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Neither Rain, nor Sleet, nor Snow—but Anthrax?

BY ROBERT L. KAISER | POLEBRIDGE, MONTANA | 2001

The letter wasn't a scare, really. In fact, Tom Sluiter laughed when he opened the envelope and saw it was full of baby powder. His 88-year-old mother in eastern Montana had sent it as a joke, with a wobbly, handwritten note that read, "Here's some anthrax -- handle it carefully. Ha ha."

But at least one person in this tiny wilderness town is taking the threat of terrorism seriously.

Dan Kaufman is kicking Polebridge's only post office out of his store because of fear engendered by the faraway terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and subsequent mailings of anthrax in other parts of the country. Kaufman, who lives above the historic post office with his wife, Deb, and their 7-year-old son, is afraid of what the U.S. Postal Service and a contract with the federal government might bring to his door.

"It wasn't 'The sky is falling,' " he said. "It's just that, if we're going to fight a battle, I don't want it to be at the bottom of the stairs."

If the postal service doesn't find another home here by Dec. 11 -- an increasingly likely prospect -- Deb Kaufman will stamp one final letter with a Polebridge postmark and the post office will close after 100 years, most of them in the 85-year-old Polebridge Mercantile.

Dan Kaufman's decision does not sit well with the people of Polebridge. Across the nation, residents are trying to balance

fear against convenience, trying to decide what amenities they will sacrifice in the name of safety and security. But here, in a town one resident describes as "the end of the road," it strikes people as a little odd.

"I don't know of anybody's concerned about [anthrax] here," said Sluiter, 62, a retired college professor.

"I was pretty incredulous that someone thought anyone would send anthrax to Polebridge, Mont.," said Becky Hardey, the contract postal carrier who for 20 years has bounced up Montana Highway 486 every Tuesday and Friday with the mail. "Half the Zip code books don't even list this place."

For the record, the Zip code here is 59928. The population is a few digits smaller, even in summer, when the tourists descend on neighboring Glacier National Park.

Year-round Polebridge is home to fewer than a dozen people, hardy souls who worry mostly about grizzly bears, mountain lions and forest fires. Many are retired. Some are artists. Others are tanners.

There is no cell phone service, and nobody has home phones. They use the pay phones in front of the store.

There is no electricity, either. The power lines stop 20 miles back down the road, a rutted and pockmarked strip of gravel and dirt that tenuously connects Polebridge to the nearest town, 35 miles to the south.

Canada is 22 miles to the north. But the border has been closed since a flood washed out the road years ago.

Nobody here likes the thought of losing the post office, one of the smallest in the country. "This is my lifeline to the outside," said John Frederick, 58, on one of his twice-weekly trips to the mercantile to pick up the mail and visit friends.

"I heard someone say the post office is the soul of the mercantile," said Frederick, a hostel owner who for 20 years has held P.O. Box 1, near the fishing lures and canned corn. "It's kind of a social thing, an institution."

Some suspect that once their gathering place loses its most reliable draw, the town will suffer and perhaps even die. "It'll just about be a nail in the coffin," said Ivan Windsheimer. 81.

Hardey, a small woman with short, salt-and-pepper hair, arrived at 10:45 a.m. one recent Tuesday dragging two canvas bags out of the back of her sport-utility vehicle and slinging them over her back.

One bag held Windsheimer's military pension check, a delivery that made him smile. But Hardey brought something ominous, too: a flier for the Kaufmans from the U.S. Postal Service that carried the headline, "Increase Awareness of Possibility of Harmful Biological Agents at Collection and Retail Acceptance Points."

Deb Kaufman, who is the postmaster, scoffed. She doesn't share her husband's concern. Nor does Andy Blanco, 24, who works at the mercantile.

"I don't think it would happen that someone would send something here," he said. "It's just too low-key."

During the summer and fall, Polebridge comes together in front of the mercantile on the wood-plank landing where Deb Kaufman has seen an occasional bold grizzly. In winter, the community gathers at a big round table inside the store to open the mail and catch up on the latest news. A regulator clock ticks off the seconds even though time seems to stand still.

The boxy red mercantile is one of two buildings in town, not counting the outhouse, and is on the National Register of Historic Places. It has hardwood floors, dusty merchandise and a small room in the middle with log walls and a window with

the word "POLEBRIDGE" over it. This is where Deb Kaufman sorts the mail. She doesn't use tongs or gloves or a face mask.

There are some in the area who admit to being wary. "I think everybody's concerned everywhere," said Jack Potter, a veteran park ranger who visited. "Who knows who's mailing things? I don't see how not to be concerned."

But in the main, Polebridge is a trusting town. Peter Moore keeps the door to his post office box ajar because he never can remember the combination.

"I worry about lions, not people," Deb Kaufman said.

Frederick smirked at the thought of terrorists targeting a town in the Montana wilderness. "Only one man is worried," he said.

Dan Kaufman knows what people are saying, and he regrets the inconvenience his decision will cause. But he makes no apologies for putting his family's safety first.

"I don't think some people take it seriously," he said. "But our mail isn't quarantined, and my wife picks it up and puts it in the boxes. My gut feelings overruled my thought process."

After the World Trade Center collapsed, and while flying home from Alaska, Kaufman had a premonition. He soon decided the \$3,000 a year that the U.S. Postal Service pays him to house a post office in his store wasn't worth it anymore.

"The anthrax thing was just kind of the last straw," said Kaufman's oldest son, Ben. "We had been wanting to be able to get away in the summers; my parents hadn't had a day off in five years. And then when my dad got scared about the anthrax, that decided it for us."

Like his mother, Ben Kaufman doesn't seem to share his father's concern. But he also doesn't understand the negative reaction to his father's decision.

Without a post office, Polebridge would keep its Zip code, Hardey said. But those five digits might serve only as an epitaph.

"Places like this are hard to find anymore," she said as the mercantile buzzed with townspeople picking up their mail.