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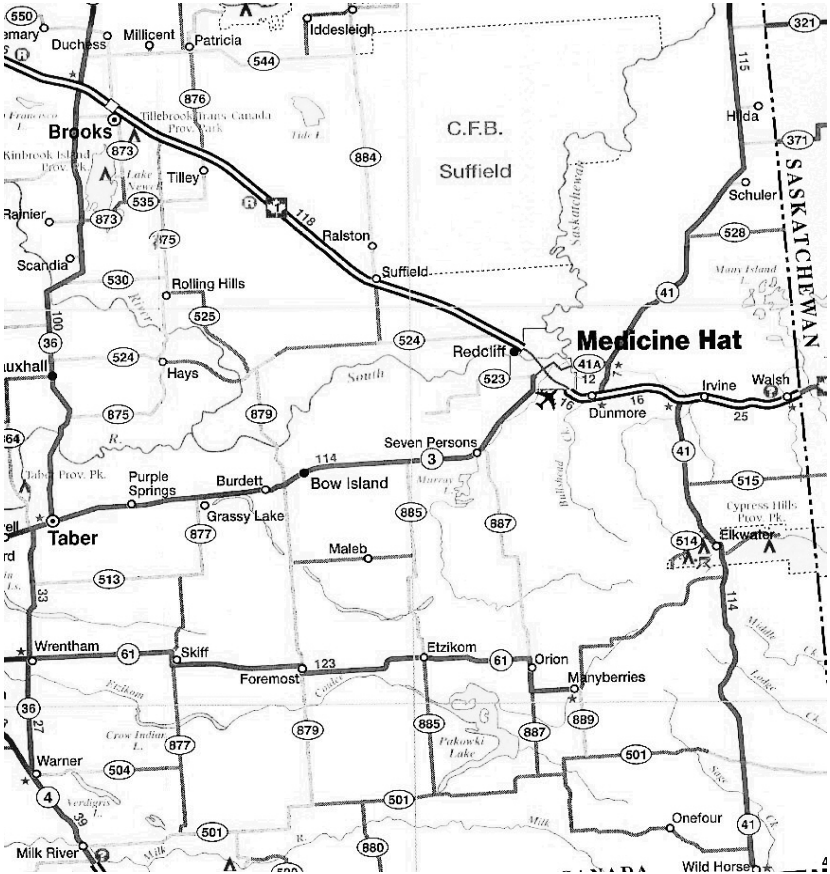
POSTAL HISTORY OF ALBERTA: EXTREME SOUTHEAST

by Dale Speirs

The corner of southeastern Alberta where the Saskatchewan and Montana borders meet is the driest part of Alberta, semi-desert at best, and sometimes full-blown desert. The land is drained by glacial meltwater valleys now holding only thin trickles of water. It is mostly rangeland, with some irrigation farming. The population outside Medicine Hat is thin and widely spread, and large areas are completely uninhabited.

The land was first settled during abnormally wet years and thus overpopulated when the long drought of the Great Depression began. It then depopulated, and numerous post offices closed as the inhabitants drifted away.



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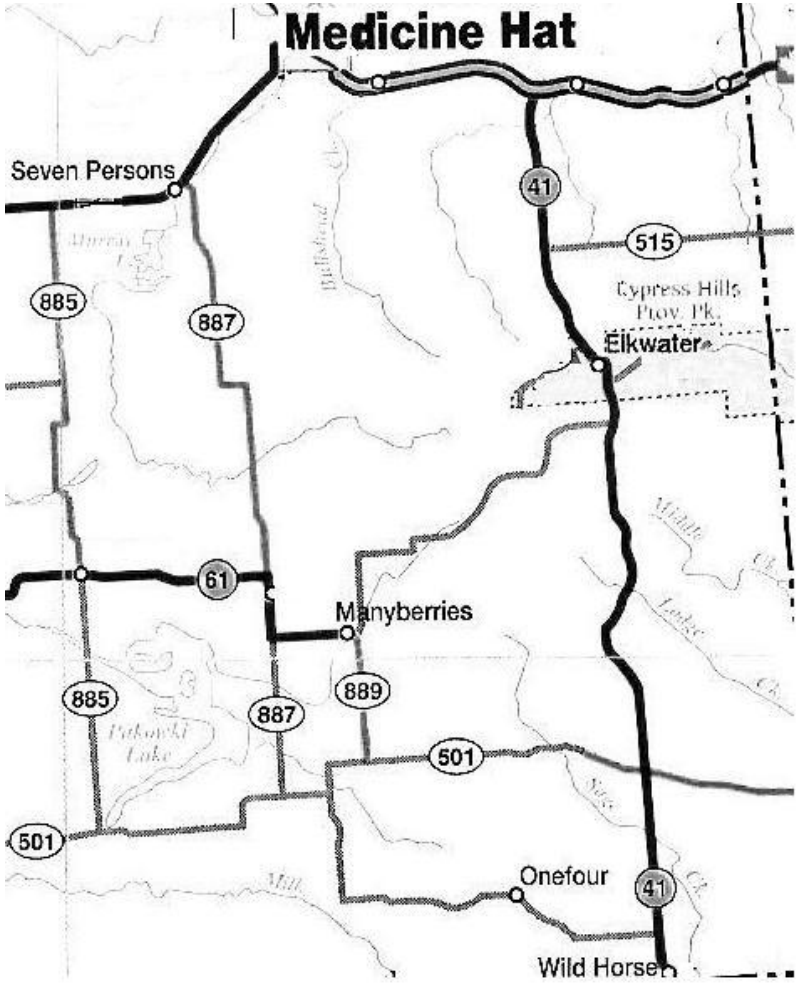
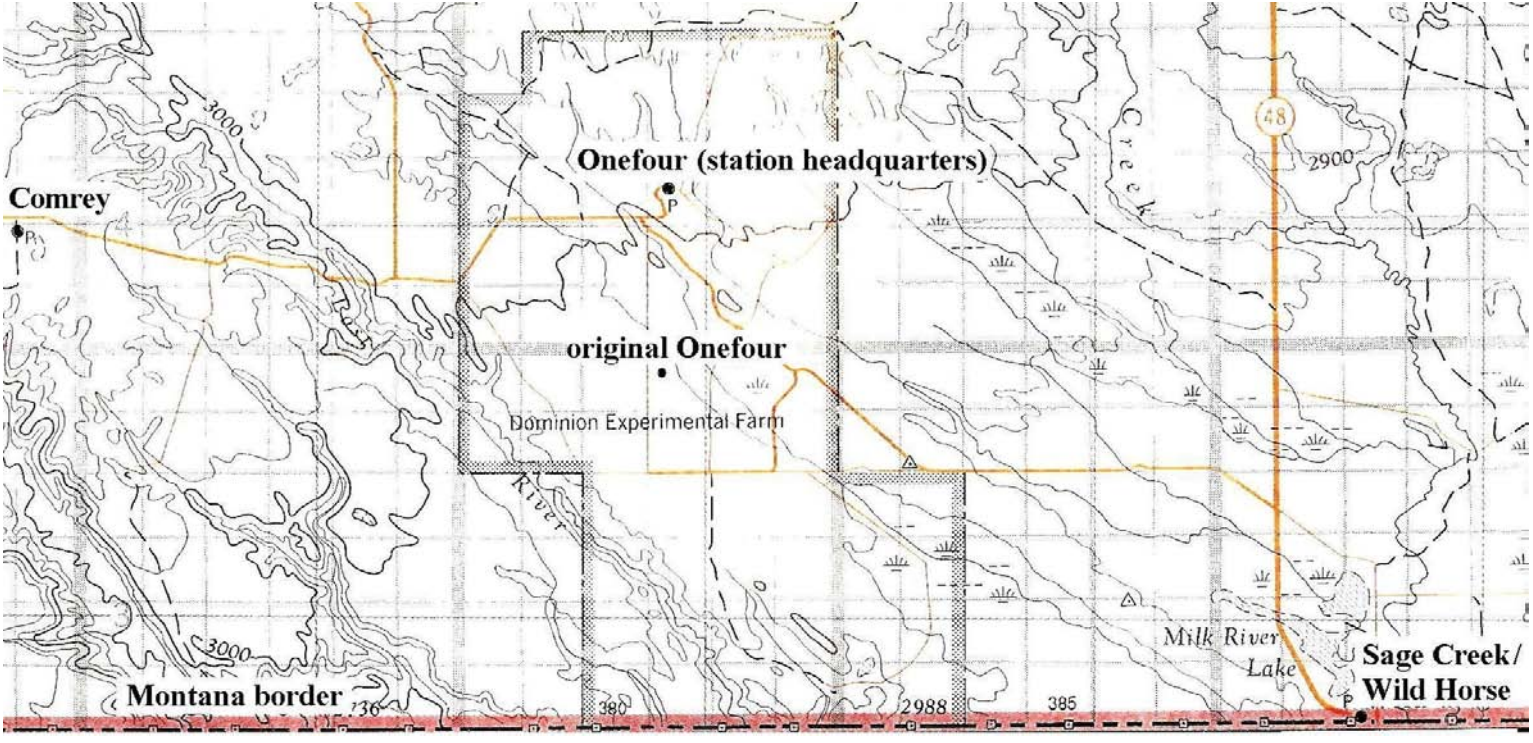


In the southeastern corner of Alberta where the Saskatchewan and Montana borders meet is the driest area of the Canadian prairies, a shortgrass and sagebrush area that is semi-desert. The land is treeless and relatively flat, although the creeks wind their way through ancient glacial meltwater channels that are many times wider and deeper than the creeks today.

The Mounties passed through in their epic long march of 1874 when the land was in a dry cycle and suffered terribly from the heat and drought. In the early 1900s, the first settlers began arriving. It happened that the area was going through a wet cycle at the time, so they were encouraged. The Dirty Thirties and subsequent droughts drove away most of them, and the land is now about as thinly populated as it can be without actually going to zero.

There never were any villages in this corner of Alberta, and the post offices were in houses or occasionally a crossroads store. Nor were there any major businesses, but the Canadian federal government had two operations that provided some non-farm employment, which were an experimental farm and a Customs post on the border. The Dominion Experimental Farm went through many name changes, and I will refer to it as the Research Station, as most of its titles had those words.

In 1926, a Customs border crossing was established at what was originally called Sage Creek but changed its name to Wild Horse when the crossing opened. The only post offices were Comrey, Onefour, and Sage Creek/Wild Horse. On the next page is a 1967 map of the area modified by me to show the post offices.


Onefour (station headquarters)
Comrey
original Onefour
Dominion Experimental Farm
Montana border
Milk River
Lake
Sage Creek/
Wild Horse
3000
2900
2988
48

Originally the Mounties carried the mails through the area as a courtesy when they came through on patrols. Some settlers used Oldham, Montana, as their mailing address and went across the border occasionally to pick up their mail. Beginning in 1910, when the first post office opened, local residents acted as mail contractors. The nearest distribution point was Seven Persons, 120 km due north of Comrey. In 1917, the railroad came through Manyberries, about one-third of the distance to Seven Persons, so the mail route switched there. William C. Trainer was the courier for eighteen years for the entire route from Manyberries to Comrey to Onefour to Wild Horse, a four-day round trip. He stayed with postmasters en route. On one trip he arrived at Onefour to find the postmaster Alec Carlson lying dead on the floor and some potatoes boiling on the stove. Carlson had died of a heart attack, probably less than a half hour before Trainer arrived [1].

Comrey.

In 1909, Columbus M. Larson homesteaded about two kilometres north of the Montana border, and soon started a store and post office, both of which shared a room in his house. The post office name of Comrey was an acronym of the names of the first six homesteaders in the district: Columbus Larson, Ole Roen, Mons Roen (brother of Ole), Sam Rolfson, John Evenson (brother-in-law of Larson), and Edward Yeager. The Comrey post office opened on 1910-04-01 with Larson as postmaster and Evenson as the mail courier [2]. Settlers then switched their mailing addresses from Montana to Comrey. At left is the proof strike of the postmark. Once a month Evenson would make a two-day round trip to Seven Persons. Larson gave up the postmastership on 1916-12-08, sold the ranch, and moved to California.

Nels Olson and Irving Sipe bought the place, with Sipe becoming the new postmaster until 1918-02-15. He was also the local barber and butcher. The mail courier was Martin Luther Houger, who had arrived from Wisconsin in 1910. He had a team of mules that took four men to hitch to the wagon. They would hold the mules until Houger was braced in the wagon and had the reins, then release the team. Oldtimers asserted that the mules would instantly bolt full speed down the trail, and it wasn't until they had run about five miles that they were winded enough for Houger to control them [1]. Houger originally made the mail pickup at Seven Persons but switched to Manyberries when the railroad arrived.

Houger took over the postmastership from Sipe and held it until 1928-08-03, when he returned to the USA. His son John Bidwell Houger, usually known by his middle name, remained behind, taking over the ranch and the post office. He was postmaster only for a short time, until 1929-04-16, but stayed on the farm and two decades later was to take up the postmastership again. Alton Prouty started a crossroads store at Comrey in 1929 and sold it a year later. He was postmaster for two months in 1929. Mrs Carrie Nelson took over the post office in her house from 1929-09-24 until her husband Oscar got the job beginning 1934-06-01 and lasted until 1941-05-14.

Prouty tried another store elsewhere in Alberta after selling the Comrey store but it failed due to a smallpox epidemic and he lost everything. He came back to Comrey and did odd jobs. He married Bessie Britney in 1936 and they rented the Bill Olson farm. The Olson and Prouty families were interconnected. Bessie took over the post office from Oscar Nelson until 1944-03-30, when the Proutys moved to British Columbia. Alton's brother Edgar Ole Prouty then became postmaster until 1945-08-15. From there, Mrs. Annie Olson kept the post office in her ranch house until 1948-09-08 when she moved to Manyberries.

The next postmaster was William Gazdag, who had come to Canada in 1933 from Czechoslovakia. He moved around Canada and then served in World War Two. After the war, he settled in the Comrey district and succeeded Annie Olson as postmaster, serving until 1953-08-05. After him, Bidwell Houger returned to the job after a two-decade lapse, serving to 1958-04-19.

The final postmaster was Mrs. Emma Loraine Gazdag, known by her middle name, who was the niece-in-law of William. The post office permanently closed on 1968-06-27, and the district was henceforth Manyberries Rural Route #1. The closure was due to a combination of depopulation and good roads. What once was a four-day round trip to courier the mail could now be done between breakfast and supper by automobile.

Onefour.

On 1913-05-01, a post office opened on the ranch of Thomas L. Duncan. It was named Onefour because the ranch was in Township 1, Range 4, West of the 4th Meridian (the Alberta-Saskatchewan border). Duncan also kept a small store in his house. He was the timekeeper for the entire district since he knew how to calculate the correct Alberta Mountain Time by marking when the sun was directly overhead and adding a certain number of minutes based on the longitude of his ranch. The other residents could then set their watches by his. In rural areas where there were no railroad or telegraph stations, and radio broadcasting wouldn't begin until the late 1920s, there was no other way for homesteaders to keep clocks on the correct time [1].

Duncan was succeeded by Axel Carlson on 1928-09-11, who actually died in office, not just figuratively, on 1939-12-19 when the mail courier found him dead on the floor from a heart attack. Carlson had no family, and was buried in the Comrey cemetery on Christmas Eve. Mabel Wetherelt was the next postmaster. She and her husband James had homesteaded in 1910 at Onefour. She retired from the post office on 1949-10-31, and eventually moved away. From there the post office moved to the Research Station where it stayed thereafter. The station is located in Township 2, Range 4, so for the last few decades of the post office it did not live up to its name.

The Dominion Experimental Farm, as it was originally called, was established in 1927. The location was specifically chosen because it was the driest location on the prairies, and the purpose of it was to test methods of growing dryland crops and irrigation. Over the years as settlers gave up and sold out, the Research Station, as it became, bought their land and expanded to enormous proportions. In time, the only significant population in the area were the staff of the station, so the post office moved there. Some of the staff were from local farms, but many positions were technical or required skilled or semi-skilled labour from outside who needed a place to live. The station developed a hamlet of staff quarters, school, post office, and a small store, the only difference being that it was not a hamlet with a democratic government but under the nominal authority of the Superintendent. By the 1980s, budget cuts and the lessened need for research information had reduced the station to a sub-station of the Lethbridge Experimental Farm, and the staff dwindled away.

Dr. Hobart Frank Peters, who had become Superintendent of the station in 1947, took over the post office on 1949-11-01. Thereafter all postmasters were either staff or spouses thereof. Alfred Robert Moench held the position from 1950-06-01 to 1954-05-05. He was followed by Miss Alice Elsie Schneider, a stenographer and clerk, who a few months later became Mrs. Wade and kept the job until 1959-04-07. Mrs. Helen Anna Martin was the next postmaster until 1964-05-26. Mrs. Betty Pearl Foster, who taught school at the station, took over the postmastership.

The Wetherelt house was moved to the Research Station for the Fosters, and the post office was kept in a front room. The Onefour post office then developed into a succession of staff wives as postmasters. Mrs. Marlene White was in charge of the post office and the store from 1970-09-01 until 1971-08-13, then Mrs. Linda Wuerfel until 1975-10-25. Mrs. Helen Gunn was the penultimate postmaster, and finally Mrs. Gerianne Ross, wife of the Station Manager. The post office closed permanently on 1989-02-04 and the Research Station is now only a shadow of its former glory [3]. Thereafter the mail was delivered as part of Manyberries R.R. #1.

Below is a cover using the original postmark as late as 1980. This was a prepaid envelope used for water level surveys of streams, with a July 1979 meter mark to prepay the cover but which was not actually returned until October 1980. It seems likely that the Calgary head office sent a year's supply of envelopes and blank forms. Since the Research Station was in charge of its own post office, the late date on the meter would not have been queried, and the Calgary posties would not pay any attention at their end.

Sage Creek/Wild Horse.

Sitting right on the Montana border and its only purpose today a very low-traffic Customs border crossing, this post office opened in 1913 as Sage Creek. The native tribes that traveled through the area referred to it as Wild Horse because of the herds of feral horses that gathered near a lake in a land where open water was scarce. At the time the post office opened there was already another Alberta post office east-northeast of Edmonton called Wild Horse, so the southern locality was instead named after the creek which was in turn named after the sagebrush rangelands of the district. Postmark collectors should be careful that they distinguish between the two Wild Horse post offices. The northern one existed from 1908 to 1914, when its name was changed to Ballantine. The southern one, discussed here, began in 1926.

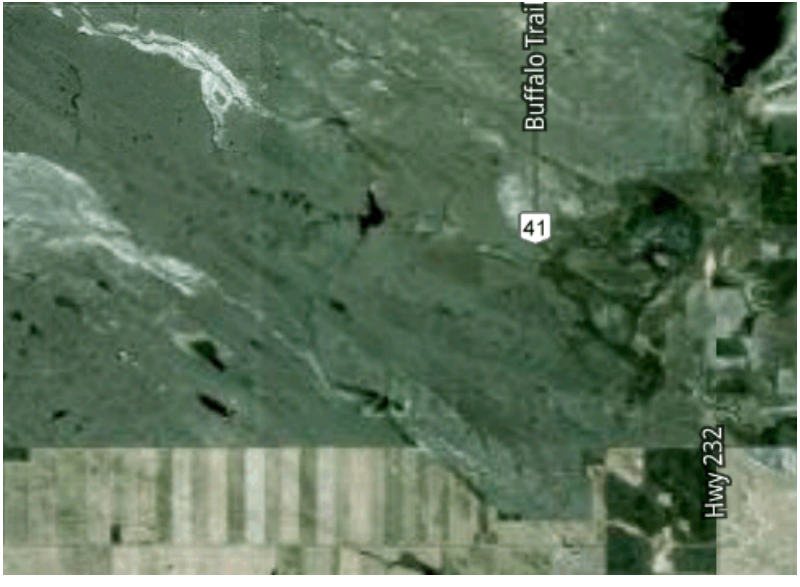
Charles Hawley, an ex-U.S. Calvary scout, homesteaded along the border on the Canadian side. The post office opened on 1913-06-01 as Sage Creek and was located in his ranch house until he resigned his position on 1923-06-22. At right is the postmark proof strike. The next postmaster was Joseph Byron (Barney) Simpson, who had come out west from Ontario with his brother Ernie. They both settled on the Montana side of the border, but Barney moved north in the early 1920s. Ernie stayed on the American side and later was postmaster in succession of Oldham and Simpson post offices in Montana, the latter named after the brothers [1].

In 1925, the Canadian federal government noticed that ranchers were criss-crossing the border without any formalities, so they opened a Customs post. The Sage Creek post office moved off the Simpson ranch to the border post and re-opened on 1926-01-20 as Wild Horse. By that time the other post office had changed its name. Both the bureaucrats and the local residents preferred the native name and so the change was made. At left is the proof strike of the new name.

The Customs officer was Reginald S. Yates and he was made postmaster ex officio. The Hawley house was moved to the crossing and became the residence of Yates and his family, as well as the post office and Customs. The photo below shows Yates standing in front of the Hawley house. There were seldom more than a half-dozen vehicles per day crossing the border in that remote location, so Yates did not have a stressful job. He stayed there for three decades, no doubt enjoying the peace and quiet of what was a cushy sinecure, and retired on 1955-03-22 as postmaster and Customs officer. He was succeeded as postmaster by Mrs. Hilda Hanna Dobson, the wife of the new Customs officer. On 1968-06-27 the post office permanently closed for lack of business and the crossing became the terminus of Manyberries R.R. #1. The Customs post still operates today, but the mail route now terminates at Onefour.

Decline And Fall.

During the Great Depression, the shortgrass prairies were stricken by a decade-long drought that depopulated southeastern Alberta and the adjacent southwestern Saskatchewan. Most of the farms reverted to rangeland, and crop farming was much reduced from the original optimistic cultivation of the pioneers. Throughout much of the prairies, a major decline in the number of post offices occurred because good roads centralized the populations. In southeastern Alberta though, it was the climatic change more so than good roads that made the difference. Families held on as long as they could but by the 1940s it was a lost cause. The federal and provincial governments put the land back into grazing and it remains so today.



Interestingly, because American farmers receive massive crop subsidies, the Montana side is cultivated right up to the border. Space satellite photos clearly show the 49th Parallel in this area. At left is a Google image showing the Wild Horse area, with strip farming (for erosion control) along the American side. The Customs post is located where Montana Highway 232 touches the border. On the Alberta side the highway takes a sharp bend west before turning north as Highway 41, also called the Buffalo Trail. Notice that the Montana strip farms define the border, while the Alberta side is open rangeland.

The 1916 Canada Census is the most recent available for analysis of the population in extreme southeastern Alberta. Federal law in Canada prohibits release of detailed house-by-house statistics until a century after a census. General details on a district-by-district basis are available for more recent censuses, but the problem is that county boundaries keep changing and include villages and towns such as Manyberries and Seven Persons, which makes it impossible to sort out present-day populations to compare with the pioneer days. The area discussed in this article is currently divided between Forty Mile County and Cypress County, neither of which existed back in pioneer days.

The 1916 Census, broken down by individual townships, shows the population of the Comrey-Onefour-Wild Horse area was 163, which was probably at or near its height during the wet years. As a workaround, I used the 2013-06-07 Householder Counts section of the Canada Post Website (www.canadapost.ca). These counts list all the postal routes and post offices in Canada and include the number of addresses that mail is delivered to on each individual route. The Manyberries Rural Route now has only two households listed for Onefour, one of which would be the Customs post. In short, the land is now almost completely empty.

To sum up, the settlement of this district and the opening of post offices was due to an erroneous idea by homesteaders of the climate because they happened to arrive during anomalous wet years. When the climate reverted back to the mean, it wiped out the economic basis of settlement and thereby shut down the post offices.

References.

1] Lanz, Olive, and Beatrice Kusler (1990) THE FORGOTTEN CORNER Published by Forgotten Corner History Book Society, Alberta. Pages 8 to 10, 96 to 99, 123 to 125, 134 to 138, 149 to 151, 161, 166 to 167, 179, 182, 234 to 237, 245 to 256, 263 to 264, 269, 271 to 272, 280, 306, 313 to 316

2] Library and Archives Canada (downloaded 2013-01-29) Post offices and postmasters. www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/post-offices

3] Hughes, Neil (1998) ALBERTA POST OFFICES 1876 - 1998. Privately published by the author, Edmonton, Alberta.