernokovskaya and Ramenskaya rural districts (volostи). The post was also delivered to the second district police chief, and to the magistrate court judge of the second court district.
7. The author asked the Gryazovets local administration and museum whether they have images of Mikhailov and Illuyev. Unfortunately, they could not find the requested portraits.