



## **“Send a Valentine to Your Valentine from Valentine, Nebraska”: the Cachet Program**

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Article Summary: In 1941, the Valentine Post Office introduced a special Valentine’s Day postal cachet inspired by the town’s name. With thousands of people sending Valentines to be postmarked, the cachet program soon grew into a community volunteer effort.

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# “Send a Valentine to Your Valentine from Valentine, Nebraska”: *The Cachet Program*

BY MARY ANN MAY-PUMPHREY

The front page of the February 6, 1941, *Cherry County News* contained a small announcement entitled “Send a Valentine to Your Valentine from Valentine Nebraska.” The subject was a specially designed Valentine’s Day cachet, which could be affixed to the envelope of a Valentine’s Day card via rubber stamp. The cachet was the brainchild of fifty-two-year-old postmaster Margaret Clare Phelps. Appointed to office in 1934, Phelps viewed the cachet as a means of attracting attention to her hometown while simultaneously pleasing the many philatelists who had for years been mailing Valentine’s Day cards to the post office for remailing in order to obtain a February 14 postmark from Valentine.<sup>1</sup>

The cachet was just one of several Valentine’s Day events launched in Valentine in 1941. Afternoon activities that day included a free tea party at

the Marian Hotel, where “tea and heart-shaped tarts were served to 250.” Main Street’s Jewel Theater hosted free showings of the official motion pictures of that year’s Rose Bowl game and the pregame Rose Bowl parade. The 1941 Rose Bowl had been a first for Nebraska. Although the team lost to Stanford, the opportunity to view the game was a rare treat in that pre-television era; estimated attendance at these showings was 1,200.<sup>2</sup>

On the evening of that first city-wide celebration of Valentine’s Day, a coronation of a “King and Queen of Hearts” was held in the civic auditorium, followed by a costume ball.<sup>3</sup> Although World War II put an end to the coronation for three years beginning in 1944, both the cachet program and the coronation have survived and thrived to the present day.



**Postmaster Margaret Phelps processing a batch of Valentines for re-mailing in 1941, the inaugural year of the cachet program.**  
*Omaha World-Herald*,  
 February 23, 1941

It is unknown whether the cachet program was also temporarily halted during the war years or whether local newspapers simply considered it too frivolous an item to cover in the midst of a world crisis. Regardless, the cachet received a good deal of publicity in 1947, the year the coronation was restarted. The Quincy (Illinois) *Herald-Whig* published an article entitled "Your Valentine Can Have Valentine Postmark from Valentine, Nebraska," which was reprinted in the February 13 *Cherry County News*. The *Herald-Whig* article included not only an image of the 1947 cachet but also a news photograph taken by Valentine newswoman Myrtle Shaul of postmaster Phelps standing at the top of the steps leading up to the post office. The article told *Herald-Whig* readers how they could obtain the cachet and Valentine postmark for their own outgoing Valentine's Day cards. In an addendum to



**Undated post card.** NSHS RG3314-8-48

Lobby of the Valentine  
Post Office, 1939.  
National Archives



the *Herald-Whig* reprint, the *Cherry County News* informed its readers that the cachet program had appeared in newspapers throughout the nation, as evidenced by the clippings that were often attached to remailing requests received by the post office. The *News* expressed the view that “intensive, coordinated local effort in connection with this holiday could pay good dividends.”<sup>4</sup>

The cachet remained largely unchanged for the first twenty-two years of its existence. During the 1940s, the “Saint and City” slogan was repositioned slightly, undoubtedly to improve its readability; the year was also added. In 1949, the month and day of Valentine’s Day were added, which gave more emphasis to the holiday aspect of the cachet. The 1949 design remained unchanged throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s.

In February 1949, postmaster Phelps was too ill with cancer to work; her daughter Margaret Jean Iseman came from her home in Denver to temporarily take over as postmaster. The *Cherry County News* paid tribute to postmaster Phelps in their February 10 issue that year by reprinting the photograph of her from the 1947 *Herald-Whig* article. The reprinted photo’s caption focused solely on Phelps’s contribution:

Mrs. Phelps is primarily responsible for the promoting of the tremendous volume of Valentines, which are sent here annually from all over the world for remailing. To supplement the regular Valentine postmark, several years ago she designed a special attractive cachet (shown at left), which is affixed in red to each piece of mail. This project has gained considerable national publicity and each year the number of Valentines remailed increases.<sup>5</sup>

The 1949 cachet featuring improved readability and date stamp remained unchanged through 1962.

(Cachets are shown here mostly larger than actual size and not to scale with each other.)



Phelps died four months later. Probably as a means of honoring her creation of the cachet program, the 1950 Valentine's Day Coronation decorations included a gigantic reproduction of the cachet she had created on the left side of the stage.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the work required to remail thousands of Valentines has been done by paid staff at the post office and Chamber of Commerce, both as part of their regular jobs and as unpaid overtime. However, volunteers have always played a big role. In 1950, the first Valentine's Day after Phelps's death, Valentine had only an acting postmaster, Doug Hammon. According to a local newspaper's report on that year's remailing requests, "*Mrs.* [emphasis added] Hammon devotes many hours to just affixing the cachets to have all in readiness for February 14th."<sup>7</sup>

The number of Valentine's Day cards and packages received for remailing with a request for the cachet varied over the years, and was often affected by outside events. In 1951, the tally was a disappointing 5,000 after going over the 10,000 mark the previous three years in a row. The sudden decline was thought to be the result of a railroad strike which led to the U.S. Postal Service putting an embargo on third and fourth class mailing, each

of which was an inexpensive means of sending a large number of Valentines to the post office for remailing.<sup>8</sup>

The cachet received nationwide publicity in 1953 when a custom-made card and envelope were sent by a Valentine couple to a Kentucky fourth-grade teacher named "Nebraska Valentine." The woman, one of four children named after geographic points, had married a man whose last name was "Valentine." Dwarfed but still clearly visible on the gigantic-sized card's envelope was the "Saint and City" cachet.<sup>9</sup>

In 1963, new federal legislation prohibiting U.S. Post Offices from holding mail for later delivery almost ended Valentine's cachet program. The city's Chamber of Commerce stepped in, complete with a new cachet design—the first complete redesign of the cachet since postmaster Phelps began the program. The new cachet was designed to resemble mileage signs on highways leading into Valentine. The cachet replaced the miles with the Valentine's Day date each year.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the original Phelps design, this cachet is still in use today. This longevity, coupled with the familiarity of the highway mileage signs, has made it one of the most instantly recognizable of all the Valentine cachets.



The year 1963 marked the advent of the second major cachet design, a close replica of mileage signposts on roads leading into Valentine.



This ornate cachet, which debuted in 1975, proved too large to fit on many envelopes.



**Cupid's Mail, which made its first appearance in 1976.**  
*North Platte Telegraph, February 12, 1978.*

A special cachet was designed for Nebraska's centennial in 1967. It used a milepost, but with a different message. The heart-shaped sign read "1867 1967 Nebraska's CENTENNIAL Greetings Feb. 14" with "Valentine 'Sweetheart City'" on the lower rectangular-shaped sign.<sup>11</sup>

The 1967 Centennial cachet figured into a "Massive Mailing of Valentines" program promoted by the Valentine Business and Professional Women's Club. A special Centennial Valentine was designed and printed, then sold by local Girl Scouts door-to-door. Local residents were encouraged to buy the Valentines, address and stamp them, then mail or deliver them to "Cupid's Helpers" who would affix the cachet and remail the Valentines, a process that ensured the Business and Professional Women's Club could track how many were sent. As part of this massive mailing, the club also sent Valentines to all Cherry County servicemen whose addresses could be obtained, to all fifty governors of the United States, to several school groups, and many others, 5,147 in all. In addition, more than five thousand were sent directly from the Post Office.<sup>12</sup>

"Cupid's Mailbox" first appeared in the 1960s as a walk-up. This sturdily built custom wooden box and backboard encouraged tourists and other visitors to drop off their Valentine's Day cards at any point during the preceding twelve months, via the message "Valentine Remailing for Feb. 14." The Chamber of Commerce periodically emptied the box, holding the cards until shortly before the holiday, at which point, a cachet was affixed to each one before remailing.<sup>13</sup>

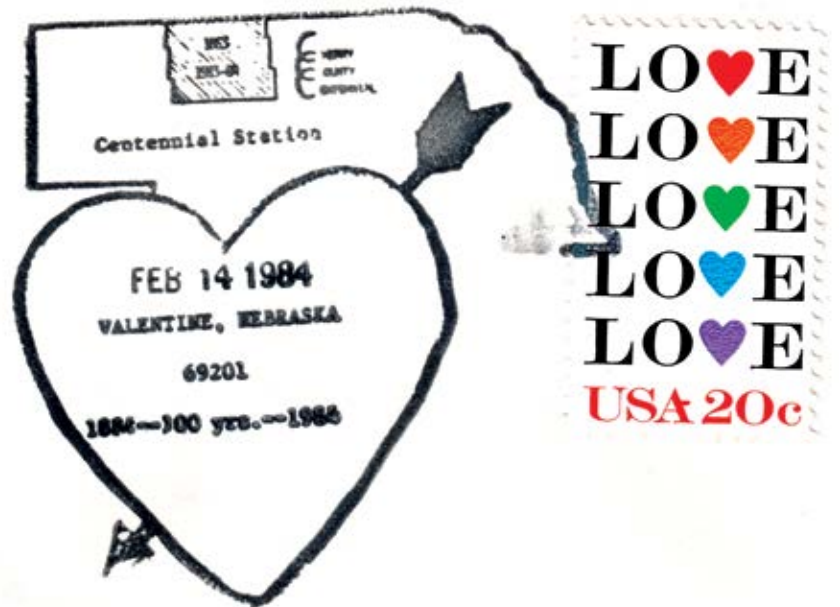
A replacement mailbox was created in 1976 after "Cupid's Mailbox" was worn out. While the original had not specifically referenced the cachet, the new "Cupid's Mail" proclaimed: "This mail will receive a special Valentine cachet and will be remailed in February." It also credited grade-school artist Mary Ellen Donovan, who won a contest for elementary school children to design the new mailbox.<sup>14</sup>

One serious drawback with these "mailboxes" was that any increase in the price of mailing a letter during the period after a Valentine was deposited into the box led to the Chamber of Commerce having to affix additional postage the following February. This was undoubtedly a prominent factor in their eventual demise.

Local artist Mildred Hansen designed a large cachet that was first available in 1975. A small heart labeled "Valentine" designated the location of the town within a larger outline of the State of Nebraska, both of which were presented as signs



The 1984 cachet celebrated Valentine's Centennial.



Valentines in 1984 could display both the Valentine's Centennial cachet and this official cancellation.

on a post. The signpost was set into a yucca, a common form of plant life in the Sandhills region surrounding Valentine. The "Nebraska's Own Heritage Sweetheart 1884 to" message was to be completed each year with the month, day, and year of Valentine's Day. While this cachet incorporated more themes than any of the previous cachets—town, state, geography, and holiday—it came at a cost. The cachet—measuring 3.5 inches in height—was simply too large to fit on many envelopes.<sup>15</sup>

A new cachet commemorating Valentine's centennial appeared in 1984. Like the very first cachet, the emphasis was on the city—"Heart of the Sandhills"—although the arrow that appears to have pierced the heart from side to side is reminiscent of Cupid's arrow. No date other than the two years—1884 and 1984—appear in this special cachet so that impressions of it in years since look exactly the same as in the centennial year.<sup>16</sup>

As part of the town's centennial celebration, the cachet program shared the limelight with a special pictorial hand cancellation, which postmaster John Cummings had received from the Post Office in response to his request. This cancellation was available only February 13-15, 1984, at

the "Centennial Station," housed in a local business, or via mail to Valentine's Chamber of Commerce. This large cancellation paid tribute to the "1983-84" centennial of Cherry County, of which Valentine is the county seat, along with the 1984 centennial of Valentine itself. The release date and the heart with an arrow through it again emphasized the holiday connection. This cancellation on an envelope with the third U.S. "Love" stamp, issued just two weeks earlier, made for a handsome collector's item.<sup>17</sup>

A new cachet produced by the Chamber of Commerce in 1988 was a re-design of the 1975 one. The post was removed and the yucca plant was downsized to fit inside Nebraska's panhandle, thereby creating a cachet that would work with smaller-sized envelopes. The message "A Valentine From The Heart City" incorporated the date of Valentine's Day, which could be changed each year.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in 2000, a new cachet featuring a little girl opening a mailbox filled with Valentine's Day cards became available. Although this cachet, created by local artist Loucinda Hamling, did not include a changeable date, it did include a nod to the town—"Valentine Ne The Heart City." According to current postmaster Arlene Paulson, this cachet is perhaps the most popular.<sup>19</sup>

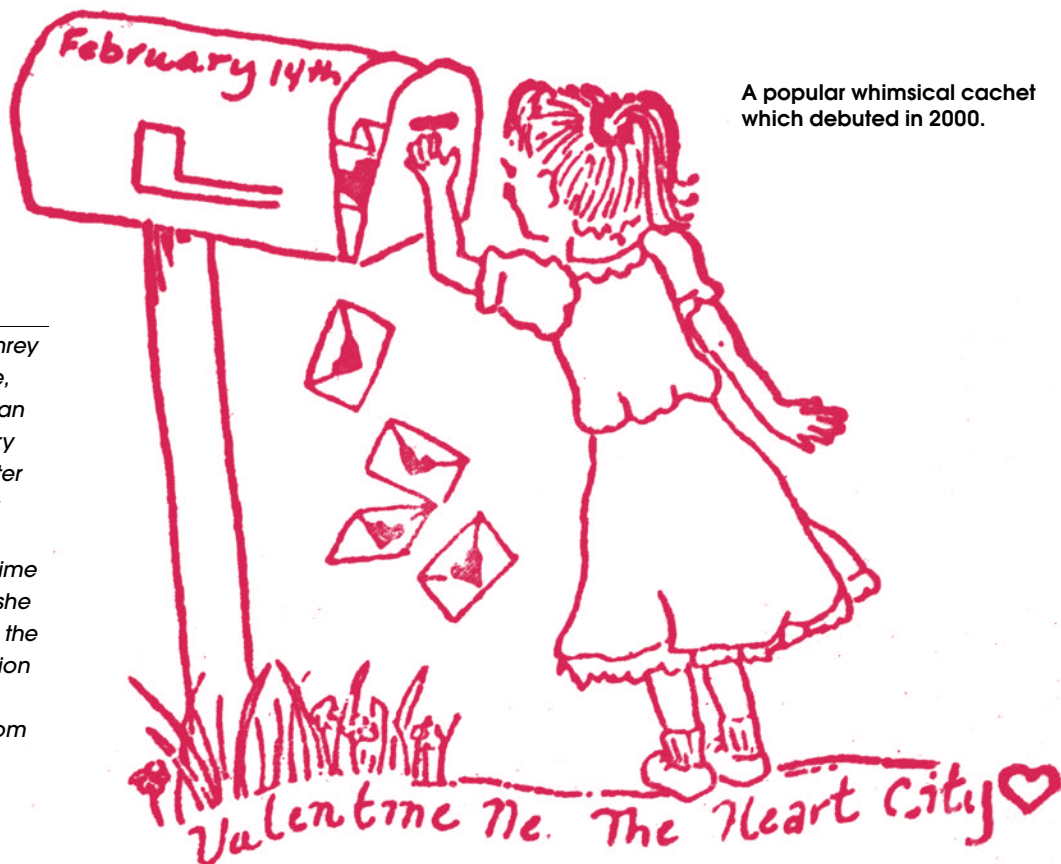
One of several 2010 designs created by high school art students.



In 2009, postmaster Paulson organized a contest for Valentine High School art students to design a new cachet. So many excellent designs were submitted that those from four different artists—Katie Brown, Josh Gallino, Sarah Simmons, and art teacher Ed Heinert—were selected; each artist was honored with a plaque on the wall of the post office. Like the 2000 cachet, none of these four includes a changeable date. Since very few of the cachets created have ever been discontinued, these latest four bring the total number of cachets available today to close to a dozen. The Post Office even maintains two rubber stamps for each cachet design—one for use with red ink and one for use with black ink, the latter of which works best on red envelopes, according to Ms. Paulson.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the current widespread popularity of email and online social networking, seventy-one years after postmaster Phelps instigated the cachet program, tens of thousands of people from all around the world are still following the 1941 adage to “Send a Valentine to Your Valentine from Valentine, Nebraska.”

A popular whimsical cachet which debuted in 2000.



Mary Ann May-Pumphrey is a native of Valentine, Nebraska, who holds an MA in American History and an MS in Computer Science. She currently lives and works in San José, California. A lifetime member of the NSHS, she has what she hopes is the world's largest collection of Valentine's Day cachet impressions from Valentine, Nebraska.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Send a Valentine to Your Valentine from Valentine Nebraska," *Cherry County News*, Feb. 6, 1941, 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Celebration of St. Valentine's Day is Very Successful," *The Republican*, Feb. 21, 1941, 1; "Plans Complete for Celebration of Valentine's Day," *The Republican*, Feb. 7, 1941, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Your Valentine Can Have Valentine Postmark From Valentine, Nebraska: Postmaster There Will Remail Greetings with Special Cachet," *Cherry County News*, Feb. 13, 1947, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Cherry County News*, Feb. 10, 1949, 4.

<sup>6</sup> "1950 Coronation and Ball Scores Big Success: Valentine's Valentine's Day Outstanding This Year," *Cherry County News*, Feb. 16, 1950, 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Lovers' Day Remailing Requests Over 4,000," *Cherry County News*, Feb. 9, 1950, 1.

<sup>8</sup> "Requests Down For Special Valentine Cachet," *Cherry County News*, Feb. 15, 1951, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Cherry County News*, Feb. 12, 1953, 1; "Valentine Postoffice Cachet," *Cherry County News*, Feb. 11, 1954, 1.

<sup>10</sup> "Local Chamber of Commerce continues St. Valentine's Day stamping tradition," *Valentine Newspaper*, Feb. 14, 1963, 8; "Happy Valentine's Day Greetings From Valentine," *Valentine Newspaper*, Feb. 14, 1963, 1.

<sup>11</sup> "Centennial Cachet," *Valentine Newspaper*, Feb. 9, 1967, 8.

<sup>12</sup> "Huge mailing of valentines planned here February 14," *Valentine Newspaper*, Feb. 2, 1967, 1.

<sup>13</sup> "Valentines Mailed From Valentine," *Valentine Newspaper*, Feb. 17, 1966, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Marianne Beel, "Cupid still hits mark at Valentine: But postage hike adds to 'Heart City' effort," *North Platte Telegraph*, Feb. 12, 1976, 3.

<sup>15</sup> "New Valentine Cachets now in use," *Valentine Newspaper*, Feb. 6, 1975, 1.

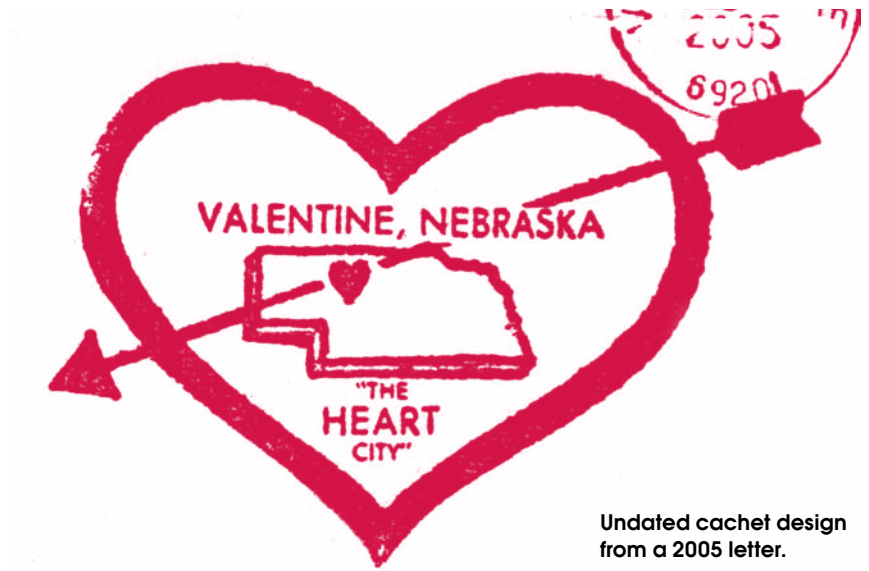
<sup>16</sup> "Centennial Committee plans tentative events," *Valentine Newspaper*, Jan. 26, 1984, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Beel, "For Valentine postmaster, it's that time of year again," *North Platte Telegraph*, Feb. 10, 1984.

<sup>18</sup> Marianne Beel, "Nebraska's 'heart city' places its mark on 15,000 valentines," *North Platte Telegraph*, Feb. 14, 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Arlene Paulson (Valentine, Nebraska, postmaster) in discussion with author, August 2-3, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



Undated cachet design from a 2005 letter.



Local resident Cliff Petersen places a cachet on a Valentine to his college-student child in 2011. Photo by Laura Vroman / *Valentine Midland News*.