The American Postal Workers Union was born during the Great Postal Strike of 1970. Prior to that date, there had never been an organized protest against the federal government by postal workers. These workers had been split into “Associations” by craft, and did not have collective bargaining rights. In 1970, there was a national move to consolidate them into a federation, and by 1971, all but the Letter Carriers, Mail Handlers, and Rural Letter Carriers had joined to form the APWU. Today, the APWU is the largest of the postal worker unions, including postal clerks as well as those who do maintenance and motor vehicle work. Branch 19 of the National Association of Letter Carriers (which represents workers who actually deliver the mail) has a suite adjacent to GCAL at 23 B Brock Street in North Haven, Connecticut: CGAL owns one set of offices, NALC owns another. John Dirzius, then a junior officer at the Seymour local of APWU, transferred to New Haven in 1973 to begin organizing locals in this area. In January, 1974, the New Haven Area Local was formed. The 1970s are described in the video “25 Years: the Building of the Greater New Haven Area Local,” as a period of “growing pains” as the union struggled to incorporate other post offices in the state of Connecticut into the Local. A number of mergers occurred in the decade, and, in 1980, the Greater Connecticut Area Local was formed with Mr. Dirzius as its President. Today, it represents 155 post offices throughout the state. In 1986, GCAL moved to its current headquarters on Brock Street.

GCAL has been a “player on the national scene” through the years. Several times its members and officers have gone to Washington to participate in rallies, sometimes providing speakers. The Local also
takes its civic responsibilities seriously. It offers an annual Children’s Christmas Party; sponsors an AFL-CIO community services program; contributes money to the Juvenile Diabetes Campaign; honors its retirees, stewards, and officers at an annual event; and offers three yearly scholarships to members’ children.

THE UNION’S GREATEST SUCCESS AND MOST IMPORTANT HISTORICAL MOMENT was, on a national level, the 1970 postal strike, which won it the right to bargain collectively, says Mr. Dirzius. Locally, it was “the merger in 1973 to; create the area local,” which signified “strength and unity of purpose.”

THE UNION’S GREATEST CONCERN TODAY is “the way the industry is changing because of electronic mail and automation.” Mr. Dirzius states that the union represents a “shrinking number of workers” due to attrition and must strive now to organize a much broader mail industry, including company truck drivers; workers who repair postal equipment; and workers at discount sort houses, in order to survive.

THE RECORDS

Mr. Dirzius and his officers and staff have kept impressive and well-organized records. They are well-labeled, accessible, and, in so far as possible, stored with a view toward preservation for the long term. In the 1990s, the office undertook a massive computerization program, so that now, every daily office function is also tracked through the computer. Current files are maintained on the first floor, in a central filing system. These records include correspondence with the postal service, with the national office, and with the AFL-CIO (both incoming and outgoing); bids on jobs; and the up to date membership list. As noted, these files are also kept on the computer. In a storage facility (two doors down in the same building), Mr. Dirzius and staff keep those records which the union’s constitution requires them to maintain for at least seven years. These include grievances and arbitrations. These are also included in a national system that may be accessed through a search on the Web, going back until the early 1980s. Office desk calendars are also kept, dating back, Mr. Dirzius said, until the early 1980s.

Other active files are kept in another office. They are carefully indexed by topic and put away, by year, into transfiles. (See Appendix B, which shows the schema for Mr. Dirzius’ system and lists topics.) They are then taken to the storage area in the basement. Many of these records go back as far as the 1970s.

Downstairs, the Local has a conference room which showcases on its walls certain important historical documents and photographs. These include: framed panoramic photographs of conventions; photographs of local delegates to conventions; framed charters of the United Federation of Postal Clerks’ locals, going back to the mid 1950s; the charter of the National Federation of Postal Employees (1918); charter of the National Federation of Post Office Clerks (1920); National Postal Union Charter (1959); old handbills from the 1970s and 1980s (all framed); exclusive Recognition of the Federation of Postal Clerks (1962); and a ballot to make the national Presidency a full time office, in 1975. It is an impressively mounted display, suggesting milestones in the history of postal workers.

A “holding cell” off this conference room serves as a temporary storage area for documents (such as old grievances), as mentioned above. But it also stores old union picket signs, going back to about 1975; and “thousands” of photographs, organized in albums dedicated to themes. Such theme topics include special events, meetings, and social events. These photographs date back at least until the 1970s, but some seem to be much older. Mr. Dirzius also showed me copies of the Bible, the Torah, and the Q’uran, which are given by the Local to members (obviously, depending upon their faith), when there is a death
in the immediate family. In this same area, the Local also keeps videos about other locals from all over the country. The latter are not yet logged.

On the second floor, on open shelves in a wide hallway, the Local maintains bound copies of the national’s publications, going back to the 1970s, and Local publications going back to 1971. It also includes newsletters from the Elm City Federation, the pre-cursor to the New Haven Area Local, going back to 1962. These shelves also hold bound copy of current local arbitrations throughout the country; national and local contract agreements going back to 1971; bound Postal Service Policy Manuals; Labor-Management Meeting minutes (dating back to 1972); regular membership meeting minutes dating back to 1968; Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) handbooks; the Local’s constitution and policies (1980-present); three ledger books containing hand-written notes of meeting minutes (ca. 1964-1967); dues books (to 1967); a small file on the 1970 postal strike, containing articles that are mostly national in scope; bound contract “reference books” and national level arbitrations (“Step 4s”); and national collective bargaining reports to 1971. Mr. Dirzius notes that most of the material in these books can be found through a search on the national database on the web, The Secretary-Treasurer and the Administrative Vice President have their offices on this floor. Between them, these offices mostly keep records that the Local is legally mandated to retain for seven years. These include: files of bills paid, by year; payroll, by year; all membership information (work records, benefit plans, grievances, and the like.) These records are also kept in the computer from 1993. Paper logs are kept from 1970 until the 1990s.

A wealth of older records are stored “in the hole” in the basement, in transfile boxes. They include treasury records, grievance logs, the President’s Workbooks 1981-1985; and correspondence dating back as far as 1980. Also stored down here are tapes of Local meetings from the 1980s; old “reel to reel” tapes from a 1977 radio program done by the Local on WNHC; and a 1988 talk show on WELI.

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