



Expositor Photo

Winona Johnson is as busy as she was when she managed the post office in Ohsweken. Now retired, she has many volunteer jobs in the community, including organizing bingo to raise money for sports.

Operating Ohsweken post office has long been family tradition

By Anne Jarvis
Expositor Staff

OHSWEKEN — The people, the places, the history, the lore — Winona Johnson can tell stories about the Six Nations Reserve because her family has worked in the heart of the community, at the post office, since it opened in 1873.

Jim Styres, her great-uncle, was the first postmaster. He operated the office from his house, now Styres Funeral Home, at the centre of the village.

Another great-uncle, Jacob Johnson, assumed the job in 1889 and moved the office to his house, across the street, beside what is now Farmer's Shell.

The office returned to the original site in 1928 when Mrs. Johnson's father, Clifford Styres, inherited the position. At 16, Mrs. Johnson swore the oath and started helping her father.

In 1961 she became the fourth postmaster.

Now 64, Mrs. Johnson is happy she officially retires June 25 after 48 years of service. Although she finished working April 3 and is enjoying a vacation, the stories continue.

She recalled that the mail contractor once transported mail from the train station in Onondaga to the postmaster by horse and buggy. In winter, however, when the ferry across the Grand River was not operating but mail had to be delivered within two days, delivery became daring.

"I heard that he used to crawl across the ice."

Mrs. Johnson's father distributed mail from his grocery store in his house. When people needed basics, regardless of time, they bought them at the store and retrieved their mail at the same time.

"I remember people coming in at 11 o'clock at night to pick up their mail when they got their groceries," she said.

Individual delivery started while Mrs. Johnson's father was postmaster. They used a horse and buggy during good weather, but when snow was deep or roads were muddy they rode horses.

She often rode a horse named Duke that "would never let anything pass him." She recalled the time when another resident on a horse caught up to her, prompting Duke to race ahead.

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"He took off. I pulled on the reins, but he wouldn't stop. I was so nervous. Finally, I just dropped the reins and he stopped. That was some ride."

Mrs. Johnson operated the office from her father's house for the first two years. She moved it later to her house near the fairgrounds, and then bought and renovated an old ticket booth from there.

There was no training for the job. "I just did it how I saw my parents do it," she said. "It was bedlam."

Without a calculator, she added columns of 60 numbers.

"I was a great adder," she said. But she worried about inspections. "I didn't know if I'd be short."

Cash, money orders and revenue from stamps were locked in Mrs. Johnson's suitcase in the office because there was no safe. She bought her own desk, filing cabinet, typewriter and phone.

That was when there were about 500 customers, and stamps were three cents for a letter and two cents for a postcard.

Like the price of stamps, the service and number of customers have grown.

Now, the new office in Iroquois Village Centre, furnished and supplied by the federal government, serves about 1,000 customers. Mrs. Johnson was the only part of the office to remain the same.

"I used to help people fill out forms, write letters. They'd say: 'How much do I owe you?' I'd say: 'You don't owe me anything.' People used to come in and talk to me about things. There was never a dull moment in the post office."

The family's dynasty may continue. Mrs. Johnson's niece, Eva Porter, was her assistant and has applied to be postmaster. Sharon and Heather Hill, Mrs. Johnson's daughters, deliver mail.

Talk of closing small rural post offices concerns Mrs. Johnson.

"I don't think they could close this office. They don't realize the volume of business we do. There are always people coming into the office saying they're moving back (to the reserve). There are more and more each year.

"Cutting out service would be a disaster. There are too many old people who can't get to the city to get their mail. They'll suffer the greatest loss."