

*Boring*  
**BUSINESS REPLY MAIL**

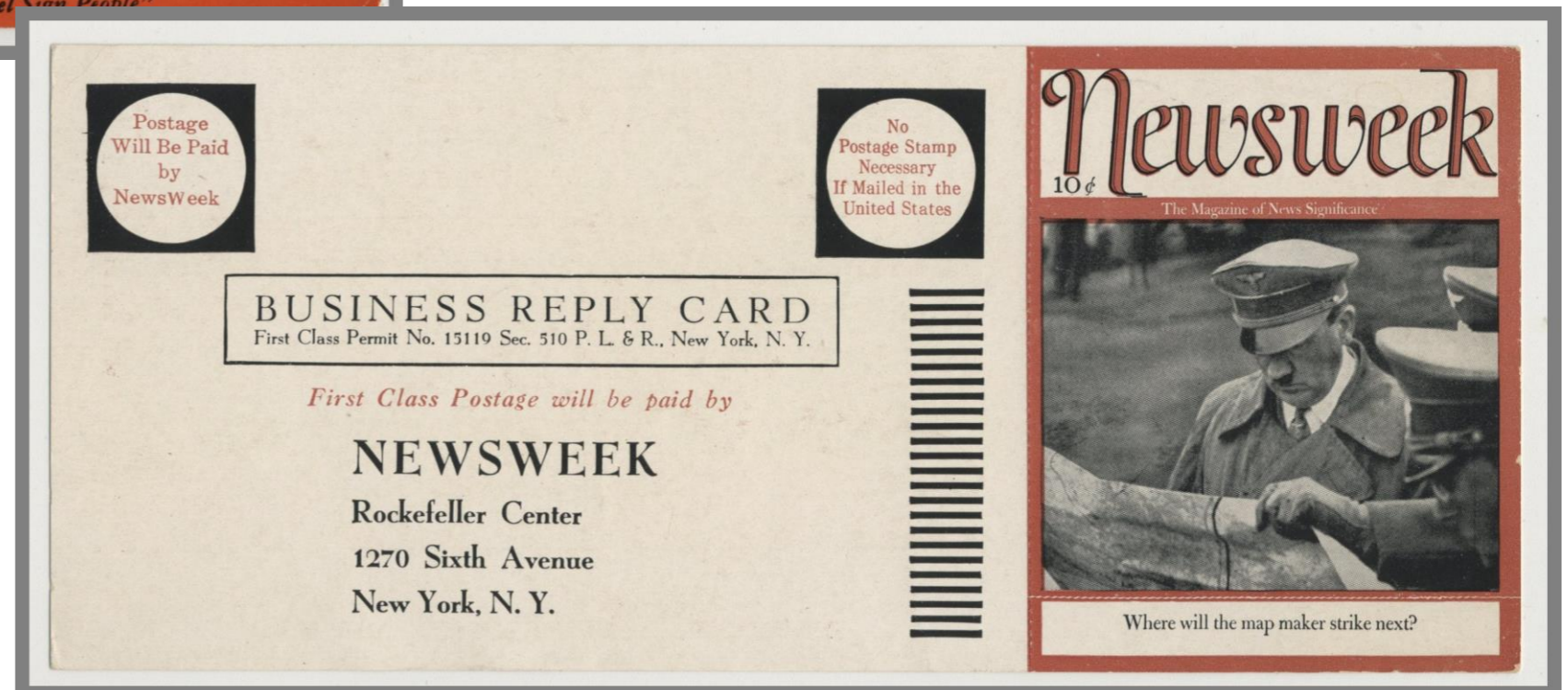
Business reply mail (BRM) – including cards, envelopes and labels (plus boxes/cartons) – is widely reviled as representing all that is wrong with junk mail. From magazines and catalogs to inserts in unsolicited mailings, BRM is ubiquitous. Yet it is widely ignored or even disdained by postal historians. Why? For philatelists, BRM represents the epitome of dull, undesirable covers – a prescribed, uniform format that is mostly unchanged since it began in 1928, usually plastered with common postage due issues. (It is no coincidence that most of the “valuable” postage due stamps pre-date BRM.) Nonetheless, despite little room for customization, BRM *can* offer some surprises and postal history interest. The small collection shown here was inspired by a single cover from the author’s collection of postage due and other “back of book” stamp covers – the beautifully illustrated “Hamilton Manufacturing” air mail envelope shown below.



BRM is and has always been charged First Class rates (air mail was treated as a category of First Class mail); since 1958, BRM can be used for any category of mail, but First Class rates still apply. In addition, an per-piece surcharge applies; it may be pre-paid (with discount) or paid on receipt. A BRM user must have a permit – originally there was no charge, but later an annual fee was imposed. More recently, annual account maintenance fees also apply for each post office used by the permit holder. Today there are also multiple classes of BRM based on volume and level of automation.

Current rules summarized: <https://pe.usps.com/cpim/ftp/manuals/qsg300/q505.pdf>

**Above left** – advertising blotter with business reply card insert. **Above right** – regular postage stamps paying postage due. **Right** – a magazine insert with an attention-getting detachment.





**FORERUNNERS AND ALTERNATIVES**

Even in the 1800s, businesses sought ways to encourage and facilitate purchase orders, bill payments, or responses to advertising. Pre-paid and "Courtesy Reply" envelopes/cards have long been used (and continue to be used today). However, pre-payment is wasteful for advertising where the response rate may be as little as 1-2%. Pre-addressed but unpaid envelopes tend to be used more for bill payments or mail orders where they ensure proper delivery. After the end of WWI, interest in another option gained steam in the wake of increased industrialization and the growth of mail order business, and BRM was finally authorized in 1928.



**FIRST CLASS**



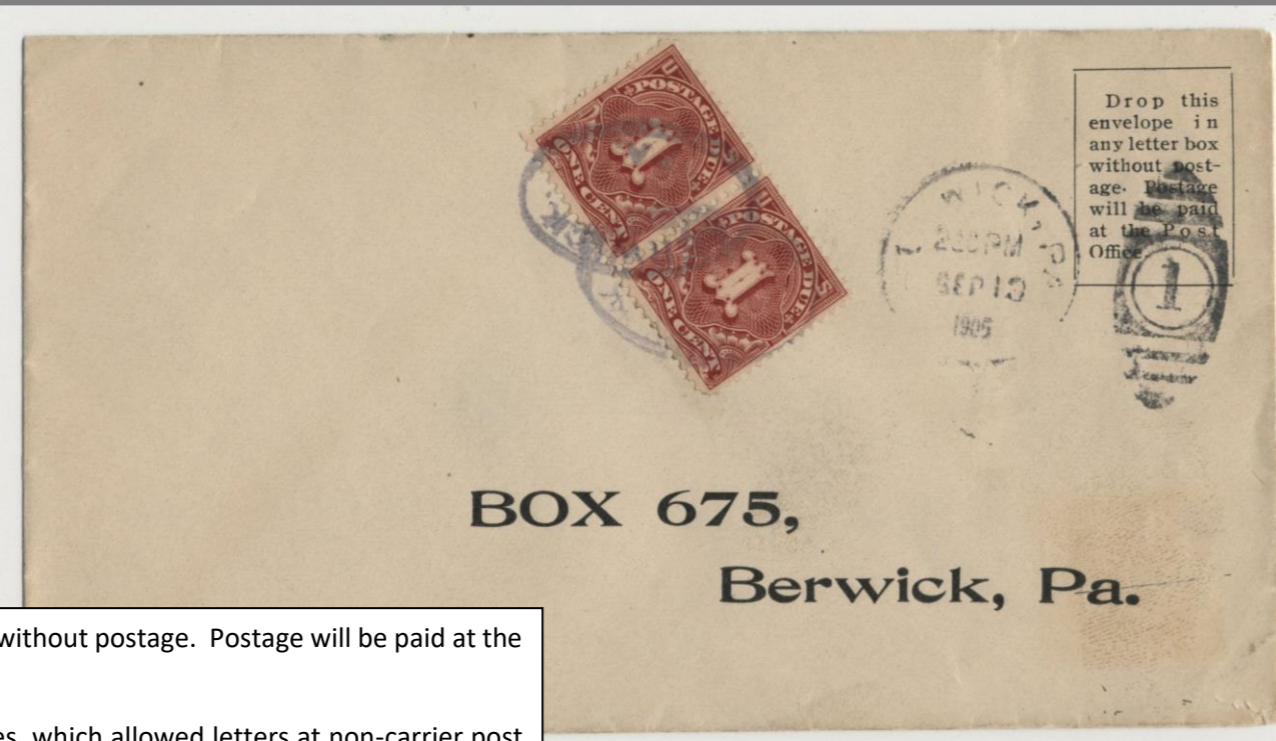
R.N.C. CANDIDATE VICTORY FUND

DEADLINE DATE: AU  
SPECIAL ATTENTION:



MANUFACTURERS OF  
**HORSE POWERS,**  
AND MACHINES FOR SAWING WOOD,  
Also, Machines for Threshing and Cleaning,  
Grain, Gasoline Engines &c.

**A. W. GRAY'S SONS,**  
Middletown Springs,  
**Rutland Co.,**  
Vermont.



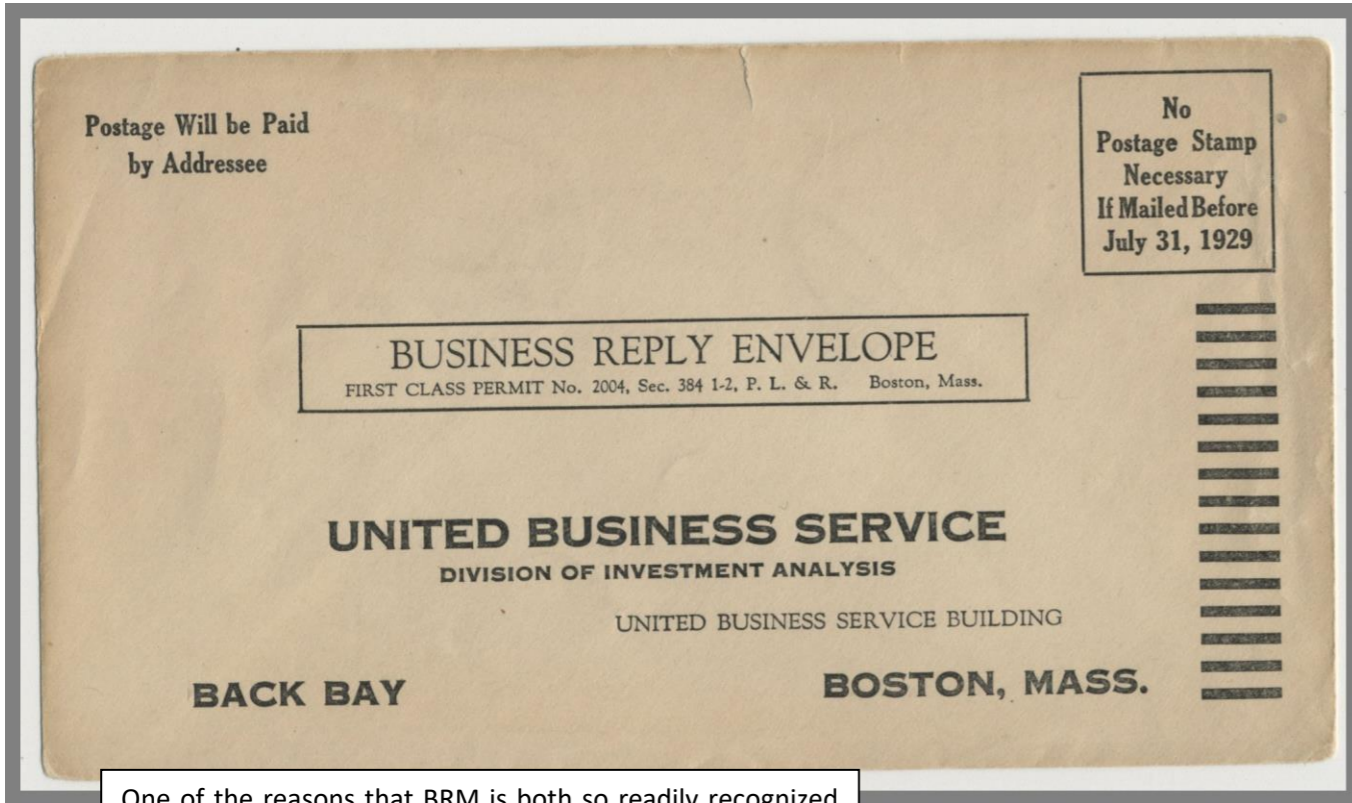
"Drop this envelope in any letter box without postage. Postage will be paid at the Post Office."

Early ingenious use of Post Office rules, which allowed letters at non-carrier post offices that did not have a return address to be delivered postage due at the regular (drop) rate. William Blount illustrates a similar short-lived usage in 1895: <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/Symposium2011/papers/Martorelli-BRM.pdf>

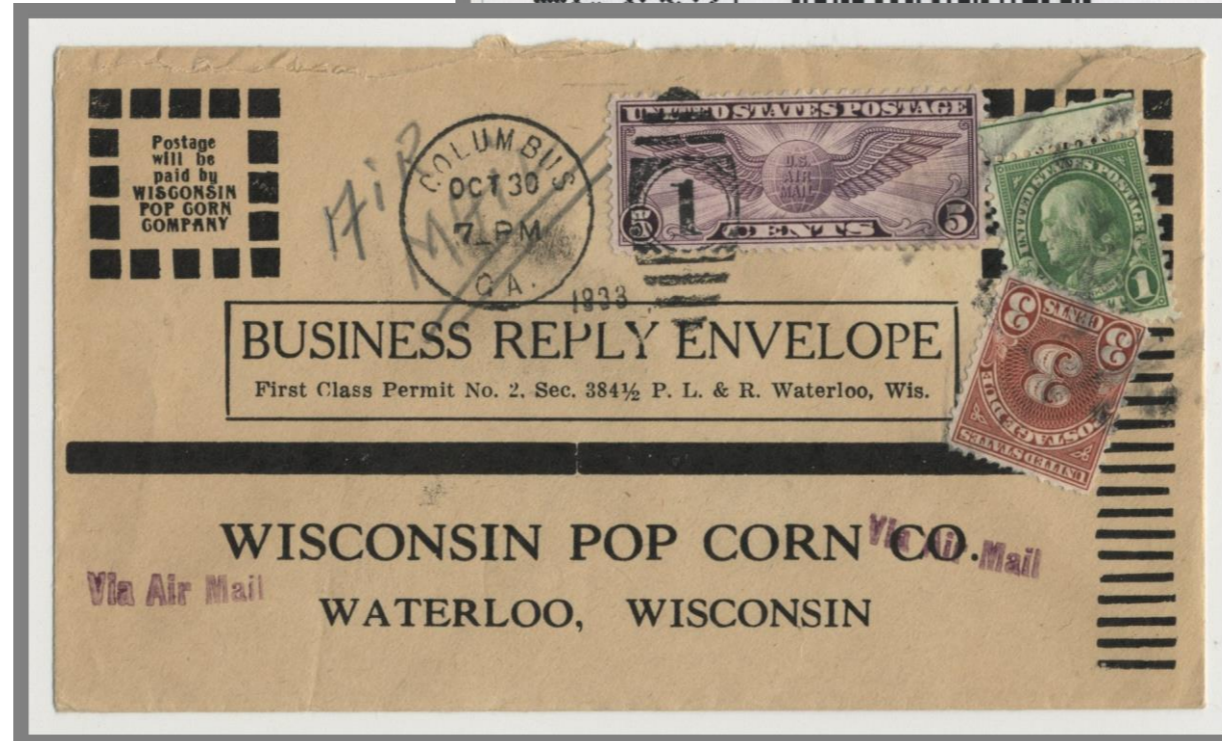


**PRESCRIBED DESIGN**

Although from early on the law recognized the use of business reply labels and even boxes (e.g., eyeglasses), its use on all classes of mail was first recognized in 1958. However, BRM was, and remains, a First Class service (including air mail and Priority Mail). Below: a modern BRM package label. Note: to avoid abuse – particularly by people who liked to send bricks and 2 by 4s (yes, the Postal Bulletin regularly mentions 2 by 4s) – business reply cards and envelopes were never permitted to be attached to anything as labels – that function was limited to actual BRM labels such as below. Improper uses were to be returned to sender or treated as trash, though the regulations required a recipient to pay full postage on anything that got through, properly or not.

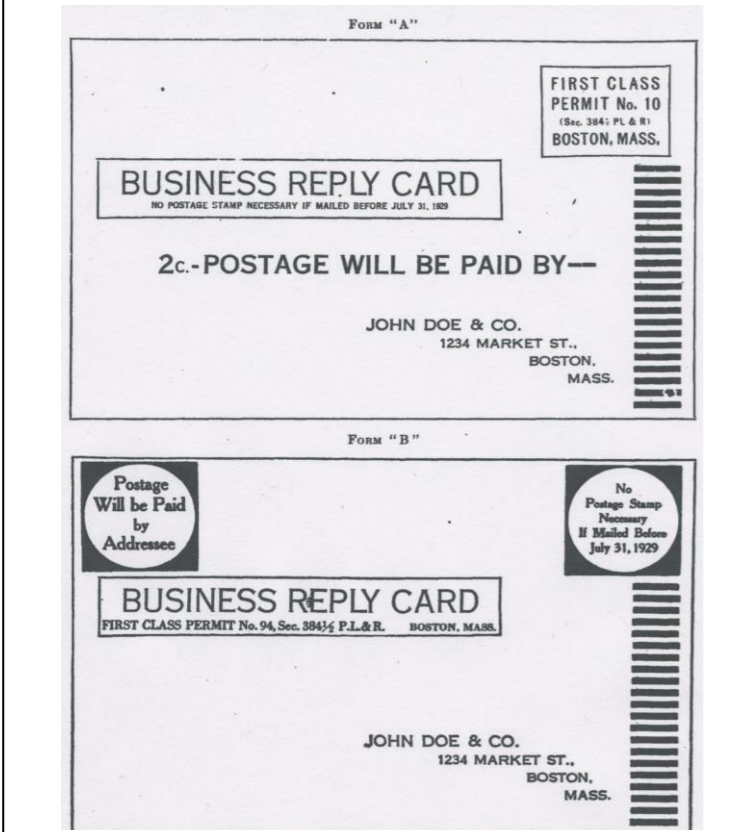


One of the reasons that BRM is both so readily recognized and considered so dull is that it is required to follow a very specific format. This basic form has remained substantially unchanged since it began, except for changes made mostly to facilitate automated mail handling.



**Top left** – Original indicia containing "... If Mailed Before July 31, 1929" changed to "... If Mailed in the United States"

**Above** – some small liberties taken with this design.



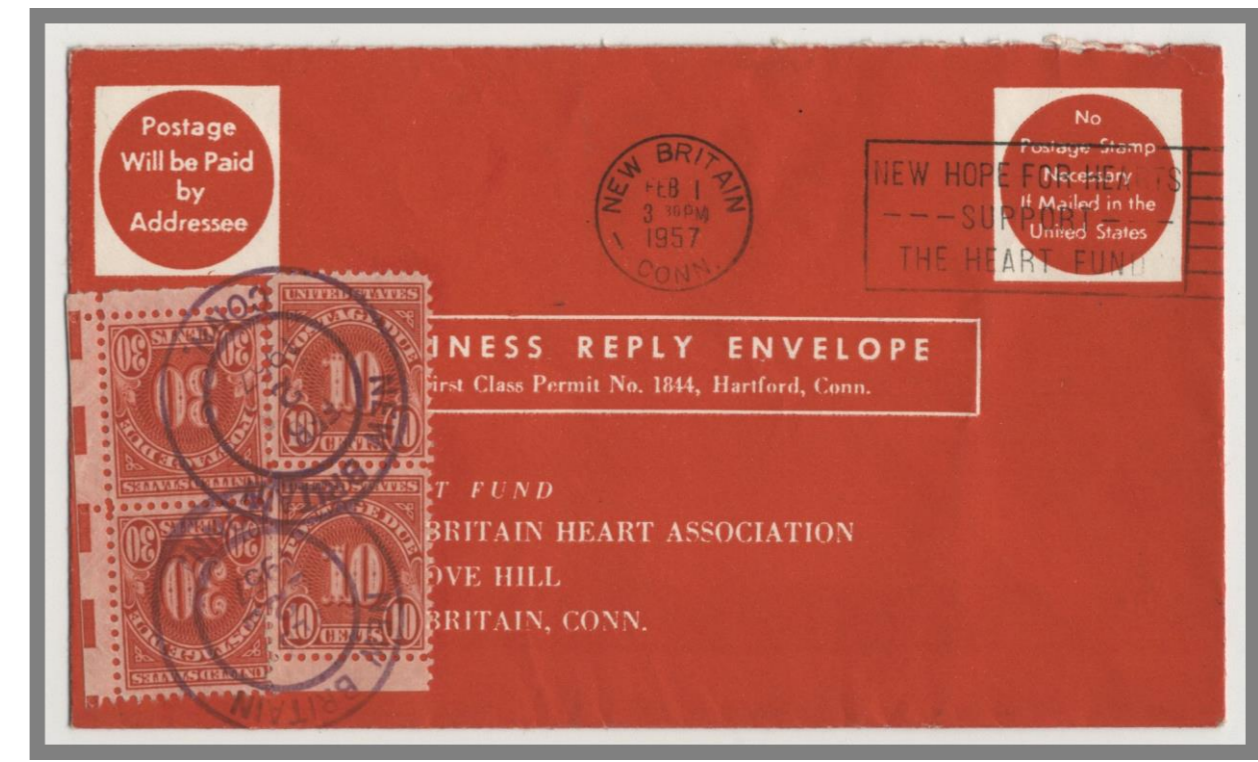
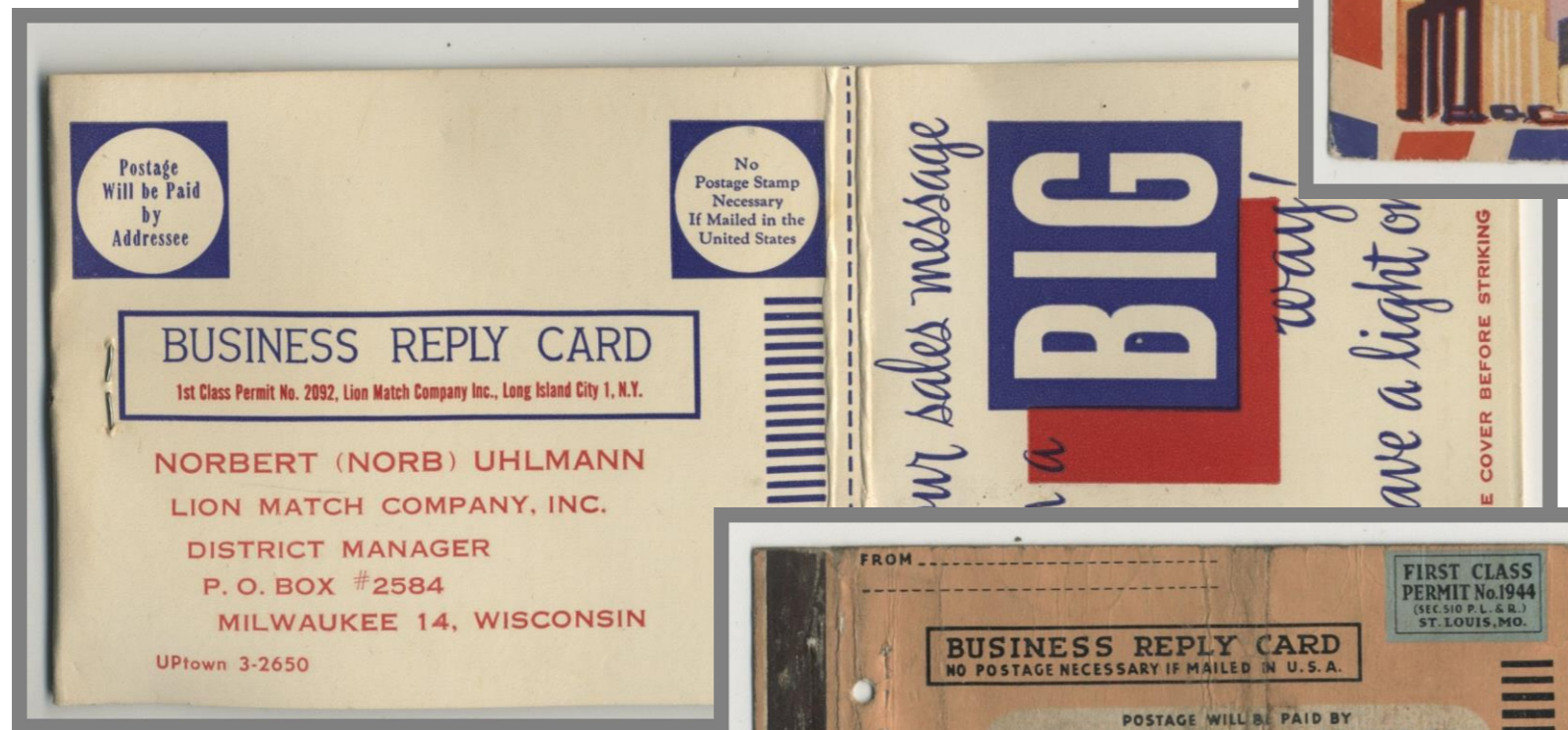


**HOW TO GET NOTICED**



Air mail return envelopes were required to have the distinctive red and blue air mail chevrons. Perhaps because they were already being printed in color, and perhaps because they were substantially more expensive to use, they tend to be far more interesting and often push the envelope in terms of adhering to prescribed design.

**Below** – possibly the finest used BRM extant? **Bottom right** – no surprise that the Heart Association would choose an attention-getting red envelope. “Top of stack” usage representing 20 returned envelopes at 3c plus 1c BRM fee.



Business reply cards are supposed to meet minimum size requirements for post and postal cards – these matchbooks obviously were tolerated by some post offices.

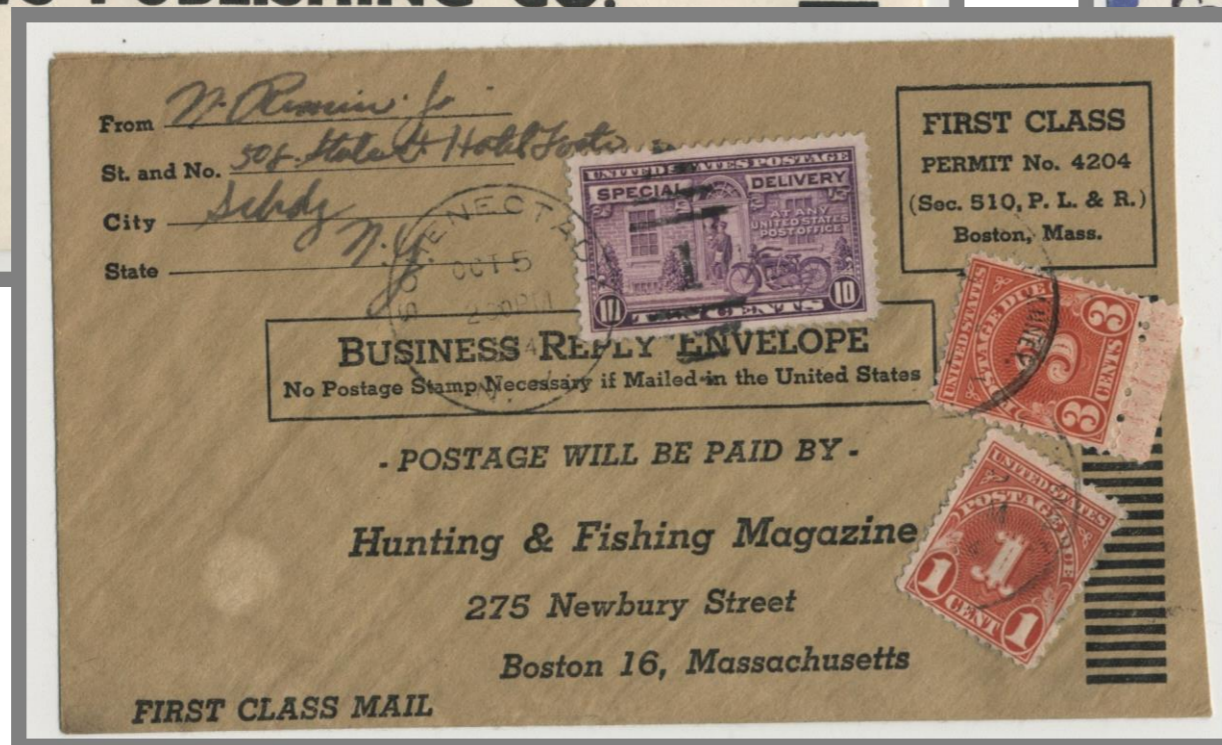
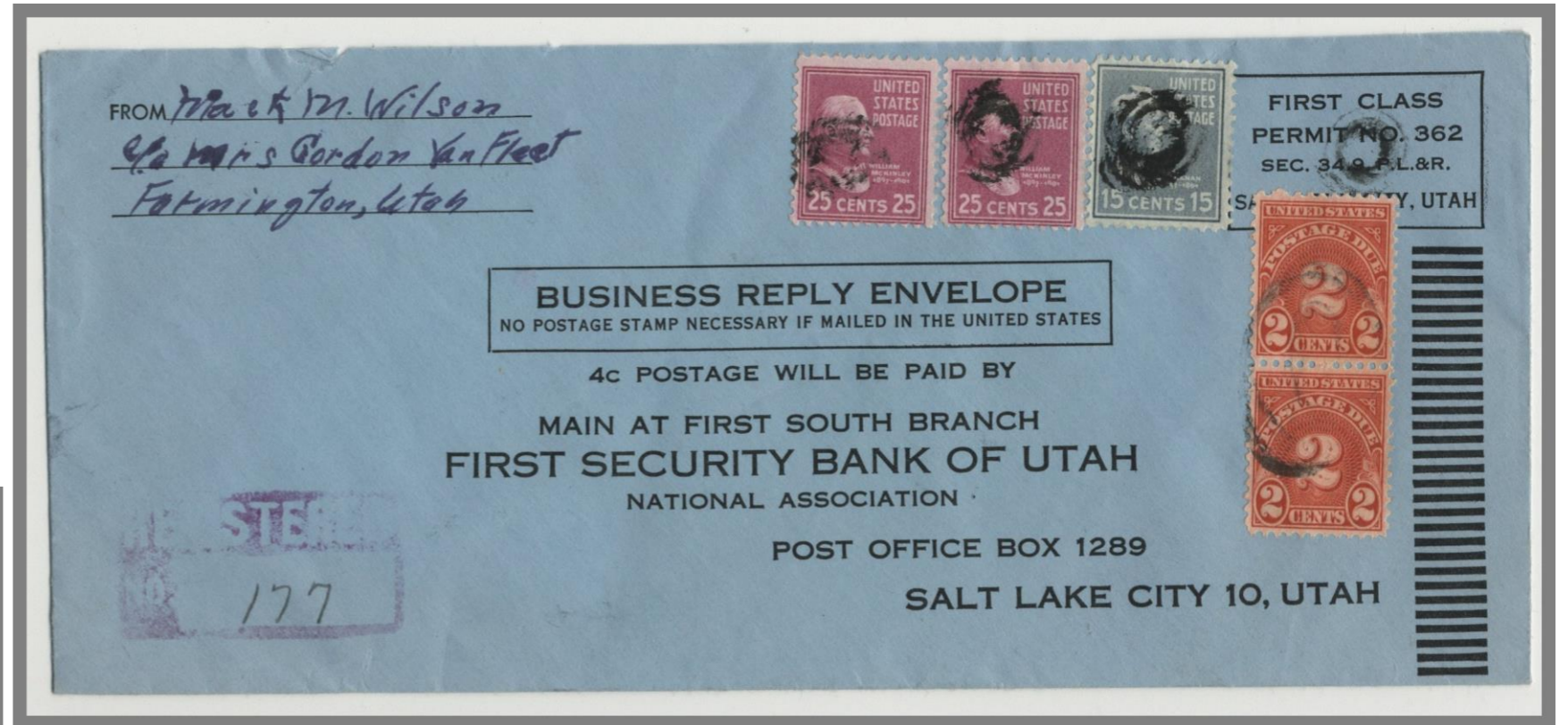


**SPECIAL SERVICES – PERMITTED OR TOLERATED**

In a 1930 Postal Bulletin, the Post Office confirmed that BRM could be accepted for registration upon prepayment of the registry fee alone. No other special services were authorized, though special delivery appears to have been tolerated. In 1963, in light of apparent abuses of special endorsements, the Post Office expressly prohibited ALL special services without prepayment of regular postal rates. Nonetheless, it appears that the rule was not universally followed.

In 1978, the Postal Bulletin clarified that registration was permitted on BRM if regular postage was fully pre-paid but indicated that *no other special services were permitted even if regular postage was paid*. However, the DMM was amended in 1982 to again permit registration of BRM without regard to whether regular postage was paid

**Right** – the rationale for registration seems clear enough – many mailings contained cash, checks or money orders. **Below** – fully paid but improperly accepted certified use. **Below right** – improperly accepted special delivery fee.





**LARGE-SCALE USERS**



Ironically, used BRMs from the largest volume users are the hardest to find, with or without postage stamps. There are several reasons for this: (1) companies jealously guarding their mailing lists, (2) consideration of user privacy (sometimes by law, as in banking), and (3) huge volumes of returns are typically not stamped individually or even "top of stack," but paid via separate postage due bills. Full canceled panes of \$5 stamps are not uncommon. Moreover, beginning in 1976, discounts are available for accounts that pre-pay both postage and fees, such that postage stamps are no longer needed (and technically no longer permitted – meters are supposed to be used).

**Left** – 37c postage due – exactly what this paid is unclear, perhaps a combination of different classes or weights.

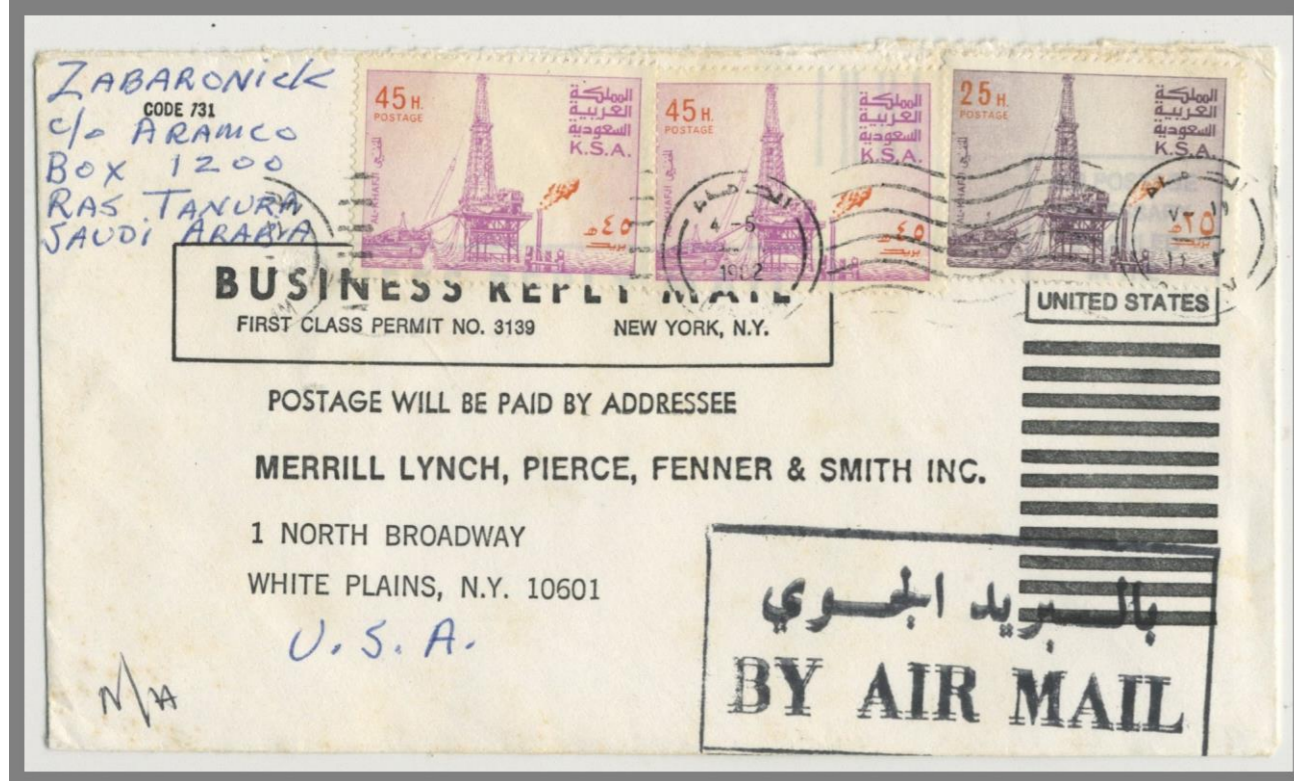
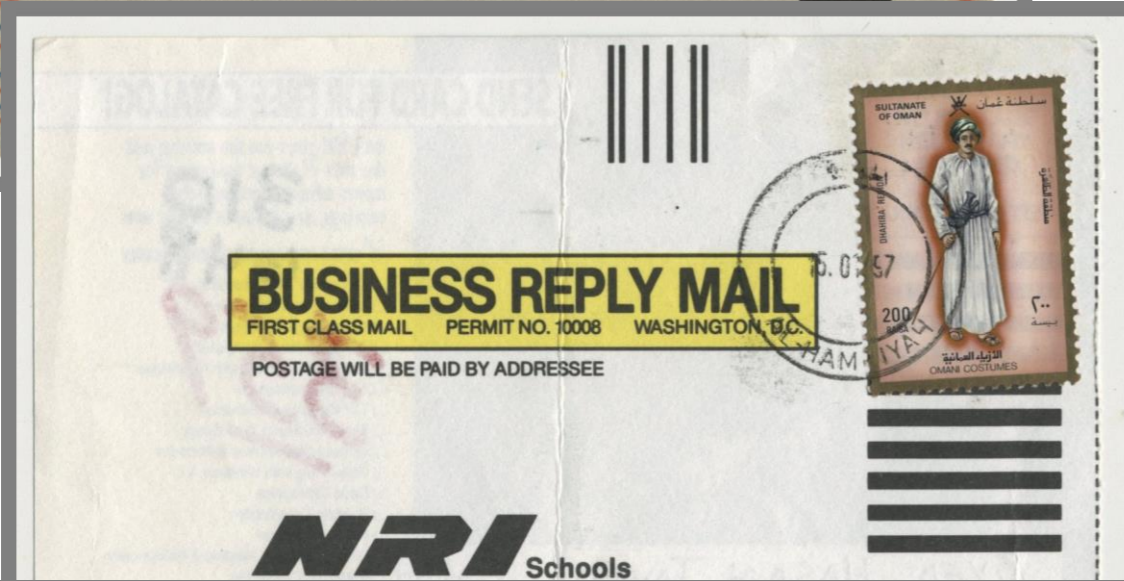
**Below left** – uncommon use of \$5.00 Liberty series stamp to pay postage due. **Below** – 17c postage due stamps were in use for a very short time and probably represent one of the rarest 20<sup>th</sup> Century stamp uses after the 1/2c stamp of the same series.



**Right** – top-of-stack business reply card with indication that the \$5 stamp paid for 250 returned pieces at 1c postage plus 1c BRM fee per card.



POSTAGE PAID BY SENDER

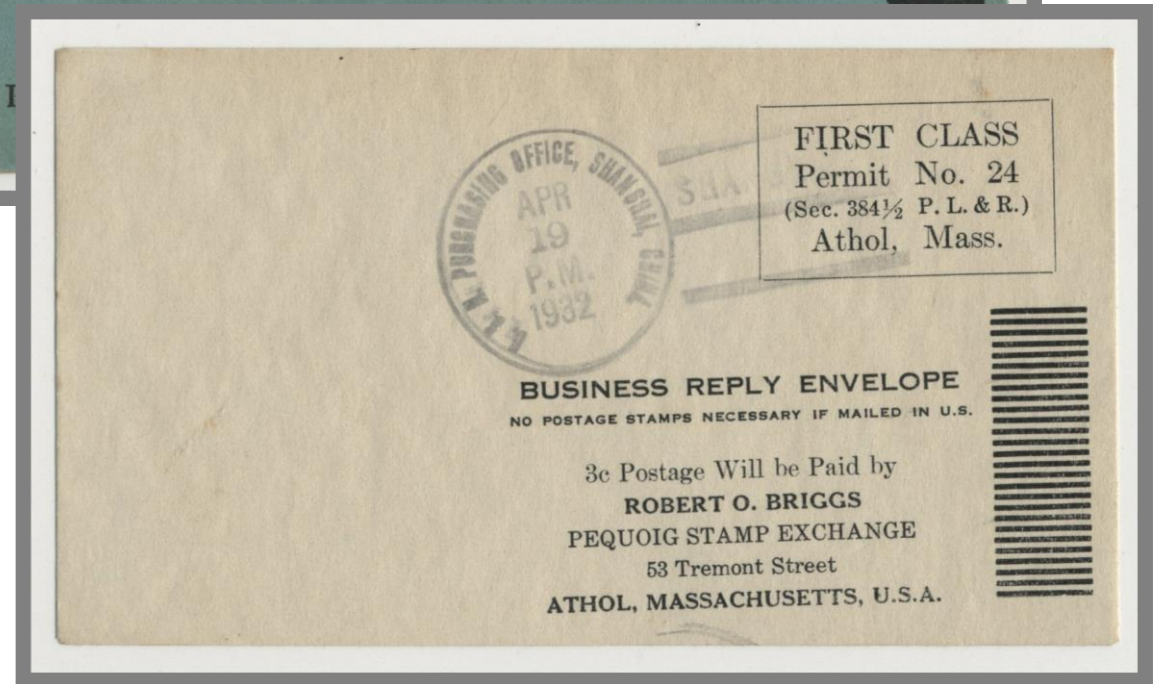
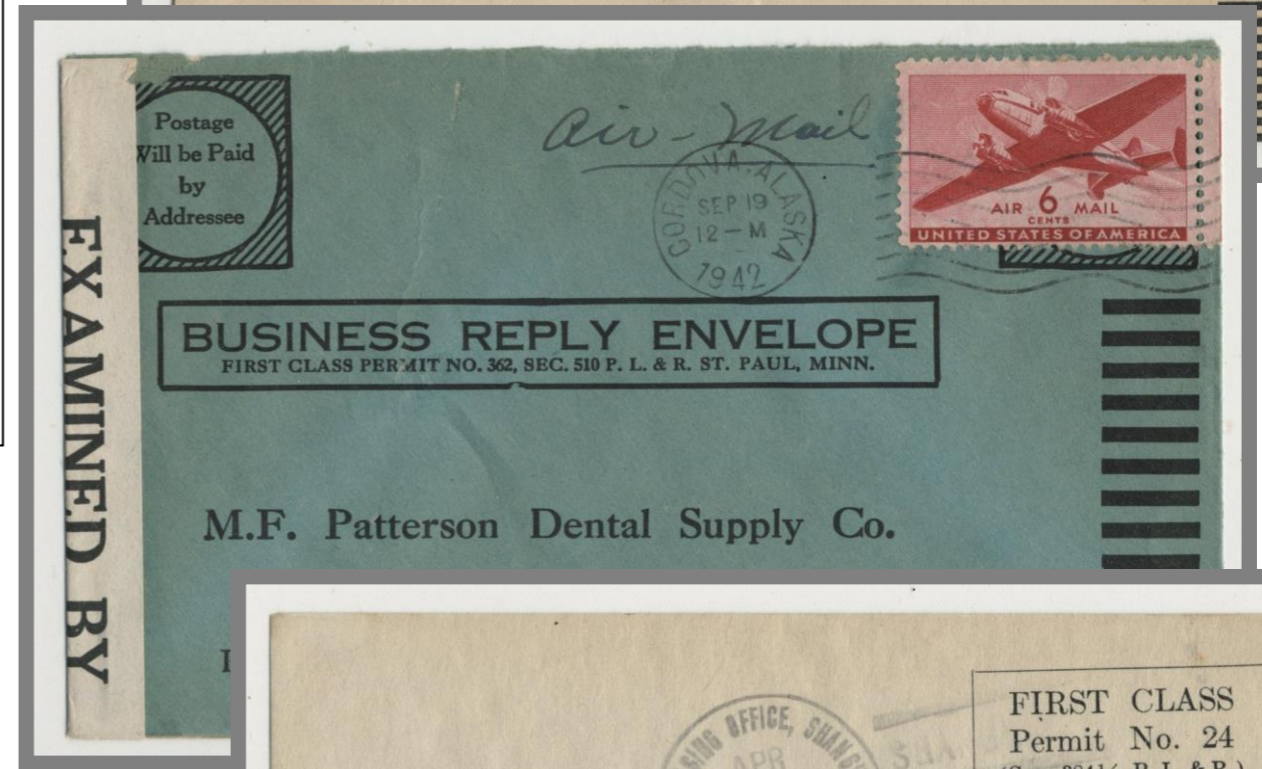


BRM used from outside the US must be fully pre-paid. Postage may also be pre-paid domestically, as a donation to a charitable recipient, to upgrade service or as a prerequisite to obtain special services between 1963 and 1978, or perhaps under the (mistaken) belief that it will expedite delivery. Under current law, the recipient must still pay both postage and per-piece charges on all BRM, even if they are pre-paid. However, a permit holder may bundle up pre-paid domestic envelopes and apply for a refund of postage only.

Experimental international reply mail was started in 1974 from the UK and the Netherlands for a 2-year period. It seems to have quietly died.

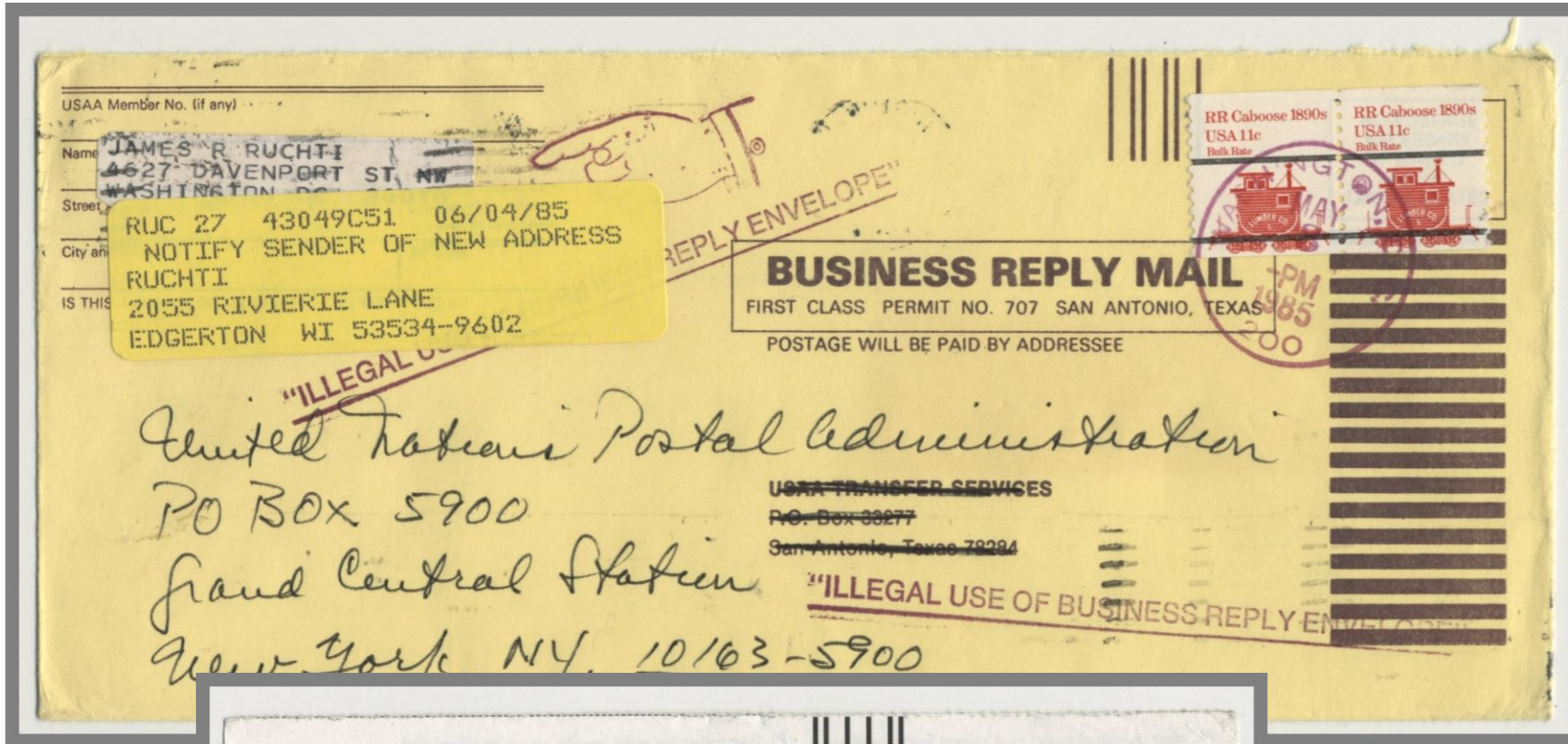
Left – post-paid items from Mexico, Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Right top and middle – envelopes uprated for air mail service from Hawaii (1939) and Alaska (1942) – for more than a year after the beginning of WWII, mail from Alaska to the Continental US was censored. Right bottom – BRM from U.S.N[avy] Purchasing Office in Shanghai treated as domestic mail without added postage.





**IMPROPER OR UNACCEPTED USES**



**Left** – BRMs may not be used for other than their intended purpose.  
**Below left** – permit not renewed.  
**Below** – successful (improper) and unsuccessful attempts to upgrade to air mail service by paying only the difference in postage.

