

Mail Flood Major Headache to Congress But Solons 'Love It'

(Editor's Note: Congress is back in session and, for most of the nation's lawmakers, that means an increase in the voluminous mail that pours onto their desks during regular sessions. Here's what happens when you write a letter to your congressman.)

By ROGER D. GREENE
AP Newsfeatures Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just the mention of "Potomac fever," an affliction that causes a man to swell without growing, is enough to set any one of the nation's lawmakers shuddering.

Some are smitten without knowing it. All avoid it like the plague. The symptoms are tricky, but here's an example of how it acts:

To the nation's lawmakers, one of the biggest headaches in a pleasantly harrowing business is the millions of letters they get—and have to answer—from all over the country.

Many of the letters ask favors, such as hard-to-get hotel reservations during Washington's spring-time Cherry Blossom Festival. Others want jobs, or perhaps an appointment to the U.S. Military or Naval Academy. Some even seek marital advice.

'Love Letters'

Yet on all Capitol Hill there's not a legislator to be found who won't say, with a mellow-voiced ring of sincerity:

"I love to hear from my constituents."

The reason, at least in part, is the dread of Potomac Fever. Once a congressman or senator starts ignoring the home folks or otherwise losing touch with the grass roots, the word soon gets around that the bug of big business has claimed another victim.

In politics, that's usually fatal. Thus the lawmakers, with nary a visible gulp, loudly proclaim that while they have to work like demons, they dearly love to see bulging U.S. mail sacks spill reams of letters across their thresholds.

What happens when you write your congressman?

To find out I interviewed a typical congressman from a heavily populated district, Rep. Barratt O'Hara (D-Ill.).

Like Headaches

"If letters from home are a headache," said O'Hara, "then you'd have to say I like headaches."

"It's the letters that keep us on our toes in Congress. They show us how the people feel on controversial issues. Often they decide how we vote."

O'Hara, now serving his third term in Congress and representing a constituency of more than 350,000 persons in six Chicago wards, said he used to get more than 1,000 letters a week in earlier sessions of Congress. During the past season he grappled with about 100 a day.

The 73-year-old O'Hara—a small, bright-eyed man who lied about his age (he was then 16) and fought alongside Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in the Spanish American War—said he got 15,000 letters in three days during the 81st Congress. That was during a hullabaloo over a bill to deny federal aid on transportation for parochial school children.

'Pour In'

O'Hara said the letters really pour in when one federal agency or another starts tinkering with the nation's landscape—such as projects to build giant dams which would engulf towns or historic landmarks.

"Members of congress have suddenly found that the conservationists have one of the most powerful voices in the country," he said. "They want to save the natural beauty of America."

O'Hara said he welcomes visits from his constituents even more than letters from them.

"I like to take them to lunch in the House restaurant. Speaker Sam Rayburn or Republican leader Joe Martin usually drop over to the table to say hello, and it gives the folks from back home a real thrill."

O'Hara conceded it is difficult to answer all the queries he gets from his constituents. Sometimes it takes hours to track down the required information on a single question.

Advice Asked

He recalled the case of a woman who wrote that she had hardening of the arteries and her doctor had prescribed a little whiskey, but she was allergic to whiskey. "What should she do?"

"We thought gin might do the trick," O'Hara chuckled. "We finally got the information she wanted after phoning half the government agencies in town."

The Illinois legislator said that with his mail-answering chores added to his other duties, he often works from 1 a.m. to midnight or later and usually spends several hours at his office on Sundays.

Asked if he thinks congressmen are overworked, O'Hara said:

"I don't think anybody can work too hard, but I'll say this—you can't do the job in a 40-hour week. You just can't be a lazy congressman any more."

O'Hara said he is completely opposed to suggestions for a four-year term, instead of the present two years, for House members.

"It would mean they might take things easy the first two years. They wouldn't be watching their votes on every bill. Now there's not a roll-call without anxious faces. They know the wrong vote will count against them—and the next election is just around the corner. So is the next mail delivery."

Answers Mail

O'Hara said he always tries to answer each letter personally—up to a point. When a major controversy is raging and he gets hun-

dreds of letters about it, he writes the first three or four replies himself. That sets the tone for his staff of three secretaries to answer the rest.

As for letters from pressure groups, O'Hara said he can spot them "a mile off."

"When I get a flock of letters with the same ideas and often the same wording from four or five states, I know the heat is on," he said. "I know it's the handiwork of a skilled, organized pressure group."

For example, I received very heavy mail on the issue of socialized medicine. Some of my constituents sent me stereotyped letters which had obviously been sent to them by their family doctor.

House Postmaster H. H. Morris said congressional mail has fallen off since World War II, but a recent spot check showed House

members alone received 173 mail bags of about 700 letters per bag in a single average day—a total of 130,000 letters.

That would mean 4,946,000 a year!

More Letters

Morris said new members of Congress usually get more letters than the old timers, probably because they are eager beavers and like to send out lots of fancy questionnaires to "take soundings" on how their newly acquired constituents feel about the big issues.

"Sometimes a single member sends out 20,000 questionnaires on an issue like farm prices," Morris said. "In reply, he'll get anywhere from 500 to 1,000 letters a day for a week or 10 days."

The postmaster explained that Congress members are authorized to use their free-mail (franking) privilege only on official business, such as replies to inquiries or news letters to constituents.

"When they send out mail to drum up votes during a campaign, they have to buy stamps just like anybody else," he said.

"Most members are very conscientious about using the franking privilege. We get many calls every day when Congress is in session about borderline cases. One congressman, a Texan, wasn't quite sure whether a big batch of letters he was sending out qualified as free mail or not. He wound up buying \$2,700 worth of stamps out of his own pocket."

House Minority Leader Joe Martin (R-Mass.) gets so many letters he can't begin to read them all personally. They average around 1,000 a week.

Digest Made

Instead, his staff makes a digest and "briefs" him every few days on the trends of popular opinion toward pending legislation.

Speaker Rayburn (D-Tex.) gets at least 1,000 letters a week.

On the Senate side, Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson of Texas said he averages about 200 letters a day from all over the nation.

"There's been a fall-off in the last few years," said one of Johnson's aides. "We used to get 500 a day, and it went to 3,000 daily during the Senate hearings after President Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur."

"A big row like that always stirs up a storm of letters."

Sen. Paul Douglas (D-Ill.), who gets about 400 or 500 letters a day, said recently:

"There is a fairly widespread feeling throughout the country that Congress in many respects has lost the necessary touch with the people."

'Some Truth'

Conceding there is "some truth" in the accusation, Douglas nevertheless declared that most congressmen "make prodigious efforts to keep in touch with the home folks" and are "always alert for every scrap of news from the grass roots."

That may explain why the lawmakers applaud, with scarcely a quiver, when Fourth of July or Labor Day orators wind up with the stirring exhortation:

"Write your congressman!"

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Bing Crosby to Give Profits To Gonzaga U.

SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — Bing Crosby will donate his profits from the motion picture "Anything Goes" to the Crosby Memorial Library fund at Gonzaga University here, the singer told the Spokesman-Review Wednesday night.

Crosby, in a telephone interview from his home at Pebble Beach, Calif., told the paper said the picture, which hasn't been released, could net in the neighborhood of half a million dollars. He wouldn't estimate how much of this would go to the library fund.

The picture also features Mitzzy Gaynor and Donald O'Connor.

Just last week, Crosby donated an additional \$100,000 to the library fund, he started several years ago. That contribution brought the fund total to about \$241,000.

Crosby grew up only a block away from Gonzaga and was a pre-law student at the university in the 1920s.

Plans for the building include a "Crosbyana Room" to house many of the singer's mementoes.

Ex-Mayor of L.A. Reveals 1953 Marriage

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Frank I. Shaw, 79, ex-mayor of Los Angeles, walked down the gangway of a freighter at nearby Wilmington with a pretty blonde on his arm, and told newsmen:

"Fellows, I'm going to let you in on a little secret. This is Mrs. Dortha Sheehan Shaw, my wife since Feb. 2, 1953."

Shaw said he and the 25-year-old ex-secretary had just returned Wednesday from their third honeymoon. This time they visited South America, he said. Previous junkets were to Hawaii and Europe.

Shaw was mayor from 1933 to 1938. His first wife, Cora, died in 1951 at the age of 68.

"We're very happy," said Mrs. Shaw. "The difference in our ages makes no difference to us."

Burglars Loot Actor's Home

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Burglars looted Actor Kirk Douglas' home of approximately \$50,000 in jewelry, clothing, art works and other items, his secretary told police Thursday.

The secretary said the articles were missing when she entered the home at 1608 San Ysidro Drive Thursday. Douglas and his wife are in Palm Springs.

All of the actor's clothes and even the contents of a freezer were taken.

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Playback of Apology Heard By Educator

SEATTLE (AP) — Mrs. Pearl Wanamaker listened Thursday to a playback of the broadcast apology of Fulton Lewis Jr. and said afterward: "I have nothing to add at this time."

The state superintendent of public instruction said previously she would file a libel suit against the national radio commentator for his references to her in his broadcast of last Friday.

Lewis devoted eight minutes of his Monday commentary to an apology to Mrs. Wanamaker and an explanation of how he had happened to make what he described as "a great boo-boo."

In the original broadcast, Lewis erroneously identified Mrs. Wanamaker as the sister of a former government employee in Europe who took "asylum" in Communist Czechoslovakia and criticized the United States.

He discussed in critical tone Mrs. Wanamaker's role as a leader in the White House conference on education.

In the apology, Lewis offered to let Mrs. Wanamaker take over one of his broadcasts to speak for herself or for the White House conference. Mrs. Wanamaker has not commented on what her decision may be on the radio time offer.

Pilot Plant to Process Oil From Shale

DENVER (AP) — A contract was signed Thursday for a pilot plant in the Denver area to process oil shale.

Herbert E. Linden of Beverly Hills, Calif., president of the Oil Shale Corp., signed the contract with the Research Institute of University of Denver.

The plant will have a capacity of 24 tons per day. Bids for its construction will be asked soon.

"We picked the Denver research institute as the most competent organization of its kind in the country to handle such a job," Linden said in an interview.

Would Cut Costs

"We hope the work, if successful, will make it possible to cut the cost of producing shale oil from the present 16 cents a gallon to a competitive figure of 13 cents."

Dr. Charles H. Prien of the research institute said the plant will use a Swedish process in extracting oil from shale. He explained steel balls, preheated to 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit, are fed into one end of a revolving ball mill. Oil shale is fed into the other end.

Crushes Shale

The shale moves one way; the hot metal balls the other, heating and crushing the shale. The volatile shale oil passes out as vapor. Some of it condenses to a highly liquid similar to petroleum. Dr. Prien said. Some remains as fuel gas.

The U. S. Bureau of Mines has operated an experimental oil shale plant at Rifle in western Colorado, close to the source of shale deposits. Last year Congress voted against further funds for the project.

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Pr. Sizes S-M-L

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Sizes 4 to 10

Water, wrinkle resistant rayon-nylon sheen fabric, quilt-lined! Handsome splash pattern. Thick dynel collar.

Sizes 12 to 14... 5.88

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Men's Fully Quilted Lined Surcoats

6.88

Sizes 36 to 46

Tough rayon-nylon sheen gabardine resists wrinkles and rain. Special Penney buy!

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