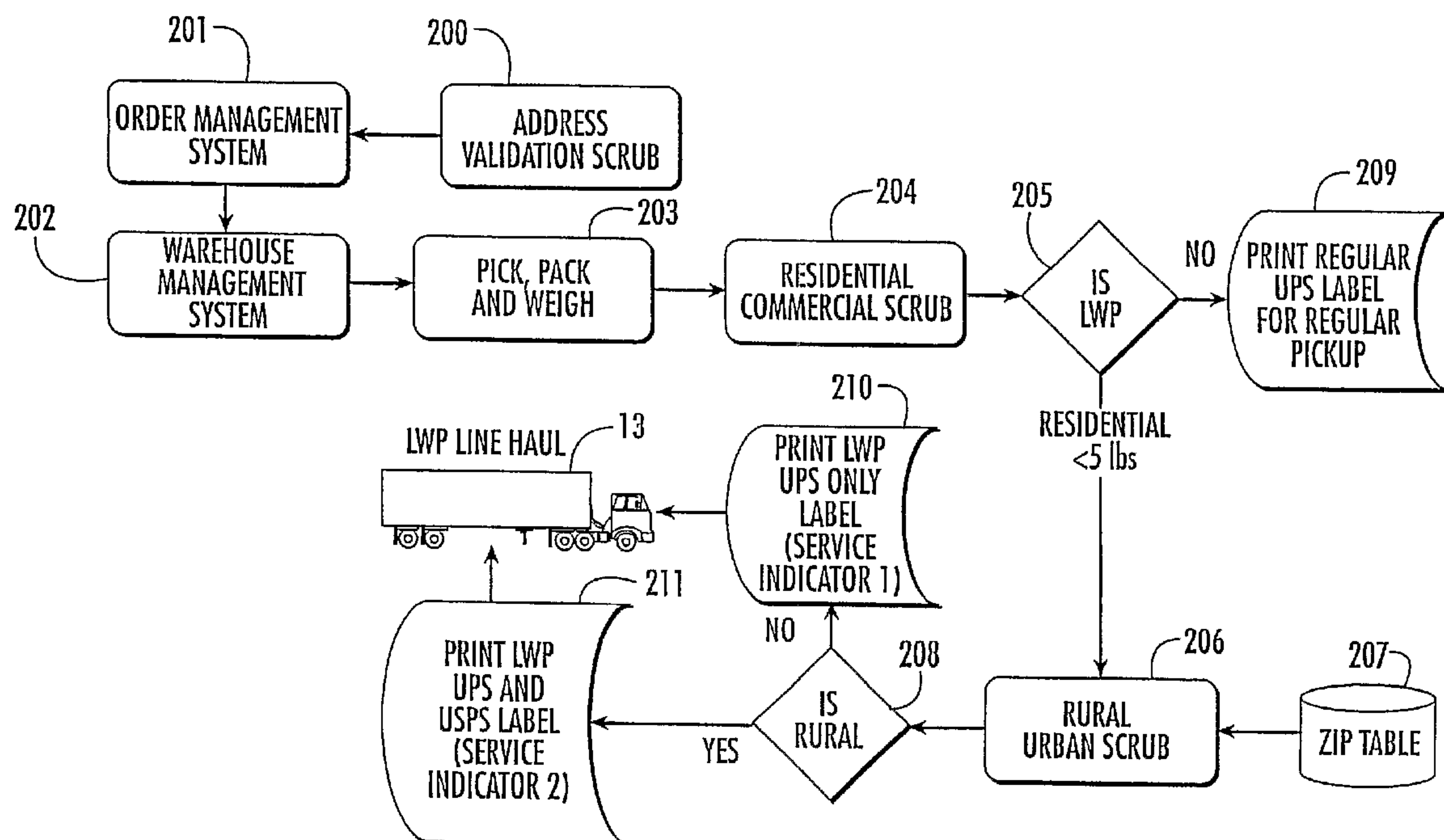




(86) Date de dépôt PCT/PCT Filing Date: 2004/04/22
(87) Date publication PCT/PCT Publication Date: 2004/11/04
(45) Date de délivrance/Issue Date: 2015/09/29
(85) Entrée phase nationale/National Entry: 2005/10/24
(86) N° demande PCT/PCT Application No.: US 2004/012610
(87) N° publication PCT/PCT Publication No.: 2004/095338
(30) Priorités/Priorities: 2003/04/22 (US60/464,529);
2004/03/24 (US10/807,679)

(51) Cl.Int./Int.Cl. *G06Q 10/08* (2012.01),
B07C 3/00 (2006.01)
(72) Inventeur/Inventor:
KADABA, NAGESH, US
(73) Propriétaire/Owner:
UNITED PARCEL SERVICE OF AMERICA, INC., US
(74) Agent: SIM & MCBURNEY

(54) Titre : SYSTEME INFORMATIQUE POUR ACHEMINER DES LIVRAISONS DE COLIS
(54) Title: A COMPUTER SYSTEM FOR ROUTING PACKAGE DELIVERIES



(57) Abrégé/Abstract:

A shipping system for shipping packages involving the coordinated use of at least a first carrier and a second carrier. The shipping system includes physical delivery facilities for the physical delivery of packages, the physical delivery facilities including at least one transfer location at which the second carrier may take over delivery responsibilities for a package. The shipping system also includes an information system having a shipper computer system configured to record and determine whether the delivery address of a package is an efficient destination for the first carrier. If not an efficient destination, such as a delivery address having a rural zip code, the shipper computer system is configured to label the package for delivery to one of the transfer locations, allowing the first carrier to transfer the selected package to the second carrier for completion of the less efficient portion of the delivery.

(10) International Publication Number
WO 2004/095338 A3

[Continued on next page]

(57) Abstract: A shipping system for shipping packages involving the coordinated use of at least a first carrier and a second carrier. The shipping system includes physical delivery facilities for the physical delivery of packages, the physical delivery facilities including at least one transfer location at which the second carrier may take over delivery responsibilities for a package. The shipping system also includes an information system having a shipper computer system configured to record and determine whether the delivery address of a package is an efficient destination for the first carrier. If not an efficient destination, such as a delivery address having a rural zip code, the shipper computer system is configured to label the package for delivery to one of the transfer locations, allowing the first carrier to transfer the selected package to the second carrier for completion of the less efficient portion of the delivery.

WO 2004/095338 A3



(88) Date of publication of the international search report:
29 December 2004

For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

A COMPUTER SYSTEM FOR ROUTING PACKAGE DELIVERIES

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention is related to computer, digital and electronic systems for coordinating a flow of data that controls the efforts of multiple carriers to ship
5 packages, and in particular relates to electronic systems for handling package, tracking, billing and other data so as to provide visibility and quality control of the shipping process involving multiple carriers.

Description of Related Art

Generally, delivery of mail pieces, such as letters and packages, entirely by
10 the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) requires collection, sorting and then distribution of each of the mail pieces. As the amount of commerce conducted by mail increases yearly, significant efforts have been made by the USPS to increase the speed and efficiency of shipping and processing mail through technical improvements in the mechanical, computer and electronic systems used to process, sort, track and
15 deliver the mail.

As an alternative solution, the USPS has made an effort at reducing its workload by allowing for preprocessing of the mail pieces by other service providers. In one instance, the USPS offers a substantial reduction in rates to a shipper, provided that the shipper complies with certain requirements that allow
20 the USPS to reduce its workload. For bulk mail, the USPS will accept delivery from a shipper along with certified documentation of the preprocessing results, such as by pre-sorting the mail pieces. Certification is via a manifest that is provided to the USPS and is representative of a group of the preprocessed documents. Although removing the burden of technical improvements to handle
25 the increased load of mail from the USPS, this solution merely shifts the technical

burden to the preprocessing facilities that still must efficiently and accurately handle the large volumes of mail during preprocessing, and report the results of preprocessing, so as to meet the requirements of the USPS program.

Preprocessing for other mail services, and in particular non-bulk mail services wherein the mail pieces are not homogenous, requires sophisticated forms of communication with the USPS to ensure accurate documentation of the mail pieces. For instance, the preprocessing facilities may include computerized scales for determining the weight of each mail piece, metering devices for determining the postage amounts corresponding to the mail piece weights and marking devices for placing certification stamps on the mail piece. Each of these devices can be connected to the USPS via a telephone link that allows the USPS to interrogate the devices.

Interrogation allows the USPS systems to periodically determine the status of the equipment, including maintenance and usage rates. Such inquiries allow the USPS to ensure that the equipment is giving an accurate accounting of the mail that is weighed, metered, marked and submitted to its facilities for further delivery. The telephone link may also allow the preprocessor to check on the progress of a particular piece of mail using an electronic inquiry of the USPS system. Typically, the progress check involves the use of bar coding, or some other unique identifying characteristic, placed on the mail piece by the marking devices. The bar coding can then be tracked by the USPS system at the conclusion of delivery of the mail piece by scanning the barcode on the mail piece and recording its delivery in a database.

A disadvantage of the above-described system is that the equipment and scale required for preprocessing of the mail pieces are too expensive for some shippers, especially when shipping to residential addresses. As a solution to this problem, intermediary entities have established cooperative relationships with the USPS to provide discounted shipping services.

Generally, the services provided by the intermediary include weighing of the mail pieces (packages) submitted by the shipper, labeling of the packages, sorting of the packages and submitting sorted groups of the packages to the appropriate local USPS facility. The USPS then makes the final delivery to the recipient addresses. In this manner, the intermediary can efficiently deal with the

front end processes and receive the USPS discount (which is typically partially passed on to the customer) and ensure delivery without the expense of a large infrastructure for comprehensive delivery coverage including rural and residential delivery. Although the above-illustrated combined system advantageously provides cost-savings for shippers unwilling or unable to invest in preprocessing facilities, these systems are still faced with the technical problems of accurately sorting, tracking and reporting the mail pieces while increasing throughput to keep up with demand.

Therefore, it would be advantageous to have a mail processing and delivery system that has a high throughput, while at the same time accurately and efficiently processes the mail pieces and communicates the results of such processing to meet the various standards imposed by the postal carrier. It would be further advantageous if such a system were a combined system that facilitates cooperation between multiples carriers (such as between a private carrier and the USPS) to take advantages of the strengths of each of the carriers.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention meets the above needs and achieves other advantages by providing a multiple carrier shipping system that accurately and efficiently processes, delivers, and/or controls the processing and delivering, of packages by multiple carriers. Generally, the shipping system is configured to implement multiple carrier processing and delivery by controlling the flow information between the carriers and the movement of the packages by various physical delivery systems of the carriers. The shipping system may also be configured to determine when dividing processing and delivery of the packages amongst the multiple carriers is more efficient than single carrier processing and delivery and to ensure the accuracy of processing and delivery by providing visibility of the processing and delivery and by executing various quality control procedures. Thus, the present invention overcomes the technical hurdles of increasing the efficiency and throughput of package processing and delivery by coordinating the efforts of multiple carriers, while at the same time ensuring accuracy of the coordination by providing visibility of the process and various quality control procedures.

For example, one embodiment of the present invention includes a shipping data handling system for coordinating a flow of data to facilitate shipping of one or more packages by a first and second carriers. Included in the shipping data handling system is a shipper information recorder which is configured to record
5 package data, including data describing a consignee address of the package. A shipper information processor is configured to process the package data by comparing the consignee address to a delivery area of the first carrier that is stored in memory. A handling instruction generator of the shipping data handling system is configured to generate, in response to the shipper information processor
10 determining that the consignee address is not within the stored delivery area of the first carrier, a combined shipping label digital image. The shipping label digital image includes the package data, a first carrier tracking data key (e.g., a machine readable barcode, symbol or alphanumeric string associated with the package), a second carrier tracking data key and an address of an intermediate location. The
15 shipping label digital image instructs the first carrier to deliver the package to the intermediate location and the second carrier to obtain the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery to the consignee address.

In addition, the shipping data handling system may include a package information computer system that is electronically connected in communication
20 with the shipper information recorder and the handling instruction generator, and is configured to obtain the package data and the first carrier tracking data key from the recorder and generator, respectively. A tracking computer system is electronically connected in communication with a first carrier scanning device positioned at the intermediate location. Using the first carrier scanning device, the
25 tracking computer can determine when the first tracking data key associated with the package has been detected at the intermediate location. A manifest generator of the shipping data handling system is electronically connected in communication with the package information computer system and the tracking computer system. These connections enable the manifest generator to obtain the package data and
30 tracking data and use the first carrier tracking key to match and combine the package data and tracking data into a digital billing manifest for electronic submission to the second carrier.

The package information computer system may also configured to obtain the second carrier tracking data key from the shipper information recorder. In this aspect, the tracking computer system is electronically connected in communication with, and configured to receive delivery confirmation data from, a second carrier
5 scanning device positioned at the consignee location. The delivery confirmation data corresponds to scanning of the second carrier tracking data key of the package at the consignee location by the second carrier scanning device. The manifest generator can correlate the delivery confirmation data with the package and tracking data using the second carrier tracking data key and add the delivery
10 confirmation data to the digital manifest.

Another aspect of the present invention is a system and method for deciding whether to offer combined carrier delivery service based on a determination of the cost to one carrier of making a delivery without assistance from another carrier. A basic criterion affecting cost may preferably be the
15 recipient's geographical location, but can be any other type of criterion that affects the cost of delivery. Furthermore, secondary criteria for determining whether to offer a combined service to a geographical region (such as a zip code area) may vary according to a characteristic of the shipper, the nature of the product or item being shipped, the season of the year, and other factors.

20 Optionally, the information system may also include a first carrier computer system configured to obtain package information from the shipper computer system and correlating the package information with tracking information recorded upon delivery of the packages to the transfer location. Correlation of the information allows the first carrier computer system to generate
25 a manifest that can be audited by the second carrier, allowing the second carrier to efficiently and confidently bill the first carrier for delivery of the packages to the selected destinations. As another advantage, the second carrier may be bound to delivery rules of the first carrier so delivery performance is transparent to the package recipient.

30 Broadly stated, a combined carrier shipping system for shipping a plurality of packages of one embodiment of the present invention includes a first and second carrier physical delivery systems and a shipment ordering system. Each of the first and second carrier physical delivery systems is configured to deliver one of the

packages to a consignee location. The shipment ordering system is connected in communication with the first carrier physical delivery system. The shipment ordering system is configured to record a request to ship the package and package information associated with the package. Included in the package information is a
5 consignee location to which the package is to be delivered. Also, the shipment ordering system is configured to determine whether the consignee location meets a stored condition for single carrier delivery by the first carrier physical delivery system. In response to the single carrier condition being met, the shipment ordering system is configured to initiate delivery by the first carrier delivery
10 system from a starting location to the consignee location. Alternatively, in response to the single carrier condition not being met, the shipment ordering system is configured to initiate delivery of the package by the first carrier delivery system from the starting location to an intermediate location for further delivery by the second carrier physical delivery system to the consignee location.

15 A combined carrier shipping information system of another embodiment of the present invention includes a shipper computer system. The shipper computer system includes program logic configured to record package information entered by a shipper, including a delivery address, and additional logic configured to determine whether the delivery address is an efficient location for delivery by the
20 first carrier. For instance, a postal code of the delivery address can be compared to a database of rural and urban postal codes, wherein the second carrier has infrastructure in the rural area for efficient delivery. Additional logic of the shipper computer is configured to instruct the first carrier to route packages destined for less efficient delivery addresses, such as the rural address, to a transfer
25 point at which the second carrier is willing to take over shipping. Advantageously from the point of view of the first carrier, the shipper computer system avoids situations in which the first carrier will incur non-recoupable costs for delivery, while at the same time ensures that profitable deliveries are completed by the first carrier.

30 The shipper computer system may also be configured to correlate the less efficient address with the transfer location from which the second carrier is willing to deliver the package to the less efficient address. The transfer location could be,

for instance, the rural post office or destination delivery unit of the USPS that delivers to the rural zip code of the destination address.

In another aspect, the shipper computer system may be configured to generate a label for delivery to the less efficient delivery address. Indicia on the
5 label preferably include the transfer location address, tracking numbers for both the first and second carriers, and the destination address. The indicia preferably are machine readable encoded information in the form of bar codes, dense or two dimensional codes, RFID tags or labels, or any other addressable tag, label, or indicia. Such a label facilitates delivery of the package by the first carrier to the
10 transfer location and transfer of the package to the second carrier for final delivery to the destination address as also marked on the label for use by the second carrier. The label may also include symbolic codes representing the package information, tracking numbers, etc. to promote easy electronic recording of the information. Notably, the label itself may also be an embodiment of the present invention
15 separate from the information system.

A combined shipping information system of another embodiment of the present invention comprises a first carrier computer system. The first carrier computer system includes a package information system, a tracking system and a verification system. The package information system is connected in
20 communication with the above-described shipper information system and is configured to receive package information, including the recipient address, transfer location address, and both carrier tracking numbers, from the shipper information system. Package information may include, for instance, shipper number, weight, consignee address (e.g., location), direct delivery unit address, date, and tracking
25 numbers.

In communication with the tracking system by any suitable method is a tracking input device (e.g., a barcode scanning device) positioned at the transfer location, wherein the tracking system is configured to receive scanned package tracking numbers from the scanning device indicating that packages have reached
30 the transfer location. The verification system is in communication with the package information and tracking systems and is configured to obtain the package information and tracking information therefrom. Further, the verification system is configured to construct a manifest by correlating the package information with the

packages received at the transfer location using one of the tracking numbers.

Advantageously, the manifest is deliverable to the second carrier for audit and billing of the first carrier, allowing the first carrier to obtain discounted shipping to the recipient address by the second carrier.

5 The first carrier computer system may also be further connected in communication with a second carrier tracking system configured to confirm delivery of the package by the second carrier. In such a case, the verification system is configured to add the delivery confirmation to the manifest by correlating the second carrier tracking number of the package information and the
10 tracking number recorded at confirmation. Advantageously, the verification system unites the disparate information from the package information and tracking systems thereby facilitating future business decisions as well as immediate billing concerns.

A system according to the invention may provide tracking information
15 access to the shipper, the recipient, the two carriers, and other authorized entities. For example, a shipping label as prepared by the shipper may contain scannable tracking numbers for both carriers. Both such tracking numbers can be associated with the package in a tracking database. The first carrier operates a known tracking information system which uploads tracking information to the database
20 upon each scan of the package label as the package travels through the first carrier's delivery network, as well as upon delivery of the package to the second carrier. The second carrier scans the package at least upon delivery to the recipient, and uploads the information to its computer system, from which the information can be transferred to the first carrier's tracking database. The shipper,
25 the recipient, the two carriers, and other authorized entities thus may access the first carrier's tracking database to obtain consolidated tracking information about the package originating from both carriers who handle the package. The tracking database can be maintained by either carrier, or even by a third party. Consolidated tracking information from the consolidated system may also be sent
30 without request ("pushed") to any of these parties.

In another aspect, the package information system may be configured to sort package information of packages based on the transfer location to construct a preliminary manifest for submission to the transfer location. At the transfer

location, the second carrier personnel can advantageously use the manifest to confirm receipt of all of the packages destined for the transfer location prior to final delivery by the second carrier. Preferably, the preliminary manifest is an electronic manifest corresponding to standards set by the second carrier and is electronically delivered to a unique electronic mail address of the transfer location. As another option, a second carrier computer system may request electronic delivery of the manifest from the personnel at the transfer location for further auditing before billing of the first carrier.

As another alternative, the first and second carrier computer systems may be electronically accessible to the shipper computer system, or a recipient computer system, to allow access to tracking, billing and other information.

In still another aspect, the scanning device may be used to provide information directly to a computer at the destination delivery unit for audit by the second carrier. For instance, wireless communication is established between a personal data assistant and the scanning device. The connection allows the personal data assistant to upload information on packages delivered to, and scanned by the scanning device at, the destination delivery unit. The personal data assistant is further connected in communication with a portion of the second carrier computer system and a printer. Thus, the personal data assistant can relay the scanned information to the printer for printing out a list of the delivered packages, or to the second carrier computer system for audit procedures.

The combined carrier shipping system of the present invention may also include a billing system. A first carrier portion of the billing system is configured to calculate the shipping charges of various carriers participating in the system. The first carrier billing system is connected in communication with the package information system allowing it to obtain such information as the shipper and recipient location, as well as the type of shipping service provided (e.g., conventional or combined). The package information is used to calculate a sum total of all charges from each carrier for payment by the shipper. Additional information for the first carrier billing system billing calculations may also be obtained from a connection to the tracking system. Information from the system can then be used to control the amount of billing based on the path of a package. The first carrier billing system can also include a single bill generator that is

configured to compile the billing charges, adding other surcharges and generating an invoice for submission to the shipper.

5 A second carrier portion of the billing system is connected in communication with the verification system and receives a shipping manifest of the deliveries received during a day from the first carrier. Also connected in communication with the second carrier billing system is an escrow account from which the second carrier can draw funds for the shipments recorded on the manifest. The first carrier billing system is also connected in communication with the escrow account and is configured to deposit funds received from the shipper in
10 payment for the invoices in the escrow account. Preferably, all of the communications of the invoices, tracking information and transfers of funds occur electronically to improve the efficiency of the shipping system.

A quality control system of the present invention may cooperate with the billing system to ensure accurate billing. A first quality control process is
15 implemented by confirming receipt of all package information from the customer computer. Each day, a list of the shipments reported by the shipper computer system is compiled and sent to the shipper for comparison to the shipper's records of package information sent to the package information repository system. Missing package information can then be resent by the shipper.

20 Another quality control process includes comparing invoices calculated by the first carrier billing statements with delivery confirmations of the same packages. Delivery confirmations are obtained from the tracking system of the first carrier, in the case of conventional delivery entirely by the first carrier, or from the second carrier system in the case of combined carrier delivery.
25 Discrepancies are communicated to the first carrier billing system for adjustment of the invoice.

A further quality control process includes periodic weight and size checks conducted at an operating center of the first carrier. Such weight and size checks may be conducted automatically on a daily basis and compared to the
30 measurements on the same packages recorded from the shipper by the package information system. Discrepancies are reported to the first carrier billing system for adjustment of the invoice. Preferably, comparisons in each of the quality control processes are done electronically.

The shipping system of the present invention may also include aspects for facilitating return of packages to the shipper when delivery does not occur.

Preferably, the carriers operate under a set of rules for attempted delivery to the recipient. For instance, only a single attempt to deliver a particular package will be
5 allowed. If the recipient is not present to sign for the package, then the first or second carrier will return the package to a holding location, such as an operating center. The package will be held for pickup at the operating center by the recipient for a predetermined time, such as five days. Once the predetermined time has elapsed, the package is returned to the shipper.

10 At the shipper location, return of the package to the shipper is recorded using a scanning device. The information from the scanning device is recorded by the tracking system of the first carrier computer system and is accessible by the verification system for matching with the package information from the package information system using the tracking number. The return information is accessed
15 by the billing system and a billing adjustment is made for the undelivered package described with the package information. In one aspect, the adjustment is an additional charge (typically equal to the outbound delivery charge) for the return of the package.

In accordance with an aspect of an embodiment, there is provided a
20 computer system for routing delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers each having one of a plurality of physical delivery systems, said computer system comprising:

a shipper computer system configured to: request a delivery, of a package by a plurality of carriers each having one of a plurality of physical delivery systems;
25 determine whether a consignee address matches a rural destination classification or an urban destination classification; generate a first carrier label including a consignee address field in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classification; and generate, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the plurality of carriers, a combination label including a subsequent carrier
30 address field in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification;

an initial carrier computer system connected in electronic communication with the carrier physical delivery system of the initial one of the carriers and the

shipper computer system, said initial carrier computer system configured to: obtain
 package information data from the shipper computer system, said package
 information data including the consignee address; determine whether the consignee
 address matches the rural destination classification or the urban destination
 5 classification; instruct the initial carrier physical delivery system to deliver the
 package to the consignee address included on the first carrier label in response to the
 consignee address matching the urban destination classification; and determine,
 based at least in part on the combination label, an intermediate location at which a
 subsequent one of the carriers is configured to receive the package in response to the
 10 consignee address matching the rural destination classification; and
 a subsequent carrier computer system connected in communication with the
 initial carrier computer system and a subsequent one of the carrier physical delivery
 systems, said subsequent carrier computer system configured to: obtain the package
 information data, including the consignee address, and the intermediate location
 15 from the initial carrier computer system; receive instructions from the initial carrier
 computer system to receive the package at the intermediate location and complete
 delivery to the consignee address, further transport of the package from said receipt
 of the package to said complete delivery by the subsequent carrier delivery system
 being based upon at least one delivery-related rule established by the initial carrier
 20 computer system; and send the package information data, including the consignee
 address, and the intermediate location to the subsequent carrier physical delivery
 system and instructing the subsequent carrier delivery system to obtain the package
 at the intermediate location and complete delivery of the package to the consignee
 address.

25 In accordance with another aspect of an embodiment, there is provided a
 method of routing delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers each having one of
 a plurality of physical delivery systems, said method of routing comprising steps of:
 using a shipper computer system to execute the steps of: determining
 whether a consignee address matches a rural destination classification or an urban
 30 destination classification; generating a first carrier label including a consignee
 address field in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination
 classification; and generating, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the

plurality of carriers, a combination label including a subsequent carrier address field in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification;

using an initial carrier computer system that is connected in communication with the shipper computer system to execute the steps of: obtaining package
 5 information data, including the consignee address, from a shipper; determining whether the consignee address matches the rural destination classification or the urban destination classification; instructing the initial carrier physical delivery system to deliver the package to the consignee address included on the first carrier label in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination
 10 classification; and determining, based at least in part on the combination label, an intermediate location at which a subsequent one of the carriers is configured to receive the package in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification; and

using a subsequent carrier computer system that is connected in
 15 communication with the initial carrier computer system to execute the steps of: obtaining the package information data, including the consignee address, and the intermediate location from the initial carrier computer system; receiving instructions from the initial carrier computer system to receive the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery to the consignee address, further transport of the
 20 package from said receipt of the package to said complete delivery by the subsequent carrier delivery system being based upon at least one delivery-related rule established by the initial carrier computer system; and sending the package information data, including the consignee address, and the intermediate location to the subsequent carrier physical delivery system and instructing the subsequent
 25 carrier delivery system to obtain the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery of the package to the consignee address.

In accordance with yet another aspect of an embodiment, there is provided a computer program product for routing delivery of a package, the computer program product comprising a computer-readable storage medium having computer-readable
 30 program code portions stored therein, the computer-readable program code portions comprising: a first executable portion for obtaining package information data, including a consignee address, from a shipper computer system; a second executable portion for determining whether the consignee address matches a rural destination

classification or an urban destination classification; a third executable portion for instructing an initial carrier physical delivery system to deliver one of the packages to the consignee address included on a first carrier label in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classifications, wherein the first carrier label
5 was previously generated in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classification; a fourth executable portion for determining, based at least in part on a subsequent carrier address field included on a combination label, an intermediate location at which a subsequent one of the carriers is configured to receive the package in response to the consignee address matching the rural
10 destination classification, wherein the combination label was previously generated, prior to initiating delivery by the initial carrier physical delivery system, in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification; a fifth executable portion for sending the package information data and the intermediate location to the subsequent carrier physical delivery system and instructing a
15 subsequent carrier physical delivery system to obtain the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery of the package to the consignee address, further transport of the package from said receipt of the package to said complete delivery by the subsequent carrier delivery system being based upon at least one delivery-related rule established by the initial carrier computer system; a sixth executable
20 portion for obtaining an initial carrier tracking number as part of the package information data and obtaining tracking data indicating detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location using a scanning device of the initial carrier physical delivery system; a seventh executable code portion for constructing a billing manifest by correlating, using the initial carrier tracking number, the
25 package information data with the tracking data indicating detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location; and an eighth executable code portion for obtaining a subsequent carrier tracking number that is different than the initial carrier tracking number, as part of the package information data and obtaining tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the
30 consignee address using a scanning device of a subsequent carrier physical delivery system.

In accordance with yet another aspect of an embodiment, there is provided a shipping information system for facilitating delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers, said shipping information system comprising:

a shipper information system configured to: receive an indication that
 5 delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality of carriers; record package information, including a consignee address associated with the package; identify an intermediate location, wherein a first carrier of the plurality of carriers will transfer the package to a second carrier of the plurality of carriers, the intermediate location being identified based at least in part on the consignee
 10 address; generate, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the plurality of carriers, a combined shipping label, the combined shipping label comprising at least a portion of the package information, a first carrier tracking symbol, and a second carrier tracking symbol differing from said first carrier tracking symbol, the first and second carrier tracking symbols each configured to provide tracking information for
 15 at least a portion of the delivery, and wherein data associated with the first and the second carrier tracking systems are further associated to generate consolidated tracking information, said consolidated tracking information being independently accessible via either of the first and the second carrier tracking symbols throughout a duration of when the package is being transported by the first carrier and when the
 20 package is being transported by the second carrier.

In accordance with yet another aspect of an embodiment, there is provided a shipping information system for facilitating delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers, said shipping information system comprising:

a shipper information system configured to: receive an indication that
 25 delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality of carriers; record package information, including a consignee address associated with the package; identify, an intermediate location at which to transfer the package from a first carrier of the plurality of carriers to a second carrier of the plurality of carriers, the intermediate location being identified based at least in part on the
 30 consignee address; generate, prior to initiating transportation of the package by the plurality of carriers, a combined shipping label, the combined shipping label comprising the package information, a first carrier tracking symbol, and a second carrier tracking symbol differing from said first carrier tracking symbol, the first and

second carrier tracking symbols each configured to provide tracking information for at least a portion of the delivery, and wherein data associated with the first and the second carrier tracking systems are further associated to generate consolidated tracking information, said consolidated tracking information being independently
 5 accessible via either of the first and the second carrier tracking symbols throughout a duration of when the first and the second carriers are transporting the package; and

a first carrier information system comprising: a package information system connected in communication with the shipper information system and configured to obtain the package information, the first carrier tracking symbol and the second
 10 carrier tracking symbol from the shipper information system; a tracking system connected in communication with a first scanning device positioned at the intermediate location and a second scanning device positioned at a shipper location, said tracking system configured to determine when the first scanning device has scanned the first carrier tracking symbol of the package at the intermediate location
 15 and also configured to determine when the second scanning device has scanned at least one of the tracking symbols of the package at the shipper location as the package is being returned; and a verification system connected in communication with the package information system and the tracking system, said verification system configured to obtain package information and tracking information from the
 20 respective systems and to use the first carrier tracking symbol to combine the package information and tracking information into a billing manifest, said verification system also configured to later modify the billing manifest upon receipt of tracking information indicating scanning of the package at the shipper location by the second scanning device due to return of the package to the shipper location.

25 In accordance with yet another aspect of an embodiment, there is provided a computer-implemented method for facilitating delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers, the method comprising: receiving, by at least one computing device comprising at least one processor, an indication that delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality carriers; recording, by the one or
 30 more processors, package information, including a consignee address associated with the package; identifying, by the one or more processors an intermediate location at which to transfer the package from a first carrier of the plurality of carriers to a second carrier of the plurality of carriers, the intermediate location

being identified based at least in part on the consignee address; generating, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the plurality of carriers, by the one or more processors, a combined shipping label, the combined shipping label comprising at least a portion of the package information, a first carrier tracking symbol, and a
5 second carrier tracking symbol differing from said first carrier tracking symbol, the first and second carrier tracking symbols each configured to provide tracking information for at least a portion of the delivery, and wherein data associated with the first and the second carrier tracking systems are further associated to generate consolidated tracking information, said consolidated tracking information being
10 independently accessible via either of the first and the second carrier tracking symbols throughout a duration of when the first and the second carriers are transporting the package.

One of the advantages of the present system includes the use of electronic transmission of the tracking, billing and other information on delivery of the
15 packages to facilitate combined delivery by multiple shipping services. As a result, the combined shipping system can automatically coordinate information flow, package delivery flow and funds flow amongst multiple carriers in a way that is efficient and reliable. Another advantage is the cost-savings realized by the shipper computer system, which identifies the most efficient packages for delivery by the
20 shipping services with differing capabilities.

Compilation of manifests by the first carrier computer system instills sufficient confidence in accurate billing in the second carrier that it allows participation in reduced rate delivery services. Auditing by the second carrier is further facilitated by coordinating package information with tracking information of
25 both carriers. Quality control checks further confirm that the shipper is correctly entering package information, and when coordinated with audits by the second carrier, results in multiple, closed-loop confirmations of the accuracy of

billing. In addition, the return system tracks returns and supplies information on returns to the billing system for refunding of billing charges paid on returned packages. As a result, each of the parties have sufficient confidence in the accuracy of billing and delivery tasks to be willing to share resources and lower the overall cost of shipping. Other advantages are realized by the present invention, not all of which are explicitly listed hereinabove, will be apparent from the detailed description and the appendices.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWING(S)

Having thus described the invention in general terms, reference will now be made to the accompanying drawings, which are not necessarily drawn to scale, and wherein:

Figure 1 is a schematic of one embodiment of a combined carrier shipping system of the present invention;

Figure 2 is a schematic of the physical delivery facilities of the combined shipping system shown in Figure 1 according to one embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 3 is a label containing indicia to facilitate transfer of delivery from a first to a second carrier and also from the second carrier to a recipient, said label being another embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 4 is a schematic of another embodiment of a combined carrier shipping system of the present invention including the creation of electronic manifests;

Figure 5 is a schematic of another embodiment of a combined carrier shipping system of the present invention;

Figure 6 is a block diagram of a first carrier computer system of yet another embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 7 is a schematic of a flow of tracking information in a shipping system according to the present invention;

Figure 8 is a schematic of a flow of preprocessing of a package by a shipper of shipping system illustrated in Figure 1;

Figure 9 is a schematic of another embodiment of a combined carrier shipping system of the present invention including an electronic mail confirmation of delivery sent to a recipient;

Figure 10 is a schematic of a billing system of another embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 11 is a schematic of a quality control system of another embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 12 is a schematic of a returns system of another embodiment of the present invention; and

Figure 13 is a another label containing indicia to facilitate transfer of delivery from a first to a second carrier and also from the second carrier to a recipient, said label being another embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention now will be described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which some, but not all embodiments of the invention are shown. Indeed, this invention may be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the embodiments set forth herein; rather, these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will satisfy applicable legal requirements. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout.

A system **10** for combining the shipping services of multiple carriers ("the shipping system") of one embodiment of the present invention is shown in Figure 1. The shipping system ships packages (used herein to refer to any item being delivered, for example, parcels or mail), from a shipper **11** to a consignee or recipient **12**. The shipping system **10** has a variety of physical facilities for facilitating delivery of packages (movement of which is indicated by the solid lines), including line haulers **13**, a sorting hub **14**, a preload facility **15** and carrier delivery facilities (vehicles, personnel, etc.) **16**, each of which are preferably operated by a first carrier, as shown in Figure 2. A second carrier (e.g., the USPS), operates its own destination delivery unit **17** and carrier delivery facilities **18**, which in the case of the USPS are local post offices and mail delivery personnel, vehicles, etc. The conventional operation of such USPS systems is well known.

Referring again to Figure 1, the shipping system **10** also includes a variety of communications systems that are preferably electronic in nature. The communication systems include a shipper computer system **20** connected electronically via a network **21** to a first carrier computer system **22** and a second carrier computer system **23**. The first and second carrier computer systems **22**, **23** are also connected via a network **24**. Generally, the communication systems allow the efforts of the physical facilities of the two carriers and the shipper **11** to be coordinated for efficient delivery of (and billing for delivery of) the packages.

Information (movement of which is indicated by the dashed lines) conveyed through the communication systems includes package information, e.g., package level details (PLD) such as an origin, destination and weight of each of the packages, which facilitates sorting and delivery of the packages and billing for the delivery services. In addition, the communication systems collect, record and report tracking information to the carriers, the shipper **11**, the recipient **12** and any other interested parties.

The shipper **11** can be a retail shipping outlet, a business shipping a high volume of packages, or any other person or entity wishing to ship packages using the present system **10**. In one aspect, the shipper **11** may agree to perform limited pre-processing activities in the present system **10**, such as those described below which are facilitated by use of the computer system **20**, in communication with the first carrier computer system **22**.

The shipper's computer system **20** has software distributed by the first carrier making it configured to record the PLD information necessary to sort, meter and ship each of the packages. In one example, the computer system **20** of the shipper **11** is connectable over the network **21** to a web server (not shown) of the first carrier computer system **22**. The web server of the first carrier computer system is configured to send data across the network to display web pages on the shipper computer system **20**. Alternatively, the shipper **11** could be directly equipped with software downloaded from the first carrier computer system **22**, or sent on media by the first carrier for installation on the shipper computer system **20**.

Preferably, package aggregation will be disabled for the PLD upload (i.e., each package will be registered as a single shipment) so that the carrier is not

accountable for delivering all of the packages together. Also preferably, PLD information is uploaded daily, or even multiple times per day, as trailers are closed for pickup by the line hauler 13. Retransmission may be performed to ensure that all of the PLD information has been uploaded. The PLD information can also be provided in printed form as a manifest, including a summary of barcodes of the packages on the trailer, to the pickup driver of the line hauler.

Regardless of the source of the software, the computer system 20 preferably includes software logic for processing all types of parcels according to zip code, weight and tracking number. In addition, the shipper computer system may also include rate information that can be updated periodically by the carrier computer systems 22, 23 via the networks 21, 24, or by other data input or transfer. Further, the shipper computer system 20 may include a database of zip codes separated into groups or indexed by population density, which preferably distinguishes urban and rural destinations. Other software logic may be configured to obtain, or generate, tracking numbers for the packages for both carriers. Rate, zip code, DDU location and other information is preferably updated on a regular basis (e.g., quarterly) to reflect current information and changes thereto.

Using the software logic, the shipper computer system 20 is configured to prompt and record entry of the PLD shipping information by the shipper 11, such as through the presentation of a graphical-user interface with fields for entry of the PLD information. To facilitate accurate recording of package weights, the computer system 20 may include a scale 26. In addition to the scale 26, the shipper's computer system 20 may also include a label printing device 27 or other type of printer. Once the PLD information has been entered or recorded, the logic of the computer system 20 is configured to use the database of zip codes to match the package zip code with a classification of the package's destination address, which in the illustrated embodiment of Figure 1 includes the rural or urban classification. In addition to classifying the destination address, the shipper computer system 20 may also have logic and data for determining the destination delivery unit 17 of the second carrier, which corresponds to the recipient's address, if necessary.

The software logic enables the shipper computer system 20 to alert the shipper as to whether the destination address of the recipient 12 is rural or urban

and to generate the appropriate label according to the classification. An appropriate label **25** is shown in Figure 3. Preferably, the urban-bound packages receive a standard first carrier label and are generally handled like a regular package delivered by the first carrier.

5 Alternatively, for the rural packages (or packages in areas where delivery is not cost-effective for the first carrier due to a lack of facilities, roads, etc.) the shipper may be offered a combined carrier delivery level of service. If the shipper selects this option, the shipper system **20** generates a combination label **25** as shown in Figure 3. In one embodiment, the combination label **25** includes a
10 second carrier address field **28** that indicates the destination delivery unit **17** to which the first carrier is to deliver the package, as shown in Figure 3. Above the second carrier address field **28** is a return address field **44** of the shipper **11** and a package weight field **45**, which in the illustrated label **25** of Figure 3 is 3 pounds.

Beneath the second carrier delivery address field **28** is a first carrier
15 alphanumeric internal routing code **29** determining the first carrier sorting hub **14** (in Figure 3 the sorting hub is FL 335 and 0-04 indicates the conveyor belt within the sorting hub) to which the line haulers **13** are to deliver the package. Next to the internal routing code **29** is a Maxicode symbol **30** (a machine readable two-dimensional or dense code) and below the alphanumeric routing code **29** is a
20 barcode symbol **31**. The Maxicode symbol **30** contains most or all of the information shown on the label **25** and at least a portion of the PLD information for the package. The bar code **31** duplicates the information contained in the alphanumeric routing code **29**, allowing the routing information to be determined using several types of scanning devices.

25 Beneath the codes **29-31** is a service name field **32** and a service icon **33** indicating the level or type of shipping service, which in the illustrated label is light-weight package (LWP) ground shipping with the icon "L". Beneath the service name field **32** is a first carrier tracking number (in the illustrated label "1Z 510 20T OL 9501 9216") field **34**. Beneath the tracking number field is a tracking
30 number barcode **35** that symbolically represents the tracking number and allows automated scanning of the tracking number.

In a bottom section of the label **25** is a recipient address **36** to which either the first, or second, carrier is to deliver the package, depending upon the

aforementioned criteria. Also at the bottom of the label **25** is a second carrier delivery confirmation barcode **37** that will be scanned by at least the second carrier, and preferably both carriers. The bar code **37** contains a second carrier tracking number, and a permit number or sender identification number indicating a source of postage to be paid by the first carrier.

Alternatively, the barcode **37** could also be an alphanumeric code, or other symbol, that is unique to the package. It should be noted that in the illustrated embodiment of the label **25** the first and second carrier tracking numbers are included on the label which allows the two numbers to be associated with each other in a database in at least the first carrier computer system **22**. The presence of both tracking numbers on the label and stored in a common system facilitates communication between the two carrier computer systems **22**, **23**, as well as providing consolidated tracking information to authorized persons. Parcel select indicia **38**, which is adjacent to the recipient address **36**, indicates that the first carrier will pay the postage for delivery by the second carrier (USPS). In another embodiment, the combination label **25** may have a different format (as shown in Figure 13) and can also include an alphanumeric delivery confirmation code **46** in addition to the barcode **37**.

An exemplary flowchart of the duties of the shipper **11** and shipper computer system **20** is illustrated in Figure 8. PLD information is entered into the shipper computer system **20** and the destination address validated in a step **200**, such as by verifying that the zip code is found in the state. The PLD information is coordinated with an order management system in step **201** and a warehouse management step **202** wherein the order is processed and the contents of the package are located. In a "pick, pack and weigh" step **203** the contents are selected, packed (such as in a conventional shipping container) and weighed by the scale **26**. In a residential versus commercial classification step **204**, the computer system **20** determines whether the delivery is to be to a residential or commercial location, such as by a comparison of the destination address to known commercial or residential addresses, by the amount of packages in the order or by an actual indication of the recipient **12** when placing the order. Validation can also include a residential-commercial "scrub" that validates whether an address is a commercial or residential address.

If the package is a commercial order, or is above a maximum weight (e.g., 5 pounds) as determined by a step 205, the label printing device 27 prints a conventional delivery label in a step 209. In a step 206, the shipper computer system 20 consults a zip code database or table 207 having postal or zip codes in two groups, rural and urban. One of the rural or urban codes in the table 207 is matched to the postal code of the delivery address contained in the PLD information in a step 208. If the destination is an urban destination, a conventional label indicating lightweight package delivery solely by the first carrier is generated and printed in a step 210 by the computer system 20. Alternatively, if the destination is a rural destination, the combined carrier label 25 illustrated in Figure 3 is generated and printed in a step 211 by the shipper computer system 20.

Advantageously, by using the delivery system 10 the first carrier avoids delivering packages to rural areas where it is less efficient, justifying shipping at a discounted rate. However, alternative or additional classifications (conditions) may be used that are not limited to population density. For instance, other classifications may describe varying capabilities of the physical delivery facilities of the first carrier, such as the proximity to a sorting hub, an airport or a destination zip code in the middle of a complete road network. In other words, the classifications could distinguish areas to which the first carrier can deliver packages more easily and with lower cost from other areas. In addition, the present invention may be extended to three or more carriers, each having their own area of efficiency, either within the delivery process, or geographically. The term "efficiency" as used herein not only indicates the cost of a service, but can also refer to the amount of time required to implement the service. It could also include some other measure of effort required to perform the service or consequences of performing the service.

Referring to Figure 4, PLD data, including the data corresponding to that on the label 25, is accessible by the shipper computer system 20 over the network 21. The first carrier computer system 25 includes a PLD repository system 39 and a tracking repository system 40. The systems, 39 and 40, may be integrated with the remainder of the first carrier computer system 22, such as the embodiment illustrated in Figure 1, or may be distinct systems interconnected via a network, as shown in Figure 4. The PLD repository system 39 is configured to obtain the PLD

information from the first carrier system 22 and storing the PLD information for further use by the shipping system 10. Additional logic may also reside on the PLD system 39 that allows the generation of preliminary reports, or manifests, which are sent to the second carrier to prepare it for incoming packages from the first carrier.

The tracking system 40 has program logic and storage configured to obtain tracking information from the package as it travels through various points along the physical delivery path. For instance, the tracking repository system may be connected in communication over a cellular telephone network 41 to a code scanning unit such as a sorting hub scanner or a delivery information acquisition device (DIAD) 42, as shown in Figure 1. In particular, the DIAD device is portable and is carried by the delivery driver delivering the package to the destination delivery unit (DDU) 17 of the second carrier (which is preferably the nearest DDU to the recipient or consignee 12 from which delivery can be achieved by the USPS in a day), or other intermediate physical pickup or delivery location along the path of package travel. The DIAD device includes a bar code scanner for reading the tracking number barcode 35 on the label 25, and a signature capture pad.

Captured symbol and signature information is stored temporarily in the unit, and then transferred via an optical link to a docking station located in the delivery vehicle. From this station, the information is transmitted to the tracking system 40 via the cellular telephone network 41. Other systems use radio frequency (RF) networks to relay tracking information to a central computer directly from the scanning unit. Scanning and barcode reading operations are described in more detail in commonly assigned U.S. Patent No. 5,770,841 entitled *System and Method for Reading Package Information*.

The first carrier computer system 22 also includes a verification and manifest generating system 43, as shown in Figure 4. As will be described in more detail below, a final manifest allows the shipping system 10 to “close the loop,” which is advantageous because the second carrier receives the packages at the destination delivery unit 17 and completes delivery of those packages without an up-front collection of the PLD information necessary for billing. Subsequent to

delivering the package to the recipient, the second carrier obtains the final manifest from the first carrier (preferably electronically), which allows billing of the first carrier by the second carrier. As described below, the system 43 also can generate a preliminary manifest for submittal to the second carrier's transfer location 17 (such as a DDU) via automatically generated electronic mail.

The verification system 43 is connected in communication with the PLD and tracking systems 39, 40 and is configured to obtain PLD data and tracking data, respectively, from those systems. The verification system includes software logic configured to identify all of the packages inbound to a particular location, such as the sorting hub 14, local pre-load facility 15, the recipient location 12, or the USPS destination delivery unit 17. The verification system is also configured to generate a drop shipment verification and clearance manifest, preferably an e8125 which is an electronic version of the 8125 form required by the USPS for any large-quantity drop shipment delivered to a destination delivery unit 17. In the embodiment of Figure 4, a portion of the verification system 43 logic resides on the PLD system 39 and allows the second carrier to access a preliminary manifest of packages inbound to a particular location.

Communication within the first carrier computer system 22, i.e., between the PLD system 39, the tracking repository system 40 and the verification system 43 (and possibly the other systems) preferably occurs by electronic data interchange (EDI) which is a well-known set of standards and technologies designed to automate the sending and receiving of routine business documents. Communication between the second carrier computer system 23 and the first carrier computer system 22 is also preferably electronic. For instance, the second carrier system 23 may include software allowing connection to, and viewing of summary manifests on, the PLD system 39, as shown in Figure 4. The e8125 manifest can also be sent electronically to the second carrier computer system 23, such as via EDI, and to the destination delivery unit 17 of the second carrier, such as via electronic mail. In yet another alternative, communication with the destination delivery unit 17 may be by facsimile, as shown in Figure 5.

Additional details on communication and handling between shipping facilities and information systems can be obtained from commonly assigned U.S. Patent No. 6,539,360 entitled *Special Handling Processing in a Package*

Transportation System; and International Patent Publication WO 03019333 A2 (6 March 2003), entitled *International Cash-On-Delivery System and Method*. Further details about communication between a central server and a tracking and PLD systems are disclosed in commonly-owned U.S. Patent No. 7,647,233
5 entitled *Systems and Methods for Providing Business Intelligence Based on Shipping Information*, filed June 21, 2002.

It should be noted that electronic communication as described herein may
10 be accomplished over various types of networks and with various amounts of manual and automated efforts. As in the example above of a facsimile transmission, personnel at the delivery unit 17 may comply with an audit request from the second carrier computer system 23 by generating a paper manifest, inserting the manifest into a facsimile machine, dialing a number, etc. It should be
15 also noted that the term “network” as used herein should be construed broadly to include all types of electronically assisted communication such as wireless networks, local area networks, public networks such as the Internet, public telephone networks, or various combinations of different networks.

The second carrier computer system 23 preferably is a pre-existing system
20 configured to receive and process the electronic manifests, and of confirming delivery of the packages under its control. In particular, the second carrier computer system 23 receives tracking information through a scan of the second carrier confirmation barcode 37 on the label 25 at the time of delivery, as illustrated by Figure 4. In the embodiments illustrated in Figures 4 and 5, the
25 second carrier computer system 23 is further configured to electronically communicate the confirmation information directly to the verification system 43 upon receipt.

During operation of the present shipping system 10, the shipper weighs the packages to be shipped and segregates the packages into those for which use of the
30 combined carrier service is desired, and those for which normal first carrier delivery service is desired. The combined carrier service may require, for example, low priority, low weight (e.g., less than five pounds) packages desired to be shipped at a discount. The shipper 11 then enters PLD for all the packages for

the various service levels into its computer system **20**. The PLD includes the recipient address which includes the zip code the computer system **20** uses to determine whether the delivery is to a zone eligible for combined carrier delivery, such as a rural area.

5 Other requirements to qualify for the discount can include, for example, shipping only to residential addresses, origin and destination within a country (such as the contiguous United States), maximum dimensions (such as 16 inches x 16 inches x 7 inches), electronic-only package detail upload or a lack of additional service options. A minimum average daily basic volume requirement may be
10 imposed, such as 5,000 packages per day. Other examples include a minimum fill for a trailer, such as 80% or 90% of full trailer capacity or use of particular label standards. Also, release without a signature may be required at any location including apartments, condominiums and commercial addresses. These requirements can be set by the shipper based on a number of factors, including
15 cost.

For an urban delivery, combined delivery service generally is not offered. A standard shipping label is generated and affixed to the package and the package is entered into the standard delivery process. When combined carrier delivery service is requested and available, the specialized label **25** is generated, including
20 both transfer and recipient delivery addresses, and the first and second carrier tracking numbers. The PLD information is then communicated over the network **21** to the PLD repository system **39** of the first carrier.

Once the packages have been pre-processed by the shipper, the line haulers
13 pick up the packages from the shipper (or other starting location) and deliver
25 them to the sorting hub **14** of the first carrier. All levels of service are commingled for this portion of the delivery path. At pick up from the shipper, the packages may be scanned by a DIAD so that tracking information is transmitted to the tracking system **40**, or tracking information for the list of packages may be
downloaded into a DIAD from the shipper computer system **20**. Notably, tracking
30 information can be reported by DIADs or other scanning units to the tracking system at several points along the physical delivery path by the first carrier, in a known manner not explained in detail here. At the hub **14**, the packages are sorted for delivery in a conventional manner, but with a possible delay imposed due to the

low priority of the packages. Generally, the sorted loads of combined carrier service packages are processed only when there is available capacity at the hub 14. From the hub 14, the first carrier ships the packages to its preload facilities 15.

5 An optional lane determination may be performed by the shipper 20 or first carrier 22 computer systems wherein package loads are separated into groups for delivery by different trucks of the line hauler 13 to different sorting hubs 14 based on the consignee's location. Determination of a lane, which corresponds to an outbound trailer position, is done by consulting a lane table indexed by consignee state, zip code, which in turn is used to identify a trailer or truck on which the load
10 is to be placed. The trailer supply is typically forecasted by the line hauler 13 from information provided by the shipper.

Notably, the first carrier does not reweigh the packages weighed by the shipper 11 and the second carrier also agrees to accept the shipper-provided weight. If necessary, periodic audits of the shipper information are conducted to
15 ensure accuracy. As another measure to ensure correct billing, the second carrier computer system 23 (and in particular the PLD repository system 39) will not accept submission of a shipping request without both the PLD and first carrier tracking code to ensure that all shipments are properly manifested and billed.

At the preload facilities 15, further sorting segregates according to zip code
20 those packages to be delivered by standard first carrier service from those packages to be delivered by combined carrier service, typically bound for rural (or super-rural) zip codes. The packages bound for other (typically urban) destinations are delivered by the first carrier in a conventional manner.

The combined carrier delivery packages are delivered directly to the second
25 carrier destination delivery unit 17 by the first carrier. Upon arrival of the packages at the destination delivery unit, the first carrier driver scans each of the packages in accordance with normal bulk stop practice, then has personnel of the second carrier verify the package count and sign the DIAD 42 for the packages. The DIAD transmits the information on the packages delivered to the DDU 17
30 back to the tracking system 40. The first carrier driver also submits form 8125 data on the packages to the DDU.

As an alternative to the physical 8125 manifest, the DIAD scan may be used to provide package information directly to the DDU 17. Preferably, the

DIAD 42 has the capacity to uplink to a personal digital assistant (PDA) which in turn is in communication with a DDU portion of the second carrier computer system 23. Such communications are preferably wireless, such as through the use of radio frequency signals, an optical interface or infrared signals. In another aspect, the PDA may be in direct communication with a printer at the DDU (not shown) allowing printing of the DIAD scan, or the DIAD itself may be able to directly communicate with the computer system 23 or the printer.

A more complete description of the use of an uplink-type DIAD is disclosed in commonly owned U.S. Patent No. 6,285,916.

For instance, Figure 1 of U.S. Patent No. 6,285,916 illustrates such an uplink system including a DIAD (35 of U.S. Patent No. 6,285,916) connected via an optical interface (37, 38 of U.S. Patent No. 6,285,916) to a PDA (12 of U.S. Patent No. 6,285,916). A mail room PC (40 of U.S. Patent No. 6,285,916) is connected via an infrared port (23, 42 of U.S. Patent No. 6,285,916) to the PDA. In this manner, the DIAD can communicate its tracking information directly to the PDA and the PDA communicates the information, in turn, to the mail room PC.

Regardless of how the delivery information has passed to the second carrier, the second carrier then delivers the packages received from the first carrier in a normal manner along with other mail or packages. The second carrier driver scans the delivery confirmation bar code 35 upon delivery to the recipient, and this tracking information is loaded into the second carrier computer system 23, typically within a few hours. For the deliveries by the second carrier, all of the rules for package release of the first carrier are applied. For instance, if the first carrier normally makes only a single delivery attempt, then the second carrier does likewise. Undeliverable packages are then preferably returned to the shipper after a predetermined (e.g., five day) waiting period. In this manner, shipment by the first or second carrier is relatively transparent to the recipient 12.

The verification system 43 subsequently obtains the delivery confirmation information from the second carrier computer system 23, the tracking information from the tracking system 40 and the PLD from the repository system 39 and generates a manifest which is sent to the second carrier system 23. By comparing the information received from these sources, the first carrier can provide an

auditable manifest of the day's package shipments to the second carrier computer system **23**. For U.S. deliveries, preferably the manifest is sent to the second carrier by 10:00 pm Pacific Time. Upon successful auditing, the consolidated manifest is used by the second carrier to create the bill which is sent to the first carrier

5 describing the exact number of parcels delivered by the carrier. Creation of the auditable manifest inspires the confidence needed by the second carrier to receive and ship large volumes of packages of varying weight, dimension, destination, etc. while foregoing prepayment but still being assured of proper compensation.

In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 4, the shipping system **10** further

10 includes immediately storing the PLD in the PLD repository system **39**, allowing the first carrier to provide advanced shipment notification to the second carrier via electronic mail of the preliminary manifest (e8125). The PLD information contains a unique shipper number associated with each transfer location **17**, such as each USPS DDU. Advanced shipment notification gives the destination delivery

15 unit **17** advance notice of the number of packages to expect in a few days for delivery. While the packages are being sorted and delivered by the first carrier, the verification system **43** uses the EDI format to pull data from the PLD repository **39** and builds and sends the electronic manifest (e8125) to the destination delivery unit **17**.

20 As noted above, when the combined carrier delivery packages reach the destination delivery unit **17**, the second carrier personnel confirm that the shipment matches the preliminary manifest, sign the DIAD **42**. The data is sent immediately to the tracking system **40**. The verification system **43** obtains the data from the tracking system **40** and compares it to the PLD data already in memory. As shown

25 in Figure 4, the second carrier delivery confirmation data, which subsequently is obtained from the second carrier delivery driver **18** via the second carrier computer system **23**, provides a third source of information for constructing a final electronic manifest.

The PLD information contains both tracking numbers which allows the first

30 carrier tracking number-referenced information from the tracking system **40** to be matched with the second carrier tracking number-referenced information from the second carrier delivery confirmation. Using these three sources of data, the verification system **43** builds a consolidated electronic manifest (e8125) of the

day's packages and sends it to the second carrier computer system 23 for auditing. The manifest may be sorted or arranged as specified by the second carrier to facilitate auditing and billing. For instance, the manifest could be sorted by destination delivery unit 17 zip code, allowing the second carrier to view all
5 packages handled at each DDU for the day.

In the embodiment illustrated in Figure 5, additional steps may be taken by the second carrier (as facilitated by the combined shipping system 10) to ensure accurate auditing and billing. As in the embodiment above, the electronic manifest is built and sent to the destination delivery unit 17 which compares it to the
10 packages received from the first carrier. The confirmed manifest can then be faxed to the managers of the second carrier computer system 23 for entry therein and reconciliation with the tracking and billing information.

Figure 7 illustrates a flow of tracking information in isolation from the physical flow of the package for additional clarity. The initially submitted PLD
15 information is sent from the shipper computer 20 to the PLD repository system 39. Each of the DIADs 42, in particular one DIAD at the DDU 17 and another at the first carrier delivery facility (truck) 42 communicate first carrier tracking information to the tracking system 40. The delivery confirmation scans of the second carrier are transmitted to the second carrier computer system 23.

20 The verification system 43 periodically pulls the PLD information from the PLD repository system 39 and the tracking information from the tracking repository each preferably using the EDI 213 standard. Delivery confirmation is sent by (or pulled from) the second carrier computer system 23 to the verification system 43. The first carrier tracking number of the original PLD information is
25 matched to the DIAD tracking information and the second carrier delivery confirmation (via the second carrier confirmation tracking number) by the verification system 43. The consolidated tracking information is then uploaded to the shipper computer 20 and may also be made available to the recipient 12. Upload may be by way of a flat file that includes comma-delimited tracking data
30 that is useable with enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, customer service systems and the shipper's own web sites.

In another alternative shown in Figure 9, the recipient (i.e., the consignee) is informed of the tracking information, including the tracking number and

delivery confirmation, with an electronic mail message. The shipper computer **20** may also access the tracking information via a web-based inquiry to the verification system **43** of the tracking repository **40**. Another option is access via Internet-based application programming interfaces, or APIs. Yet another option is
5 to use a single tracking number for both urban and remote delivery so that a single shipper account number can be used for manifesting both types of deliveries.

In addition to controlling the flow of tracking information and the physical delivery of packages, the above-described combined carrier shipping system **10** may have additional, or alternative, aspects that allow or facilitate the flow of
10 funds for delivery services. For instance, a billing aspect of another embodiment of the combined carrier shipping system **10** of the present invention is illustrated in Figure 10. The flow of billing information is indicated in Figure 10 by a long-dash line, the flow of funds is indicated by a short-dash line and the movement of various invoices is indicated by the heavy black solid line.

15 A first carrier billing system **225** is preferably a computer system configured to calculate the cost involved with each shipment based on information collected from the other systems. A portion of the cost that includes shipment by the line haul carrier **13** from the shipper **11** to the sort facility **14** is calculated using mileage. Similarly, delivery costs to the DDU **17** of packages determined by the
20 shipper computer **20** to require delivery to rural zip codes (or some other less efficient location) are also calculated. Further, costs are assessed for delivery by the second carrier from the DDU **17** to the recipient **12**, when necessary.

The first carrier billing computer system **225** is connected in communication with the PLD repository system **39** from which it obtains billing
25 information, including an indication of whether shipping requires just the first carrier, or a combination of carriers. Preferably, this indication is from use of a specific flag placed by the shipper **11** or the presence of a tracking number for the second carrier in the PLD information. This indication allows a determination by the billing system **225** of whether to include charges from the line haul carrier **13**,
30 the second carrier, or both.

The first carrier billing system **225** is also connected to the tracking system **40** from which it obtains tracking information on the progress of physical package delivery. Such information is used to determine the distance, and other indicators

of the amount of effort involved in delivery such as the number of stops and sorts, that are factors in calculating the delivery charges. Similar to previously illustrated embodiments, the tracking system 40 is connected in communication with one or more DIADs 42 from which it obtains the information on packages passing
5 through locations along the delivery route.

Billing by the second carrier is implemented by a portion the second carrier computer system 23 which is connected in communication with the verification system 43 and is configured to receive the daily manifest therefrom. Also connected in communication with the second carrier computer system 23 is an
10 escrow account 229 (set up at initiation of the system 10) from which the second carrier can withdraw funds for payment of the fees associated with each daily manifest. In this manner, the second carrier always has immediate access to funds once it has received and completed auditing of the daily manifest.

An integrated, or separate, component of the first carrier billing system 225
15 may include a single bill generator 230. The single bill generator is configured to compile the charges calculated by the rest of the billing system 225 into individual bills that are easily handled and paid by the shipper 11. The bill generator 230 may also be configured to add additional surcharges to the bill required by the various carriers.

20 During operation the shipper 11 records shipments on its computer system 20 from which the PLD information is uploaded to the PLD repository system 39. Physical delivery of the packages commences and the tracking system 40 tracks the progress of the packages using the DIADs 42 until either final delivery by the first carrier in the case of conventional packages labeled by the shipper system 20,
25 or delivery to the DDU 17 of the second carrier for transfer.

At the end of each day, the daily manifest is constructed (such as described in detail in the embodiments above) and communicated to the second carrier computer system 23. Upon receiving the manifest, the second carrier conducts the various audit and quality control procedures described above and below and then
30 debits the escrow account 229. Funds are transferred, preferably electronically, from the escrow account to the carrier computer system 23. Alternatively, some or all of the audit and quality control procedures may be conducted after the debit

transaction and any necessary corrections refunded or further debited to the escrow account 229.

5 Either during, or at the end of, the same day, the first carrier billing system 225 obtains PLD information and tracking information from the PLD repository and verification systems 39, 40. The PLD and tracking information determines the individual charges to be levied by the first carrier, second carrier, and line haul carrier, respectively. These charges are packaged in an invoice, along with any other surcharges, by the single bill generator 230 and the invoice is then submitted to the shipper 11.

10 Payment by the shipper 11, preferably electronically by the shipper computer system 20, is transmitted to the first carrier billing system 225. The first carrier billing system deducts the charges for the first carrier's services (which may also include charges required by the line-haul carrier 13) and forwards the remaining amount, preferably electronically, to the escrow account 229.

15 Advantageously, the escrow account is available for debit by the second carrier at any time, further bolstering the second carrier's confidence that compensation is being received for its delivery services.

 Billing may be further facilitated by several options for quality control ("QC") wherein the accuracy of the tracking, PLD and other information is

20 confirmed via several audit cycles, as shown in Figure 11. As shown by a first quality control step 250, the PLD repository system 39 can be monitored for missing transmissions. For instance, follow-up telephone calls or electronic communications (such as an electronic manifest) may be made to the shipper 11 to confirm that all shipments have been received that were sent by the shipper. Such

25 electronic communications would relate the information recorded by the PLD repository system 39 for a day to the shipper 11. The shipper would then compare the records made by the shipper computer 20, or recorded on paper, to those made by the PLD repository system 39. Shipments that failed to be transmitted to the PLD repository system 39 could be retransmitted.

30 Another quality control step 260 may be implemented using the verification system 43. In step 260 delivery confirmations recorded by the system 43 via communication with the tracking system 40 in the case of conventionally delivered packages entirely via the first carrier, or with the second carrier computer system

23 in the case of combined delivery, are compared with the billing statements sent by the first carrier billing system 225. Discrepancies are communicated to the billing system 225 for adjustment of the bill, e.g., by adding missed packages.

Yet another quality control step 27 is conducted at the operating center 15 by the first carrier. Periodic size and weight checks are conducted at the operating center either manually 271, or automatically 272, or both. The automated facilities are configured to audit packages on a daily basis. An amount of revenue that should be associated with the package size and weight determined by the audit is calculated 273, such as by the first carrier billing system 225. The difference in the initial calculation is compared to the audit calculation and billing adjustments are made 274 and applied to the final invoice or bill 275 before it is communicated to the shipper 11 for remuneration.

In addition to the quality control steps performed by the first carrier, the various audits by the second carrier may also be regarded as additional quality control steps. As described above, the second carrier has an opportunity to compare the packages listed on the electronic manifest (or the capture and printout of the DIAD 42 information) with the packages as they are received at the DDU 17. Discrepancies between the manifest and the actual packages received could be reported to the billing system 225 for adjustment of the bill. Billing could also be adjusted by the second carrier merely adding or subtracting funds from the escrow account 229. A connection between the second carrier system 23 wherein the facsimile of the confirmed manifest shown in Figure 5 can be used to detect anomalies which are reported to the billing system 225 for adjustment. The net effect of the multiples quality control cycles and audits is that they allow the second carrier to be confident of accurate compensation for its part in the combined package deliveries. In turn, the second carrier can pass on savings from its efficiency in the rural areas to the first carrier.

A return aspect of the shipping system 10 of the present invention is illustrated schematically by Figure 12. Packages delivered under the shipping system 10 are delivered using predetermined customer relationship rules. These rules include rules about delivery times, number of attempts at delivery, duration before return, etc., that govern how returns are handled. For example, the rules may require delivery within 24 hours after the DIAD scan at the DDU, only a

single attempt at delivery and if no recipient **12** is present for delivery, a return to the shipper **11** of the package after a 5 day period.

Referring again to Figure 12, packages are delivered using the aforementioned exemplary customer relationship rules. If the recipient **12** is not present, the package is returned to the local first carrier operating center **15** by the first carrier delivery truck **16**. The returned package is held for five days in a “will call” cage at the local operating center, making the package available for call and pickup by the recipient **12**.

If the package is not picked up after five days, a return to sender process is commenced wherein the package is returned to the shipper **11**. At the shipper’s location, a DIAD **42** is used to record the shipper’s acknowledgement of receipt of the returned package. The information from the DIAD is recorded by the tracking system **40** and is accessed by the verification system **43** for matching with the PLD information from the PLD repository system **39**. The first carrier billing system **225** then calculates the original cost of shipping and adds an additional cost for the return services based on the PLD information obtained from the verification system **43**. Typically, return services will have a cost that is about the same as the outbound shipment.

An embodiment of the first carrier computer system **22** of the present invention is shown schematically in Figure 6. The first carrier computer system includes a processor **100** that communicates with other elements within the computer system **22** via a system interface or bus **101**. Also included in the first carrier computer system **22** are display and input devices, including the DIADs **102** used for tracking and various terminals **103** for receiving and displaying data within the system. The first carrier computer system **22** further includes memory **104**, which preferably includes both read only memory (ROM) **105** and random access memory (RAM) **106**. The ROM **105** is used to store a basic input/output system (BIOS) **107** containing the basic routines that help to transfer information between elements within the first carrier computer system **22**.

In addition, the first carrier computer system **22** includes at least one storage device **108**, such as a hard disk drive, a floppy disk drive, a CD-ROM drive, or optical disk drive, for storing information on various computer-readable media, such as a hard disk, a removable magnetic disk, or a CD-ROM disk. As

will be appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art, each of these storage devices 108 is connected to the system bus by an appropriate interface. The storage devices 108 and their associated computer-readable media provide non-volatile storage for the first carrier computer system 22. It is important to note that the
5 computer-readable media described above could be replaced by any other type of computer-readable media known in the art. Such media include, for example, magnetic cassettes, flash memory cards, digital video disks, and Bernoulli cartridges.

A number of program modules may be stored by the various storage
10 devices, such as within RAM 106 (as shown in Figure 6) or within the storage device 108 (as not shown for clarity). Such program modules include an operating system 109, a PLD module 110, a verification module 111 and a tracking module 112. As described both above and below, the PLD module is configured to record and store PLD information from the shipper computer system 20 and may also be
15 configured to generate reports of the packages, along with their PLD information, en route to the destination delivery unit 17. The verification module 111 is configured to generate the billing manifests using the PLD information, tracking information and the confirmation information received from the second carrier. Also located within the first carrier computer system 22, is a system interface 113
20 for interfacing and communicating with other elements of the overall shipping system 10, such as the shipper computer system 20 and the second carrier computer system 23.

It will be appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art that one or more of the components of the computer systems described herein may be located
25 geographically remotely from other components. Furthermore, one or more of the components may be combined, and additional components performing the functions described herein may be included in the first carrier computer system.

Figures in the present application are block diagrams, flowcharts and control flow illustrations of methods, systems and program products according to
30 the invention. It will be understood that each block or step of the block diagram, flowchart and control flow illustration, and combinations of blocks in the block diagram, flowchart and control flow illustration, can be implemented by computer program instructions. These computer program instructions may be loaded onto a

computer or other programmable apparatus to produce a machine, such that the instructions which execute on the computer or other programmable apparatus create means for implementing the functions specified in the block diagram, flowchart or control flow block(s) or step(s).

5 These computer program instructions may also be stored in a computer-readable memory that can direct a computer or other programmable apparatus to function in a particular manner, such that the instructions stored in the computer-readable memory produce an article of manufacture including instruction means which implement the function specified in the block diagram, flowchart or control
10 flow block(s) or step(s). The computer program instructions may also be loaded onto a computer or other programmable apparatus to cause a series of operational steps to be performed on the computer or other programmable apparatus to produce a computer implemented process such that the instructions which execute on the computer or other programmable apparatus provide steps for implementing
15 the functions specified in the block diagram, flowchart or control flow block(s) or step(s).

 Accordingly, blocks or steps of the block diagram, flowchart or control flow illustration support combinations of means for performing the specified functions, combinations of steps for performing the specified functions and
20 program instruction means for performing the specified functions. It will also be understood that each block or step of the block diagram, flowchart or control flow illustration, and combinations of blocks or steps in the block diagram, flowchart or control flow illustration, can be implemented by special purpose hardware-based computer systems which perform the specified functions or steps, or combinations
25 of special purpose hardware and computer instructions.

 Many modifications and other embodiments of the inventions set forth herein will come to mind to one skilled in the art to which these inventions pertain having the benefit of the teachings presented in the foregoing descriptions and the associated drawings. For instance, the destination delivery unit **17** could be any
30 formal or informal, transfer location at which the second carrier is willing to take over delivery of a package to its final destination. Therefore, it is to be understood that the inventions are not to be limited to the specific embodiments disclosed and that modifications and other embodiments are intended to be included within the

scope of the appended claims. Although specific terms are employed herein, they are used in a generic and descriptive sense only and not for purposes of limitation.

THE EMBODIMENTS OF THE INVENTION IN WHICH AN EXCLUSIVE PROPERTY OR PRIVILEGE IS CLAIMED ARE DEFINED AS FOLLOWS:

1. A computer system for routing delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers each having one of a plurality of physical delivery systems, said computer system comprising:

a shipper computer system configured to:

request a delivery, of a package by a plurality of carriers each having one of a plurality of physical delivery systems;

determine whether a consignee address matches a rural destination classification or an urban destination classification;

generate a first carrier label including a consignee address field in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classification; and

generate, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the plurality of carriers, a combination label including a subsequent carrier address field in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification;

an initial carrier computer system connected in electronic communication with the carrier physical delivery system of the initial one of the carriers and the shipper computer system, said initial carrier computer system configured to:

obtain package information data from the shipper computer system, said package information data including the consignee address;

determine whether the consignee address matches the rural destination classification or the urban destination classification;

instruct the initial carrier physical delivery system to deliver the package to the consignee address included on the first carrier label in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classification; and

determine, based at least in part on the combination label, an intermediate location at which a subsequent one of the carriers is configured to receive the package in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification; and

a subsequent carrier computer system connected in communication with the initial carrier computer system and a subsequent one of the carrier physical delivery systems, said subsequent carrier computer system configured to:

obtain the package information data, including the consignee address, and the intermediate location from the initial carrier computer system;

receive instructions from the initial carrier computer system to receive the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery to the consignee address, further transport of the package from said receipt of the package to said complete delivery by the subsequent carrier delivery system being based upon at least one delivery-related rule established by the initial carrier computer system; and

send the package information data, including the consignee address, and the intermediate location to the subsequent carrier physical delivery system and instructing the subsequent carrier delivery system to obtain the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery of the package to the consignee address.

2. The computer system of claim 1, wherein the package information data includes an initial carrier tracking number and wherein the initial carrier computer system is configured to communicate with a scanning device of the initial carrier physical delivery system to receive tracking data indicating detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location by the scanning device, said initial carrier computer system also configured to electronically notify the subsequent carrier tracking system of arrival of the package at the intermediate location.

3. The computer system of claim 2, wherein the package information data also includes a subsequent carrier tracking number that is different than the initial carrier tracking number and wherein the subsequent carrier computer system is configured to communicate with a scanning device of the subsequent carrier physical delivery system to receive tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee location, said subsequent carrier computer system configured to notify the first carrier computer system of detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee address.

4. The computer system of claim 3, wherein the initial carrier computer system is further configured to combine the package information data with the tracking data indicating detection of the package at the intermediate location into an electronic billing manifest using the initial carrier tracking number and wherein the initial carrier computer system is configured to bill the subsequent carrier by transmitting the electronic billing manifest to the subsequent carrier computer system.

5. The computer system of claim 4, wherein the initial carrier computer system is also configured to combine the tracking data indicating detection of the package at the consignee address with the package information data in the billing manifest using the subsequent carrier tracking number.

6. The computer system of claim 5, wherein the subsequent carrier computer system is configured to display the billing manifest for audit.

7. The computer system of claim 5, wherein the subsequent carrier computer system is configured to compare the package information data with the tracking data indicating detection of the package at the consignee address to confirm delivery of the package on the electronic billing manifest.

8. The computer system of claim 7, wherein the initial carrier computer system is configured to obtain from the shipper computer system a compilation of package information data on a plurality of packages and is further configured to periodically compare the package information data to the compilation of package information data to confirm receipt of the package information data from the shipper computer system.

9. The computer system of claim 8, wherein the initial carrier computer system is configured to electronically transmit at least one of the package information data, the tracking data and the electronic billing manifest to the shipper computer system or a consignee computer system.

10. The computer system of claim 5, wherein the initial carrier computer system is further configured to generate cost of shipment data, including costs associated with delivery of the package by one or more participating carriers,

generating an electronic invoice including the cost of shipment data and transmitting the electronic invoice to the shipper computer.

11. The computer system of claim 10, wherein the cost of shipment data includes a cost of delivery to the intermediate location by the initial carrier and a cost of delivery to the consignee location by the subsequent carrier.

12. The computer system of claim 11, wherein the initial carrier computer system is configured to: control receipt of funds from the shipper computer system for payment of the invoice; debit an amount of the funds for shipment services provided by the initial carrier; and deposit a remaining amount of the funds in an escrow account.

13. The computer system of claim 12, wherein the subsequent carrier computer system is electronically connected to the escrow account and is configured to withdraw funds from the escrow account for shipping services provided by the subsequent carrier and is also configured to compare the amount of the funds debited by the initial carrier to the electronic billing manifest.

14. A method of routing delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers each having one of a plurality of physical delivery systems, said method of routing comprising steps of:

using a shipper computer system to execute the steps of:

determining whether a consignee address matches a rural destination classification or an urban destination classification;

generating a first carrier label including a consignee address field in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classification; and

generating, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the plurality of carriers, a combination label including a subsequent carrier address field in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification;

using an initial carrier computer system that is connected in communication with the shipper computer system to execute the steps of:

obtaining package information data, including the consignee address, from a shipper;

determining whether the consignee address matches the rural destination classification or the urban destination classification;

instructing the initial carrier physical delivery system to deliver the package to the consignee address included on the first carrier label in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classification; and

determining, based at least in part on the combination label, an intermediate location at which a subsequent one of the carriers is configured to receive the package in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification; and

using a subsequent carrier computer system that is connected in communication with the initial carrier computer system to execute the steps of:

obtaining the package information data, including the consignee address, and the intermediate location from the initial carrier computer system;

receiving instructions from the initial carrier computer system to receive the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery to the consignee address, further transport of the package from said receipt of the package to said complete delivery by the subsequent carrier delivery system being based upon at least one delivery-related rule established by the initial carrier computer system; and

sending the package information data, including the consignee address, and the intermediate location to the subsequent carrier physical delivery system and instructing the subsequent carrier delivery system to obtain the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery of the package to the consignee address.

15. The method of routing delivery of claim 14, wherein the initial carrier computer system is further adapted for obtaining an initial carrier tracking number and obtaining tracking data indicating detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location in response to the use of a scanning device of the initial carrier physical delivery system.

16. The method of routing delivery of claim 15, wherein the subsequent carrier computer system is further adapted for notifying the subsequent carrier tracking system of detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location.

17. The method of routing delivery of claim 15, wherein the initial carrier computer system is further adapted for constructing a billing manifest by correlating, using the initial carrier tracking number, the package information data with the tracking data indicating detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location.

18. The method of routing delivery of claim 17, wherein the subsequent carrier computer system is further adapted for obtaining a subsequent carrier tracking number that is different than the initial carrier tracking number and obtaining tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee address in response to the use of a scanning device of the subsequent carrier physical delivery system.

19. The method of routing delivery of claim 18, wherein the subsequent carrier computer system adapted for constructing the billing manifest includes the subsequent carrier computer system being further adapted for correlating, using the subsequent carrier tracking number, the package information with the tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee address.

20. The method of routing delivery of claim 17, wherein the subsequent carrier computer system is further adapted for comparing the electronic billing manifest with the tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee address to confirm delivery of the package on the electronic billing manifest.

21. A computer program product for routing delivery of a package, the computer program product comprising a computer-readable storage medium having computer-readable program code portions stored therein, the computer-readable program code portions comprising:

a first executable portion for obtaining package information data, including a consignee address, from a shipper computer system;

a second executable portion for determining whether the consignee address matches a rural destination classification or an urban destination classification;

a third executable portion for instructing an initial carrier physical delivery system to deliver one of the packages to the consignee address included on a first carrier label in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classifications, wherein the first carrier label was previously generated in response to the consignee address matching the urban destination classification;

a fourth executable portion for determining, based at least in part on a subsequent carrier address field included on a combination label, an intermediate location at which a subsequent one of the carriers is configured to receive the package in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification, wherein the combination label was previously generated, prior to initiating delivery by the initial carrier physical delivery system, in response to the consignee address matching the rural destination classification;

a fifth executable portion for sending the package information data and the intermediate location to the subsequent carrier physical delivery system and instructing a subsequent carrier physical delivery system to obtain the package at the intermediate location and complete delivery of the package to the consignee address, further transport of the package from said receipt of the package to said complete delivery by the subsequent carrier delivery system being based upon at least one delivery-related rule established by the initial carrier computer system;

a sixth executable portion for obtaining an initial carrier tracking number as part of the package information data and obtaining tracking data indicating detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location using a scanning device of the initial carrier physical delivery system;

a seventh executable code portion for constructing a billing manifest by correlating, using the initial carrier tracking number, the package

information data with the tracking data indicating detection of the initial carrier tracking number at the intermediate location; and
an eighth executable code portion for obtaining a subsequent carrier tracking number that is different than the initial carrier tracking number, as part of the package information data and obtaining tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee address using a scanning device of a subsequent carrier physical delivery system.

22. The computer program product of claim 21, wherein the seventh executable code portion is further for correlating, using the subsequent carrier tracking number, the package information data with the tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee address.

23. The computer program product of claim 22, further comprising a ninth executable code portion for comparing the electronic billing manifest with the tracking data indicating detection of the subsequent carrier tracking number at the consignee address to confirm delivery of the package on the electronic billing manifest.

24. A shipping information system for facilitating delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers, said shipping information system comprising:

a shipper information system configured to:

receive an indication that delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality carriers;

record package information, including a consignee address associated with the package;

identify an intermediate location, wherein a first carrier of the plurality of carriers will transfer the package to a second carrier of the plurality of carriers, the intermediate location being identified based at least in part on the consignee address;

generate, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the plurality of carriers, a combined shipping label, the combined shipping label comprising at least a portion of the package information, a first carrier tracking symbol, and a second carrier tracking symbol differing from said first carrier tracking symbol,

the first and second carrier tracking symbols each configured to provide tracking information for at least a portion of the delivery, and wherein data associated with the first and the second carrier tracking systems are further associated to generate consolidated tracking information, said consolidated tracking information being independently accessible via either of the first and the second carrier tracking symbols throughout a duration of when the package is being transported by the first carrier and when the package is being transported by the second carrier.

25. The shipping information system of Claim 24, further comprising a first carrier information system comprising:

- a package information system connected in communication with the shipper information system and configured to obtain the package information and first carrier tracking symbol therefrom;

- a tracking system connected in communication with a first carrier scanning device positioned at least at the intermediate location, said tracking system configured to determine when the scanning device has scanned the first carrier tracking symbol of the package at the intermediate location; and

- a verification system connected in communication with the package information system and the tracking system, said verification system configured to obtain package information and tracking information from the respective systems and to use the first carrier tracking symbol to combine the package information and tracking information into a billing manifest for submission to the second carrier.

26. The shipping information system of Claim 25,

- wherein the package information system is also configured to obtain the second carrier tracking symbol from the shipper information system; and

- wherein said tracking system is connected in communication with, and configured to receive delivery confirmation information from a second carrier scanning device positioned at the consignee location, said delivery confirmation information corresponding to scanning of the second carrier tracking symbol of the package at the consignee location by the second carrier scanning device.

27. The shipping information system of Claim 26, wherein said verification system is further configured to correlate the delivery confirmation information with the package information and tracking information using the second carrier tracking symbol and combine the delivery confirmation information with the package information and tracking information in the billing manifest

28. The shipping information system of Claim 26, further comprising a second carrier computer system connected in communication with, and configured to obtain the billing manifest from the verification system, said second carrier computer system being configured to display the billing manifest for audit by the second carrier.

29. The shipping information system of Claim 26, further comprising a quality control system connected in communication with the verification system and the tracking system, said quality control system configured to compare the delivery confirmation information with the billing manifest to ensure that the package listed on the billing manifest has been delivered.

30. The shipping information system of Claim 26, further comprising a quality control system connected in communication with the package information system and the shipper information system, said quality control system configured to periodically compile package information associated with the packages and received by the package information system, said quality control system further configured to send the compiled package information to the shipper information system for comparison to package information recorded by the shipper information system.

31. The shipping information system of Claim 26, further comprising a quality control system configured to record package sizes and weights as part of the package information and further configured to record subsequent measurements of package sizes and weights and compare the subsequently measured sizes and weights to the sizes and weights of the package information.

32. The shipping information system of Claim 24, wherein the consignee address includes a zip code and wherein the shipper information system is configured

to compare the zip code to a list of zip codes within the stored delivery area of the first carrier.

33. The shipping information system of Claim 24, wherein the intermediate location is a local post office and the second carrier is governmental postal service.

34. A shipping information system for facilitating delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers, said shipping information system comprising:

a shipper information system configured to:

receive an indication that delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality carriers;

record package information, including a consignee address associated with the package; identify, an intermediate location at which to transfer the package from a first carrier of the plurality of carriers to a second carrier of the plurality of carriers, the intermediate location being identified based at least in part on the consignee address;

generate, prior to initiating transportation of the package by the plurality of carriers, a combined shipping label, the combined shipping label comprising the package information, a first carrier tracking symbol, and a second carrier tracking symbol differing from said first carrier tracking symbol, the first and second carrier tracking symbols each configured to provide tracking information for at least a portion of the delivery, and wherein data associated with the first and the second carrier tracking systems are further associated to generate consolidated tracking information, said consolidated tracking information being independently accessible via either of the first and the second carrier tracking symbols throughout a duration of when the first and the second carriers are transporting the package; and

a first carrier information system comprising:

a package information system connected in communication with the shipper information system and configured to obtain the package information, the first carrier tracking symbol and the second carrier tracking symbol from the shipper information system;

a tracking system connected in communication with a first scanning device positioned at the intermediate location and a second scanning device positioned at a shipper location, said tracking system configured to determine when the first scanning device has scanned the first carrier tracking symbol of the package at the intermediate location and also configured to determine when the second scanning device has scanned at least one of the tracking symbols of the package at the shipper location as the package is being returned; and

a verification system connected in communication with the package information system and the tracking system, said verification system configured to obtain package information and tracking information from the respective systems and to use the first carrier tracking symbol to combine the package information and tracking information into a billing manifest, said verification system also configured to later modify the billing manifest upon receipt of tracking information indicating scanning of the package at the shipper location by the second scanning device due to return of the package to the shipper location.

35. The shipping information system of Claim 34, wherein the verification system is configured to modify the billing manifest by adding a returned package charge.

36. A computer-implemented method for facilitating delivery of a package by a plurality of carriers, the method comprising:

receiving, by at least one computing device comprising at least one processor, an indication that delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality carriers;

recording, by the one or more processors, package information, including a consignee address associated with the package;

identifying, by the one or more processors an intermediate location at which to transfer the package from a first carrier of the plurality of carriers to a second carrier of the plurality of carriers, the intermediate location being identified based at least in part on the consignee address;

generating, prior to initiating delivery by an initial one of the plurality of carriers, by the one or more processors, a combined shipping label, the combined

shipping label comprising at least a portion of the package information, a first carrier tracking symbol, and a second carrier tracking symbol differing from said first carrier tracking symbol, the first and second carrier tracking symbols each configured to provide tracking information for at least a portion of the delivery, and wherein data associated with the first and the second carrier tracking systems are further associated to generate consolidated tracking information, said consolidated tracking information being independently accessible via either of the first and the second carrier tracking symbols throughout a duration of when the first and the second carriers are transporting the package.

37. The computer-implemented method of Claim 36, further comprising: receiving, by the one or more processors, an indication that a first carrier scanning device has scanned the first carrier tracking symbol of the package at the intermediate location; recording, by the one or more processors, the indication as tracking information; and generating, by the one or more processors, a billing manifest for submission to the second carrier, the billing manifest being generated at least in part by using the first carrier tracking symbol to combine the package information and the tracking information.

38. The computer-implemented method of Claim 37, further comprising: receiving, by the one or more processors, delivery confirmation information from a second carrier scanning device, the delivery confirmation information comprising an indication that the second carrier tracking symbol of the package has been scanned at the consignee location; and

modifying, by the one or more processors, the billing manifest to combine the delivery confirmation information with the package information and the tracking information.

39. The computer implemented method of Claim 36, further comprising: receiving, by the one or more processors, a first indication that a first scanning device has scanned the first carrier tracking symbol of the package at the intermediate location; recording, by the one or more processors, the first indication as tracking information;

generating, by the one or more processors, a billing manifest for submission to the second carrier, the billing manifest being generated at least in part by using the first carrier tracking symbol to combine the package information and the tracking information;

receiving, by the one or more processors, a second indication that a second scanning device has scanned the second carrier tracking symbol of the package at a shipper location due to the package being returned; and

modifying, by the one or more processors, the billing manifest to combine the second indication with the package information and the tracking information.

40. The computer system of Claim 1, wherein:

the shipping computer system is further configured to determine whether the package is at least one of a low priority or a low weight package; and

the shipping computer system generates the combination label further in response to the package being identified as at least one of the low priority or the low weight package.

41. The method of Claim 14, wherein:

the shipper computer system is further configured to determine whether the package is at least one of a low priority or a low weight package; and

the shipper computer system executes the step of generating the combination label further in response to the package being identified as at least one of the low priority or the low weight package.

42. The computer program product of Claim 21, wherein:

the second executable portion is further configured for determining whether the package is at least one of a low priority or a low weight package; and

the combination label is generated further in response to the package being identified as at least one of the low priority or the low weight package.

43. The shipping information system of Claim 24, wherein the shipper information system is further configured to associate the first and the second carrier

tracking symbols with each other prior to initiating transportation of the package by the plurality of carriers.

44. The shipping information system of Claim 34, wherein the shipper information system is further configured to associate the first and the second carrier tracking symbols with each other prior to initiating transportation of the package by the plurality of carriers.

45. The computer-implemented method of Claim 36, further comprising associating, by the one or more processors, the first and the second carrier tracking symbols with each other prior to initiating transportation of the package by the plurality of carriers.

46. The shipping information system of Claim 24, wherein the shipping information system is further configured to determine whether the package for which delivery is facilitated qualifies for a combined shipment by the plurality of carriers, the determination comprising a confirmation that the package is designated for a low priority shipment service.

47. The shipping information system of Claim 46, wherein the determination further comprises a confirmation that the package is designated for a delivery destination in a rural area.

48. The computer-implemented method of Claim 36, further comprising the step of determining whether the package for which delivery is facilitated qualifies for a combined shipment by the plurality of carriers, the determination comprising a confirmation that the package is designated for a low priority shipment service.

49. The computer-implemented method of Claim 54, wherein the determination further comprises a confirmation that the package is designated for a delivery destination in a rural area.

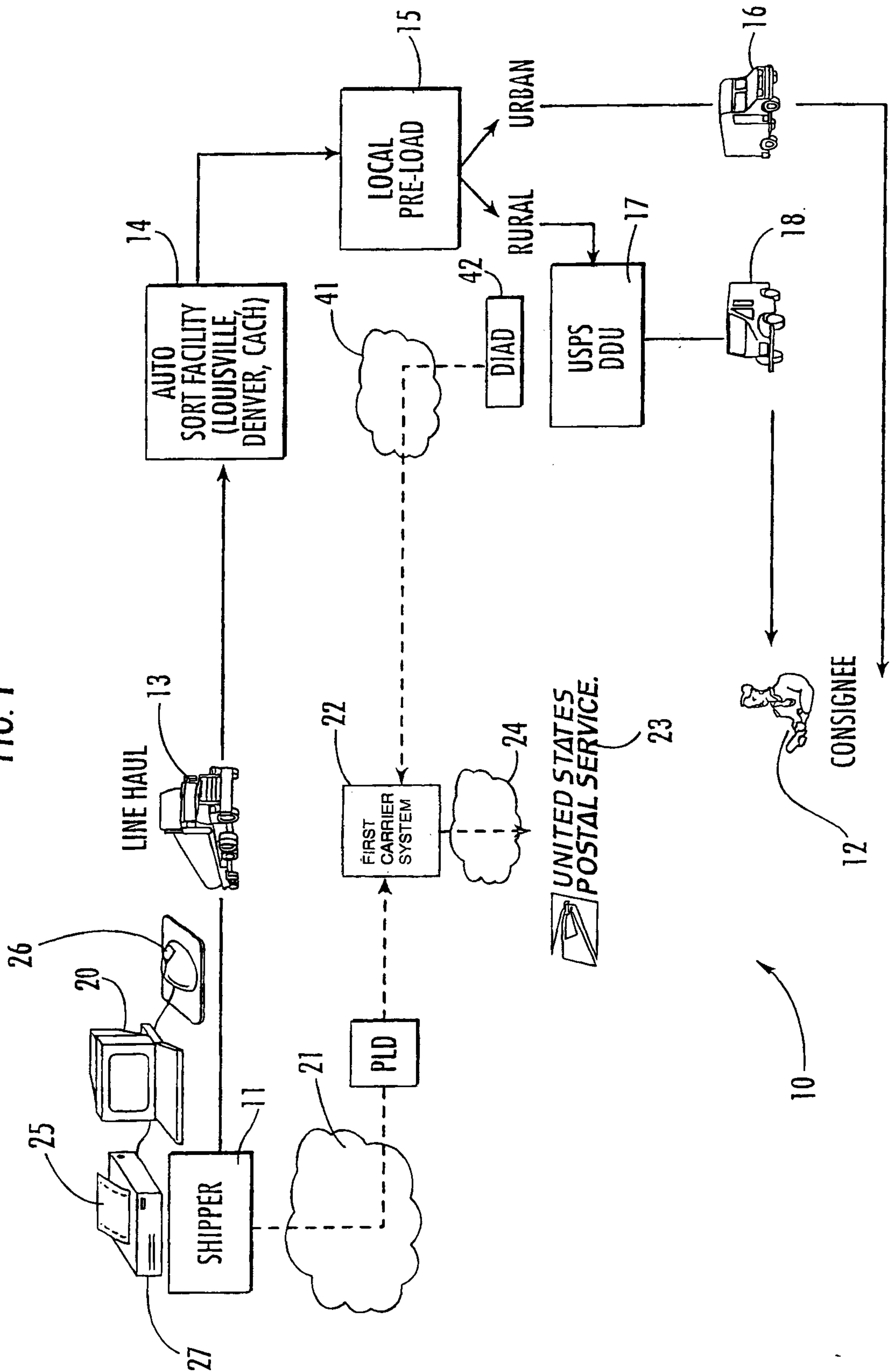
50. The shipping information system of Claim 24, wherein the indication that that delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality carriers is determined based at least in part upon the package being identified as at least one of a low priority or a low weight package.

51. The shipping information system of Claim 34, wherein the indication that that delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality carriers is determined based at least in part upon the package being identified as at least one of a low priority or a low weight package.

52. The computer-implemented method of Claim 36, wherein the indication that that delivery of the package will comprise transportation provided by the plurality carriers is determined based at least in part upon the package being identified as at least one of a low priority or a low weight package.

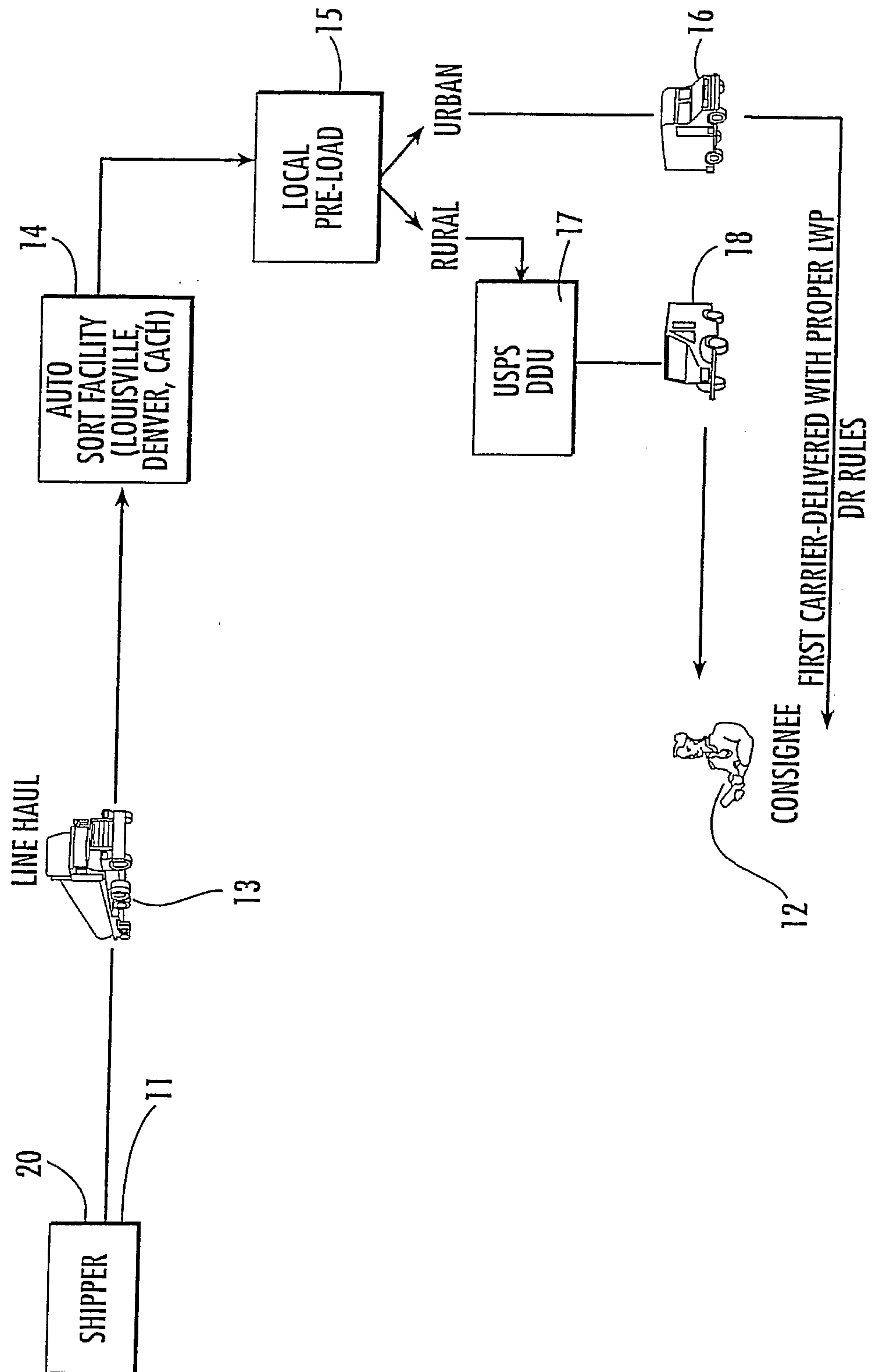
1/13

FIG. 1

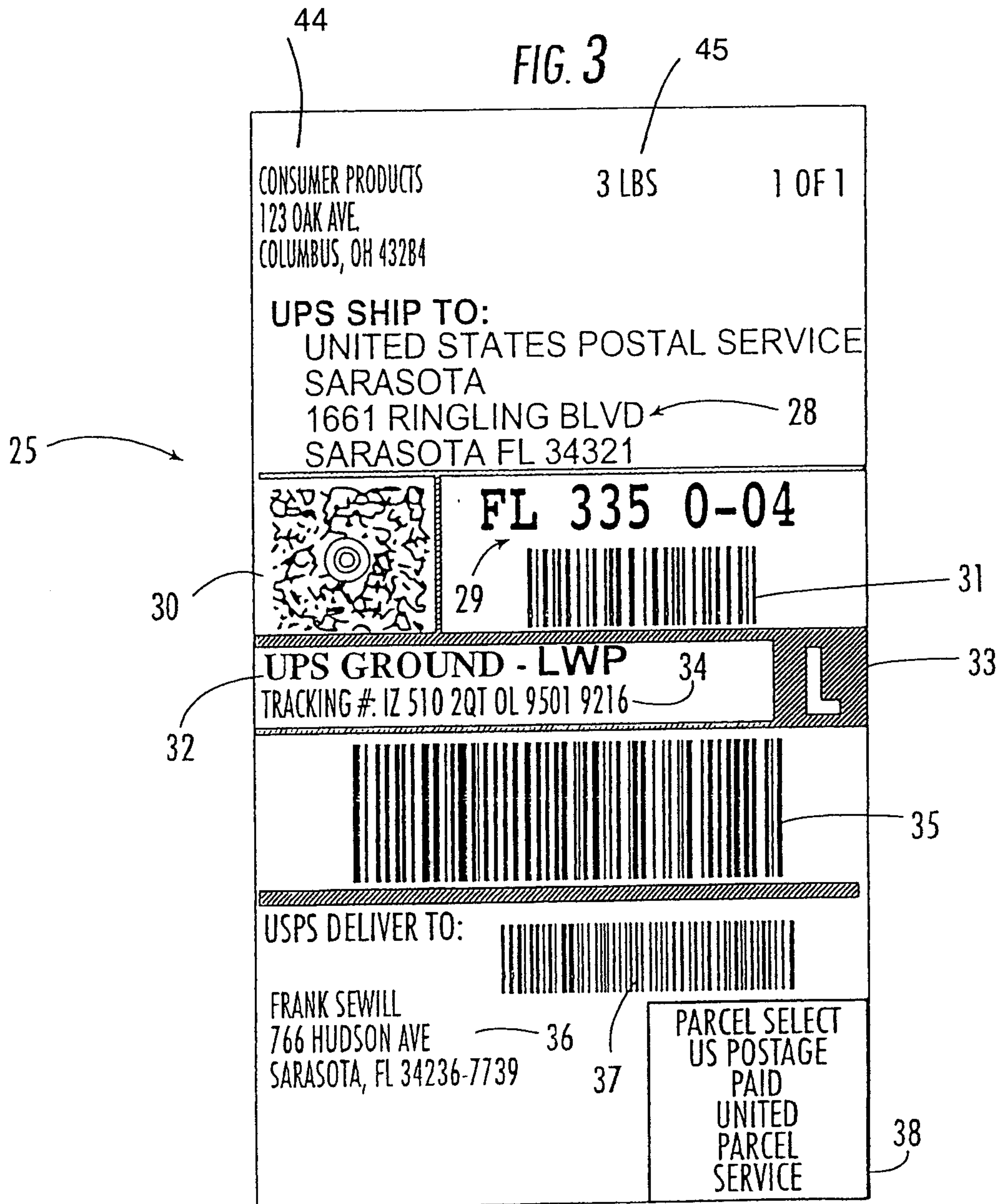


2/13

FIG. 2

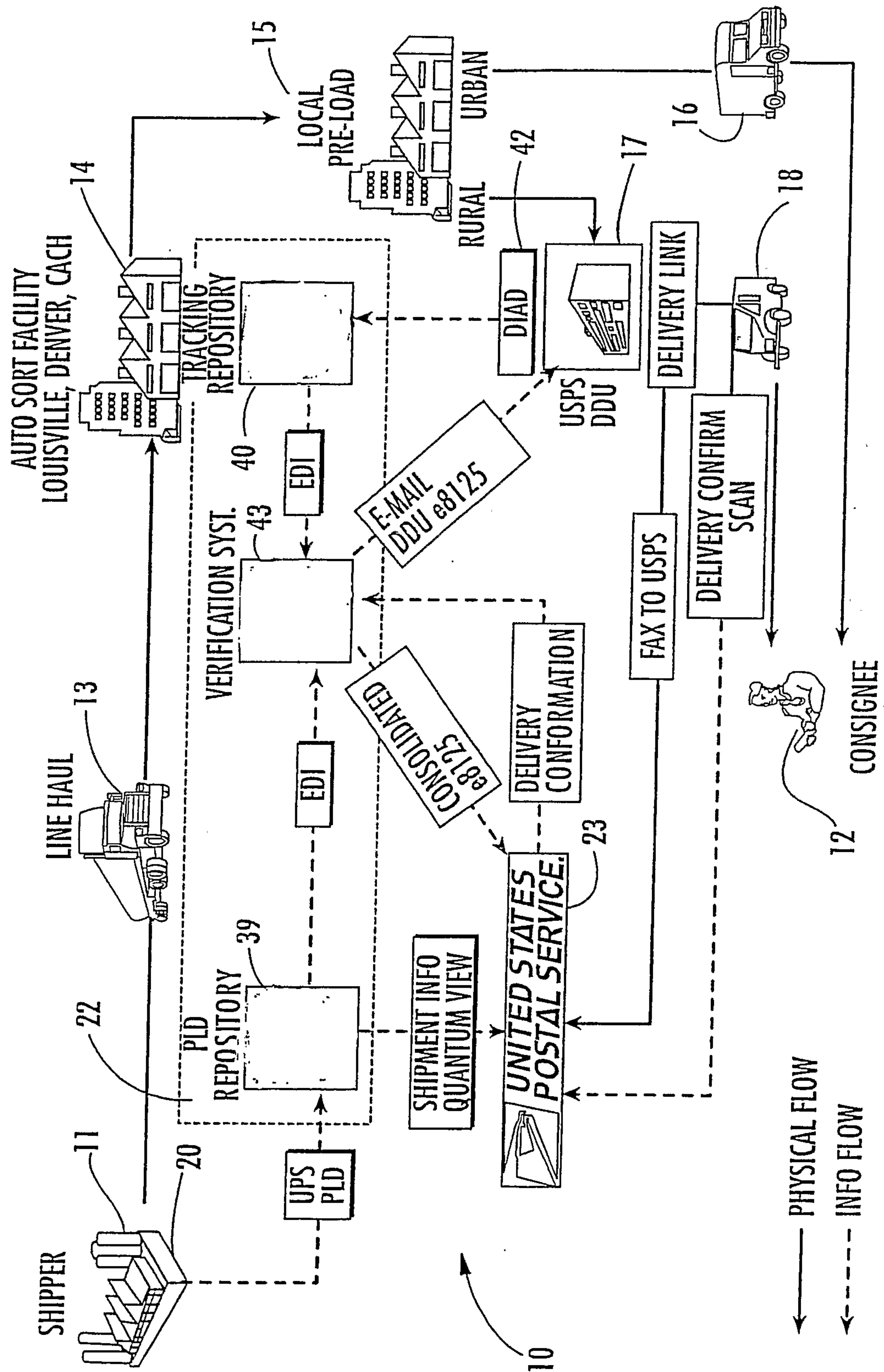


3/13



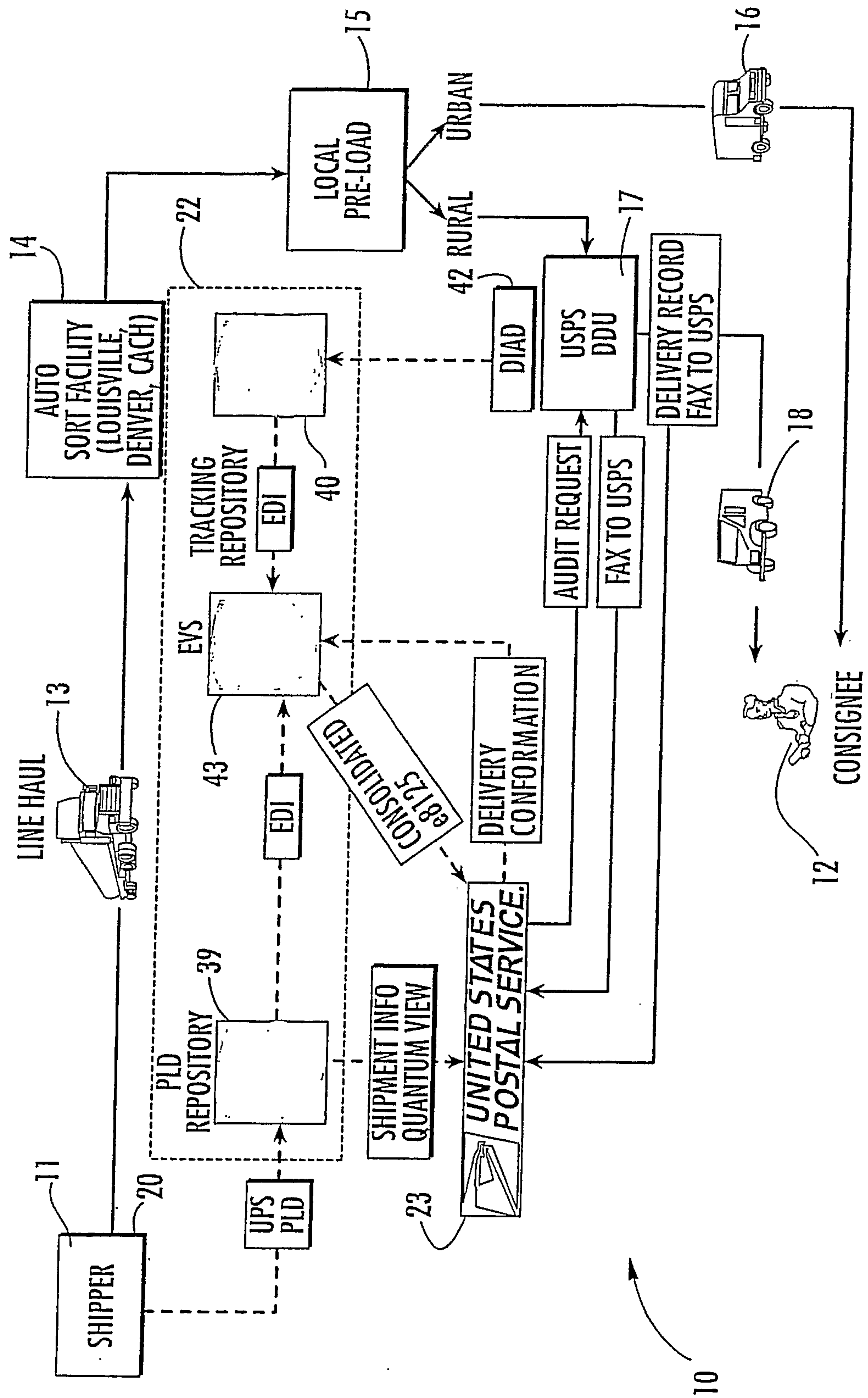
4/13

FIG. 4



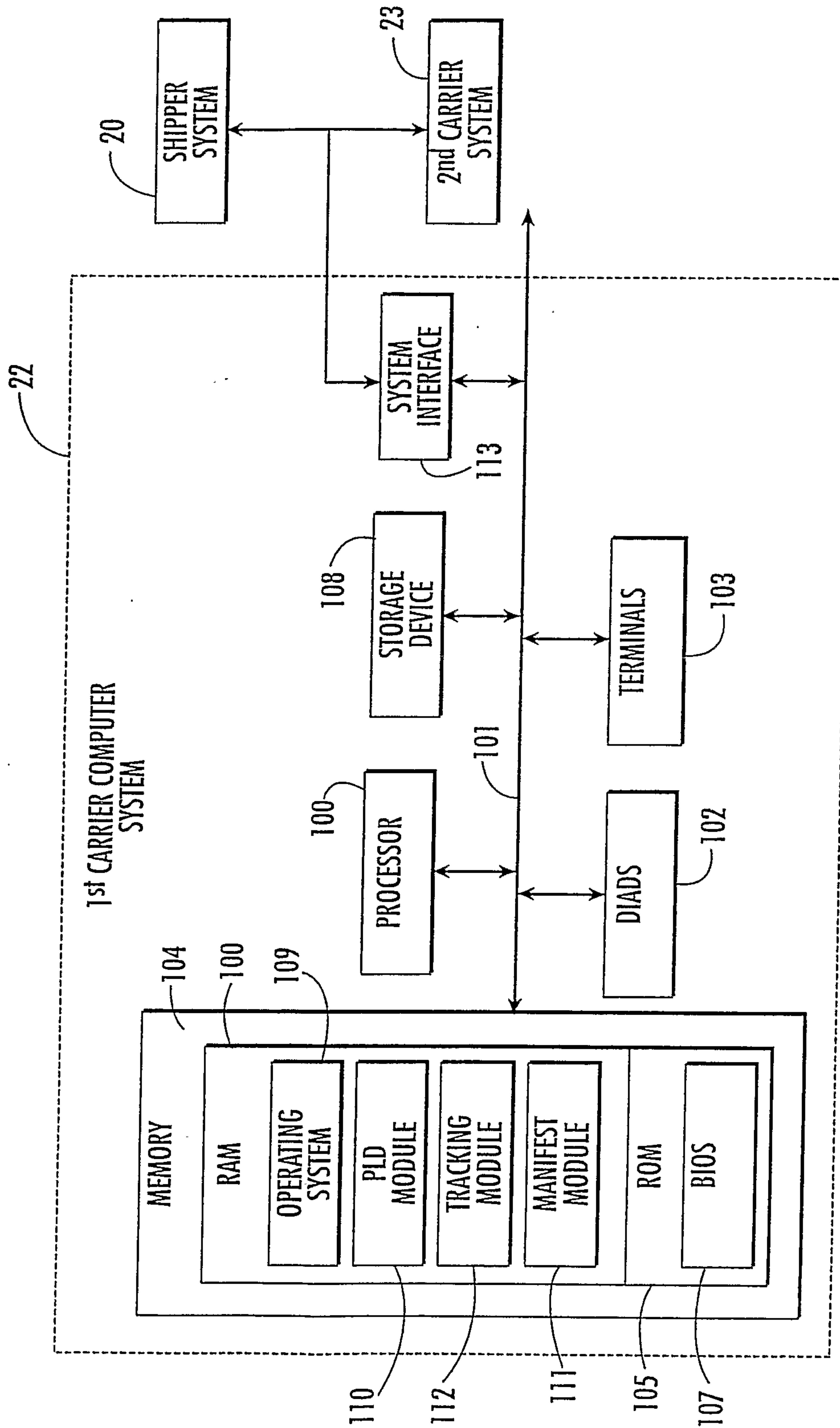
5/13

FIG. 5



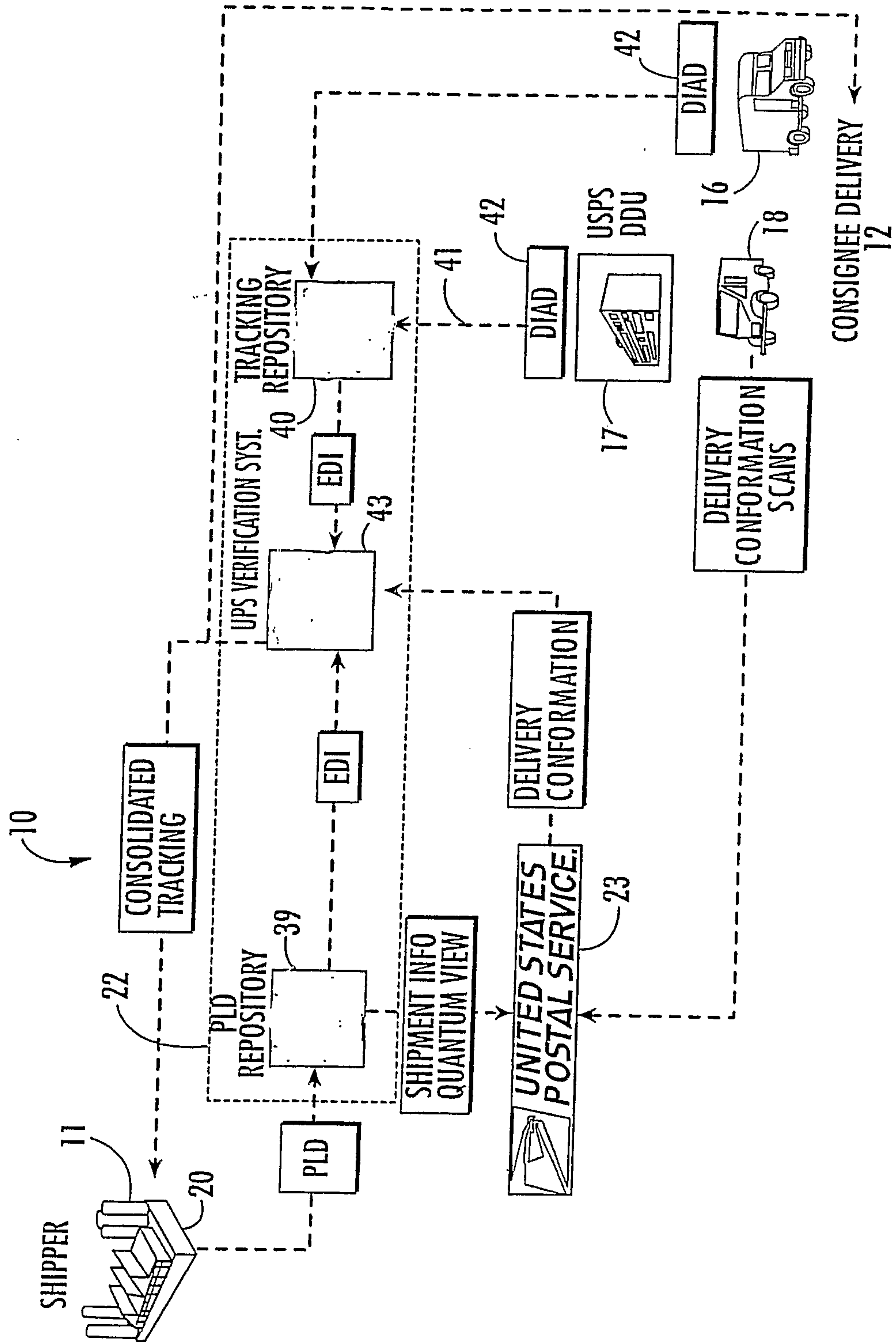
6/13

FIG. 6



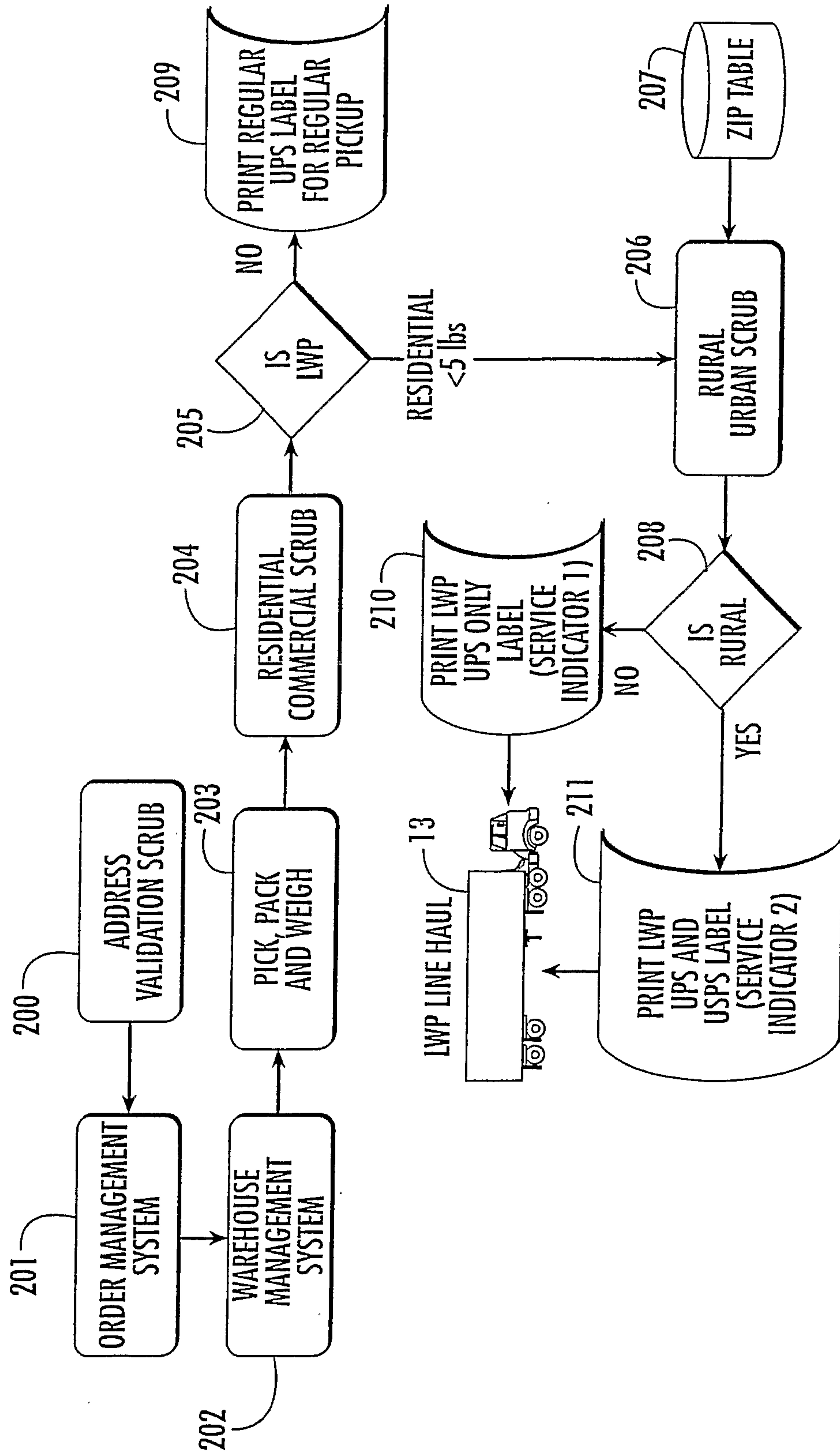
7/13

FIG. 7



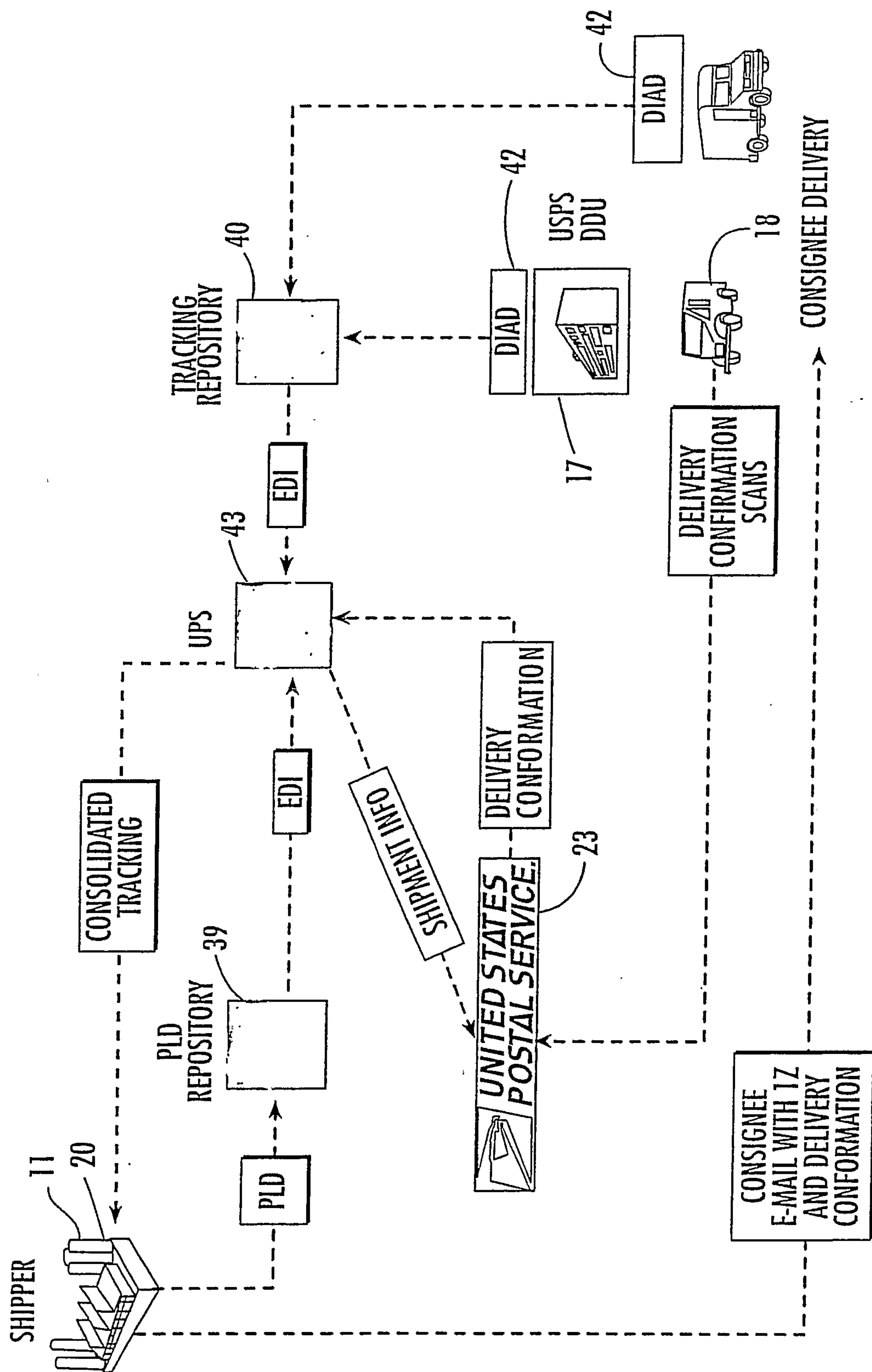
8/13

FIG. 8



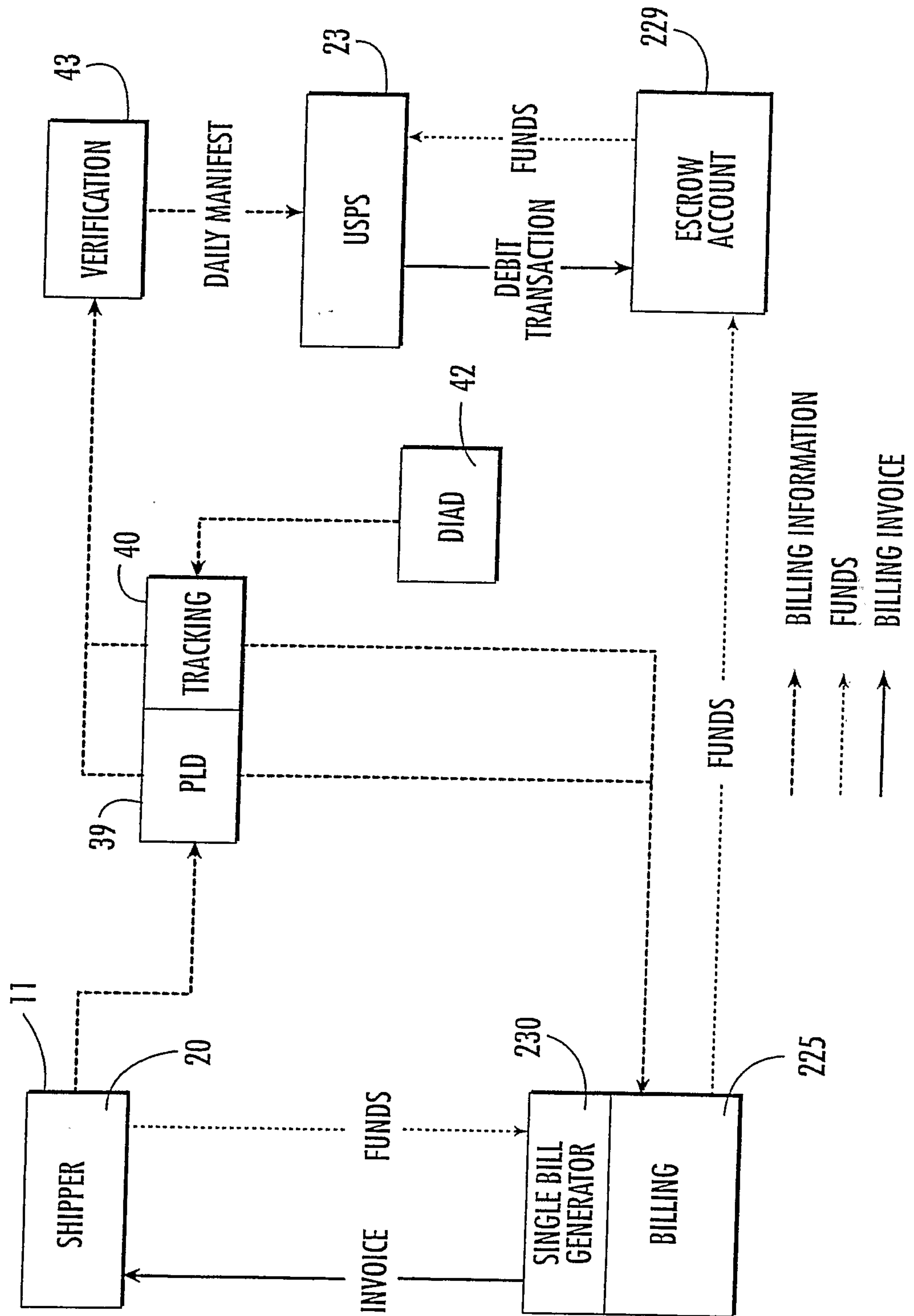
9/13

FIG. 9



10/13

FIG. 10



11/13

FIG. 11

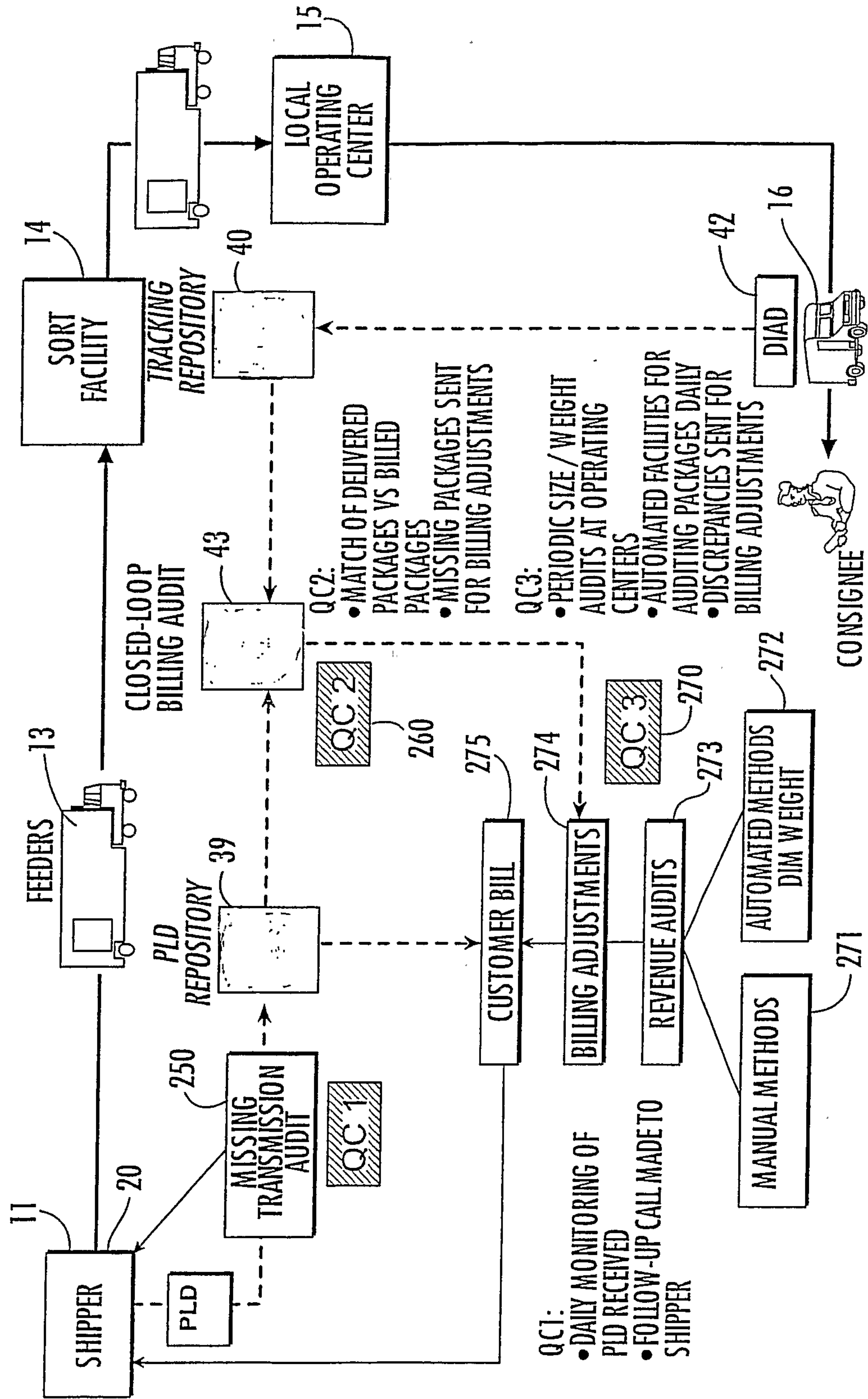
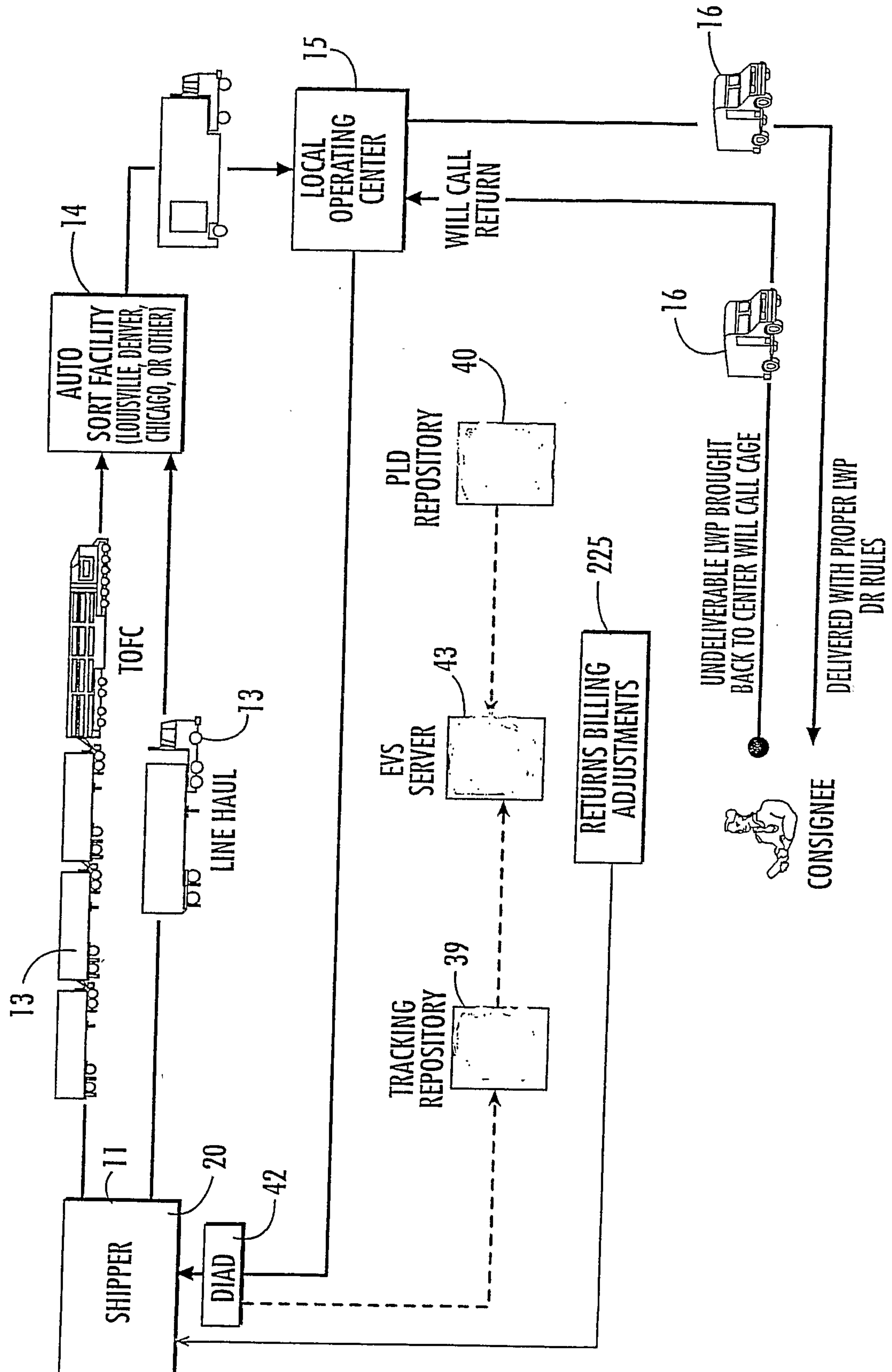


FIG. 12



13/13

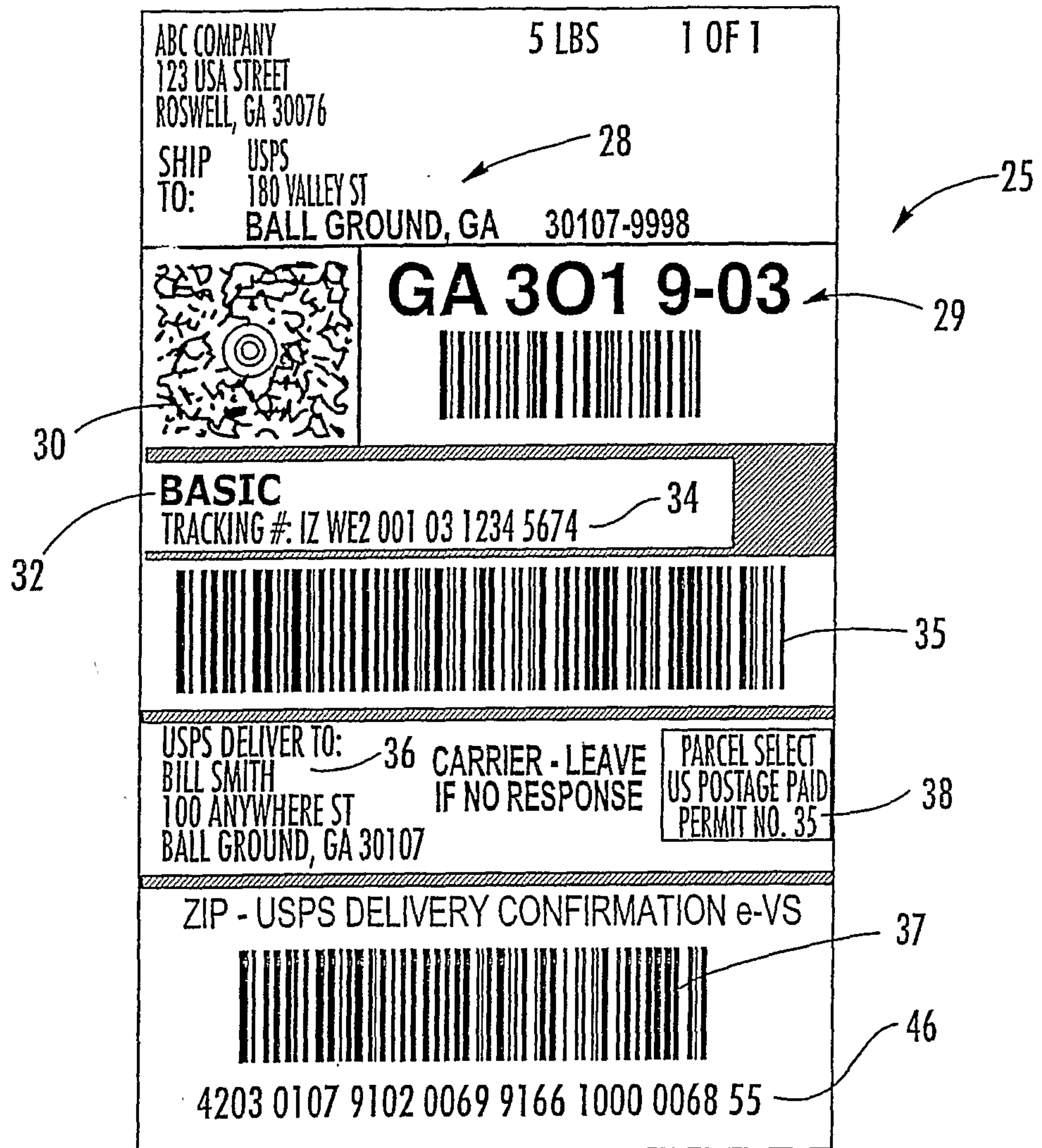


FIG. 13

