

Area postal boss offers spirited defense of

By BILL AKERS

Anyone mailing a letter today in Aptos, say, can expect to have it delivered anywhere within the county the next day 95 per cent of the time. In fact, it will be delivered the next day within the postal section that runs from below King City on the south to Milpitas on the north.

That's what a gathering of highly skeptical members of the People's Democratic Club of Santa Cruz County was told Thursday night by a regional postal official who interrupted his vacation to come speak to them.

"Postal service is probably better than it ever was," said San Jose postmaster and sectional center manager William Lawrence, "except possibly during the

depth of the depression when we had more employees."

The fact that a lot of people hold a contrary opinion was due in part, he indicated, "to the newspapers. . . the newspapers have no reason to be for us because we're their biggest advertising competitor."

Lawrence, who is vacationing in Santa Cruz County, was invited, along with Aptos postmaster John Tarr, to speak to the Democratic club members at a meeting held in the Aptos Library. As sectional center manager, Lawrence is in charge of 50 post offices and 3,500 employes serving 3½ million people.

Actually, the club had invited the various postmasters in the county to come talk to them about the cost of mailing a letter and

the general quality of postal service, but Lawrence vetoed that idea and came to the meeting himself. When asked why he chose to do it that way, Lawrence said:

"If you want to talk to the postmasters about matters strictly within the county . . . why they go up this street and not that. . . that's all right." But when it comes to postal policy in general, Lawrence said, "They all have different ideas about how things should be done, and they don't understand the big picture."

Lawrence is one of a vanishing breed — the politically appointed postmaster. He said he got his job from the late Sen. Clair Engle during the Kennedy administration 16 years ago, before what he called the "straight arrow" postmaster came into

being — those who are chosen on merit. "I practically grew up in Democratic clubs," he said.

Taking the bull by the horns, Lawrence started talking about the "high cost" of mail service. "High cost? Compared to what? Milk? Bread? Autos?"

The US gives the lowest cost postal service among western nations "except Switzerland, which is about the size of the section I run, and Canada, which is highly subsidized," he said.

And he reminded his audience that in the days when a first class letter cost three cents to mail, workers were making 65 cents an hour.

"The good old days weren't all that good," he declared, adding that "the high cost of

mail is a non sequitur, like 'When did you stop beating your wife?'"

Admitting that a few letters do go astray, Lawrence steadfastly maintained that 95 per cent of the mail in his section is delivered on a next-day basis. That figure is substantiated by something called the ODIS (Origin-Destination Information System) test the post office uses to measure its efficiency.

The ODIS test, Lawrence said, was scrutinized by the General Accounting Office and found to be an accurate yardstick on how the post office is doing its job.

If that is the case, why then do people think the mail is not being delivered as fast as it should be?

He said part of the trouble is with postage

service

meters business firms use to stamp their mail. The dates put on the mail by these meters "are not believable. . . the post office cancellation date is believable."

He explained that "mail covers" are used to keep track of when mail is mailed and received "and they show the mail does get to them exactly as we promised."

He offered to put one of these "covers" on the mail of anyone in the audience to prove his point, but it required someone who receives at least 50 or so pieces of mail a month. No one volunteered.

The efficiency rate for second- and third-day mail drops to 85 to 90 per cent, Lawrence said, "and if it isn't 100 per cent

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by the end of five days, we know something is wrong."

Banks, too, can be a problem. "People swear that we have a check-losing department." People mail checks to banks to be deposited in their accounts and begin writing checks on that amount. "But the bank makes its last pickup Friday morning, and if Monday is a holiday, that mail isn't processed (by the bank) until Tuesday.

"Checks begin bouncing all over the place and we get the blame for it," Lawrence complained.

As for all the local mail going to San Jose to be processed before coming back here to be delivered, Lawrence had an explanation.

Thanks to the zip code, mail can be sorted by machine many times faster than someone doing it by hand. Those machines cost \$200,000 each, far beyond the reach of small post offices. But by consolidating the mail in San Jose, the mail can be sorted much faster at a lower cost. "In San Jose we can pay for some of those machines in six months because it's more efficient than a person."

Tarr, the Aptos postmaster, told the audience the mail from his post office leaves for San Jose at 5 p.m., and is back here by 5:15 a.m. the next day, sorted and on its way to the addressee by 9:15 a.m.

In preparation for this meeting, Tarr said he made a random sampling of 21 pieces of mail that showed letters coming from Kansas City, Florida, and New York in three days, and other letters from Louisiana and Florida in two days. Palo Alto mail was delivered overnight, Tarr said.

Someone asked why it takes a three weeks for a parcel post package to go to Hawaii from San Francisco, but only two weeks from Los Angeles. "I hear there are fewer ships from San Francisco to Hawaii than from Los Angeles," Tarr responded.

Parcel post is slow, Lawrence said, "because the trains don't run anymore. Parcel post is not flown. All first class mail is flown."

But not everyone was convinced. One said, "Our letters simply aren't getting there. You are giving us beautiful arguments . . . but are we just making this up?"

Lawrence answered, "It is easy to say and easy to believe (that mail is slow) if it's simply an individual piece that goes astray. We do make individual errors," he said, but he maintained that mail delivery is good otherwise.

And there are other reasons for mail getting lost. Vandalism is on the rise, both men said, Tarr cited a recent incident in which youngsters stole mail from mail boxes, tore it up and threw it away. "Kids have no respect for mail boxes," he said. "I call their parents and they threaten to sue me."

It has been necessary to lock up post office lobbies at night, much to the consternation of the boxholders, because of a rash of nighttime burglaries. "There is no way to protect people's mail after dark," Lawrence stated, "so we lock up the lobbies."

Unconvinced members of the audience gave voice to their individual experiences of slow or lost mail, but Lawrence held his ground.

He said some of the misinformation about postal service is due to newspapers and television which, he maintains, don't like the competition of mail advertising. "You call it junk mail, but somebody must read it."

People's Democratic Club president John Laird had a sympathetic word for the postal service. The trouble started, he said, when "an angry Congress made the post office start paying for itself.

"We can buy bombers; why can't we put a little bit more money in the post office instead?"

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Said Lawrence, "The post office is the only public agency you see every day. You get mad at Internal Revenue once a year. You can get mad at us every day.

"It gets to be a matter of policy," he concluded. "What role should the post office have?" To get the kind of service people say that want, "We've got to be subsidized."

Although they weren't convinced by his arguments, the club members gave him an ovation for interrupting his vacation to meet with them.