

Owney, the Postal Dog

by Bill Steeg

As a postal worker I have always been fascinated by the story of Owney, a mixed breed dog who became famous in the late 19th Century as the unofficial mascot of the Railway Mail Service. A long standing slight has finally been righted with the issuance of a stamp in honor of this loyal canine in Albany, NY on July 27 of this year.



The story began in November of 1888, when a stray dog appeared around the post office in Albany. Kindhearted postal clerks allowed the dog to come in from the cold, and he liked the surroundings. Soon he would climb into the mailbags and hitch a ride on the mail trains; however, he always seemed to make it back to Albany.

Railway mail clerks soon regarded Owney as good luck on their trips and would provide tags for the dog. (According to the website of the National Postal Museum, no train Owney rode on was ever involved in a wreck.) Soon, Owney made even longer voyages, including a round the world trip where he would visit Japan and Egypt. The Japanese postal authorities were particularly fascinated by the dog, being as he by now was loaded down with tags. (They thought he was owned by some important person, maybe even royalty!)

Owney's story ended tragically in 1897 when he bit a postal worker in Toledo, Ohio and was shot as a result. Mail clerks from all over the nation raised money to have Owney's body preserved, and he was displayed at the Post Office Department's headquarters in Washington, DC until 1911, when he was given to the Smithsonian Institution. Since then, he has rested in peace at the Smithsonian and currently is at the atrium of the National Postal Museum in Washington.

I feel this stamp is long overdue and may help to get more children interested in stamp collecting. Now, maybe we can honor a brave railway cat who valiantly kept mice away from letters!