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POSTAL HISTORY OF THE ARROWWOOD AND MOSSLEIGH DISTRICTS

by Dale Speirs

About 70 km east-southeast of Calgary is a rural area that was settled with high hopes but never amounted to much. The principal villages were Arrowwood and Mossleigh, of which only the former still has a post office. Both have dwindled to hamlets. The Bow River forms the northern boundary of the district. The two settlements were originally further south of their present location. When the Canadian Pacific Railway came through in 1929 further north, the two villages relocated to the tracks.

In the 1880s, much of the land was given over to huge tracts of leased ranches, in the tens of thousands of hectares. The ranches were syndicated to British and eastern Canadian investors, but never earned a profit. The vast ranches were too big for economical cattle raising, and because they used only paid help, they couldn't recover their costs. The end came after the winter of 1906-07, considered the worst in southern Alberta history, when half the cattle were killed off by intense cold and heavy snowfalls.

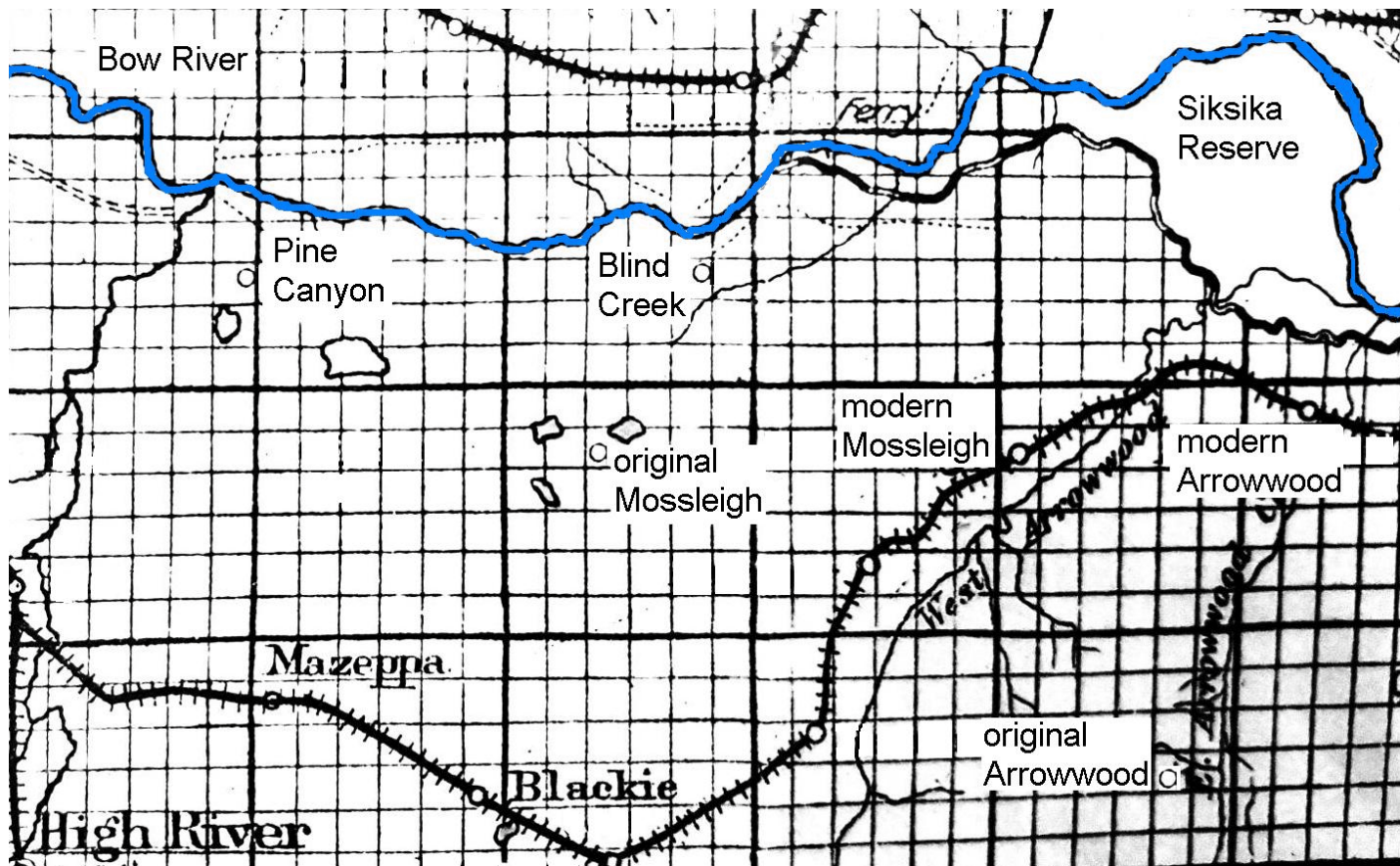
The government took back the leases and subdivided the land into sections (one square mile). Homesteaders could claim a quarter-section and prove up the land by ploughing a certain amount and building a house and barns. Their labour was accounted as free, and the smaller farms did not need gangs of hired cowboys. It was this that led to the development of the Arrowwood-Mossleigh area by homesteaders.

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Below is a modern map of the district. The map on the next page shows all the pioneer and present post offices, adapted from a 1934 map. The small squares are one mile on a side. The dashed lines meandering across the map are the original trails used by pioneers. For both maps, the blue line is the Bow River.





Arrowwood.

Commonly misspelt with one “w”, this village derived its name from a nearby creek, which in turn was a translation of the Siksika name. The banks of the creeks and rivers in the area are lined with willow shrubs, which supplied the source of arrows for the Siksika tribe [1].



Arrowwood as a settlement was originally a loose collection of homesteaders and squatters southwest of the present-day village. The post office opened in a farm house on 1909-03-01 with Mrs Ellen Maloney as postmaster. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left. The Maloneys were among the first homesteaders in the area after the breakup of the big ranches. The local inhabitants referred to the post office as East Arrowwood but the official post office name was just plain Arrowwood [2].

The post office moved to the house of Stanley Harrow, who on 1910-04-30 became postmaster [3]. After staying at his farm for three years, the post office moved again to the homestead of Jack Kirk Goldthorpe. He became postmaster on 1913-03-19 and stayed on the job until the post office closed on 1924-10-15.

The Goldthorpes came from England in 1907 and homesteaded in the area, along with their grown son and his family [4]. The farm house post office closed mainly because the railroad had arrived further north, but also because Jack’s wife Nellie was seriously ill and died a month later. The photo on the next page shows Jack and Nellie with their youngest child.

In 1924, the Canadian Pacific Railway began construction of a station where the village is now. The CPR then sold legal surveyed lots, as a result of which the settlers abandoned their original location and moved en masse to the new townsite [2]. The railroad arrived in 1924, although Arrowwood was end-of-track for another five years.



Harry and Florence Brown had lived and worked in various locations within a 100 km radius of Arrowwood. When the village was founded, they moved there and opened a lumber yard for the homesteaders. A post office was located within the yard and opened on 1924-10-15 with Harry Brown as postmaster [3]. He had too much going on and resigned a few months later on 1925-02-20.

Roy R. Saunders took over as postmaster. He was a newly arrived pharmacist and the post office moved into his drug store. The family initially lived at the back of the store and post office. Saunders was a restless sort and sold the drug store and post office in 1933, taking the family to Kirkland Lake, Ontario. They found the winters too harsh out there and returned to Alberta in 1937, settling in Calgary [2].

Ernest Edmund Jacques bought the drug store and officially became postmaster on 1934-09-29. He was actively involved in the community and served as Mayor from 1942 to 1945. His wife was stricken with cancer, and he sold the drug store in 1950. They moved to Calgary in the hopes that she might get better care but she died the following year.



Clifford Richardson Curtis became the new postmaster on 1950-03-16 after buying the drug store. At left are two types of postmarks from the Curtis era.

His neighbour Elbert Eugene Burriss operated a general store next door in the same building. In 1967 Burriss made an offer to Curtis which was accepted, and then took over the whole building. The post office moved into the general store, the drug store ceased business, and Burriss became postmaster on 1967-08-01.



Canada Post records cut off at this point, but he remained postmaster until 1982, when his daughter Mrs Karen Buijs took over. She was still postmaster as of 2011. The photo at left shows the post office as it was in 1989. The author's mother, the late Betty Speirs, is standing by the front door.

Below is the postmark as of 2018, and on the next page is a photo of the Arrowwood post office building as it was on the same day of the postmark.





Mossleigh.

The district of Mossleigh, as opposed to the hamlet which moved several times, was homesteaded at the turn of the 1900s. There is disagreement about who the hamlet was named after because there were several Moss families, one of which intermarried into the Leigh family, and another of which came from Leigh, England.



Eventually enough homesteaders were in the district to justify a post office. It opened on 1906-02-01 with Dennis Donovan as the first postmaster. Four Donovan brothers came from Quebec. Dennis opened a crossroads store and added the post office. At left is a proof strike of a split-circle postmark used during his tenure. He sold out to his in-law John H. McManus, who moved the store and post office a mile north to his homestead. He became postmaster on 1910-07-21. These two locations are collectively the original Mossleigh [2].

McManus brought his family out from Massachusetts and arrived in southern Alberta in 1904. He died suddenly on 1918-10-31 and the post office went with him. No one else stepped forward to take it over. Settlers therefore had to use other post offices in the area. When the railroad came through in 1929, the settlers moved to the track siding that became modern Mossleigh. A townsite was platted by the CPR and quickly developed. The post office re-opened on 1930-06-01.

Andrew Joseph Troy was the new postmaster, and operated the post office in his hardware store. He died suddenly on 1931-08-28. His widow continued to operate the store, with Frank Vickers as postmaster. The post office then passed to Miles Milton Hurl on 1931-02-29. It relocated into his combination barber shop, grocery store, and insurance agency. Hurl was the longest-serving postmaster, staying in the job until 1955-03-29, when he retired and moved to Calgary. The photo on the next page, undated, shows Hurl carrying the mails to the railroad station in a wheelbarrow.



Mrs Muriel M. Brassard bought the post office and moved it to a separate building. She operated it as a standalone business until her retirement on 1975-12-30. Shirley M. Eckes then took over until 1979. As Mossleigh declined, done in by good roads like so many other prairie hamlets, the turnover of postmasters and locations increased. The photo below shows Betty Speirs in front of the Mossleigh post office as it was in 1989. The final location of the post office, converted to a retail postal outlet, was in a garden centre, where it permanently closed on 2008-03-14.





At left is the postmark about a year before the postal outlet died. Mail service today is by box numbers serviced from Vulcan. The photo below was taken in July 2018.



Seen at the entrance to the village on 2018-07-31.



Blind Creek.

The name origin of the creek, and by extension the post office, is unknown. Sufficient homesteaders settled in the area that a farmhouse post office was opened on 1913-03-01, with Mrs Bessie Watts Stephens as the first postmaster. She gave up the job by Christmas Day of that year, when her retirement was officially registered.

Porter T. Rhoades bought the Watts farm and took over the post office that came with it. He served as postmaster until 1920-08-10, when the post office permanently closed. What killed it was a combination of drought that depopulated the district and a bridge that opened over the Bow River, allowing easy access to the village of Carseland on the north bank. In 1925, Rhoades and his family abandoned the farm and moved back to Iowa, whence they had come. The district today has only a few family farms, served by rural mail delivery from Blackie [2].



This photo was taken July 2018 and shows the flatlands of the Blind Creek area.

Pine Canyon.

There are no native pines in this district but spruce trees grow abundantly in shaded coulees and slopes of the Bow River. Then and now, the general public confuse spruce, pine, and fir species, so the name is understandable. The post office was obscure, and local histories omit it.

G.W. Inman was the first postmaster when the office opened on 1913-09-16 on his farm. Below is the proof strike of the first postmark. The post office transferred to R.K. Oakley on 1915-01-16. Since the address didn't change, it is presumed he had bought the Inman farm [3]. The post office permanently closed on 1916-12-14. The area today is populated only by a few farm families.



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