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On a rainy autumn night in 1888, a scruffy little dog slipped into

the rail mail depot at Albany, New York and began a journey that ultimately took him 140,000 miles to immortality.

The postal clerk who took him in and made him a bed of mail sacks named the little Border Terrier “Owney,” and though it was against the station rules, the supervisor let Owney stay. The dog developed a special affinity for the scent of mail sacks.

Soon afterwards, a mail sack tumbled off the wagon leaving the station and Owney rushed out and stood guard over it until a postal worker came back and collected it. The stray made the depot his home and guarding the mail became his life work.

When the clerk who watched over him was transferred, Owney stayed. But Owney was no stay-at-home. He hopped into a mail car one day and rode it from Albany to the next town up the line, where he jumped to another train with mailbags and followed them back home. After that, he regularly rode the rails, resting atop sacks of mail.

As Owney ventured farther and farther out by rail, the Albany crew feared their wayward friend might get lost, so they gave him a collar with the inscription, “Owney, Albany P.O., N.Y.” And a curious thing began to happen. Owney started returning with special labels, tags and medallions attached to his collar from postal workers at distant depots letting the Albany crew know where he’d been.

The Albany station lay at the nexus of several mail train routes on the New York Central Railroad: east to Boston, south to New York City and west to Buffalo, Cleveland Toledo and Chicago and point west. The web of tracks gave the mail dog access to much of America.

It was a busy time for the nation's railroads — and a chaotic and dangerous time, too. Derailments and train collisions, the bane of the U.S. Postal Service, were all too common. But postal workers noticed an odd thing. Any train that Owney rode made it safely to its destination. He was their lucky charm.

The sole exception was in 1893 when Owney disappeared for several months. His friends in Albany — and all up and down the lines — were afraid he was dead. But he showed up one day on the Boston and Albany line heading home with part of an ear missing. Postal clerks retraced his journey and found he'd been injured in a train accident in Canada. He'd apparently taken time off to recover, then headed back to work.

In July of 1894, Owney was in New Orleans again, a visit mentioned in the New Orleans Times-Democrat. He was last there two winters earlier. The newspaper wrote, “He never travels in any but mail cars, and when he reaches a town that he forms a good opinion of from the car door, he follows the mail wagon to the Post Office, and when he is ready to travel again, he follows the wagon to some train and is off for parts unknown.

“Since he was here, Owney has taken in the World's Fair and a part of the widespread labor troubles...[traveling] to Seattle, Washington, Kansas City, Mo.; Memphis, Fort Worth, Taylor, Texas; Waco, San Antonio and Houston.”

Owney was something of a free bird, apparently, and he became widely known to postal clerks and rail workers across America who watched over him, and kept him fed and sheltered during layovers.

Every time he returned home to Albany, the postal workers

carefully collected and stored his new tags, tokens, trinkets and medallions and started him off fresh for his next trip. He always came home loaded with more.

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle reported in 1894, "Nearly every place he stopped, Owney received an additional tag, until now he wears a big bunch. When he jogs along, they jingle like the bells on a junk wagon."

Postmaster General John Wanamaker was fond of Owney and had a coat made so he could display his collection more comfortably. Wanamaker in presenting the coat announced that Owney was now the official mascot of the U.S. Postal Service.

Owney is estimated to have been given 1,017 medals and tokens during his 11-year career, but not all survived. The National Postal Museum in Washington has 372 in its possession.

Among them are a medal from the Los Angeles Kennel Club in 1893 for "Best Traveled Dog" and a medal from William Winter Wagner in Chicago in 1894 for "Globe Trotter."

His array of trinkets and tags was an important part of Owney's identity — it's how postal workers all across the nation recognized him when he showed up on the mail train. Owney only traveled on mail cars and recognized mail workers from other pedestrians and travelers. While he was a friendly and agreeable terrier, he would not let anyone but postal workers come near the mail.

Postal workers considered Owney one of their own. He accepted their food, water and petting, but when the mail bags left, so did he.

Not all his travels went smoothly. The Albany Post Office once got a telegraph from the postmaster in Montreal, Canada saying he was keeping Owney in a kennel there until he received \$2.50 for feeding the dog. The sum was collected and Owney showed up on the train a few days later.

Owney was commended for going above and beyond the call of duty on another trip when a mail pouch tumbled off the wagon en route from the railhead to a nearby town. Owney leapt off and guarded it. When they noticed he wasn't on the wagon when it reached town, they backtracked and found the sack and its canine protector... and the mail made it through.

The trip that made Owney world famous began on Aug. 19, 1895, when he boarded a steamship in Tacoma, Washington and set sail with the mail. For four months he traveled throughout Asia and Europe before reaching New York City on Dec. 23 and returning home.

The Los Angeles Times reported that Owney had seen North Africa, Asia and the Middle East on his journey and another report said that the Emperor of Japan had bestowed medals on Owney bearing the official Japanese coat of arms.

Rachel Barclay, a curatorial intern at the National Postal Museum in 2009, extensively researched Owney and his travels, using newspaper accounts and railroad maps to create chronological timeline of his career.

She wrote, "His story appears in the smallest of local papers to newspaper giants such as the New York Times on a regular basis."

An 1895 article in the Hopkinsville Kentuckian states, “Owney has traveled the length of every railroad in the United States and has seen the inside and enjoyed the hospitality of more post offices than the oldest inspector of the service.”

He grew old riding the rails. When his postal friends were afraid it was no longer safe for him to roam, mail clerk J.M. Eblen of St. Louis agreed to take Owney in.

At that time, an influential Chicago manager of the Railway Mail Service ordered his employees not to let “that mongrel cur” ride any of his trains. By then, Owney had traveled 143,000 miles and was well loved by postal workers across the land. Some St. Louis letter carriers decided to defy the manager’s ban and in 1897, snuck Owney aboard a mail car for his last ride — to Toledo, Ohio.

Accounts vary on what happened next, but apparently Owney was chained by a clerk in the basement of a post office in Toledo so he’d stay put until a newspaper photographer could arrive and document his visit. Owney resented being restrained and became unruly. He bit the offending clerk — and was shot. On June 11, 1897, Owney died, to the outrage of postal workers across America.

One newspaper wrote, ““Postal clerks refused to bury their beloved mascot. Clerks across the country asked that the dog receive the honor they considered he was due by being preserved and presented to the Post Office Department's headquarters.”

He was preserved and was on display at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. Owney went from there to the Smithsonian

Museum, which said he was and remains a highly popular exhibit.

Owney the mail dog has been the subject of five books and a stamp was commemorated in his honor in 2011.

He even has his own Facebook page today, “Owney The Railway Mail Dog,” where he “writes,” “love to travel and will go anywhere a train goes. I've also started collecting stamps, especially those featuring trains, dogs, and places I've visited. Ask me a question or just say hi— I love to hear from friends!”