

A Short History of Branch 2184

Background: In October 1999 Branch 2184 celebrated the 75th anniversary of its Charter as a local Branch of the NALC. The festivities were highlighted by a membership banquet. Then Branch 2184 Executive Vice-President and now retired activist and NALC Gold Card member Joe Golonka composed a brief history of the Branch for the banquet program. As we approach our 100th anniversary in just two years, Joe has rewritten and updated our history. Part 1 of this historical narrative follows.

In The Beginning

Branch 2184 of the National Association of Letter Carriers received its Charter as an NALC Branch on November 25, 1924. The newly formed Branch was located in the city of Dearborn, Michigan. The Great War, as World War I was then known, had been over for six years, a global pandemic had eased, and it was the middle of the “Roaring 20s” for much of America. However, despite an era of general prosperity, especially for wealthier Americans, the Union movement and Organized Labor was struggling against corporate, political, and government resistance, led by the stridently anti-Labor Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover Presidential Administrations.

In 1924 Edward Gainor was in the 10th year of his 27-year tenure as NALC National President. The NALC had affiliated with AFL (American Federation of Labor) in 1917. Letter Carrier wages then ranged from just \$1400 to \$1800 a year in this era before collective bargaining. Congress had recently passed a bill to increase letter carrier wages by \$300 a year, but President Calvin Coolidge vetoed it. The legislation was finally signed into law in 1925, despite continued fierce political resistance. Although a mediocre salary for the time, during the subsequent Great Depression years it was considered to be substantial.

However, city letter carrier wages were cut by Congress in a government economy move during the Depression year of 1932. Letter carrier wages remained substandard for the next 38 years, until the Postal Re-organization Act of 1970 gave the NALC the right to bargain for wages and benefits instead of begging an often hostile Congress and Presidential administrations for pay raises. In fact, city letter carriers did not receive another permanent pay increase until July 1945, as the Second World War was ending.

Meanwhile, Branch 2184 remained the union representative entity for Dearborn letter carriers, who also delivered mail in Melvindale and the growing suburb of Dearborn Heights. Many Branch 2184 members served with distinction during the Second World War and also during the Korean conflict in the early 1950s, some of them interrupting their postal career to do so. The 1940s and 1950s also saw the initial

employment of women letter carriers in the United States, who capably demonstrated their ability to handle what had traditionally been a male-dominated profession.

During the 1950s letter carrier working conditions and wages were under constant attack from the Eisenhower Administration and from a resolutely anti-labor postmaster general. Even as prosperity was widespread in much of the nation, letter carriers were prevented from sharing in the economic pie. Many letter carriers had to work a second job in order to cover basic necessities for their families.

Frustration festered during the 1960s, and Branch 2184 joined with other area NALC Branches to form the “Liberator District” of the NALC. The Liberators, as they were known, promoted an aggressive and united approach to letter carrier issues and to lobbying efforts, along with an emphasis on education, communication, and information sharing. Although the Liberator District merged with the Michigan State Association of Letter Carriers in 1968, the success of a united approach to our issues had been aptly demonstrated.

The Dawn of the “Modern Era”

In a display of solidarity with their Union brothers and sisters across much of the nation, Branch 2184 members actively participated in the legendary March 1970 strike. Some of the participants in that courageous action are still actively involved retired members of our Branch and the NALC. Strike signs that were signed by our active members in 1970 were later framed, and they are proudly displayed in our Branch 2184 meeting room. An iconic picture of striking Branch 2184 members picketing the Dearborn post office appears in “*Carriers in a Common Cause*,” the official history of the NALC.

The strike paved the way for substantial letter carrier wage increases and the right to collectively bargain for wages and benefits under the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. On July 1, 1971, the “Post Office Department” which had been a cabinet-level government agency, ceased to exist. The Post Office Department was replaced by a new “quasi-independent” agency known as the United States Postal Service, a self-funded agency that was no longer dependent on the whims of the Legislative and Executive branches of the Federal government for funding. Also during the 1970s, Vietnam era military veterans began to join our letter carrier ranks.

The groundwork had been laid for a series of local Branch mergers (known as amalgamations) that began with Branch 2184’s merger with the Inkster, Michigan NALC Branch on September 1, 1972. Under the guidance of longtime Branch President Richard Adams, the remainder of the 1970s and the 1980s saw a continuing series of amalgamations between Branch 2184 and smaller neighboring Branches. Each of these made the Branch larger and stronger, with additional resources that were needed to

counter increasingly antagonistic and abusive postal management tactics during the 1980s and 1990s.

City letter carriers that delivered mail in Lincoln Park, Wayne, Westland, Plymouth, Canton, Trenton, Woodhaven, Rockwood, Flat Rock, Taylor, Romulus, Grosse Ile, Belleville, and Northville all became members of Branch 2184 during this period. Branch 2184 was no longer known as the "Dearborn Branch," but had now become the Western Wayne County Branch of the NALC. Then as now, Branch 2184's hallmark was rigorous, no-nonsense and consistent contract enforcement on behalf of our members, even as our Branch developed and expanded other member services. During the early 1980s the Branch purchased and renovated a building and property in Taylor, thus providing a facility for business offices and meetings that was owned by the Branch and its membership.

By 1990 Branch 2184 had become the second largest NALC Branch in Michigan, but there would be much more to come, including additional Branch mergers, widespread battles with postal management, and the transformation of the Postal Service into the automated era of mail processing and delivery technology. Branch 2184 would itself also undergo a still continuing period of modernization. Part 2 of Branch 2184's his-tory will cover the period from the 1990s until the present time. It will appear in a subsequent issue of our publication.

Promises Made, Promises Broken

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were an exceptionally turbulent time internally for the Postal Service. An existing culture of antagonism and open disrespect for craft employees and especially for city letter carriers further deteriorated into a widespread pattern of abusive management conduct that was encouraged and rewarded at every level of USPS hierarchy. The work floor environment became intolerable in many post office stations throughout the United States, culminating in a series of violent incidents and tragic shootings. On November 14, 1991 our NALC union brothers and sisters in nearby Branch 3126 were devastated by a shooting rampage at the Royal Oak post office which killed five employees and wounded several others. Unfortunately, it did not end there.

The same abusive postal management culture existed in many Branch 2184 offices. On May 6, 1993, a shooting rampage at our Dearborn Main post office killed two and wounded one other person. In a display of compassion and solidarity, during the next several days letter carriers and others from numerous other post offices came together to assist their union brothers and sisters from Dearborn, who had been devastated by the attack.

Following these and numerous other tragic incidents at post offices throughout the United States, the NALC and other postal unions pushed hard for internal cultural

change within the USPS. When promised changes were slow to occur – and in many instances did not occur at all, Branch 2184 leadership and our members picketed the Dearborn post office, calling direct attention to the failure of USPS management to clean up its abusive and disrespectful behavior, which continues in some locations to this day.

A Union “Grievance Mill”

Meanwhile, changes were underway within Branch 2184 and with letter carrier job duties. Following his long tenure as Branch President, Dick Adams retired. He was succeeded during the 1990s by Tim Manning and then by Paul Diebolt. Under Tim’s and Paul’s insightful leadership, Branch 2184 began a modernization process. The personal computer age was just beginning, and Branch 2184 was among the first NALC Branches to make use of this boundless new technology. The Branch’s internal structure was also modernized with the establishment of a functioning executive board and updated Branch Bylaws.

Something that did not change during the 1990s was postal management’s flagrant disregard and outright contempt for our labor contract and its negotiated work rules and procedures. One postmaster in a Branch 2184-represented installation announced on her first day that “I didn’t sign the contract, so I don’t have to abide by it.” During the succeeding months she was proven to be quite wrong. Following hundreds of grievances in that installation which cost the USPS hundreds of thousands of dollars, along with labor charges and other union responses, she was finally “moved” – to a higher-level postal management job in another State.

In each of our post office stations, Branch 2184 continued and even improved on what we already did best – rigorously enforce the collective bargaining agreement. Hundreds and even thousands of grievances were initiated in some Branch 2184 stations each year, as our dedicated stewards and branch officers spent countless hours fighting back. During the middle and late 1990s, while the contract enforcement war was raging, Branch 2184 was tagged by some in management as a “grievance mill.” We wore that label as a badge of honor. Revisions to the contractual grievance procedure beginning in 1998 streamlined some aspects of the process, but ultimately proved of little value in halting or even slowing management’s disregard for negotiated work rules and procedures.

The developing computer age and flourishing of the Internet brought new tools and information access which were quickly harnessed for use by Branch 2184 officers and stewards to more effectively represent our members. The early and middle 1990s also brought the first of several significant changes to the letter carrier job in the form of machine sequenced letters, known as delivery point sequencing. The dynamics of the job were changing, with letter carrier assignments having less office time and more street time. More changes were soon to be realized.

A New Millennium and New Issues

The first years of the new millennium saw a resumption of mergers with neighboring NALC Branches, beginning with Ypsilanti in 2004. A few years later Monroe, Temperance, and Dundee also became part of Branch 2184. The early 2000s also brought internal issues caused by the personal agendas of a few individuals. This challenged our solidarity but not our resolve, even as it threatened to damage our standing within USPS and NALC circles. Branch 2184 officers and stewards continued to zealously and effectively enforce the contract and defend the rights of our members throughout this troubled period. In November 2005 our membership put an end to the internal issues when the instigators were defeated in a Branch election.

Mark Judd began a 15-year tenure as branch president in 2006. Under his leadership we restored the Branch to its customary position of leadership and respect, even while continuing to modernize our contract enforcement function. At the same time, we began an upgrade and expansion of member services such as retirement and injury compensation assistance as well as adding a uniform bank and other services. At the end of his tenure Mark guided the Branch through the difficult first year of the Covid pandemic. In 2008 the Postal Service initiated a nationwide attack on thousands of injured letter carriers, which they termed the National Reassessment Program or NRP. Those impacted included a number of Branch 2184 letter carriers. The officers and stewards of the branch coordinated a tenacious and effective response, resulting in perhaps our finest hour in the realm of contract enforcement. Each of 17 NRP-related grievances initiated by Branch 2184 on behalf of our members was ultimately resolved in favor of the union, either at arbitration or by settlements prior to arbitration.

Saving the Postal Service from Itself

Meanwhile, during the first decade of the 2000s ominous storm clouds were looming for the Postal Service and its craft employees, and especially city letter carriers. Despite its status as a “quasi-independent” agency, the USPS is still subject to numerous federal laws and regulations. As such, political whims and ideological agendas can and do have an outsized impact on the Postal Service and its employees.

In late 2006, Congress passed and then President G.W. Bush signed legislation that imposed an onerous “prefunding” requirement of future retiree health benefits for the next 75 years. This was done under the guise of “postal reform” but it was effectively a poison pill designed to bankrupt the Postal Service so that its functions could be parceled out to private industry. Just a year later, an economic collapse began in the United States (the “Great Recession”) and the USPS quickly slid into deep financial trouble.

Misguided USPS leadership relentlessly pushed for service cuts, including a reduction of delivery days. Recognizing that the USPS was going to cut its services into extinction, the NALC and its members aggressively fought back. NALC legislative activists in Branch 2184 and throughout the United States worked tirelessly lobbying Congressional representatives to support real postal reform that would rescind the prefunding scam and position the USPS to effectively compete in the 21st Century delivery world. It took more than 15 years, but we finally succeeded with the passage of the Postal Reform Act of 2022, signed into law by President Joe Biden.

More Changes, but a Bright Future

USPS financial struggles prior to the recent Postal Reform Act did act as impetus for changes in the letter carrier workforce structure. In January 2013 a binding contract arbitration settlement created a category of noncareer letter carriers known as city carrier assistants (CCAs). Unlike previous noncareer city carriers, CCAs had a career path. The first CCAs in Branch 2184 began work in early 2013, many of them former transitional employees (TEs). Almost 10 years later, about half of Branch 2184's current active members were formerly or currently are CCAs. Advanced scanning technology and the burgeoning package business throughout the United States has further changed the scope of duties for letter carriers.

In 2019 the Allen Park branch merged with Branch 2184, becoming the 20th USPS Installation whose city letter carriers are represented by our Branch. In January 2021 Mark Judd handed over the duties of Branch President to Walt McGregory. Walt, along with our departed union sister Michele Szafran who we suddenly and tragically lost in October 2020, were Branch 2184's first graduates of our national union's prestigious Leadership Academy, but they won't be our last graduates. Additionally, there will be future mergers as letter carriers further consolidate their strength and resources.

Branch 2184 and its members have navigated many obstacles over the years, most recently a lengthy pandemic, and our reputation for contract enforcement excellence remains unparalleled and a source of pride. But the future comes, and more quickly than we expect. For nearly 100 years Branch 2184's members have served as our nation's official couriers for an ever-increasing portion of Southeast Michigan. The next 100 years awaits.

-- Joe Golonka

Retired Branch 2184 member