

'Wrong side' mail drivers push the envelope daily



[2 images](#)

Tony Harless works a U.S. Postal Service rural route while driving from the passenger side of his vehicle off of Virginia 114 in Montgomery County. Many rural mail carriers use the opposite-side method to drive and deliver.

By [Jeff Sturgeon](#)

[381-1661](#) | Posted Apr 12, 2012

Who's in the driver's seat at the U.S. Postal Service? In up to half of rural mail vehicles, nobody is.

The driver's seat is empty or has a stack of mail. The driver takes the passenger side to reach out the window to mailboxes strung along country roads and — from there — must also accelerate, brake and steer.

The practice of wrong-seat driving in rural America evokes statements of disbelief from some national postal associations based in the Washington, D.C., area, but postal service spokeswoman Cathy Yarosky acknowledged its use in some areas. Wrong-seat driving is legal and, police say, usually safe.

Postal supervisors teach it to new letter carriers being assigned rural routes. But the practice is not without issues. Official data is scarce, and agency leaders discourage postmasters and drivers from discussing it. No one at the agency could say whether wrong-seat driving elevates the agency's crash rate.

There is even sensitivity about what to call it.

Today's computers make emailing items such as bills and letters a much faster alternative, but plenty of postal workers still must drive mailbox to mailbox to support the tradition of Rural Free Delivery that first brought mail to farm families in 1896. These federal servants are seldom issued mail trucks and must drive personal vehicles with temporary yellow signs and sometimes a light as they hopscotch from box to box.

Of those rural carriers in personal vehicles, about two-thirds have the steering wheel in the usual place — on the left.

If they drove in the usual way, they would have to stop and scoot over at every mailbox. Instead, these dexterous drivers sit in the middle or on the passenger side, leaning left to steer and signal and leaning right — out the passenger window — to feed mailboxes.

They aren't complaining. It's high-wage work, paying \$25.52 per hour in 2010, and they are reimbursed for gas, insurance and wear and tear.

"It's easy once you get used to it," said veteran postal worker Tony Harless, 45, who drives a 38-mile Christiansburg mail route five days a week. He's modified his 1986 Country Squire station wagon with a small mail-staging basket above the glove box. He likes having his work space and view of the road not encumbered by a steering wheel. He steers with his left hand, works the pedals with his left leg and said he has never crashed.

"They're like, 'What are you doing?'" Harless said. "I say, 'I'm your mailman. I'm a rural carrier, which means I don't have a uniform and drive my own vehicle. I'm still a postal worker just like the other guy.'"

You'll see wrong-seated postal drivers on Bent Mountain Road between Roanoke and Floyd and on Virginia 114 in Christiansburg, to name just a few locations.

In Central Virginia's Appomattox County, veteran postal worker Jerry Mitchell drives with one leg in the left floor well to reach the gas and brake and one in the right well. He sits in the middle of the bench seat in his Chevrolet S-10 pickup, which fortunately has an automatic transmission. He steers with his left hand.

It's his preferred way to drive.

"I've been doing it for 30 years," Mitchell said. "I feel more natural sitting on the side rather than up in front of the steering wheel."

Right-hand drive vehicles and conversion kits are available for purchase, and the postal service contributes something to defray the cost if employees choose that route.

Even so, 660 of the 1,168 rural post routes in the postal service's Appalachian district are covered by workers who drive a traditional, left-hand drive car, truck or van they own, according to data provided by Yarosky. The district extends roughly from Lynchburg to Bristol, Tenn., and over most of West Virginia.

Put another way, about every other rural postal worker in the region is a potential wrong-seat driver, a practice Yarosky calls "opposite-seat driving."

Some newspaper carriers, who complete their routes before dawn, drive against traffic to reach tubes from the driver's window. But that's not an option given to postal workers, forcing them to wrong-seat drive. Yarosky said mail must be delivered from the right.

An apparent solution, buying all rural carriers right-hand drive mail trucks used in cities, is not a possibility for the cash-strapped postal service, though it is adding some to rural routes, Yarosky said. But saddled with a five-year, \$25 billion loss triggered by declining mail volume and retiree benefit expenses, the agency lacks flexibility and could enter bankruptcy this year.

Nor is there the money to add a second person to rural delivery vehicles so one could handle mail while the other drives, Yarosky said.

John Penn thinks the postal service has created a risky situation and said he's trying to do something about it. He's a Tennessee-based vendor of right-hand drive conversion equipment that can be installed by the consumer or a mechanic. Penn charges \$1,585 for the kit and shipping, much less than a new right-hand drive vehicle, he notes, which can run more than \$20,000.

The system places a second steering wheel and second set of pedals on the right while leaving the originals in place.

Wrong seat driving "is by far the most dangerous way to drive a vehicle," Penn said. "Try it."

Plus, his customers report back strain and pain from the practice, he said.

Customer Ann Wertz of Moneta bought one.

The work "was bothering my back," said Wertz, who retired six years ago for health reasons after 25 years in the business. "It was just more comfortable for me and you didn't have to reach so far."

Sherri Blevins, who teaches driving at the New River Valley Driving School in Christiansburg, said she accepts that it is possible to steer from the passenger seat; she does it when riding with students who need a hand keeping the vehicle between the lines.

After training and experience, it is possible wrong-seat driving "just becomes second nature," she said.

But wrong-seat driving makes it impossible to put both hands in the recommended position for maximum safety.

Overall, mail delivery is "a scary job" given the laxity with which some other drivers regard letter carriers in traffic, she said.

"We are supposed to yield to them. We're supposed to watch out for them," Blevins said.

That's sound advice that Blevins offers.

In fiscal year 2011, carriers were involved in 34 crashes in the Roanoke and New River Valleys and 186 crashes across the Appalachian district, according to crash data released to The Roanoke Times by the postal service. Across the district, with 2,947 full-time, part-time and temporary carriers handling hundreds of urban and rural routes, that's about one wreck for every 16 carriers in a 12-month period.

Yarosky could not say what share of crashes involved wrong-seat driving by postal workers, but she said postal officials have no data showing that wrong-seat driving is unsafe or less safe than regular driving.

"Rural carriers have been doing this for about 80 years," Yarosky said. "It's not at all unusual. It's the way the rural mail carriers deliver the mail."

All postmasters contacted for this story declined to comment, and Yarosky said she was unable to find a wrong-seat driving postal worker who was willing to speak to a reporter about the practice of wrong-seat driving. Harless was flagged down while delivering mail.

Because of the many miles carriers cover, Yarosky said, the agency offers extensive driver training and operates in a culture of safety. She said many postal workers have received safe-driving awards and that the postal service as a whole has earned more citations from the National Safety Council for miles driven without a preventable crash than any other public or private industry.

That said, no one at the Illinois-based council that issued the awards could say what share of the award winners have been wrong-seat drivers. Mitchell is one, his name showing up on a winner's list for 2011.

In spite of the practice having a long history, the practice stirs up strong feelings and disbelief.

"It is not a condoned practice," said Mark Strong, who directs the National League of Postmasters in Alexandria, Va. He said "it would not happen" on the one day a year that supervisors follow each postal worker for evaluation.

Charlie Moser, who directs the larger National Association of United States Postmasters, also in Alexandria, said he recalled seeing wrong-seat driving as a child.

"It may not be something they do anymore," Moser said.

Roanoke County insurance agent Jeff Tinaglia said such drivers would probably be unable to get insurance based on what he assessed as the danger of the practice.

But he later said auto insurer GMAC confirmed to him by phone that the insurer knows about wrong-seat driving and insures postal workers who do it.

Mike Honaker, a first sergeant at Virginia State Police, said that however they position themselves in the vehicle, letter carriers as a group appear well-trained in driving and he sees few letter-carrier wrecks. Driving from the passenger seat is a legal way for mail workers to drive, he said. Straddling is allowed, too.

"What it boils down to is, can you properly maintain control of your vehicle?" Honaker said.

That's where Brittany Burdette, a 21-year-old mail carrier, ran afoul of traffic authorities in January.

According to Honaker and a police report released by the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, Burdette was going 35 mph on Clendenin Road near Pearisburg in Giles County on a delivery of mail for the postal service. Driving her GMC Jimmy unbelted from the passenger seat, she ran off the right side, struck a culvert and hit a tree or trees, Honaker said. She was taken to a hospital by rescue workers with serious injuries and her vehicle was totaled, the report said.

She was not charged for not being belted. Postal workers aren't required to wear one if it interferes with mail delivery and they determine they can be safe without one. But they are supposed to belt up when driving to and from their specific assigned route, officials said.

Burdette, according to a recent court hearing, will have her reckless driving charge dismissed after she completes a driver improvement class. She still works for the postal service but it's unclear whether she any longer delivers mail. She said outside court April 3 the postal service forbids her from speaking about the incident to the media.