



# THE CANADIAN DEAD LETTER OFFICE

*The British North America  
Philatelic Society  
Dead Letter Office  
Study Group  
Newsletter*

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## **The Victoria Exception**

**1888 to**

**June 30 1897**



*Article by  
Brian Plain*

## Research

All specialists pick up needed information wherever they can find it. They turn over every rock and poke into every nook and cranny to uncover some unknown tidbit that may help them understand an item in their collection that has defied explanation.

There is some information on the Dead Letter Office in the National Archives. However, it is unlikely to tell the whole story or answer all questions. I recently purchased 'A Modern Mercury' pamphlet and have included a few tidbits in the newsletter. Last week I obtained a copy of the Post office Department Financial Branch Manual of Financial Procedure' for the Director of Financial Services for April 30 1951. When I have the time I am hoping to find some mention of the Dead Letter Office, even though this was near the time the DLO was renamed the UMO.

## Chairman's Desk

From time-to-time, one wonders if all the dead letter material has been discovered, however the past few weeks have proven the weakness of that line of thinking. A long sought-after 'Victoria Exception' item has been found, reposing unrecognized in an extensive collection of covers. On-line dealers are beginning to list DLO items that demonstrate new early and late dates, and interesting items continue to appear at local shows and bourses. Items of DLO stationery are emerging, and printed instructions on these items help to increase our knowledge of the workings of the Dead Letter Office.

Although our group membership is small, there seems to be a growing interest in the DLO, and successful exhibits at regional and national shows have helped to increase our profile. I would encourage our members to consider exhibiting, even at a local level, as this may spur further interest from other philatelists and prod dealers to include DLO material in their inventories. Also, if so inclined, I would suggest that members write a short piece for a subsequent newsletter. I hope that some of you will be able to attend BNAPEX in North Bay in September. One never knows what the bourse might hold!

***The Canadian Dead Letter  
Office Study Group***

The Canadian Dead Letter Office Study Group comes under the sponsorship of The British North American Philatelic Society (BNAPS)

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**Editor's Comments**

This issue of the Canadian Dead Letter Office Newsletter is a little late as I have been busy exhibiting at the Ottawa show and attending the Montreal RPSC show. Both shows were well attended by members of all collecting interests. I did however notice a lack of Dead Letter Office material available at these shows.

It appears from the Chairman's note that some dealers in the west are beginning to carry more of this material, and although attracting more attention is to risk higher prices, it would be nice if more dealers were able to identify and stock DLO and UMO items.

The study of the Dead Letter Office is still not at the 'mature stage'. There are new finds to be made, revision of listings to be done, analysis of existing material and articles to be written and reviewed.

**Recent Auction & Sale Listings**

In the recent Maresch auction of Jun 15 2011 there were two large lots of Dead Letter Office material by our past member Marc Eisenberg. With some luck and good bids this material may see its way into the hands of DLO Study group members.

Lot #142 included over 300 DLO items, mainly Dead Letter Office Return envelopes but included some other material. I believe it may also have been in the original exhibit pages still. The estimate for this lot was \$2500. It sold for \$4000 plus buyer's commission and taxes (\$5300).

Lot #164 was a group of 15 covers or cards from 1887 – 1926, all with cancels and markings. The estimate was \$150, sale price I believe was \$140 plus commissions and taxes. there were 15 covers or cards from 1887-1926 all with cancels and markings. The estimate was \$150.

## The Victoria Exception 1888 to June 30 1897

By Brian Plain

Following Confederation in 1867, post office regulations directed that all mail that was undeliverable, for whatever reason, was to be sent to the Dead Letter Office in Ottawa for processing. This regulation was not a great burden on Central Canada, the Maritimes or Manitoba, as much of the region (the eastern prairies being the exception prior to 1880) was serviced by a well-established railway grid, water routes and stage-roads. The prairies west of Winnipeg were sparsely populated, but connections south to the United States provided access to a rail link to the East. On the other hand British Columbia, with its burgeoning coastal and Fraser Valley population and increasing commercial interests, found adherence to these regulations to be very onerous and an obstruction to effective and efficient commerce. An example of the problem is shown below.

### Registered cover Victoria to Soda Creek



This registered cover was mailed at Victoria on June 3, 1885 and arrived in Soda Creek on June 10. Held for six weeks and then marked **NOT CALLED FOR**, it was sent via the post office in Victoria to the Dead Letter Office in Ottawa

where it was processed and finally returned to Victoria, being dispatched from Ottawa on November 16, 1885. The total time from original mailing to return to sender in Victoria was about 170 days. The reverse side shows the original dispatch mark from Victoria and receipt in Soda Creek. The two Dead Letter Office marks show receipt by clerk #1 on November 6, 1885, and a November 16, 1885 dispatch mark from that office.

The slowness of service became the focus of numerous complaints to the Post Office Department in Ottawa, primarily from business concerns anxious to see an improvement that could enhance their business competitiveness. In response to the intense lobbying for improved service, the Post Office Department agreed to relax its regulations and create an 'exception' for Pacific Coast mail.

On January 1, 1888 E. H. Fletcher, the P.O. Inspector in Victoria sent a circular to all postmasters in his region. This document, entitled Circular to Postmasters in British Columbia states:

*Sirs,-*

*I am directed by the Postmaster General to instruct you to forward on and after this date, in one of the enclosed envelopes, any letters addressed to places in British Columbia or the Pacific States, which, owing to their not being prepaid, or not sufficiently prepaid, cannot under the present regulations of the Department be forwarded to their address.*

*Letters so posted and sent to this office, should be carefully postmarked with the date of posting, and the stamps, if any thereon, carefully obliterated.*

*Unpaid or insufficiently prepaid letters, addressed to other places should be sent to the Dead Letter Office (i.e. Ottawa) as heretofore.*

*I am, Sir,*

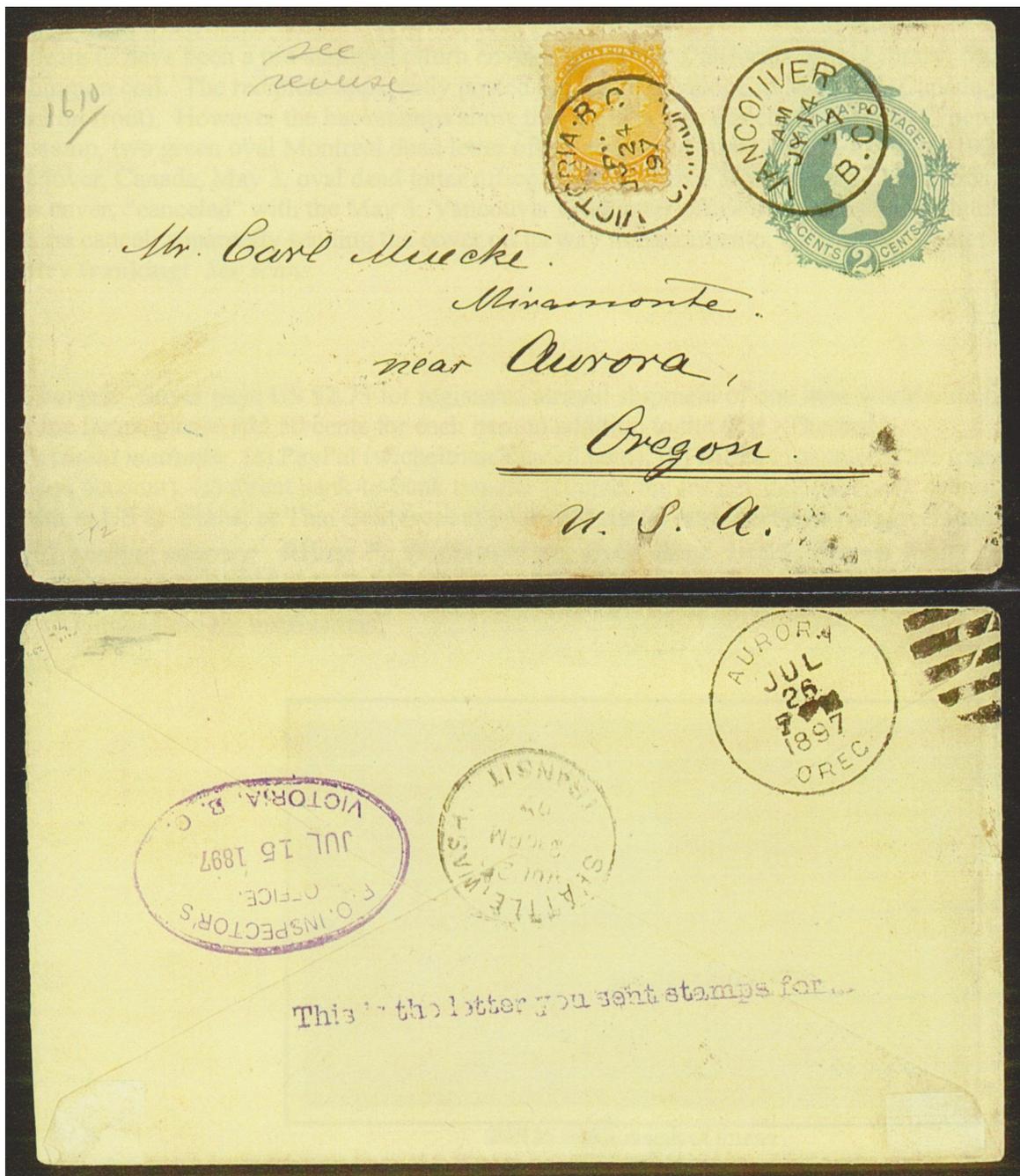
*Your obedient Servant,*

*E.H. Fletcher*

*P.O. Inspector*

Two examples of mail from this period are known.

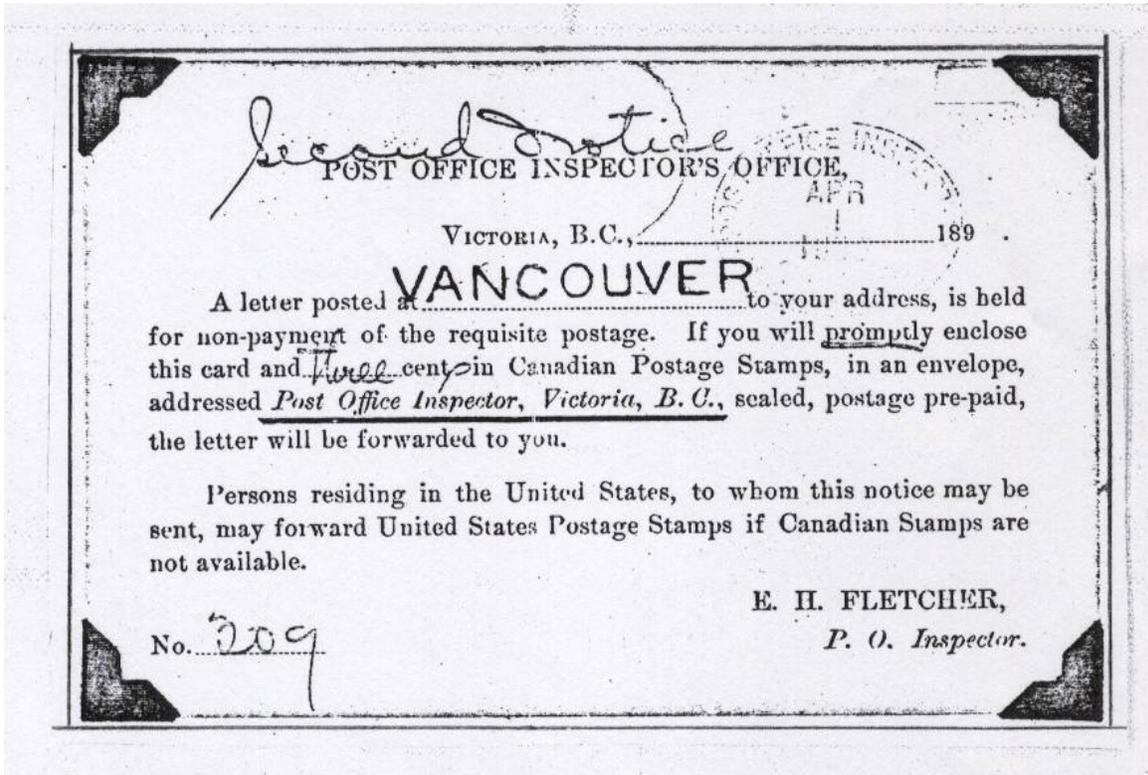
**THE CANADIAN DEAD LETTER OFFICE**



Courtesy of Bill Pawluk

Sent from Vancouver to Oregon on July 14 1897, this cover was 1¢ short-paid. In keeping with the approved procedure, it was forwarded to the Post Office Inspector in Victoria where he marked it on arrival on July 15 and a filing number (1610) added. A notice was sent to addressee indicating that the item was being held until payment was received [see an unrelated example below]. Upon receipt of payment in Victoria, the item was forwarded to its destination on July 24, 1897. It was received in Aurora Oregon via Seattle on July 26.

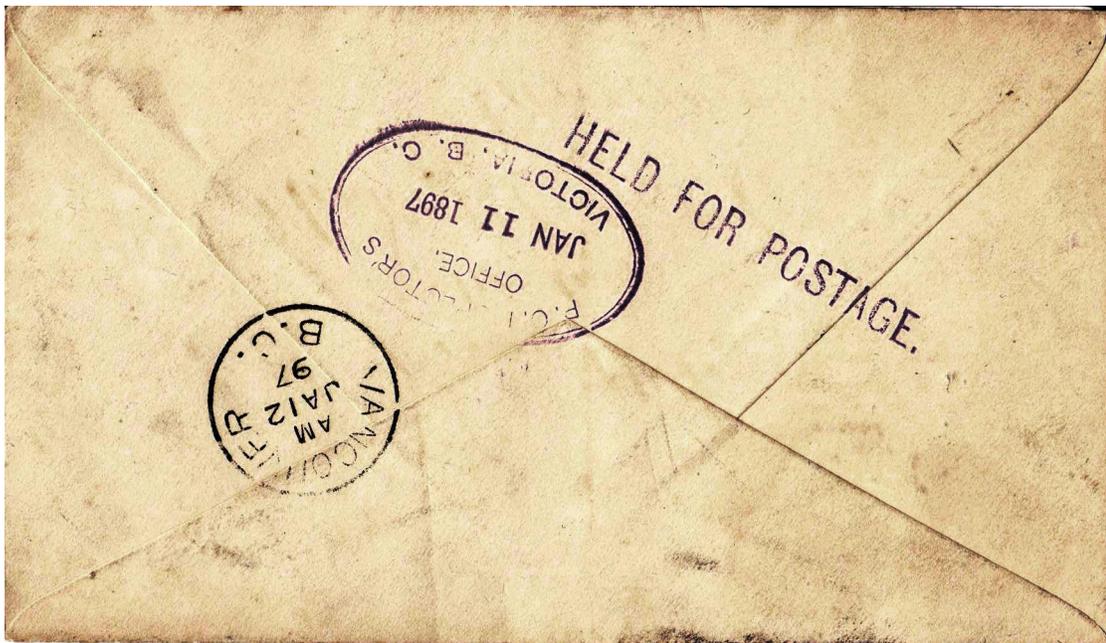
**Notice to Addressee**



- no known source

Recently, a second cover has been found that further illustrates this 'exception'.





This letter was mailed at Victoria without postage on January 9, 1897. In compliance with the instructions from E.H. Fletcher, it was sent to his office for processing. The shortfall in postage was collected from the sender (who was identified by the P.O. Drawer Number), and the item forwarded on January 11 to the addressee in Vancouver. It was received on January 12.

On July 1, 1898, Victoria was among the Canadian cities to be granted its own Branch Dead Letter Office. As such, it was authorized to process all categories of mail, including first class and registered mail. This office remained open until the mid-1920s, but from 1902, when the Branch Dead Letter Office opened in Vancouver, it was only responsible for undeliverable mail to and from Vancouver Island and the Yukon.

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## A Personal View

by Gray Scrimgeour

All the 'preliminary' checking of an undelivered letter for say Vancouver had been done by the UMO before the letter got to the DLO when I worked there. A batch of mail came each morning from the UMO (just down the hallway from the DLO), and went to the bottom of the BC clerk's pile. All the handstamps (e.g., GIVEN DIRECTORY SERVICE) were applied at the UMO, not the DLO. The UMO clerks looked at each undelivered letter -- using the Vancouver City Directory as their main reference, edited the address, and sent the letter to a sub PO, where a letter carrier would see if he/she could deliver it. Some were sent out several times, to different sub POs.

The Super was given any letters with valuables, but only after the clerk filled out an 8-1/2 x 5-1/2 inch form with its 6 carbon copies. The forms listed name and address of the addressee, name and address if given of the sender, description of the valuable, etc. He was also given any envelopes found to have either lottery ticket booklets for sale, or lottery ticket foils. All of these lottery-related items (and there were many) went eventually to the RCMP.

## **A Personal View cont'd**

Undeliverable greeting cards were a common problem. A birthday card containing a \$10 bill, with the card just signed "Grandmother", for example. No return address inside the envelope.

Pyramid schemes were also illegal, and they went to the Supervisor. "Mail this letter and a handkerchief to each of xx friends" etc.

I was assigned to the Saskatchewan and Alberta sorting cases. All was small-town material. Return addresses would just be the senders' names and town names.

When I got my day's work done, I would tackle the backlogged material in the BC case. Some was 3 or 4 months old. Much of it was addressed to radio station CKNW, to their Fiesta contest. Each letter had a guess to a mystery question. That particular contest was finished long ago. Multiple envelopes from many people. The senders had carried the envelopes to the station, and rather than placing them in the station's own mail box, put them in the closest POD mail box. Without any postage. The law said that we must return each of these in an ambulance envelope, with postage due to be charged. That was fine for senders who had only one or two envelopes; theirs could be sent back in a single ambulance envelope. Large-sized ambulance envelopes were available. To take care of the multiple mailings, I suggested to the Supervisor that I first mail a single unpaid letter back to the sender. Thus warned, when a large brown envelope with 41 more old Fiesta entries arrived, the sender would refuse the big batch and its expensive postage due, it would return to us, and we could legally destroy it. The Super said sure. It worked. That person's junk was gone from the case. After a few of those, I suggested that we could judiciously just destroy (without sending them back) the rest of the outdated Fiesta entry letters. And I got approval for that approach.

I liked our Supervisor; he was great to work with. He and I were the only workers on Saturday morning shifts. We got a lot of work done in those four hours. He cleared up paper work, and I answered the phone when it rang and did my usual letters. I remember an angry woman phoning, and asking "Where's my dog whistle?" After I calmed her down and found out her name, I learned she and her dog were staying at the Vancouver Hotel. A hotel worker had taken the dog for a walk Friday evening, and he took the whistle with him. Somehow, the whistle was dropped and was inadvertently put into a mail box. I assured the woman that if that were true, we'd have it by Monday morning and would mail it to her. And that's what happened. [I won't tell you the name of the woman. Her husband was a famous industrialist. She tried to pull rank with me, but got the usual good, polite service.] The DLO got all kinds of non-mail from drop boxes.

The Supervisor has a separate room in one corner of the DLO. Locked when he wasn't there. All the valuables wound up there. All money was sent by money order to the Receiver General for Canada. Held for 3 months, or until claimed.

The UMO did not have any ambulance-type envelopes. They would have some sort of official envelope, though -- a generic probably. They did not have permission to open letters. Only the DLO could do that. We sliced the top off (about 1/8 inch) with an electric slicer.

New Handstamp  
 District Superintendent of Postal Service  
 D.L.O.  
 NOV 19 1929  
 1  
 Winnipeg, Man.

by Gary Steele

Double Circle  
 37+27mm

No known proof



Collectors tend to gravitate toward various stamp and postal history collections for a variety of reasons. I like Dead Letter Office covers because they have a good story on almost all in my collection. Also, it is still a subject in the maturing stage even though they can be over 100 years old; there are still new items to find.

Last year I obtained my first Winnipeg double circle #2. Note this is not a Barrel handstamp, as Barrels are known for the 1950's style handstamps using a device called a 'Barrel Assembly' with five different wheels. See Robert Smith's book 'Canada's Barrel Postmarks'.

The Winnipeg #2 and #4 double circle handstamps were proofed on December 4 1924 and November 7 1924 respectively. These appear to be a rubber handstamp as the inside circles are usually irregular. However, until the actual hammer device is found this is not concrete. It did not occur to me that a #1 and #3 might exist as none have been reported and only two of the #2 hammers have thus far surfaced.

Always surprised by new postal history material popping up, I came across this handstamp with a '1' imprinted on it. The upper letters are sans serif, lower letters seriffed. All letters are mixed with only D.L.O. being in caps, as is normal for the acronym of Dead Letter Office.

The cover originated in Winnipeg, Man. Aug 7 1929 paying the 3 cent 1<sup>st</sup> class letter rate to Ocean Grove, N.J. PO machine imprint Aug 10 1929 with the address crossed out and '201 E24 W N.Y. - c' written in. Held over for two months the cover was then returned to the Madison SO PO Oct 8 1929, leaving Oct 9 1929 for delivery to the New York Dead Letter Office. There it was then opened and delayed again with the only N.Y. DLO handstamp dated Nov 14 1929, forwarded to the Winnipeg Dead Letter Office, received on Nov 19 1929.

No additional information about the addressee or handstamps is shown, as this would have been placed on the Dead Letter Office Return envelope (Ambulance cover).

## A Modern Mercury

by Gary Steele

Another picture shown in the pamphlet 'A Modern Mercury' under Errors Section 2 shows five men working in the Directory Services Section. Although, not exactly a part of the Dead Letter Office most items go through this section and onwards to the DLO if they cannot find the correct street addresses. The DLO in various cities would then have to open the envelope to determine if the sender included an address inside the envelope.



## Dead Letter Office Per Postmaster's Information Book 1940

'Page 75. Section **568. Frequency of Returns.** – At the close of each month all dead mail matter, which has remained in the office for one month after receipt, is to be forwarded to the District Dead Letter Office.'

In this case the Post Office had printed special envelopes to send quantities of mail to the District Dead Letter Offices. An article on these will be posted in the future. Material sent in these envelopes is listed in section 569 below:

'Page 75. Section **569. Making up Returns.** – (1) Dead mail matter of the following description: –

- (a) letters of Canadian or other origin;
- (b) parcels of Canadian or other origin;
- (c) samples, circulars, catalogues and other printed matter, except newspapers, see clause (d);
- (d) only newspapers bearing a direct request for return, originating in other countries except Great Britain (including Northern Ireland), Ireland (Erie) and the United States; and
- (e) registered letters or other registered articles of Canadian or other origin, except the United States.

may be included in returns to the District Dead Letter Office.'

...to be continued

**Member's Mail**

We would like comments, suggestions, notes on articles, and questions posted in this section. This will be a forum for trying to use the expertise of all members. There will also be a Bulletin Board that we can use in-between newsletters to hash out certain key points and then have more concrete notes for the newsletters.

**Want List and For Sale**

**Wanted** – Documents related to the Dead Letter Office, Canada prior to 1900 [bcplain@shaw.ca](mailto:bcplain@shaw.ca)

**For Sale** - Canada covers, precancels, plate blocks and other postal history. If nothing showing in your area please email with your want list.

[www.canadapostalhistorycovers.com](http://www.canadapostalhistorycovers.com)

**Wanted** - DLO handstamps on cover 1954 down, Registered Ambulance/Return Letter Envelopes with Wax Seals, any DLO correspondence with handstamps and Moose Jaw Local Office. Please e-mail [gary.steele@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:gary.steele@ns.sympatico.ca)

**Wanted** – Place your ad here

**Wanted** - Mail Service Suspended covers from the Second World War with or without DLO handstamps, please e-mail and I will advise if any particular country is still required: [gary.steele@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:gary.steele@ns.sympatico.ca)

**For Sale** - 1 Cent Jubilee 1897 covers with and without combinations of other stamps. Please email for list or any specific needs. Also have precancels off cover and cancelled stamps [gary.steele@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:gary.steele@ns.sympatico.ca)