



PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS

NEWSLETTER OF THE PANNEBAKKER FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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In 14th-Century Florence, Some Residents Socially Distanced While Others Hit the Bars

A global pandemic rages. In some cities, people shun society completely, while others sit in bars, downing beers and trying to forget about the disease raging around them.

But this isn't 2020—it's the mid 1300s. The Black Death, which arrived in Europe in 1347, ripped across the continent, killing around 50 percent of its population. Jean de Venette, a French Carmelite friar who documented the pandemic, called it "a most terrible scourge inflicted on us by God." We now know that it was caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which spread from rodents to humans through fleas. Commentators have frequently compared the time of the Black Death to the fallout from diseases including SARS, Ebola, and now COVID-19. As lockdowns around the world have begun to lift, we can extend that analysis to drinking habits.

The Decameron provides a fascinating account of how people from all social classes drank differently during the plague. In his celebrated collection of novellas, Giovanni Boccaccio describes the plague invading his home city of Florence in 1348. Food, and particularly drink, are central to this account.

Boccaccio uses mealtimes to illustrate how quickly the plague became fatal: "How many brave men [...] broke fast with their kinsfolk, comrades and friends in the morning, and when evening came, supped with their forefathers in the other world." He even describes symptoms with food metaphors, writing of "the emergence of certain tumours in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg."

Florentines also reportedly sought out culinary "cures." Tommaso del Garbo, a professor of medicine at Bologna and Perugia, advised stuffing one's mouth with cloves, then eating "two slices of bread soaked in the best wine" as a remedy. However, confusion over what really cured the plague recurs throughout Boccaccio's account. People began to guess at preventatives, or reject them altogether.

According to Boccaccio, two extremes emerged, and they may sound very familiar to modern readers deciding whether or not to take advantage of bars and restaurants reopening. While a lockdown wasn't officially imposed during the Black Death, some Florentines went into voluntary hiding. They restricted their diet to simple meals and only drank small amounts of fine wine to sustain themselves; they were intent on "avoiding every kind of luxury, [...] eating and drinking very moderately of the most delicate viands and the finest wines." They believed gluttony was a root cause of plague and thought that "to live temperately and avoid all excess" would protect them. One of the fine wines they favored was likely Vernaccia; described in *The Decameron* as a "good white wine." It is still considered one of Italy's finest whites today.

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Others went a different route. Florence was decimated and its population only recovered pre-plague numbers in the 1800s. Faced with almost certain death, many threw themselves among the dying for a cup of ale and maintained that “to drink freely, [...] sparing to satisfy no appetite, was the sovereign remedy for so great an evil.” Pub crawls were a regular sight, with desperate citizens “resorting day and night, now to this tavern, now to that, drinking with an entire disregard of rule or measure.” A strange open-house policy emerged, as people invited passersby inside for a drink. “The owners, seeing death imminent, had become as reckless of their property as of their lives,” writes Boccaccio. Little did they know the true extent of their recklessness—scientists have since discovered that humans infected with plague pneumonia passed on infectious droplets via coughing and sneezing.

How did the two groups feel about each other? Clearly some hoped that the disease might be controlled, whereas others, consumed with desperation, resorted to binge drinking. Boccaccio describes a growing paranoia among the community: “Citizen avoided citizen, [...] kinsfolk held aloof, and never met, or but rarely.” However, the author refuses to wholeheartedly condemn either party; the “fury of the pestilence” was so severe that there were no winners and no time for moral superiority. People died alone, bodies piled up, and most buildings were emptied of their former occupants.

Boccaccio himself preferred a third way: fleeing to the countryside. But for those who were unable to leave, plague-stricken Florence became a city in which “every man was free to do what was right in his own eyes.” Arguably both options had their merits. by Rachel Ashcroft

Gerry Townsend (Hendrick/Eve, Jacob/Margaret Tyson, Henry/Barbara Tyson, Cornelius/Ann Detweiler), is a Past President of British Columbia Institute of Technology Alumni Association. As such he is a member of BCIT Past President's Advisory Committee to BCIT, and recently completed a 3-year term on the BCIT Alumni Association Governance Committee, mentoring new Directors.

At the virtual AGM he was given recognition as a retiring BCIT Alumni Committee member and an impressive trophy of recognition. He was also mentioned in BCIT Alumni Association Annual report.



Cutting the cake L to R: BCIT Alumni Association President Emil Bosnjak; Past President '80-'81 Anne Marie Webb-Hughes; Past President '16-'18 Elena Romero; and Past President '90-'91 Gerry Townsend.

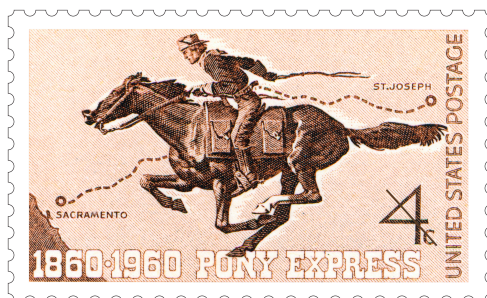
A Brief History of the United States Postal Service

From 1753 to 1774, as he oversaw Britain's colonial mail service, Benjamin Franklin improved a primitive courier system connecting the 13 fragmented colonies into a more efficient organization that sped deliveries between Philadelphia and New York City to a mere 33 hours. Franklin's travels along the post roads would inspire his revolutionary vision for how a new nation could thrive independent of Britain. But not even he imagined the pivotal role that the post would play in creating the Republic.

By the early 1770s, Franklin's fellow patriots had organized underground networks, the Committees of Correspondence and then the Constitutional Post, that enabled the founders to talk treason under the British radar. In 1775, before the Declaration of Independence was even signed, the Continental Congress turned the Constitutional Post into the Post Office of the United States, whose operations became the first—and for many citizens, the most consequential—function of the new government itself.

James Madison and others saw how the post could support this fledgling democracy by informing the electorate, and in 1792 devised a Robin Hood scheme whereby high-priced postage for letters, then sent mostly by businessmen and lawyers, subsidized the delivery of cheap, uncensored newspapers. This policy helped spark America's lively, disputatious political culture and made it a communications superpower with remarkable speed. When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the young country, in 1831, the United States boasted twice as many post offices as Britain and five times as many as France. The astonished political philosopher wrote of hurtling through the Michigan frontier in a crude wagon simply called "the mail" and pausing at "huts" where the driver would toss down a bundle of newspapers and letters before hastening along his route. "We pursued our way at full gallop, leaving the inhabitants of the neighboring log houses to send for their share of the treasure."

Back when the railroads only went as far west as Missouri, the Pony Express helped cover the missing ground for about a year and a half. Mounted carriers famously sped mail the 1,800 miles from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California, in just ten days.



By the 1840s, the post faced a crisis. Average citizens, fed up with high prices—sending a letter more than 150 miles cost around 20 cents, or roughly \$6 today—were turning to cheaper private carriers, almost putting the Post Office out of business. In response, Congress converted the post into a public service that no longer had to break even, and in 1845 slashed letter postage to 5 to ten cents, depending on distance.

The post continued to subsidize the nation's transportation infrastructure.

In the East, railroads replaced mounted couriers and stagecoaches. To connect the coasts, the department first financed steamships to carry the mail through the Isthmus of Panama. Then it invested in stagecoaches, which sped the mail from Missouri and Tennessee, where the railroads stopped, to California, enabling vital communications

during the gold rush. In 1869, the great transcontinental railroad was completed. The mail was a lifeline connecting Western settlers with loved ones back home.

When the Civil War split America, Montgomery Blair, President Lincoln's postmaster general, used the savings from suspending service in the Confederacy to upgrade the Union's mail system. He expanded the Railway Mail Service, authorized the first money orders and began deliveries to urban residences, while the post became the first major institution to employ large numbers of women and African Americans.

The innovations that followed included Rural Free Delivery (1896) and Parcel Post (1913), which brought rural residents into the mainstream. At a time when banks largely ignored the needs of average citizens, the Postal Savings System (1911) provided basic financial services. As World War I engulfed Europe, the Post Office recognized the value of air transport and almost alone supported the aviation industry until the late 1920s.

The boom after World War II doubled the volume of mail even as the cash-starved department racked up big deficits and faced a fiscal crisis recalling that of the 1840s. Alarmed, Congress in 1970 remade the department into the United States Postal Service, a government-business hybrid that has received no tax dollars since 1982 but nonetheless remains subject to congressional oversight. By the end of 2006, the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act had saddled the service with tens of billions of dollars of debt by requiring that it prefund its retirees' health benefits.

While the post is once again the subject of controversy, it's still the federal service that Americans rate most highly, according to a 2019 Gallup poll. Apparently unaware that much of the USPS's business is now parcel delivery, which boosted revenue by \$1.3 billion from 2018 to 2019, Jerry Seinfeld recently joked that he couldn't fathom how a "system based on licking, walking and a random number of pennies" is struggling. Yet in 2020, with Americans isolated by Covid-19, countless folks depend on a system that supplies every address with critical materials, including stimulus checks, ballots and, perhaps soon, medical tests.

by Winifred Gallagher

2019 Reunion Booklet

Work has begun on the 2019 Reunion Booklet, which in the future will probably be considered a collector's item and sold at the 2049 reunion. Putting together a list of the events is the easy part. I would like to include comments and reactions from those who attended, but I need those attendees to send me their comments and reactions. If this booklet ends up being in digital form, I would like to include pictures from the 3 days. Please send your pictures. Many thanks to those who have already sent pictures. I will include the names of those who attended and hopefully remember the names of those who attended as last-minute sign-ups. I especially would like to have the comments of the members of the planning committee. Please send all information to Bruce Pennypacker at the address or email listed on the last page of this newsletter.

New Member

We are pleased to welcome our newest member, **Joy Henning** (Hendrick and Eve Umstat, Peter and Elizabeth Keyser, Jacob and Christine Dotterer, Elizabeth and Frederick Snyder...). Joy lives in Willow Park, Texas.

Officers

President: Ron Pennypacker
520 Loch Alsh Ave.
Ambler, PA 19002
(484) 302-6842
r.pennypacker@yahoo.com

Vice President: Linda Millerick
751 Monterey Salinas Hwy.
Salinas, CA 93908-8953
(831) 484-2834
lmcnealmillerick@yahoo.com

Secretary: Marcea P. Kligman
4170 Summit Way
Marietta, GA 30066-2346
(770) 928-9055
mpklig@bellsouth.net

Treasurer: Ed Pennypacker
271 Hafner Rd.
Royersford, PA 19468
ed@jepcosales.com
Tel 610 948-7867

Membership/ Newsletter/WebMaster/ Genealogy:

Bruce Pennypacker
201 Shady Brook Drive
Langhorne, PA 19047
(215) 380-1748
throwcoach@gmail.com

Board of Directors

Tom Armstrong, Branchburg, NJ
Mary Bullock, Long Island, NY
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Pannebakker Family Association



The Pannebakker Family Association is an outgrowth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999. The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699. In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pfannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."