

I REMEMBER

THE MAIL TERMINAL

By Tom Parker

In the early sixties you couldn't help to notice a steady stream of United States Post Office trucks turning into the driveway just west of Central Station and going to a facility at the far end of the Central Station complex. The trucks back up to a loading dock while directly overhead, a platform is lined with railroad mail cars. Both floors are a beehive of activity. Trains of mail carts pulled by small tractors scurry back and forth, in and out and up and down ramps. Mailbags slide down a spiral chute from the second floor to the first, while other mailbags ride a conveyor belt from the first floor to the second. Mail handlers are loading and unloading vehicles on both floors, checking the tags on the mailbags and dispatching them to their proper destination.

This facility was known merely as the "Mail Terminal" on the railroad, although I'm sure it had a more formal name. For over fifty years, a large part of Memphis' bulk mail was handled through this facility, handled in and out of Memphis on trains of the Illinois Central, the Frisco and Rock Island. In addition to the volume handled "across the dock", a large amount of bulk mail was handled directly from train to train either by switching a whole carload from one train to another, or by physically unloading mail from one car onto a cart and reloading it into another car on another train.

Anyone who has observed the activity at an airport would immediately recognize the same activity at Central Station. Carts loaded mail, baggage and express as well as empty carts are strategically spotted in anticipation of the arrival of trains. Additionally, carloads of mail, mostly catalogs and magazines, are being shuttled around by switch engines, to and from the Mail Terminal, and between tracks in the station.

I made my first day with the Illinois Central in 1962 at the Mail Terminal. I broke in with my older brother, Mike, who was working as a Mail

Supervisor off the clerk's extra board. The Mail Supervisor's job went to work at 4:30 in the morning. The first duty of the day was to analyze the manpower requirements of the day, seeing which mail handlers had come to work, checking on the volume of expected mail, and calling in additional mail handlers if needed. During the Christmas rush, college students would often be used during their holiday break. The rest of the day was spent overseeing the mail handlers and keeping track of the mail handled through both the terminal and the station.

Even as I made my first day at the Mail Terminal, its days were numbered. The post office was diverting the mail from trains to trucks and airplanes. Within a relatively few years, the Mail Terminal would be closed and mail would no longer ride the rails.

Gee, I wonder if Fred Smith ever worked at the Mail Terminal at Christmas time? Maybe that's where he got the idea.....



Photo from Mike Condren's Web Site

Three mail cars sit at the platform of the Mail Terminal at Central Station. This view is looking southwest towards Broadway. The Terminal was located next to the south end of Track 10