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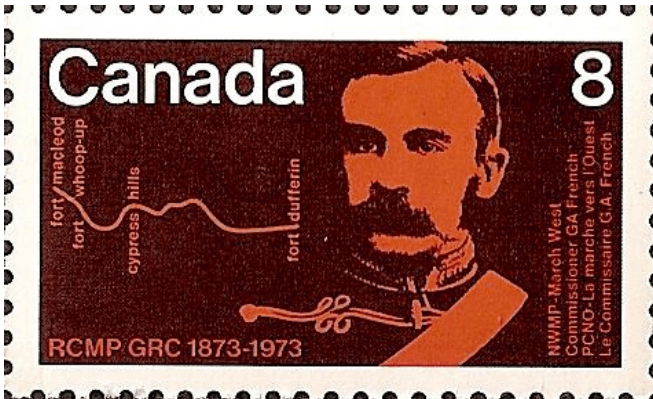
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WHISKEY TRADER POST OFFICES

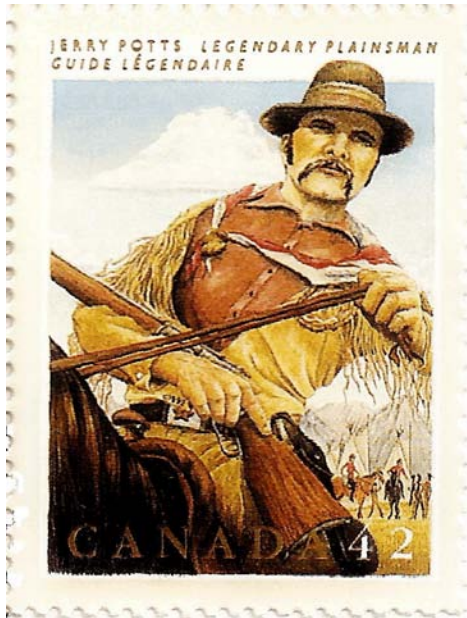
by Dale Speirs

In the middle 1800s, American whiskey traders moved into the Canadian prairies, peddling rotgut to the aboriginal tribes and causing much distress. They generally worked independently of each other, and built forts to do their trading. The forts could be anything from a palisaded compound to an oversize log cabin with a heavy door. This article looks at some locations in southern Alberta that subsequently were civilized and later had post offices. There were many other whiskey forts as well, but they never had post offices. Reviewed here are Whisky Gap (on the Montana border), Stand Off (today the principal settlement of the Kainai Reserve), and Fort Kipp (on the northwest border of the Reserve and long since abandoned).

The problems caused by the whiskey traders became so great that the Canadian federal government created the Mounties to deal with the traders and establish rule of law in what is now southern Alberta. The North West Mounted Police arrived in 1874 and quickly ran the traders out of business. Many of the traders didn't even wait for the actual arrival of the NWMP and skedaddled on the rumours, as a result of which the Mounties found many of the forts deserted. They took over some of them as their own forts.



At left is a stamp issued in 1973 for the centennial of the march west of the NWMP, showing the route taken into Alberta. The NWMP went through the Cypress Hills on what is now the Alberta/Saskatchewan border, then to the whiskey trader post called Fort Whoop-Up, upstream from present-day Lethbridge. They found the fort abandoned, then moved on to establish their own fort on the Oldman River, named Fort Macleod, which became the command post for their area operations [1].

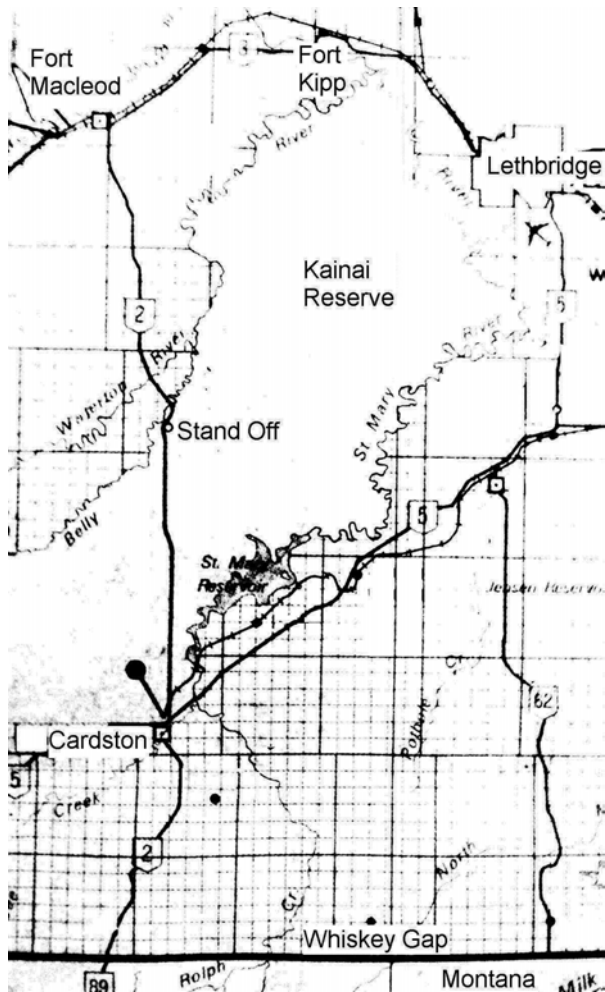


The Mounties were fortunate to have a half-breed named Jerry Potts to guide them through the area of the whiskey traders. He knew the tribal languages and where the forts were.

North West Mounted Mail.

Prior to the opening of post offices in southern Alberta, any mail was carried by favour of friends or by the NWMP. The Mounties distributed a lot of mail in southern Alberta before the postal system developed, ostensibly as a courtesy but additionally as an excuse to visit people and keep an eye on them [2]. Pickup or delivery of mail was not by established routes but more or less by random chance.

Orderly Rooms at NWMP forts in southern Alberta accepted civilian mail and sold stamps. The stamps were American stamps prior to 1883 because the only post office routes were to the south via Fort Benton, Montana. The transcontinental railroad came through Medicine Hat and Calgary in 1883, at which time the mail routes switched direction and became part of the Canadian system. On the next page is a map of the general area where the whiskey fort post offices were.



Stand Off.

The only whiskey fort post office still operating today is Stand Off, now the main town of the Kainai Reserve. The Kainai, referred to as the Blood Indians in older references, belong to the Blackfoot Confederacy. This is the largest Reserve in Canada, officially established in 1885, although the Kainai were settled on the land in 1880. It is a plateau bounded by the Belly and Saint Mary Rivers, with Cardston and the Mormon diaspora forming the southern border [3]. The smallest squares on this map are a mile on each side.

The name Stand Off came from an incident that led to its founding. A gang of American whiskey traders, including Joseph Kipp, were pursued by a U.S. Marshal northwards from Montana. At that time, the 49th parallel boundary between Canada and the USA was not yet surveyed and was unmarked. The traders were exhausted by the chase, and finally stopped and stood their ground. They told the marshal they were on Canadian soil and therefore the officer had no jurisdiction. After an argument, the marshal conceded the point and departed back to Montana. The traders thereupon built a trading post and named it Stand Off in honour of the incident [4].

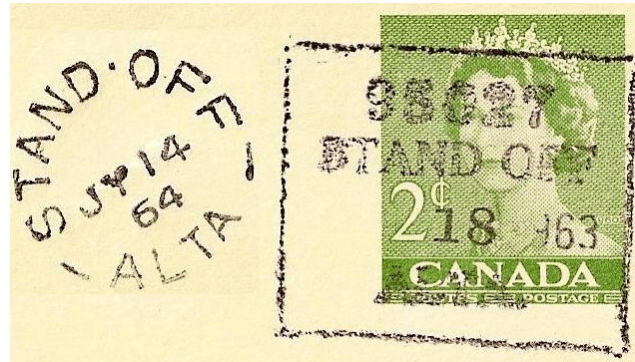
When the NWMP arrived, they took over the fort in 1878. At first they used it in an on-and-off fashion, but finally established a permanent post to patrol the Kainai Reserve. P.H. Bowes built and rented to the Mounties some buildings, and a hamlet grew up around the fort.

Frederic Pace took his discharge from the NWMP and opened a trading post there. He became the first postmaster on 1896-01-01 and served until his death on 1898-12-08. Bowes then took over the store and post office, serving until 1900-06-01 as the postmaster [2]. Mail service came from Fort Macleod, nearby to the northwest of the Reserve.

Bowes sold out to George Pearson, an Englishman who had come out west in 1881 and worked as a cowboy before going into business for himself in Fort Macleod. Although Pearson was officially postmaster, it seems likely that he appointed a clerk to run the post office, since during this time and many years thereafter he had investments throughout the Fort Macleod and Porcupine Hills area. Pearson resigned as postmaster on 1909-07-12 when he sold out and moved to a ranch in the Porcupine Hills [8].

William T. Butcher was the next store owner and postmaster until 1915-03-06. Following him came Edward McNeil who was the longest serving postmaster, staying until 1941-12-07 when death parted him from the job. His widow Sadie continued to run the store but his son John Edward took over as postmaster until 1948-05-10. The postmastership continued to stay in the McNeil family, when Blakely McNeil stayed in the job until his death on 1953-01-10, followed by his widow Ella M. McNeil. She was postmaster until 1963-12-23, when she sold the store, ending almost five decades of postal service in one family [8].

There were two more white folk as postmasters before a major change occurred. Neil Allan Smith served until 1967-02-02, and Robert Stanley Granrude briefly until 1968-09-10, both in the general store. Below are samples of postmarks from the Smith tenure.



After Granrude, the Kainai took over the post office. Ben Red Crow was the first aboriginal postmaster, taking up the job on 1968-09-30. The post office moved from the store into the Kainai administration building. Mrs. Marion Heavyshields took over on 1971-02-22 but only served briefly [5]. At that point, the postmastership began changing frequently, and it was obvious that the postmaster was simply an administrator who had charge of the post office among other duties.

In 1973, construction of the Chief Shot Both Sides Building was completed, and the post office moved into it where it still was in 2016. This is a combination administration building and shopping mall. Below is the building as it was when I visited it in June 2016.



This is the interior as of June 2016, showing the post office with the original 1970s style sign, unchanged since the post office moved into the building.



Stand Off is on the plateau above Highway 2.



Fort Kipp.

The same gang that built Stand Off then built Fort Kipp a year later and named it after their compatriot Joseph Kipp. It was located at the junction of the Oldman and Belly Rivers, on the opposite bank of what later became the Kainai Reserve. The Mounties took over the fort when they arrived in 1874. It was about 35 km north-northeast of Stand Off, a day's ride back then. In 1885, Richard Urch, whose ranch was just north of Fort Kipp, built a stopping house near the fort. Over the next two decades, various structures were built, abandoned, rebuilt, and replaced by other buildings. Fort Kipp was littered with buildings in various stages of decay or use. It was still occupied by the Mounties in 1901, but by then it was down to two constables and two horses [2].

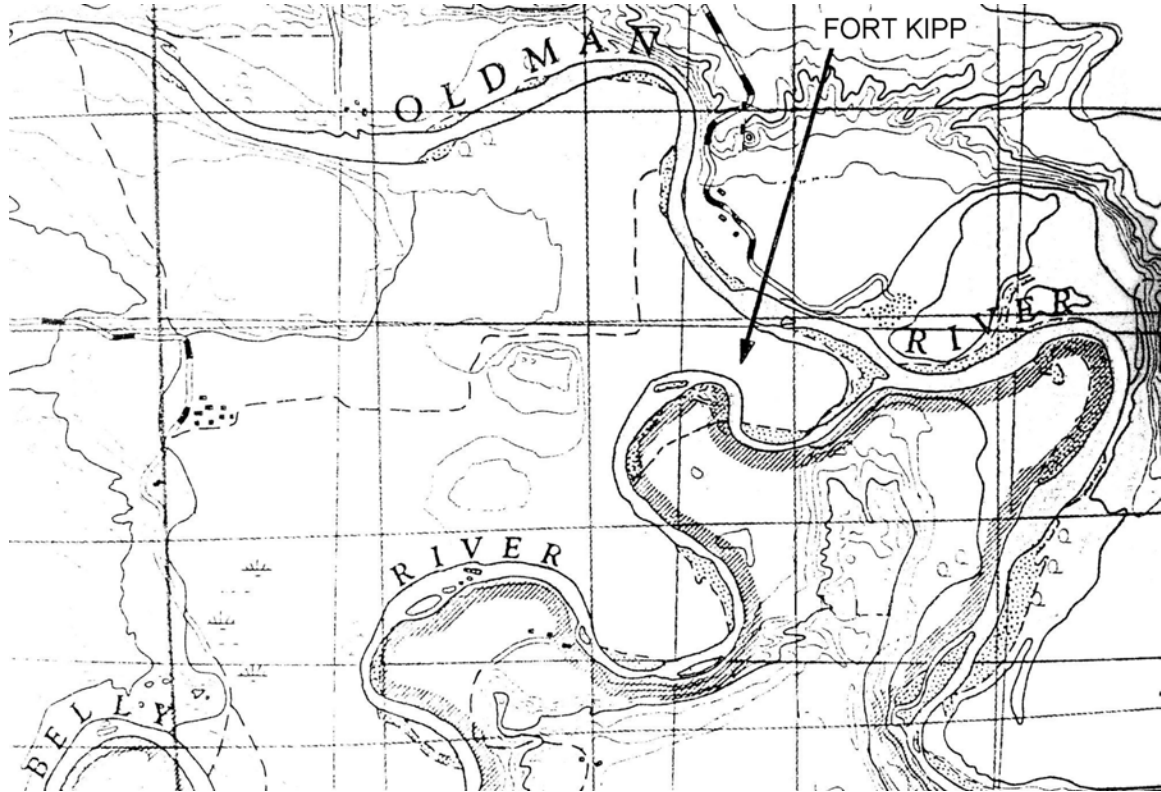


Albert J. Whitney established a horse ranch at Fort Kipp in 1885 when he came out west from Ontario. A post office was opened in his ranch house on 1886-04-01 with himself as postmaster. At left is the proof strike of the postmark. Undoubtedly the post office served very few people, just some ranchers and cowboys, and the local Mounties. Whitney was a wheeler-dealer in farmland, horses, and cattle, and was often away from the ranch for long periods. He had as many as 650 horses at one time. The post office didn't do that much business to justify his time, so he resigned on 1893-01-24. He continued to live on the ranch until 1938 when death claimed him.

Richard Urch and his brother-in-law William H. Long ranched north of the Oldman River. They set up a stopping house on that side of the river and a ferry just upstream of the fort. Urch took over as postmaster, and the post office moved into the stopping house. The place was halfway between Fort Macleod and Lethbridge on the stagecoach route, so mail service to Fort Kipp was from either of those two towns. The post office permanently closed on 1898-06-30 after a railway began operating directly between Fort Macleod and Lethbridge, bypassing Fort Kipp. The line was 5 km north of Fort Kipp. With no more stagecoach passengers, the stopping house had no further use and became a private residence [6]. The next page shows the stopping house several decades after it was completely abandoned.



The Long family left the area. After the Mounties abandoned the fort in 1901, the only inhabitants left were Urch and his wife, and the widower Whitney. Any remains of Fort Kipp are now for archaeologists only, and are on private land. There is a hamlet called Kipp about 8 km east of Fort Kipp, but it is not related other than by name. That hamlet had a post office but was an ordinary farm settlement and should not be confused with the whiskey fort.



Whiskey Gap.

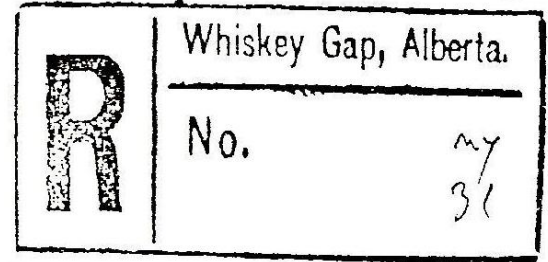
Just inside the border from Montana is a long range of hills running parallel to it, the Milk River Ridge. All the water that falls on the south face of the hills flows to the Gulf of Mexico, and all the water that falls on the north face eventually winds up in the Arctic Ocean. There is a break in the hills that was a natural travel route for aboriginals and white folk alike. The whiskey traders also used this route, and the origin of the place name is obvious. Their fort was dealt with in the usual way by the Mounties. By the time organized homesteading began in the 1890s, the fort was two decades into history and few were left who had actually seen it.

A post office opened on 1918-03-01 in the ranch house of James H. Faulkner [5]. He considered the name Whiskey Gap to be undignified, and called the post office Fareham, after his ancestral home in England. Faulkner only lasted a month as postmaster, departing the job on April 8 with his family and never returning. The post office then moved to the ranch house of his brother-in-law William P. Harper, who served until 1925-09-02. His wife Esther actually ran the post office. Two more postmasters came and went, and the post office was shuffled from one ranch to another.



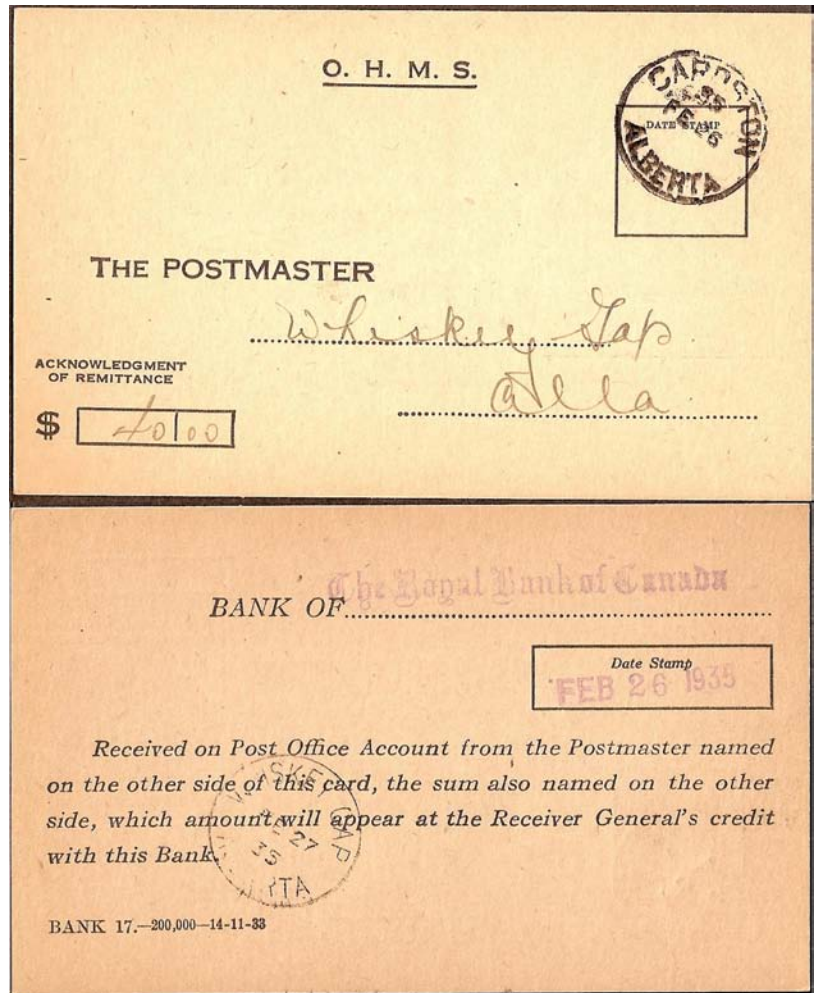
A dramatic change occurred in 1929, when the railroad from Cardston was extended to Whiskey Gap, although it never went any further. At once, a hamlet sprang up at the railway siding. Alvin Edward Knight took over the post office on 1930-01-15, moving it into his general store. At left is the proof strike of the Fareham CDS just after the move.

Knight applied for a name change, and on 1931-07-01 the post office was henceforth known as Whiskey Gap. At right is the proof strike of the registration marking, made in anticipation of the change.



As the railhead for the border area, Whiskey Gap generated considerable economic activity, and for a brief period the district prospered.

The scan on this page shows both sides of a 1935 remittance card sent to Whiskey Gap from the Cardston bank that handled its financial accounts. Knight gave up the post office on 1938-03-14, sold the store, and moved his family to central Alberta, where he got into the petroleum business [7].



Post-war, good roads began taking away traffic from the railway, and Whiskey Gap went into a long slow decline. After Knight left, there were twelve postmasters until the post office finally closed on 1967-09-15. This worked out to an average of a different postmaster every two years. Closure was due to lack of a suitable replacement. By then, the land was almost completely empty. The hamlet is long gone, and the rails were lifted in 1978. Mail service today is a rural route out of Cardston.

The location today is marked by a tourist turnout with a large sign explaining the history of the whiskey traders. Nothing beside remains. On the next page is a photo I took in June 2016 from the sign, looking towards the gap. The Montana border is on the opposite side of the farthest hills.



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