

# AM with Tony Eastley

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## US Postal Service disappearing

Jane Cowan reported this story on Monday, February 21, 2011 08:18:00

TONY EASTLEY: Once it was a sign of America's growth and optimism. As settlements spread across the vast inland, the United States Postal Service followed. But it's become a casualty of the email and other mass electronic communications.

The US mail is being massively downsized, a move that's seen by some as an attack on small-town American life.

North America correspondent Jane Cowan reports.

(Sound of a key going into a lock and turning)

JANE COWAN: Every day at around noon postmaster Terry Goad trundles down the few steps outside the white weatherboard building that is the Star Tannery Post Office and collects the 20-odd letters that have been dropped in the old blue post box.

TERRY GOAD: Ha. It's not super busy here.

JANE COWAN: In this sleepy corner of Virginia, 150 kilometres west of Washington, there's often barely a bird perched on a power line to keep her company.

TERRY GOAD: Well I get here in the morning at 8.30 and I hoist the flag then I come in and I get out my cashbox and wait for a customer.

JANE COWAN: Sometimes it takes a while. The US postal service has seen mail volumes drop by more than 20 per cent in the last four years, thanks partly to emails and internet bill payments.

Now there are rumblings that as many as 2,000 post offices in far-flung parts of the country could be nearing the end of their days.

But as the customers amble in to the Star Tannery Post Office to buy stamps and mail letters, none of them wants to lose their local.

VOX POP: I live right across the street. I can walk over here if I have to and an important thing to the community, I think. Been here as long as I can remember.

VOX POP 2: People tend to gather here and talk and chat, find out what's happening.

VOX POP 3: You know, it is pretty rural out here. So there is a lot of people you just wouldn't see otherwise.

VOX POP 4: Well, it's real convenient, you know. They are talking about closing it so I don't know whether there is anything we can do about it or not.

JANE COWAN: Do you do email and that type of thing?

VOX POP 4: Well, no, we don't, we don't do nothing on email. That's just a bunch of junk.  
(Laughs)

JANE COWAN: In its heyday in 1901, the US Postal Service had more than 70,000 post offices across the States but that number has already dwindled to about 32,000. Last year the postal service lost \$8.5 billion dollars - that's \$23 million a day.

Dennis Voorhees is the postal manager for this part of Virginia.

DENNIS VOORHEES: Well many people in the communities think the post office is very important for the community actually I've closed previous post offices before and the communities are still there. It is actually the community that makes up the community, not the post office.

JOHN LOGAN: Well, the post office is a symbol and I think there's good reason for places to feel worried when these symbols of their existence are taken away.

JANE COWAN: John Logan is a sociologist at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

JOHN LOGAN: A lot of small cities have lost their air service and some places have lost their train service and some places you can't get a bus from anymore and now there is not even a post office. So, these are all signs of a very long-term trend, population loss, retrenchment. People can get postal service one way or another. The real issue is whether there's still enough of an infrastructure to sustain a community.

JANE COWAN: And if there isn't?

JOHN LOGAN: No, there's a point at which there ceases to be community.

JANE COWAN: Star Tannery plans to fight to hold on to its post office - and its community.

This is Jane Cowan in Virginia for AM.