

JOURNAL OF ALBERTA POSTAL HISTORY

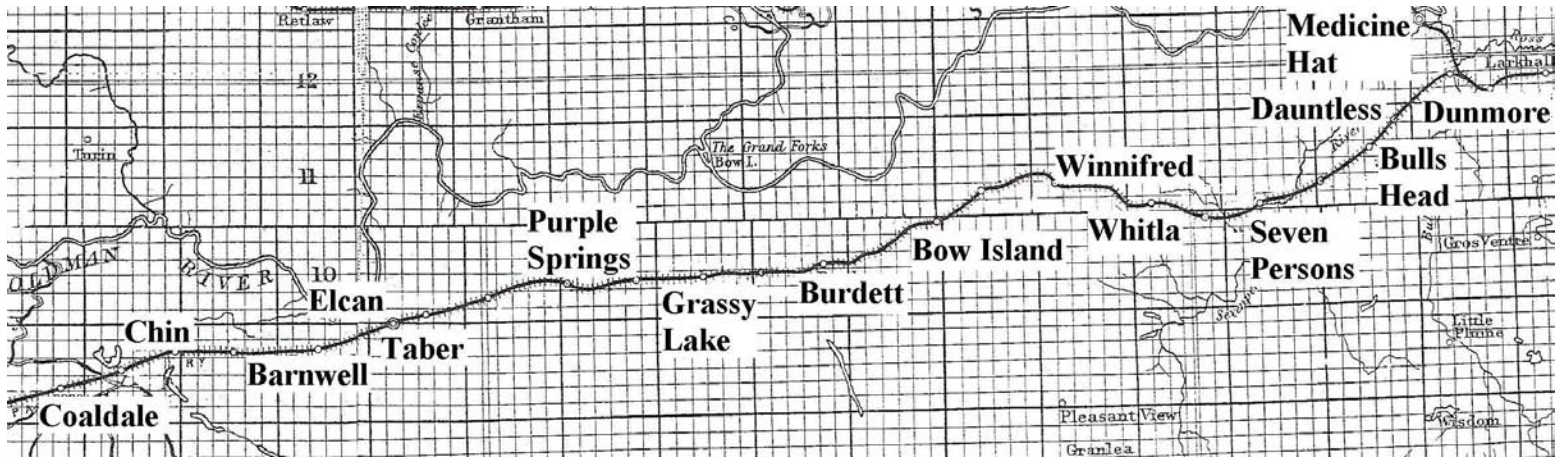
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POSTAL HISTORY OF ALBERTA: THE TURKEY TRACK RAILROAD

by Dale Speirs

The first railroad into southern Alberta was the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) transcontinental, which reached across the province in 1883 from Medicine Hat to Calgary and then onward through the Rocky Mountains. From it, various branch lines were developed, not only built by the CPR but also various of its competitors. In the late 1800s, railroads were the dot.coms of their day. Many were branch lines not intended to be run as a company but to be bought out by the big boys, just as many dot.coms today hope to be bought out by Microsoft or Google. One such railroad line was built from Medicine Hat to Lethbridge in 1885. It was a narrow-gauge line thrown together on the cheap in 43 days and was popularly known as the Turkey Track because it meandered about the countryside so as to save money on cut-and-fill track leveling. Below is a 1922 map of the Turkey Track modified to show all the sidings that had post offices.



The official name of the Turkey Track was the Alberta Railway and Coal Company. It was run by Alexander Galt of the famous family that was involved in Confederation politics back east. When Canada became a Dominion in 1867, he was the first Minister of Finance. He and his son Elliott built up Lethbridge as a coal-mining town, although they were not the founders. The Turkey Track shipped coal from Lethbridge to Medicine Hat to supply the CPR trains on the transcontinental mainline. In 1897 the CPR bought out the Galts and merged the Turkey Track into the CPR system, replacing the tracks with standard gauge rails. The line was extended westward through the Crowsnest Pass into southeastern British Columbia to take advantage of the freight trade from coal and hard-rock mines [1]. After World War Two, Highway 3 was built from Crowsnest Pass to Medicine Hat, generally following alongside the railroad and taking away some of the traffic.

Prior to the Turkey Track, there was a stagecoach service between Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. The coaches met at what is now Grassy Lake and exchanged drivers. The land was almost empty of settlers and was in a drought cycle at the time. When the Mounties came out west in 1874, they had so many bad experiences in this area, with lack of feed for their horses and little water, that afterwards they habitually avoided this area unless on a specific assignment.

A few of the railroad sidings of the Turkey Track developed hamlets or villages, but settlement was always thin. The track crosses the shortgrass prairie of the driest part of Alberta. Farming was dryland wheat or rangeland. The joke of farmers was that they wore out three seed drills since settling but their harvesting machines were still in dealer showroom condition. Irrigation farming developed when the Mormons began colonizing southern Alberta. It was their specialty, but most of them settled around Lethbridge and Taber, as well as further west to Cardston.

The area today is sparsely populated, and most of the post offices that sprang up along the Turkey Track did not survive. The post offices did not open in sequence along the Turkey Track. Roughly speaking, the eastern half of the railroad was settled by traditional homesteading and the western half by Mormons from Utah. The mail was carried by the CPR until 1960, after which the village post offices received daily service by trucks.

For convenience this article will consider the post offices in geographical order from Medicine Hat to Lethbridge. Postmaster names and dates up to the middle 1970s are from the Post Offices And Postmasters Website of the National Library of Canada [2], and up to the 1990s from Neil Hughes's book [3]. Place name origins come from Karamitsanis's work [4]. Just for the record, the following railroad sidings and hamlets along the track never had post offices: Anstead, Antonio, Bellcott, Broxburn, Fincastle, Fitzgerald, Ghent, Inversnay, Juno, Lethbridge Stock Yards, Montana Junction, Neidpath, Reliance, Stornham, Tempest (there was a different Tempest in central Alberta located at 19-37-3-W4, but it was no connection), Wetmore, and Woodpecker.

Dunmore Junction/Dunmore/Coleridge/Dunmore.

This locality was the point at which the Turkey Track branched off the CPR transcontinental railroad and headed southwest. The original post office was about 10 km west of Medicine Hat at the track junction, but was later moved a few kilometres east onto the main line. The name Dunmore Junction was given to honour Charles A. Murray, 7th Earl of Dunmore, who was an investor in the area. The reason why it was later changed to Coleridge has been lost in the mists of time.

Dunmore Junction in 1899 was actually larger than Medicine Hat because of its advantage of being at the junction of two major railroad lines. The fatal flaw was water. Medicine Hat is on the South Saskatchewan River, which gave it a large water supply that enabled industry to grow. The river was large enough for sternwheelers before the arrival of the transcontinental railroad. Dunmore only had poor water wells that easily dried up, and its growth fizzled out by World War One [5]. A development company tried to pitch Dunmore as the next Chicago but went bankrupt. They had promised to bring in a water pipeline from the South Saskatchewan River but went out of business before doing so.

The lack of good and abundant water was what killed any hopes of Dunmore developing into a town. During the Great Depression, the CPR closed its maintenance facilities at Dunmore and centralized them into Medicine Hat. In 1987, a water pipeline was finally built from Medicine Hat and some new houses followed. The city is close enough on the paved Trans-Canada Highway that many people commute to work there from Dunmore. One reason why water wells didn't last long in the Dunmore area was because they are in porous sand and gravel. This did, however, allow several large quarries to start up which now supply Medicine Hat with its sand and gravel [6].

Post offices were in homes or stores of postmasters. Before the railroad arrived in 1883, mail came to homesteaders in the area by horse-and-buggy from Medicine Hat. William B. Higginson was the first postmaster when the office opened on 1886-02-01 under the name Dunmore Junction. He was succeeded by W.A. Killien on 1888-07-27, who stayed until 1893-07-15. Three postmasters came and went over the next two years before W.J. Horner took on the job on 1896-01-01. He was a CPR agent on the line. He gave up the postmastership on 1898-08-05, at which time the post office not only moved east down the line a short distance but also shortened its name to Dunmore because it was no longer at the track junction.

James Sallows was then postmaster until 1902-12-15, when he resigned. He was also the district (and only) schoolteacher and had homesteaded nearby, making it a dairy farm. Milking cows twice a day and teaching all day was enough work in addition to meeting the trains to exchange the mails and then sorting it. Mrs. M.A. McEwen took over until 1908-09-04 when her term was ended by death. During her tenure, she changed the post office name on 1905-01-01 to Coleridge. In this era, there was some disagreement between homesteaders as to whether the district should be called Coleridge or Dunmore. No matter what name it went by, there were dissidents who preferred the other name, but the postmaster always had final say. Her husband Robert took over after her death until 1910-11-30, followed by a brief placeholder [6].



Mrs. M. Acheson lasted longer, from 1911-12-23 until 1917-11-26. A proof strike of the Coleridge postmark used during her tenure is shown at left. She was followed by Cortland Lewis Shaw until 1920-03-02. He was succeeded by F.W. Bauer, a homesteader, who had the office until 1936-10-26. All the official records spell his name Bauer, but his descendants anglicized the name to Bower. The neighbours reminiscing about him in local histories retroactively changed his name to Bower. He and his family moved into the hamlet, taking the post office with them, and establishing a combination house/post office/store on the main road of what would eventually become the Trans-Canada Highway.

Bauer owned the natural gas well and lines that supplied the hamlet. One night an adjacent hotel caught fire and a bucket brigade had to be formed to wet down the roof of the house/post office. The building was saved because the wind blew most of the sparks away from the post office, although the hotel was a complete loss. Bauer was a talented gardener and the post office was famous for the dahlias that surrounded it, often attracting the attention of passing motorists.



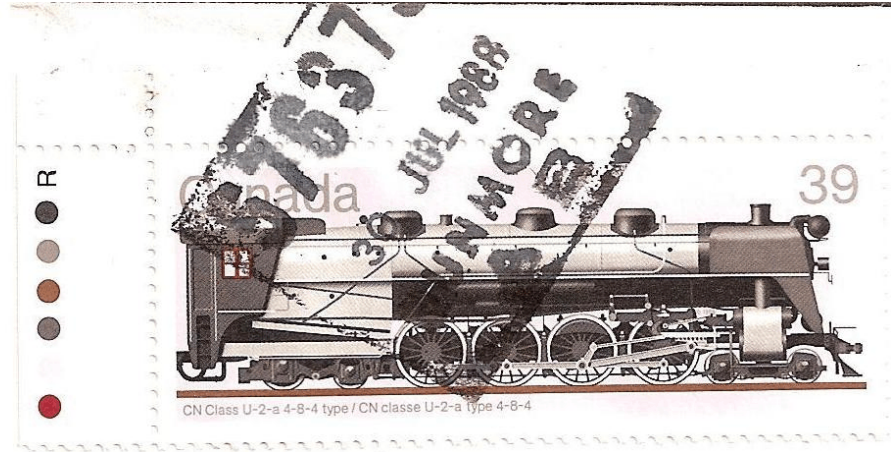
Another placeholder had the post office for a few months after Bauer retired, but on 1937-08-15, Robert Negus Cavan took over, staying until 1946-02-25. He was the son of the first homesteaders in the Dunmore area. He bought the natural gas well and system that supplied the district. He then sold out to James Cecil Oliphant in 1946, who only stayed a year or so and in turn sold to Roy Duane Gale all the operations.

Gale also operated a highway service station and was the mail contractor in addition to postmaster, serving the post office from 1947-08-09 until 1974-03-31. It was during his tenure that the post office once again changed its name on 1957-08-16, going back to Dunmore. A proof strike of the name change postmark is shown at left.

Jack T. Nichols then took over and moved the post office to his tractor shop and fuel pumps, but soon sold the business and the post office to Adeline Didack and her husband. He ran the shop, she was postmaster and front-end attendant at the pumps, and their children helped out everywhere they could.

At right is a 1988 rubber-stamp Dunmore postmark. There is a story behind the cover that bears this specific postmark. My parents, Cecil and Betty, enjoyed driving around rural Alberta seeing the sights, photographing the post offices, and getting postmarks therefrom. Many of these post offices are no more, and I now treasure the photos as a valuable part of my philatelic collection. My father would photograph my mother standing next to these post offices. (She appears in some of the photos further on.)

Evidently my parents arrived in Dunmore after the tractor shop/post office had closed for the day. There was no letter box, so the photo on the next page shows my mother slipping covers under the door in the hope, successful as it turned out, that they would be cancelled. My father can be seen in the reflection of the door as he took the photo.





The post office permanently closed on 1990-03-23, and was replaced by a retail postal outlet (RePO) run by Joan Deering. The RePO was still there as of 1998 but closed sometime thereafter. Residents now receive mail via community cluster boxes. Dunmore is today basically an outlying suburb of Medicine Hat, only a few minutes drive from the city. As the city expands, it seems probable that eventually Dunmore will be annexed.

Dauntless.

This railroad siding was originally named Delane but in 1913 the Canada Cement Co. renamed it Dauntless for reasons known only to them. The site was chosen because it was near to clay pits. A huge factory was built, a spur line was run from the siding, gas wells were drilled, and enough lots platted for 100 houses, although only eight were actually built. There were several stores and small businesses associated with the village. Everything was completed just in time for the outbreak of World War One, which effectively killed the demand for concrete as Canada diverted its resources into armaments. Dauntless steadily declined and by the end of the war was mostly dead. Attempts at revival were stymied by lack of sufficient water to run the factory, and a proposed pipeline from Medicine Hat came to naught. Most of the inhabitants ended up in nearby Medicine Hat. The factory building has survived as a warehouse to this day but everything else decayed or was removed [6].



The post office opened on 1914-01-01 with C.S. McEwan as postmaster but he didn't stay long and was gone by February 26. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at left. I suspect that by the time the canceller arrived out west, the post office was already on its second postmaster. George Alexander McCullough took over a few months later on May 11, but on October 21 he too left the area. The post office didn't re-open until 1915-05-03, with local homesteader David Oke as the final postmaster. It permanently closed on 1917-11-30, a victim of the war.

Bull's Head.

This place name is a translation of the Siksika tribal name for a nearby butte said to resemble a bison's head. It was a short-lived ranch house post office, with P.M. Olson opening it on 1910-02-01. He resigned on 1912-06-29 and S.A. Borg took over for a few months until the post office permanently closed on 1912-10-31. The proof strike of its postmark is shown at right and the hammer saw little use. It was ranching country with a very low population density.



Seven Persons.

The earliest European visitors to a nearby creek which bears this name found seven graves, which were those of Cree raiders killed in a battle with the Siksika. The name is a translation from the Siksika language. The railroad siding in turn took its name after the creek. A hamlet started to form by 1902 as railway section workers settled around the siding.

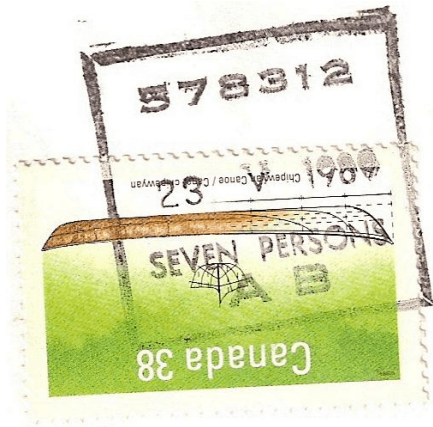
Initially a mail bag was left dangling from a post by the siding and residents helped themselves. The post office opened on 1903-04-01 with G.H. Lusk as the first postmaster. It was in his house on the south side of the tracks. Harry H. Foster, a CPR man, took over the post office on 1906-08-01. He was succeeded by Charlie M. Robb on 1914-02-18, who moved the post office into his general store.

Thomas McDonald, brother-in-law of Robb, became the longest serving postmaster from 1916-05-05 until 1950-09-07. He was a Scotsman who came to Canada in 1911, followed a few years later by his fiancé and then wife Jenny. The post office went into their house, which was a converted lumberyard office. Jenny worked as the postal clerk. The era between the two world wars was the height of the mail order business. McDonald met several trains a day for the mails, most of which was parcel mail for homesteaders ordering from catalogues such as Eaton's, Simpson's, and many others. Every order sent in required a postal money order to pay for it, so McDonald did good business on

that side. Tom and Jenny also acted as public scribes, reading and writing letters for illiterate Canadian-borns and immigrants who could speak English but had trouble writing it [7].

After McDonald, the post office moved into a general store. The postmasters changed every few years as the store changed hands. William Gill farmed but couldn't make it pay because of droughts. He worked a variety of jobs and then he and his wife Adeline bought the general store in 1964, with him becoming postmaster. He retired in 1973 due to her ill health and they moved to Medicine Hat. The post office then went through several more people and locations before the post office closed on 1989-12-11. The photo shows its final location in a house garage in 1989.





At left is one of the final post office postmarks. The post office was replaced by a retail postal outlet at Premium Sausage, which opened in 1993 and was still open as of 2014. An example of its postmark is shown below.

Seven Persons, like most of the surrounding area, went through a long stagnation, declining slowly and then leveling off to about 100 people. The land is dry and must be irrigated, there are few mineral resources, and only a public school and a few small businesses (such as the sausage factory) provide any steady industry. It is in stasis, neither dying or growing.



Whitla.



This post office was named after R.J. Whitla, a Winnipeg wholesaler who did considerable business with prairie merchants in southern Alberta. The post office opened on 1909-05-22 with Samuel S. Richardson as the first postmaster. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. The post office was located in Richardson's general store at the hamlet, but he commuted to it from his homestead several kilometres away. This was to cause problems, as one night burglars broke in and blew the post office safe open. They miscalculated the amount of explosives and the shockwave ripped apart several bags of flour that had been piled adjacent to the safe. When Richardson opened up the next morning, he found the post office section covered with white powder [8].

The Richardsons were from the USA originally. During the post-WW1 economic slump, they moved to Detroit. Henry and Minnie Lavelle bought them out and on 1923-02-01 he became the postmaster. He expanded into other businesses, particularly machinery and petroleum. In 1944, Henry's health began to fail and he sold the store/post office to the Lyon family. Roy Wesley Lyon became postmaster of Whitla on 1944-07-16, operating the store/post office as part of multiple businesses, including a service station, telephone exchange, farm implement agency, insurance agency, plus working two jobs in Medicine Hat. His wife Anne Martha manned the postal counter most of the time. Roy's health declined and they sold out and moved to Medicine Hat. His sister-in-law Doreen Phyllis Lyon took over as postmaster on 1949-09-23 but stayed only until 1951-02-24, when the store was sold [9].

Mattie Hazel Dunn was the next postmaster, she and her husband having bought the store from the Lyons. Whitla was in terminal decline by then. The land was slowly bought out by large-scale irrigation centre-pivot farms and cattle ranchers, depopulating the region. Good roads made Medicine Hat reasonably close, costing local businesses their trade. The final postmaster was Alice Edith Cranmere, as of 1956-04-29 when she and her husband George bought the store. The store closed in 1960 but the post office continued to operate. George later accepted a position as a ditch rider with the St. Mary irrigation district south of Burdett. No one could be found to take over the Whitla post office, and on 1962-04-17 it permanently closed.

Winnifred.

This post office is the next one down the track from Whitla, and was named after the daughter of R.J. Whitla. Winnifred was Mile 31 on the Turkey Track before it was named. The very earliest settlers in this district had their mail delivered occasionally by stagecoach at nearby Cherry Coulee. The railway dropped off a mailbag at the siding for the section men, and carried settler mail as a courtesy. Mrs. Mary Regan acted as unofficial postmaster. The outgoing mail bag was attached to a large loop next to the tracks. The train would slow to a crawl as it passed by and the engineer would reach out and hook his arm through the hoop. As the train chugged along, he took off the bag, attached the incoming bag to the hoop, and tossed them out further down the track. It was quite a hike for Mrs. Regan to locate the bag and hoop. Residents would call at the railway section office to get their mail.

Peter J. DeMarce homesteaded in the area in 1907. He opened a general store on the south side of the railroad tracks at Winnifred siding, and on 1909-05-01 became postmaster as well. The village then relocated to the north side of the tracks, a short physical distance but one that cut off the store from its customers, who preferred to use another store on their side of the tracks instead of having to walk the extra distance. DeMarce closed his store and gave up the post office on 1910-06-29.

James Reid Agar took over the post office in the same building, but his children Margaret and Cecil did most of the work behind the counter. Agar was originally from Ontario, and lived in several places in the Northwest Territories before trying his luck in Winnifred. He was a townie, with an insurance and real estate office, grain buying, notary public, and carpentering. In 1912, Cecil died of typhoid fever. The family moved to Bow Island shortly thereafter to escape the memories.

G. Wilfred Parker took over the post office from 1912-07-10, with W.L. Weed as his assistant. The post office was the distribution point for several hamlets south of Winnifred, and the route took the mail courier two days. In addition, the railroad was a busy one, and as every passing train picked up or dropped off mail, usually on the fly, someone, usually Weed, had to meet them at all hours of the day and night. The Parkers relied on their homestead for the bulk of their living but the droughts finally drove them away to Manitoba.

Thomas C. Godfrey took over on 1919-01-22 as postmaster. He was a WW1 veteran who got the office by preference, and stayed until 1922-06-30, when Thomas Trebble took over [10]. At right is a proof strike of the duplex postmark used during Godfrey's tenure.

Trebble was an Englishman who came out west and did various things before settling at Winnifred. He stayed as postmaster until his death on 1944-05-08. His widow Thurza briefly looked after the post office until 1945-11-19, when Emily Krokum was appointed. She was the final postmaster, and on 1970-02-09 the post office permanently closed.

As elsewhere along the Turkey Track, the land has been taken over by large-scale irrigation farms and cattle ranches, which do not require as many people to run. A few people are left in Winnifred and were indignant when it was classified as a ghost town, but the facts are against them.



Bow Island.

The post office took its name from an island in the junction of the Bow and Oldman Rivers where they meet to form the South Saskatchewan River, about 15 km from the post office. The original townsite was supposed to be elsewhere, close to the island, but was moved to the railroad siding instead, resulting in the peculiarity that the post office out on the dry flatlands is named after a feature far over the horizon.

Bow Island post office opened on 1905-06-05 with Jason Wesley Hopkins as the first postmaster. Prior to him, mail was carried in from or dispatched to the Winnifred siding. The post office was initially in Hopkins's house out on his farm, but in 1909 it moved into town with its own building, where it stayed for fifty years. The postmastership in those days also included ex officio the Registrar of Vital Statistics and later radio licences. Box numbers were constructed at the postmaster's expense but in exchange he could keep all the revenue as personal income [11]. The photo below shows Hopkins sitting in the mail cart (the middle of the three men) used to carry the mails to and from the train station.





At left is a proof strike of a split-circle postmark used during Hopkins' tenure.

J.C. Whitehead took over on 1919-02-18 as postmaster after Hopkins retired. Whitehead was a war veteran and got the job on preference as a "returned man". He was succeeded on 1921-07-14 by George Calder Sr, a Scotsman who came out west in 1906. The post office now included a telephone exchange, so his daughter Margaret not only helped behind the postal counter but acted as telephone operator. George's health began to fail in the late 1940s and Margaret became postmaster de facto, although not officially until 1949-01-31. In 1948, the Bow Island post office was doing well enough that it was taken over by the Canadian Post Office directly, and Margaret became staff. She spent a decade as postmaster before resigning on 1959-07-24 to marry Don Taylor, the postmaster of Vermilion in northern Alberta. It would be interesting to know how they met; perhaps at a postmasters' convention?

After a brief interregnum with a placeholder postmaster, on 1960-02-09 the new postmaster was Albert Kenneth Bateman, who served until 1977-02-07. Sometime during this period a new post office was built. The photo on the next page shows the Betty Speirs standing in front of it in 1989. The post office was still there as of 2015, the only difference being that the hedge has disappeared. Both Bateman and his second wife Audrey were career posties. His reason for leaving was that both of them accepted transfers to the Crowsnest Pass to work in the Coleman and Blairmore post offices. William R. Cameron was the next postmaster, in charge at Bow Island until 1980-10-04. He had served in WW2 and afterwards became a peripatetic postmaster throughout southern Alberta. He was postmaster at Granum, Turner Valley, Bow Island, and finally Raymond before retiring in 1987 from Canada Post [12].

Glen A. Olmstead was the next postmaster, previously having been postmaster at Ralston, northwest of Medicine Hat. His wife Linda worked as a rural mail courier for several years to various hamlets around Bow Island. Glen resigned as postmaster on 1988-10-07 a couple of weeks after Linda died from an illness, and left Bow Island for good. He was succeeded by Gwen Heidinger, a Medicine Hat native who came to Bow Island in 1975. She drove a school bus and worked part-time at the post office. Eventually she worked her way up to postmaster, serving until her unexpected death on 1994-10-03. Donna Houston then took over until 2000-12-31, after which Canada Post records cut off due to privacy regulations.



Bow Island's future looks good. It is the regional headquarters for the irrigation districts, and the rest of the land is cattle ranching and dryland wheat. There is a well-established petroleum industry, particularly with natural gas. Below is the Bow Island pictorial postmark advertising the major irrigation crop in the district.



Burdett.

The railroad siding was named after Georgina, the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, who was one of the major investors in the Turkey Track. Enough settlers collected around the siding such that on 1908-03-16 a post office could be opened. Harold O'Connor was the first postmaster but he didn't stay long and moved out of the district before the year was over, relinquishing his appointment on December 19 of that year.

Alexander Hamilton took over and became a long-serving postmaster until October 1931. He homesteaded nearby but as soon as he had proved his claim (gotten title by cultivating the land and building a house and barn) he rented it out and moved into town to work his trade as a blacksmith. The post office was in a two-storey building and he and his family lived above it. He is seen at right, and the post office below as it looked in 1911, the white building in the foreground.





A proof strike of one of the postmarks Hamilton used is shown at left. His wife Sarah and later his daughter Jean were the postal clerks. They basically ran the post office because Alexander was the village Mayor for eighteen years and a school trustee in addition to operating his smithy. The post office burned down in 1928 but another building was moved in to replace it [13].

Harry James Washford, who kept the local hotel, took over briefly as postmaster but resigned on 1933-11-15 due to overwork. He was succeeded by Frank W. Bertram who stayed until 1944-02-24. He had homesteaded south of Burdett in Sheep Tail Coulee before taking on the post office. The post office burned down again in late 1943 and this probably contributed to his leaving. He then moved to British Columbia where he worked in the navy dockyards.

Next up was Sidney Alfred Palmer, born and raised on a homestead in nearby Grassy Lake. He served during WW2 in the tank corps. After being invalidated, he returned home and became postmaster. He also farmed on the old family homestead, did carpentry and renovations, and worked as a mechanic. He gave up the post office on 1952-01-28 due to poor health.

After a brief placeholder, Mrs. Rachel J. Wilson became postmaster. She and her first husband farmed near the village. When he died in September 1951, Rachel turned the farm over to her son and moved into the village to take over the post office. She subsequently remarried and gave up her position on 1953-07-17.

Her successor was Dorothy Lee Dyer, who was to serve until retirement on 1976-04-08. She managed to raise four children while running the post office, while her husband worked for the Alberta Wheat Pool. Helen Sinclair then took over, but Canada Post privacy rules cut in after this. Sometime during the last few decades the post office moved into the village hall.



At left is Burdett's pictorial postmark, advertising its only claim to fame, the first use of centre-pivot irrigation in Canada.

The photo below shows the post office in 1989, still in the same location as of 2014 with only a new sign. Betty Speirs can be seen dropping a letter into a mail slot that was created by cutting out part of the windowsill; the slot was still the same in 2014.



Grassy Lake.

The post office name is a translation of the Siksika name for the area, a reference to the grasslands that cover the district. Adam Galger opened the post office on 1902-08-15 in the CPR shack at the siding where he was the section man for the railway. He stayed until 1906-11-07, after which he was replaced by Harry Austin Briggs. In those days, post offices were political patronage positions. After the Tories came to power in 1911, Briggs was bumped out of office on 1912-06-25 and replaced by Parker Carruthers, who voted the right way.



Carruthers had come out west in 1903 as a CPR telegrapher for the CPR siding at Grassy Lake. In 1908 he took up a homestead nearby where he lived until shortly before his death in 1955. He served until 1916-03-11 as postmaster but the workload was too much because of other businesses and he resigned. William Salvage then became postmaster until 1929-03-31 when death took him. At left is a proof strike of a split circle postmark used during Salvage's tenure.

Hugh J. Scott briefly served as post master until 1931-01-12 when he was removed from office due to political partisanship. This seems rather late for federal fiddling such as occurred en masse across Canada after the 1911 election. The Social Credit party was rising during the Great Depression or it may have been that Scott took politics too seriously and offended someone by meddling in the mails. Scott had homesteaded in the area in 1912. Between the two world wars he also worked as a real estate agent [13].

Sylvester Smeltzer, a local schoolteacher and homesteader, took over the post office until 1932-06-01. Between the workload of all his occupations and poor health, he did not stay long in the job and died in 1934. Alexander (Sandy) McPhee was the longest serving postmaster, taking over from Smeltzer and staying until 1964-11-26 when he retired owing to old age. He had come out west in 1902, farmed near Bow Island, worked at Taber, and then finally moved to Grassy Lake in 1928. There he had a pool hall and barber shop, while his wife Mabel owned a general store in her own right. He was postmaster but the post office was in her store [14].

After they retired, Clarence Friesen became postmaster. Below is a photo of the store/post office in 1989. An addition was built onto the end sometime later and the entrance then became the middle part of the wall. The post office remained in the general store but was reclassified to a postal outlet on 1991-09-26 when Canada Post began its purge of rural offices. Ownership of the store and post office has changed hands several times since then, but as of 2014 it was still surviving. Much of Grassy Lake is vacant lots but there are enough villagers to keep a few local businesses going. The store/post office also has the advantage of being on Highway 3, which runs through the centre of the hamlet alongside the railroad track.



Purple Springs.



The place name comes from a nearby spring that is surrounded in season by masses of blooming purple vetch, a native wildflower. C.E. Whitney opened the post office on 1909-05-15 in his general store. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. Whitney vacated the postmastership on 1913-01-27 and it went to Miss Sara McMillan until 1916-06-12. Mrs. Eva Hudson was the next postmaster, serving until 1920-08-19 when the store was sold.

Thereafter the store/post office seemed to change hands about once a decade, Frank Raymond Wright being the postmaster until 1930-01-14, followed by George Hamilton Savage until 1943-11-27. From there the post office moved to a lumberyard owned by David William Treece, who kept it until 1947-08-20, when it then moved back to the store [14].

The store/post office regularly changed hands over the next few decades as the village declined into a hamlet and the population shrank. The post office closed permanently on 1986-07-31, but was revived as a postal outlet on 1990-05-29 in a store. Again there was a steady turnover of store owners and postal station contractors. The postal outlet closed sometime in the early 2000s. Like the rest of the Turkey Track, drought was an ongoing problem and the hamlet dwindled, especially after the construction of Highway 3 made the bigger town of Taber a short drive away and a better place to do one's shopping. There are about ten houses left. It didn't help that while one street of the hamlet touches the highway, the rest of the hamlet angles away from the highway with no business frontage to attract travelers.

Taber.



There are several explanations for the name, all but one requiring a spelling error. It supposedly honours a missionary named Tabor somewhere in the Middle East, no first name ever given, or Mount Tabor in northern Israel. The most logical name is that it comes from “tabernacle”, especially when compared with nearby Elcan (see below). This area is part of the Mormon diaspora from Utah, and still prospers as a town based on irrigated vegetable farming and processing.

The Taber townsite was the homestead of James S. Hull, who arrived in 1903 from Utah. He and his brothers took up claims around a railroad siding known as Tank 77. Hull opened up a general store to supply railway section men and homesteaders. Settlers were pouring in and Hull soon built a ten-room hotel. He prospered and became the first postmaster on 1904-08-01.

The photo shows him about this time, looking a rather dashing young man. Despite being of great wealth in a growing town with a bright future, he became homesick for Utah and left Alberta for good in 1906.

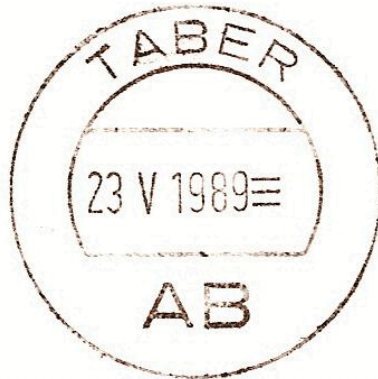
The photo on the next page shows the post office just before he left. It is the second building from the right, with a curved sign that reads “Post Office”, although it may not be legible in print. The Taber Trading building at right is where the post office moved to after Hull left.



After a brief placeholder came and went, Hibbert Parsons Munro, also known as Herbert, took over as postmaster on 1907-12-10 and held the position until his death on 1929-08-03. He and his wife Mabel Leslie Munro (her maiden name by coincidence) came out west from Ontario via a short stay in Manitoba. He was an accountant and she taught school. Hibbert originally worked part-time as postmaster with a counter in the Taber Trading Co. store where he was the bookkeeper. A fire destroyed the building and its contents in 1909.

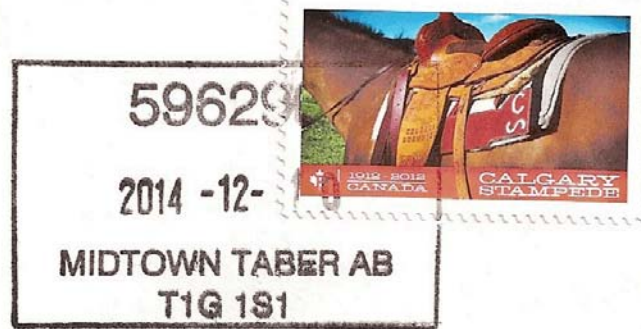
In the aftermath, Canadian Post Office officials decided that mail volumes were heavy enough to justify a full-time postmaster and a purpose-built building, so Hibbert took the job full time. Taber was a major distribution point for the surrounding rural post offices, and being on the railroad created extra business. In 1929, Hibbert went back east to visit his brother and suddenly died there. His widow Mabel was given preference as the new postmaster since she had six children to support. She stayed until 1944-01-09 when she retired and was replaced by her son Donald Leslie Munro. He served until 1947-04-23, completing four decades of service by the same family [14].

The postmastership passed on to John Middleton Kinniburgh. He was born in Tennessee of Scottish parents who then moved to Taber in 1899 along with numerous other Kinniburghs. He grew up on a homestead near Taber. John served until 1951-08-24 and was followed by two short-time postmasters. N.M. Loree took over as postmaster on 1952-08-21 and put in a couple of decades, retiring on 1971-10-07. During his tenure, the post office moved into a new building in 1955, where it still is today. The photo on the next page shows the building as it was in 1989, with Betty Speirs standing in front. The covers she obtained had the Klussendorf cancel seen below.





L.C. Layton took over as postmaster but at this stage privacy laws kick in. He has been succeeded by several postmasters. The main post office was supplemented when a retail outlet opened in Value Drugs on 1990-04-02, which operated by 2014 as Johnson's Drugs, although the outlet name is Midtown Taber. Below is the postmark. Taber is well established today as a major centre of irrigation farming and petroleum servicing.



Elcan.

This locality was about 2 km north of the railway track at Barnwell and the only one not on a siding. The name is the last five letters of “tabernacle” spelled backwards. Why the Mormons didn’t just use “Nacle” is puzzling as it would have made a much better fit with nearby Taber. Elcan was also known as Coal City but never had a post office under that name. The village’s economy was originally based on numerous small coal mines in the area. After World War One, major coal mines went into full production around Drumheller and Lethbridge. Elcan could not compete and gradually its mines shut down, killing the settlement [14, 15]. Had it been on the railroad, it might well have survived, if only as a hamlet, but Barnwell usurped it. It also had the disadvantage of being halfway between Taber and Barnwell, and good roads made it easier to shop in either of those towns.

Elijah Williams was an Englishman who came out west in 1907. He opened a general store at Elcan and was the first postmaster from 1910-04-01 until 1916-02-02. The mail was received via Barnwell. Below is the proof strike of the first postmark. Williams then moved to Barnwell, where he ran a general store and eventually their post office. David A. Bell was the second postmaster until the post office permanently closed on 1924-09-30 and became a rural route out of Barnwell. The Elcan townsite was a ghost town by then. Williams returned a few years later, bought up the entire townsite, demolished most of the buildings, and converted the location into a farmstead. So died Elcan.



Barnwell.

This siding was originally named Woodpecker after an island in the Oldman River north of it, which was a translation of the Siksika name for the many such birds on the island. The area was colonized by the Mormon diaspora out of Utah and is today mostly irrigation farming. The Mormon settlers renamed it Bountiful Ditch for a year because of the success of their first irrigation project, but when the post office opened it was named after Richard Barnwell, a CPR agent on the Turkey Track.



James Francis Johnson Sr was the first postmaster of Barnwell, opening the post office on 1909-04-01 in his general store. He and his brothers had arrived in the district from Utah in 1902 and claimed adjacent homesteads. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. He gave up the post office on 1910-02-26 due to pressures of his businesses, farming, and with his wife raising eighteen children. On top of that, the Johnsons moved back and forth each year between Barnwell and Provo, Utah [15]. He must have been a busy man indeed!

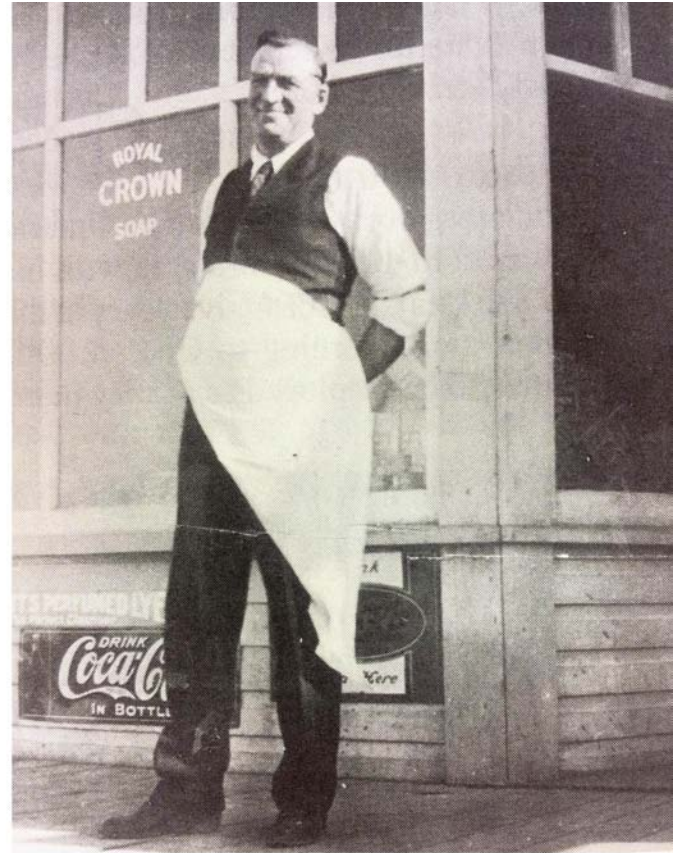
The next postmaster was Harry C. Beckner, who had the post office in his general store. He resigned on 1917-08-06 when he and his wife moved to Carstairs and bought a store with better prospects. Three postmasters came and went over the next few years, including Elijah Williams from Elcan, before Donald Yuill took over the post office on 1923-06-23.

Yuill was a Scotsman who arrived in the Taber area in 1910. He worked briefly in the Elcan coal mines, then leased the Vickery general store and became postmaster. The photo shows him standing in front of his store/post office in 1925.

The post office, although located in the store, was a separate operation. When Vickery sold the store in 1939, Yuill moved the post office into a building across from the CPR station. He retired on 1948-09-18 and was succeeded by his son John Petrie Yuill, who had been the postal clerk for his father. John gave up the post office on 1952-10-30 when he bought a ranch north of Brooks.

Reed Wesley Jensen then took over the post office full-time and put in two decades. He was succeeded on 1974-02-07 by his daughter Mrs. Verla Edwards. She only stayed a few months and on 1974-05-02 her sister-in-law Mrs. Shirley Clements took over. She was still postmaster until the late 1980s when the local history books cut off, and privacy laws block any further listings by Canada Post.

Sometime during the tenure of the Jensen family the post office moved into the building it is still in today. The photo on the next page shows Betty Speirs at the Branwell post office in 1989. The building has since been painted white but otherwise looks the same as of 2014.





Here is a recent postmark of Barnwell.



Chin.



The post office name comes from a nearby butte said to look like a chin, although the Siksika name translates as “beard”. William H. Lust and his family came from Minnesota. In addition to homesteading, he built a store at the townsite and opened the post office on 1910-07-15. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. Lust didn’t stay long as a merchant, selling the store and post office to John Haibeck and going back to farming full-time. Haibeck became postmaster on 1911-06-01 and was the longest serving, staying until 1944-05-09.

Charles Doram then bought the store and post office in partnership with his brother William, with Charlie taking the postmastership. The brothers had a chance to buy a hotel in Vauxhall, about 40 km north of Taber. They sold the store to Maurice Judd Couillard, who became postmaster on 1949-01-05. He didn’t last long and on 1950-10-06 resigned the postmastership and sold the store [16].

Chin was declining by this time, caught between the two bigger towns of Barnwell and Coaldale, which took away much of the trade as good roads were built through the district, particularly Highway 3. There were seven more postmasters who came and went in less than a decade before the post office permanently closed on 1960-04-12. The official reason was “Closed owing to the lack of a postmaster”. Chin is in the heart of large-scale irrigation farms. Highway 3 bypassed it a short distance to the south of the Turkey Track but the hamlet is on the north side of the track on a side road. There were about a dozen houses and several small businesses and warehouses as of 2014.

Coaldale.

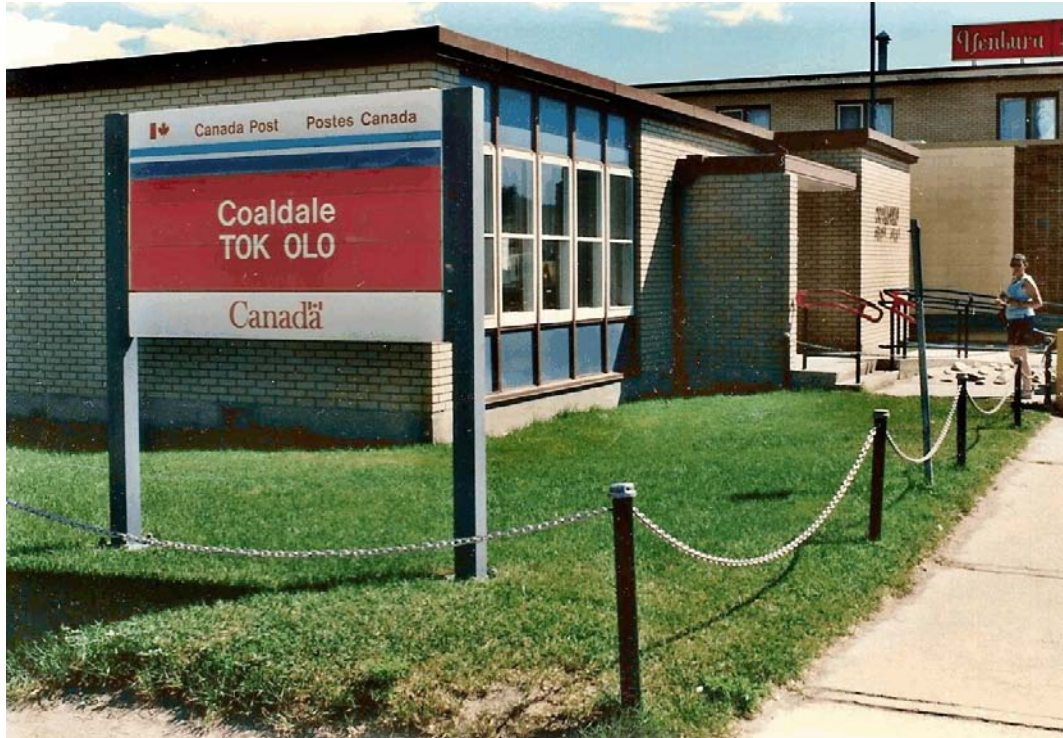


The post office name is self-evident and refers to the primary industry of the area. The village was founded by Harry A. Suggitt, who was also the first postmaster. He was an Englishman who first settled in Iowa and then organized a colonization company for what became the Coaldale district. The main emphasis was on irrigation and sheep. Suggitt was postmaster only briefly, from the post office opening on 1907-09-01 until his resignation on 1908-04-28, as he had too many businesses plus his homestead to look after. He suffered financial losses after WW1 and in 1925 left the area [16].

After a brief placeholder came and went, Fred J. Colaren took over the post office on 1910-07-21 when he bought the general store. He stayed until 1917-02-20, selling out to the Baldry family. Robert J. Baldry was the next postmaster until 1935-11-08. By that time he was wearing many hats as a school trustee, Justice of the Peace, and Mayor of Coaldale.

The Baldry family kept running the store but R.J.'s son, Robert Ernest (Bob) took over the post office as a separate operation. He had previously worked in the Lethbridge post office before WW1 and later as a postal clerk for his father. Bob died suddenly on 1952-01-30 and was temporarily replaced by his clerk Miss Ellen Riley. At left is a batch of proof strikes of duplex postmarks used by the Coaldale office.

Elmer John Wiens took over as postmaster. He had served in WW2 and then became the Alberta Wheat Pool agent for the area. His service at the Coaldale post office ended on 1966-06-23 when he transferred to the Lethbridge post office a short drive west. John Henry Clarke took over, then Ferdinand F. Glass from 1972-02-01, at which point Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws. Sometime during the late 1960s or 1970s, the post office moved into a new building. The photo below shows the building in 1988. The only difference I could see in 2014 was that the roof trim is now painted blue and red in Canada Post colours instead of brown, with new signage.



Here is the pictorial cancel still in use, which refers to a local bird sanctuary. Coaldale is surviving and with modern paved highways is close enough to the big city of Lethbridge to be considered a suburb.



Epilogue.

As a rough rule, the advent of a paved highway paralleling the Turkey Track thinned out the crop of post offices the way an irrigation farmer thins his crop so that the larger spacing allows the remaining plants to grow. The surviving post offices are spaced far enough from each other to allow the villages or towns to survive. Without a doubt, the main economic engine of the Turkey Track today is centre-pivot irrigation, which provides a better return on investment than dryland wheat or ranching. Had the Mormons not colonized the area with irrigation farms, the land would be like the southeastern corner of Alberta, almost completely uninhabited.

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