Rixeyville Post Office Celebrates Bicentennial

by Allison Brophy Champion
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RIXEYVILLE—A local post office at the heart of a Culpeper County farming village celebrated its bicentennial Friday with friends, memories, laughter and cake.

"This is not something that just happens every day," said present-day Rixeyville Postmistress Belinda Creel McLawhorn, in the position since 2005. "It's amazing that the post office has survived this long."

Rixeyville became a post office Feb. 16, 1818, with Thomas Amiss the first postmaster. Two centuries later, McLawhorn is the 20th person to hold the position. The 32-year veteran of the postal service, McLawhorn said her current position is a "dream job."

"This is a farming community and I have learned so much from the people here," she said.

Her mentor at a previous post office in Northern Virginia taught her how to treat people, McLawhorn said.

"If you worked hard, he would walk through fire for you," she said. "I loved the way he did business and it stuck with me as what I wanted to do. I put in for probably 20 postmasters jobs before I got this one. It's just wonderful."

The post office – with its two full-time mail carriers, one part-time and a clerk – delivers to about 1,200 addresses, she said.

The original post office started in a log cabin not far from its current location just past Ma & Paw's store, where it was previously located. It's been in its current spot for 24 years.

Mail carrier Mark Jarrell, of Orange, has worked at the Rixeyville Post Office for 30 years and was busy sorting mail in the back of the tiny building while past and current employees, friends and neighbors reminisced out front.

"It's another day. It's nice if you like that kind of thing," he said. "I like to work and that's it, but it's nice that it's been here this long. We still have to work."

There have been very few days in his 30-year tenure that the mail didn't go out.

"If they get us the mail, we deliver," Jarrell said.

Though there was that one time when three-feet of snow blanketed the area, recalled McLawhorn, remembering only three times in her career that the post office closed due to weather.

Former mail carrier and Culpeper County resident Jean Scott showed up Friday morning for the celebration.

"It was fine," she said of the job. "I was among farms in an area that I knew, and no traffic. My job was to be there early in the morning when they threw the mail off the truck and I dragged it" into the post office.

Scott marveled at the post office's history.

"When I think of 200 years, I think that's startling," she said. "Imagine what it was like 200 years ago. In those days, people came to pick up their mail from the post office when they were heading to town in a horse and buggy."

Scott surmised the Rixeyville Post Office has been around so long dues to its proximity to the Rappahannock, Hazel and Thornton rivers.

"There were many mills out here," she said. "People had to go somewhere that somebody had a stone and they were grinding grain to

get flour. People who really wanted to develop an area had rivers and mills and then they got themselves a post office."

Virginian James Monroe was president when the Rixeyville Post Office opened and Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" published a month later. Frederick Douglass was born in 1818, it was the year Paul Revere died and Illinois became the 21st state admitted to the union.

William Rixey took over as the second Rixeyville postmaster on Oct. 19, 1819 – fitting since it was for his family the village was named, according to "Culpeper: A Virginia County's History Through 1920" by Eugene M. Scheel. Rixey and his sons, Charles, John, Presley and Samuel, owned approximately 12,000 acres in the area, according to the history.

In 1835, the community was described as "situated handsomely on a healthy and high position," located on the stagecoach road between Washington and Charlottesville.

The Rixeyville Post Office closed from Sept. 4, 1857 to Jan. 3, 1868, years that included the Civil War with its fierce battles around Culpeper County.

Postmistress Grace Rosenberger had the longest tenure in Rixeyville at 40 years beginning in 1932 until 1972, according to the U.S. Postal Service.

Modern-day mail clerk Michele Glendenning, of Culpeper, has worked at the post office for three years.

"It's a fantastic job. I love it," she said, laughing with coworkers. "I love meeting the people, the customers are great—couldn't ask for better. I lucked out when I stepped into this job."

Asked about the post office's bicentennial, Glendenning was flabbergasted.

"Oh, my God—really? 200 years? It doesn't seem possible we survived that long," she said, later adding, "It's one thing to read about it in a history book. It's another thing to be part of it."

Customer Cathy Chamberlain recently moved to Rixeyville from Alaska and found fast friends at the post office. She too marveled at the age of the place.

"Alaska's been a state for just 59 years so it's hard for me to comprehend something 200-years-old – that's amazing," Chamberlain said. "And the people here are so kind to me."

Mail carrier Joyce Bache is getting ready to retire from the Rixeyville Post Office after 30 years.

"I consider myself lucky being able to be here the whole 30 years," said the town of Culpeper resident.

Retired postmaster Dennis Martin, who worked at the site from 1992 to 2005, has worked all over Northern Virginia for the U.S. Postal Service and never before experienced an anniversary celebration elsewhere like the one held Friday.

What makes Rixeyville different from all those other places?

"It's a small place," he said, but with a big sense of community.