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MR. ZIP, 'DIGITAL' ICON, TURNS 40

WASHINGTON – Mr. ZIP, the nation's original 'digital' icon, who encouraged Americans to include special digits when addressing their mail, marks his 40th birthday this week. Thanks to technology associated with his work, the cost of mailing a First-Class letter today, when adjusted for inflation and taxpayer subsidies, is the same as it was in 1963 when a First-Class stamp was five cents.



As a testament to the technology associated with the ZIP Code, today's U.S. Postal Service delivers nearly three times as much mail to 50 percent more customers at more than twice as many addresses than when Mr. ZIP first started work 40 years ago.

The little stick figure character who used a letter and satchel to convince Americans into using ZIP Codes to move the mail faster and more efficiently, Mr. ZIP took his mission seriously. Within a year of his introduction, between a third and a half of America was using ZIP Codes. Today, virtually everyone uses ZIP Codes.

"Mr. ZIP helped to usher in the age of high technology," explained Postal Historian Meg Ausman. "He helped make the business of conducting commerce in America through the mail more efficient, reliable and cost-effective."

In 1963, the five-cent First-Class stamp only covered 80 percent of its own costs. Taxpayer subsidies covered the rest. The Post Office Department processed and delivered 68 billion pieces of mail to 188 million customers at less than 60 million addresses. Today's U.S. Postal Service earns its own way without taxpayer support for postal operations and delivers 203 billion pieces of mail to 291 million Americans at more than 141 million addresses.

Mr. ZIP the cartoon figure was adopted by the Post Office Department as the trademark for the ZIP (Zoning Improvement Plan) Code, which began on July 1, 1963. Faced with growing mail volumes, the Post Office developed the five-digit Zoning Improvement Plan code, or ZIP Code, as a way to quickly sort mail and speed its delivery. The first digit in the ZIP Code indicates a general geographic area of the nation, starting with "0" in the eastern U.S. to "9" to represent areas in the western U.S.

The next two numbers in the ZIP Code represent regional areas, and the final two numbers identify specific post offices or postal zones.

Ausman added that today's use of ZIP Codes extends far beyond the mailing industry. They are embedded into the way that businesses work and have become an integral element of the 911 emergency system that uses ZIP Codes as an aid in saving lives.

Mr. ZIP made his mark on American culture when he appeared in public service announcements, urging postal customers to use their five-digit ZIP Code. Actress Ethel Merman also helped out. She joined Mr. ZIP in introducing the ZIP Code by singing a public service announcement for television.

Mr. ZIP was based on an original design by Harold Wilcox, son of a letter carrier and a member of the Cunningham and Walsh advertising agency, for use by a New York bank in a bank-by-mail campaign. Wilcox's design was a child-like sketch of a postman delivering a letter. The figure was used only a few times then filed away. Later, AT&T acquired the design and made it available to the Post Office Department at no cost.

Post Office Department artists retained the face but sharpened the limbs and torso and added a mail bag. The new figure, dubbed Mr. ZIP, was unveiled at a convention of postmasters in October 1962. After the 1983 introduction of ZIP+4 (the four new numbers were street specific information), Mr. ZIP took a hiatus. His image was printed in the white area outside of the stamp image, known as the selvage, but that practice ended in January 1986.

So where is he now?

Currently undergoing a renaissance, the Mr. ZIP character is being updated by the Postal Service for licensing and other purposes, extending his cultural icon status to a new generation of Americans. "We assure you that we still love our Mr. ZIP," says Pamela York, manager of USPS Licensing. "He may have been out of sight in recent years, but certainly not forgotten. We expect Mr. ZIP to make an appearance in the near future in some unexpected places. As the Postal Service has changed in the past 40 years, expect a new look – and outlook – for Mr. ZIP in coming months," said York.

Since 1775, the U.S. Postal Service has connected friends, families, neighbors and businesses by mail. It is an independent federal agency that makes deliveries to about 140 million addresses every day and is the only service provider to deliver to every address in the nation. The Postal Service receives no taxpayer dollars for routine operations, but derives its operating revenues solely from the sale of postage, products and services. With annual revenues of more than \$66 billion, it is the world's leading provider of mail and delivery services, offering some of the most affordable postage rates in the world. The U.S. Postal Service delivers more than 43 percent of the world's mail volume - some 203 billion letters, advertisements, periodicals and packages a year - and serves seven million customers each day at its 38,000 retail locations nationwide.