SYNOPSIS

Ai, Georgia--A Postal History Field Trip

A brief and cryptically worded post card dated on January 9, 1914, invites a closer look because the name of the post office from which it was sent; the north Georgia town of Ai, is the shortest name of any post office in Georgia, and tied as the shortest name in any state.

The superficial novelty of the name aside, the post card invites some important questions for the postal historian. The post office at Ai opened in 1898, on the eve of the implementation of Rural Free Delivery, and it would remain in operation until 1932.

Why did the post office at Ai remain open so long when tens of thousands of small post offices were closing? What postal service was provided to the patrons of Ai, when the post office closed? The goal of this article is to reveal answers to those questions and to illustrate how some postal history research cannot occur from behind a desk.

The post office at Ai remained open so long because it lacked the improved roads required for RFD. The site of Ai is in secluded Cashes Valley in the Southern Appalachians. The population of the valley is lower now than it was in the nineteen thirties. The decline in population and poor roads meant that by the time of its closure, Ai could neither justify a post office nor meet the requirements for RFD.

This article will examine how the researcher today confronts the same challenges that deterred RFD. The interesting quest to uncover the story of the post office at Ai, involved going to the site miles beyond improved public roads. The study involved uncovering information from social media sites on which family members of the early residents of Ai provided informative maps not available anywhere else. This is the story of a valley in the mountains of north Georgia that proved to be too rural for RFD.