

Domo arigato

Mail call at Dow Chemical used to be a beeping robot

Herman is at the end of his useful 600-pound life, but he still has a fascinating story of technology to share.

The Lake Jackson Historical Museum will be adding Herman, a robotic mail distribution vehicle, to its Dow Chemical section. The 4-foot-tall, 650-pound Mailmobile could run for at least eight hours and could carry 800 pounds of mail when it was still in operation.

This mobile was made by Bell & Howell, and it's official name was C-Series Mailmobile Automated Delivery System. Herman is the name given to it by Dow Chemical employees, a common practice in companies that used the device in its offices.

The Mailmobile would use black lights underneath it to follow an invisible fluorescent pathway that was sprayed onto the floor, even if carpeting covered the route. In one of the diagrams it followed, it shows the path for the third floor of the Dow building in Freeport.

The machine would beep to get people's attention and to make sure that it would not run over anything or anyone.



About Artifacts

This regular feature tells the stories behind items found in Brazoria County museums. This month we feature an item at the Lake Jackson Historical Museum.

Story by
ALEXANDRA GOLDEN

Photos by
JENNA KIESER



A sticker from Dow Chemical is seen on the Mailmobile robot at the Lake Jackson Historical Museum. The robot, which was invented in 1976, was donated to the museum by Dow.



The Mailmobile sits in the Lake Jackson Historical Museum. The robot was donated to the museum from Dow Chemical and soon will be put on display.



Labels from Dow Chemical are seen on the old Mailmobile at the Lake Jackson Historical Museum.

“It would beep for caution, but also when it got to where it was going, it stops for mail delivery,” museum Executive Director David Thomas said. “It would ring a bell and you would have like 30 seconds to come get your mail before it kept going.”

Sometimes Herman would trap people in corners as workers scrambled out of its path. Precautionary measures were taken besides the beeping sound to avoid injury since the machine was automatic, Thomas said.

“It had these bumpers so if it did run into someone or anything, it wouldn’t hopefully destroy it,” he said. “But if it got off track or went offline, you can operate it manually through this (panel.) It has a key to start it and this handle which steers it and you can guide it around.”

When the machine was in automatic mode, it could only go forward and would go 100 feet per minute, according to the manual. When it was changed into manual mode, it could go forward or reverse and at varying speeds, according to the manual.

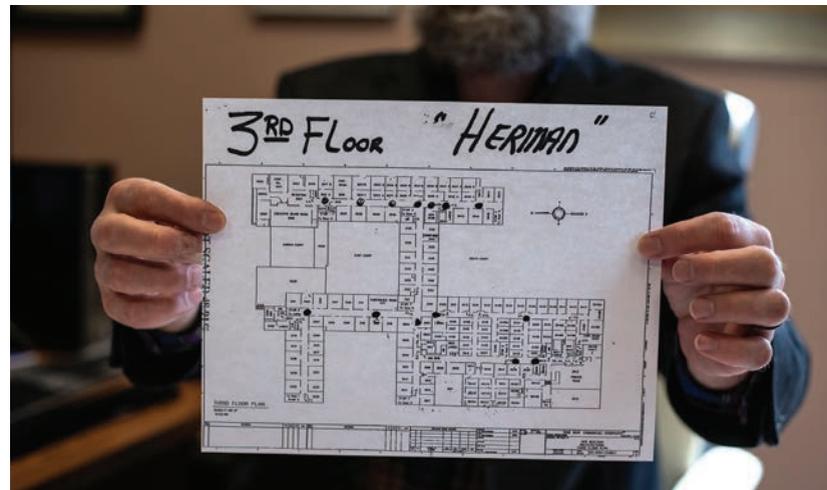
When the product was first marketed, they tried personifying it like people did with R2D2; even though Herman never talks, people still think of him as a person, Thomas said. This is why the Mail mobiles were named and why this specific one was named Herman or HAL, the latter a reference to the onboard computer in the movie “2001: A Space Odyssey,” Thomas said.

“They were kind of joking that this was plotting to take over the place,” he said.

The FBI also had a Mailmobile in its office that they called Marvin. The FX show “The Americans” used Marvin as the basis for their device in the show, Thomas said.

“They have a mail bot in there that sometimes people take their anger out on. I think it was a critical part in a plot by the Russians, so they were literally basing that off of one of these,” Thomas said.

Not only did the Mailmobile have an acting career, some have their own social media pages. The Rhode Island Computer Museum has its own called Molly Beep Beep, which served



Museum Executive Director David Thomas holds a old map from Dow Chemical depicting where the Mailmobile robot would stop around the office.

the Citizen’s Bank offices starting in 1985 and remained in use for 30 years, the museum’s website states.

Another one called M.O.M stood for Mail on the Move, Thomas said.

Mailmobiles could run upward of \$80,000, but the price of Herman is unknown. The more expensive ones could summon elevators and open doors themselves, Thomas said.

Herman still has the original stickers on it from its operational days at Dow, designating shelves for different departments and employees. There is even a Dow sticker on it to show where it was from and where it was running.

“This was technology before technology was cool,” volunteer Joyce Smith said.

Machines such as Herman became obsolete because of email and the internet. In their prime, Mailmobiles would carry up to 800 pounds of mail, a task that would take a lot of employees to match, Thomas said. This was just an easier way of doing it. But, since stuff is more digital now, Dow phased out Herman and donated it to the museum.

This shows how much technology is evolving, Smith said.

“The world is changing and things that were once top of the line now are in a museum,” she said.