

JOURNAL OF ALBERTA POSTAL HISTORY

Issue #19

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Published June 2019.

POSTAL HISTORY OF ALBERTA: WEST CENTRAL DISTRICT, PART 3

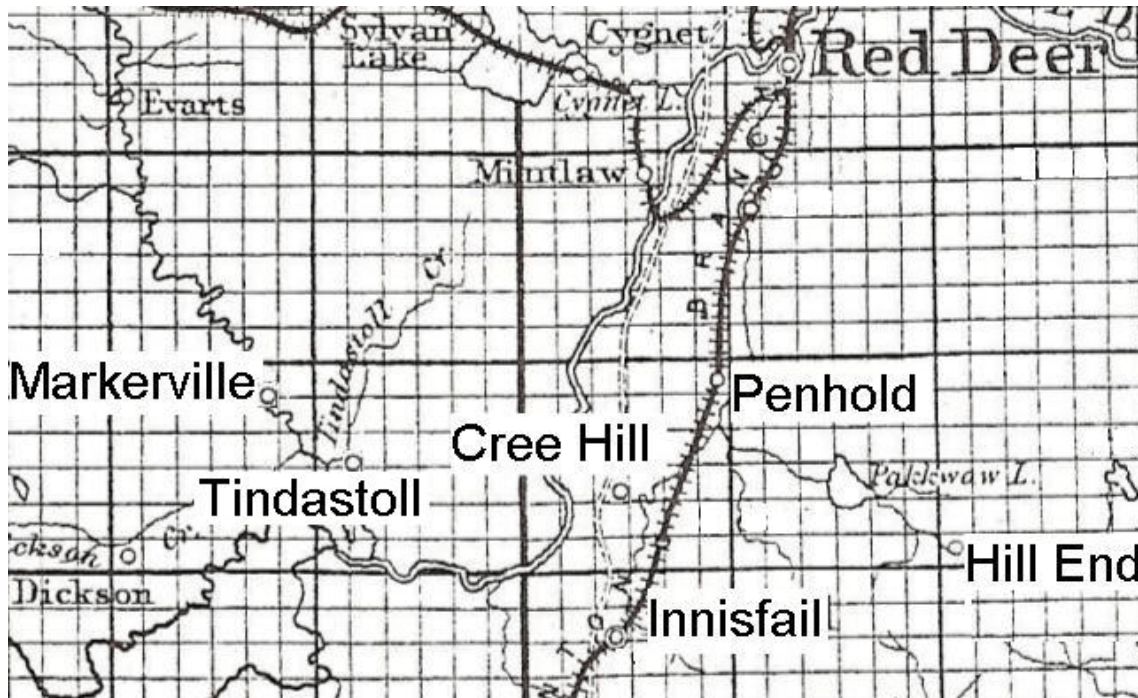
by Dale Speirs

Index Of Post Offices

Cree Hill	5
Hill End	20
Innisfail	6
Markerville	22
Penhold - village	14
Penhold - RCAF	18
Tindastoll	21

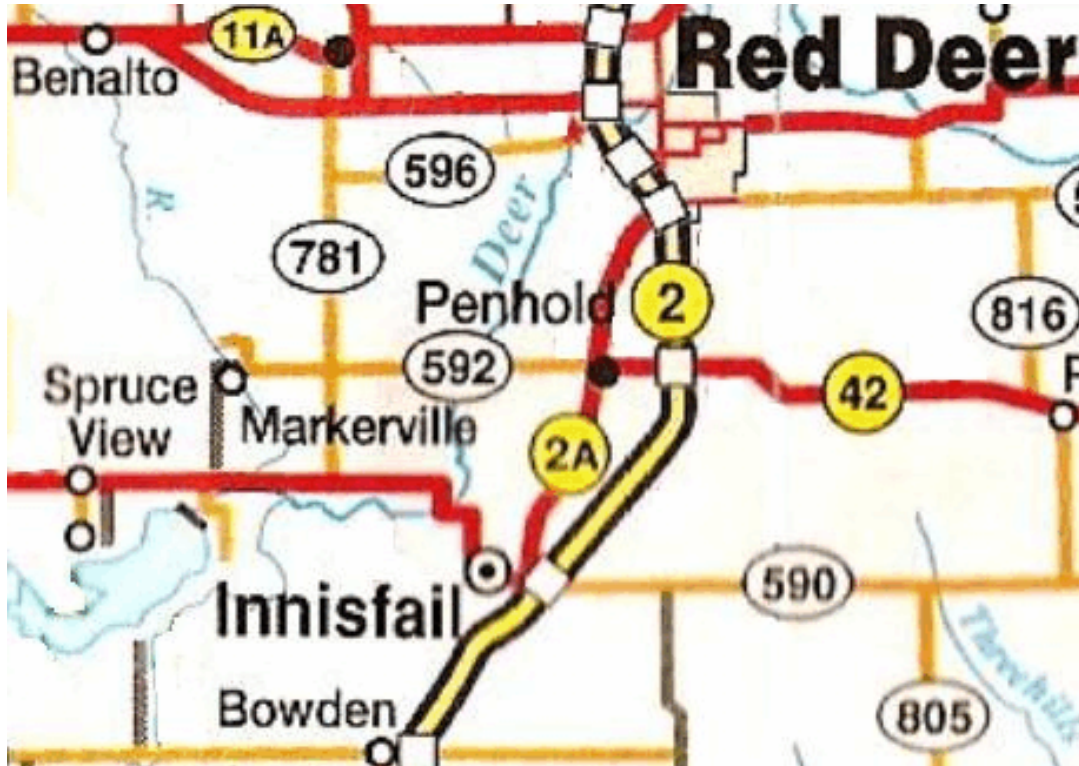
Approximately halfway between Calgary and Edmonton is the Innisfail and Penhold district, just south of Red Deer. It was settled in the late 1800s, particularly by contingents of Icelandic homesteaders. The area was originally on the main north-south railroad track in Alberta, and is now on the heavily trafficked Highway 2 running parallel to the tracks, which guaranteed its economic prosperity.

In the 1800s, stopping houses existed along the Calgary-Edmonton Trail roughly every twenty miles, the distance a traveler or stagecoach could go in a day. They were primitive inns, not far removed from medieval inns. All of them went out of business in 1892 when the railroad came through. The week-long trip between Calgary and Edmonton was reduced to a 12-hour ride in comfort.



This map shows the post offices of the pioneer era. The small squares are a mile on each side. Each square mile was called a section, and homesteaders claimed a quarter-section for their land.

Here is a map of the modern landscape. Innisfail is the principal town, while Penhold survived as a military base during the Cold War and later the de facto airport of the city of Red Deer. There is a very large hill north of Innisfail, with Red Deer on the far side, and the highway makes a noticeable climb over it. I grew up in the Red Deer area and have driven the highway over the hill countless times. It is very noticeable that the hill acts as a meteorological divide, with more rain and snow on the Red Deer side, and milder weather on the Innisfail side. The dominance of the hill was reflected in local post office names such as Cree Hill and Hill End.



Before any post office was established, mail was carried by the North West Mounted Police from Calgary to Red Deer Crossing, upstream from today's Red Deer. This was done as a courtesy and as an informal way to keep track of inhabitants. The homesteaders at Innisfail would arrange for one of them to go up to Red Deer Crossing and bring back the all the mails for their district. It wasn't a huge load in those days. This process terminated once the railroad came through in 1892.

Cree Hill.

Walter H. Carter was a Scottish immigrant who brought his family to the Innisfail district to homestead. With a partner named Charles Ross, the two men established the Cree Hill Ranch straddling the Calgary-Edmonton Trail [1]. Carter opened a post office on 1890-11-01, the first in the district. It was in his stopping house on the ranch. There is an error in the online post office records [2] which describe the legal location as being W3M, that is, west of the Third Meridian, which would put it in Saskatchewan. It is a typographical error and should be the Fourth Meridian, W4M.



The post office only existed when Alberta was a district of the Northwest Territories. It was long gone when Alberta became a province in 1905. Shown here is the proof strike of its postmark. As was common with territorial postmarks, they often showed the district rather than NWT.

The post office closed on 1892-03-31 after the railroad came through several kilometres to the east, bypassing that section of the Trail. Carter closed the stopping house, sold the ranch, and moved into Innisfail. He had been an accountant in Scotland, and resumed his practice as Innisfail rapidly grew into a good-sized town.

I visited the area in May 2019 but could not locate the original site of the post office. It is now all farmland and acreages.

Innisfail.

The first settlers arrived in 1883 at what is now Innisfail, clustering around a pair of stopping houses, Constantine and Poplar Grove [1]. The land was well watered, with good pasture and plenty of spruce and poplar trees to provide lumber. When the railroad came through in 1892, it assured the success of the settlement.

The first post office opened on 1891-04-01 under the name of Poplar Grove [2]. The postmaster was Norman W. Stiles. After the railroad arrived, the post office name was changed to Innisfail on 1892-04-01. The hamlet had a number of Irish immigrants, and the new name was from Ireland [1]. Stiles continued as postmaster until 1906-11-07. The growing settlement absorbed both stopping house areas into what quickly became a town. Proof strikes of the two post office names are shown below, both from the territorial period.



Beautiful downtown Innisfail in 1895, looking toward the railroad siding.





Edmund James Dodd then took over and became the longest serving postmaster, eventually retiring in 1949. He had begun working in the post office in 1902 as a clerk, previously having homesteaded on the banks of the nearby Red Deer River. The post office burned down on 1918-11-26, and relocated from storefront to storefront several times over the next few decades. Its original location shared a building with a pool hall, real estate office, and jewelry store. The Dodd family lived on the second floor above the post office.

Shown on this page is a 1909 photograph of Innisfail's main drag, with the post office at the right side of the photo, and an enlargement to show the post office. Compare with the previous photo to see what a difference a few years made.



Alexander John Dodd succeeded his father on 1949-07-30 and served as postmaster until his death on 1952-03-31. His aunt Jennie Dodd Stiles briefly filled in as postmaster until 1952-03-31. Her husband George was Norman's son. Jennie had been working as a clerk in the post office since 1902, having started alongside her brother Edmund. She took time off for children, but once they were all in school, she returned to the post office and served four decades as a clerk.

James Walter Murphy then became postmaster until 1959-08-21. His successor was Norman Sveinson, the grandson of Icelandic homesteaders. Canada Post records cut off after this due to privacy laws.



At left is a duplex postmark from Murphy's tenure. The hammer was over-inked, showing that the duplex was not two separate pieces but a single circular device. The full cover is shown on the next page.

The sender, Bill Edgar, was a friend of my father, and also owned pastures just north of Red Deer adjacent to our ranch. The Little Red Deer River flows past Innisfail east of the town, hence the name of the Edgar ranch.

Little Red Deer Hereford Farm

W.J. Edgar & Sons

Innisfail

Alberta

*District Taxation Office
Traders Building
Calgary.
Alta.*



In the Heart of One of the Best Mixed Farming Districts in Alberta

The Innisfail post office is today in a standalone business at 50 Avenue and 53 Street, with a retail postal outlet at a Shoppers Drug Mart. On this page is a photo I took in 2012 showing the main post office. On the next page is a photo taken at the same time of the Shoppers outlet.



The Shoppers RePO was known as the Henday Centre, after Anthony Henday, the explorer who in 1754 first traversed this area.



CANADA		POSTES
POST		CANADA
Paid		Payé
Lettermail Poste-lettres		
3130932		



At right are two pictorial postmarks used by the main post office. Innisfail's official slogan was "INN our town"

Below is the Shoppers RePO handstamp.



Penhold: The Village.

Penhold was the next railroad siding north of Innisfail, and began as a standard village servicing surrounding homesteaders. The name is popularly said to come from an incident where a pioneer threw a pen at a map and the nib stuck on the spot where the village is. I consider this to be folk etymology. Far more probable is that it was named after a place in Scotland, or possibly some other place in Britain, since Scottish immigrants were prominent in this area [8, 9].

The post office opened on 1891-12-01 just as the railroad came through, with George Fleming as the first postmaster [2]. He also served as the first mayor of the village. F.C. Newlands succeeded him on 1907-07-27, and served until 1910-11-07. Below left is the proof strike of the first postmark during the territorial period. Below right is the postmark proofed during Newlands's tenure after Alberta became a province. Although the date looks like a 03 from the territorial period, it is actually an incomplete strike of 08, as can be seen by comparing the shape of the 8 with the 3 in the date above it.



The next postmaster was E.F. Morris until 1913-07-22, followed by J.H. Brown, who covered most of the war years until 1917-08-27. The longest serving postmaster was Aubrey Wood who took over the job until 1949-05-11. The post office moved into the Wood & Walker General Store [3]. From 1949 to 1951, there was a rapid turnover of three postmasters due to death and as placeholders until a permanent postmaster could be found.



One of those temporaries, in 1950, was Mrs. Elba Mary Foster who finally became permanent postmaster on 1951-03-01. At left is a sample duplex postmark from her tenure. She served until 1960-07-11, when she moved to the nearby post office at the Royal Canadian Air Force base (see page 19).

After another placeholder, Mrs. Joyce Winnifred (Lee) McKinnon took over on 1961-03-01. Canada Post records cut off after this date due to privacy laws. In 1967, the post office was upgraded to Semi-Staff, which gave the posties the status of civil servants. It moved into a standalone building.

The photograph on the next page shows the Penhold post office as it was in 1989. The woman standing in front is my mother, the late Betty Speirs. She collected a specimen postmark as shown at right.





The post office later relocated into a shopping plaza where I photographed it in May 2019.



Penhold: The Airport.

The village exists today because of its airport, and is basically a suburb of nearby Red Deer, which has sprawled southwest toward it. An airstrip began in the 1930s on the property of William and Sarah Fleming. In the early days of airmails between Calgary and Edmonton, aircraft would land here if the weather at the destination was too rough. They would then exchange mails with the trains before returning home [4].

From World War Two to the end of the Cold War, the airport was an on-again-off-again base for the military, which made for a complicated history of its post office. The airport was militarized in 1940, closed after the war but then re-opened in 1950 as a NATO base until 1965. It then became the Red Deer airport, although air force cadets continued to use the facilities. I photographed the entrance in May 2019. The new terminal is at right and one of the WW2 hangers is at left. The yellow airplane is a Harvard trainer, used for decades for rookie pilots.



The history of the airport post office was not synchronized with air operations, and underwent many changes. MPO #1307 was established 1942-10-09 as the airfield ramped up for the war. Sgt. H.E. Waddington was the first postmaster until his death on 1944-07-18. His replacement stayed only a month before being transferred, followed by two more postmasters who each served about a year. By the war's end the postmaster job was being assigned to corporals.

There was an interregnum before a post office re-opened on 1954-10-25 under the name of RCAF Station Penhold. It was a Semi-Staff position, not military, and the first postmaster was James Howard Ballentine until his retirement on 1960-06-03.



Succeeding him was Mrs. Ebba Mary Foster until her retirement on 1968-05-10. During her tenure, the post office name was changed to Mynarski Park on 1966-12-01 in honour of an RCAF pilot of World War Two. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at left.

Three more postmasters served until Mynarski Park was closed on 1992-05-27 as part of Canada Post's countrywide purge of small post offices. It then became a retail postal outlet operated by Ross Hurley until it closed on 1995-06-03. At about the same time the place was renamed Springbrook and redeveloped. Postal services were taken over by the Penhold post office [7].

Hill End.

The big hill separating the Innisfail and Red Deer districts has never had a consistent name. Cree Hill was only one of several local names. Settlers who homesteaded east of Penhold simply called it Hill End. One of the homesteaders was Edwin Songhurst, an English immigrant who had previously been a grocer before bringing his family over. He opened a general store on the homestead, and on 1902-07-01 became the first postmaster of Hill End post office. His name is mis-spelled as Soughurst in the postal records [1] but all local history references refer to the Songhurst family [2]. The photo below was taken sometime during the 1910s and shows the Hill End farmhouse post office [4].



Songhurst eventually resigned due to his many business activities and travels. On 1918-09-30, Edwin Soloman Snider took over as postmaster, and moved the post office to his farm.

The post office lasted until 1928-03-31, until it became unnecessary due to good roads. Car travel was much easier and the district became a mail route out of Innisfail.

Tindastoll.



In 1888, systematic colonization of the area west of Innisfail began by Icelandic homesteaders. They dominated the area so much that the Icelandic language was spoken more than English until the 1960s when the last of the colonists died off. With the help of a local pioneer L.M. Sage, a non-Icelander who had preceded them, they set up a mail drop called Cache City, named after Sage's son [5]. Once a week Sage went into Poplar Grove, as Innisfail then was, carrying the mail. It was entirely informal, not a Canadian Post Office operation.

Sage was a horse thief with multiple convictions, and his son Cache was no better, so it was surprising that the Icelanders trusted him with the mails. Jumping ahead a few years later, Johann Bjornson, the first official postmaster of the Tindastoll district, had an armed confrontation with Sage while Bjornson was carrying mails. The dispute was actually over a stolen unbranded filly, but when Sage pointed a revolver at Bjornson, the latter replied that if he didn't return with the mails, the Icelanders knew his route and would come looking for him. Sage holstered his weapon, and the filly mysteriously re-appeared on Bjornson's farm the next morning [6].

Tindastoll was a farm house post office, opened on 1892-06-01, and Johann Bjornson was its only postmaster (photo at left). The post office was named after the district in Iceland where the majority of colonists had come from. Bjornson hauled the mail once a week from Innisfail, even before the post office was officially opened, having taken over from Sage. Once Markerville rose to ascendancy, Tindastoll's days were numbered, and on 1912-12-31 it closed permanently [2].

Markerville.

This nearby settlement displaced Tindastoll because of its large creamery that supplied most of west-central Alberta with milk and cheese. Although it was purely Icelandic, the colonists named it in honour of C.P. Marker, the Dairy Commissioner for Northwest Territories. (Alberta was not separated out of the NWT until 1905.) With a core business, it quickly grew into a village, whereas Tindastoll was never more than a few farmhouses and a cemetery.

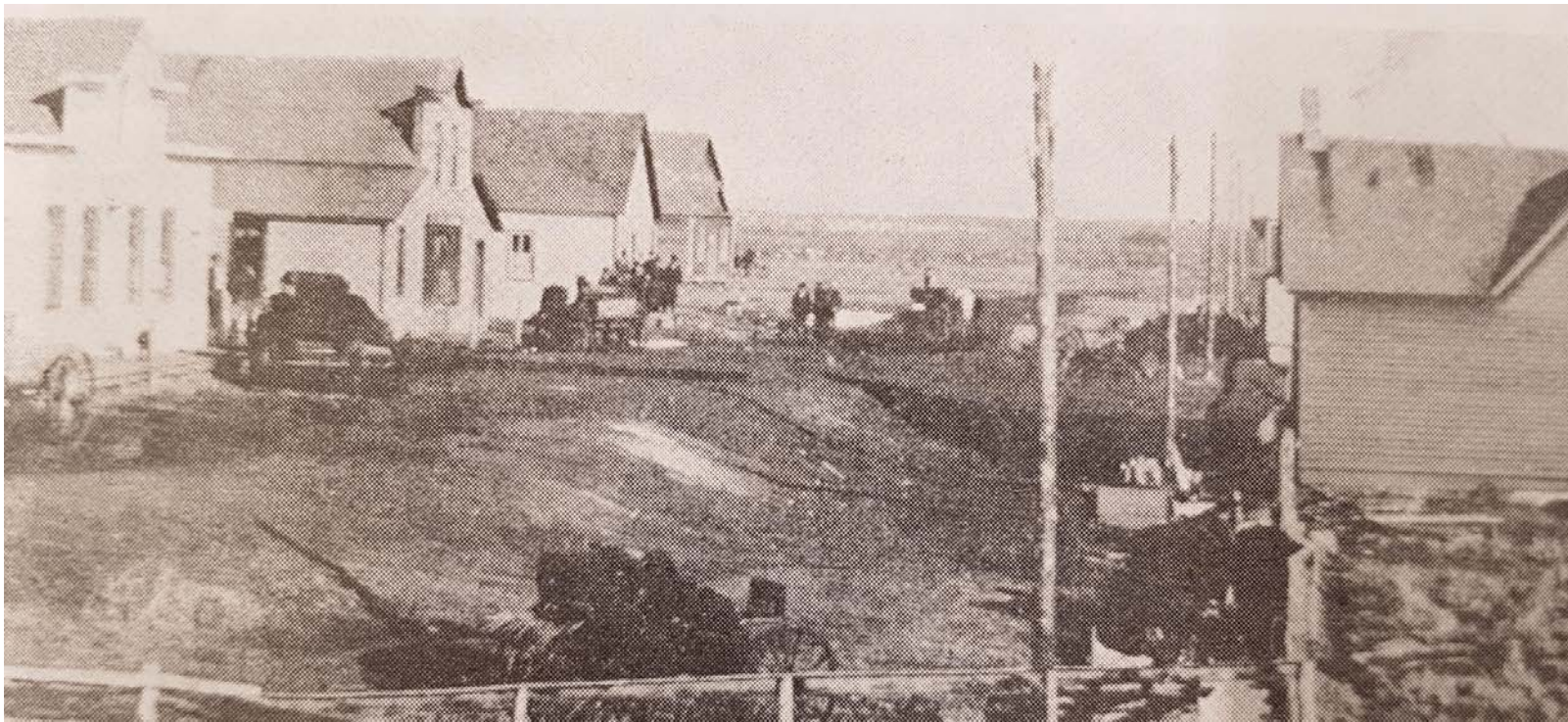


On 1902-12-01, the Markerville post office opened in the store of Oliver Benedictson. For reasons not recorded in local histories, he gave up the post office on 1908-12-07 to his neighbour, another storekeeper named Gremur E. Johnson. He was a long-server, staying on the job as postmaster until 1940-06-27, when he sold the store and post office to Clifford Royden Gremm. At left is a proof strike of a postmark from the provincial period.

Gremm was born in Alberta of German parents. After working in various retail establishments elsewhere, he settled in Markerville. The post office was in his store until 1957, when good roads killed the business. Gremm then moved the post office into his house. He also operated school buses, so his wife Lindia actually ran the post office [5].

They retired on 1970-01-15, and the post office then went to Mrs Opal E. Bradley. Canada Post records cut off after this date due to privacy laws. She was the last operator of the post office until 1991-02-12, when it permanently closed [7]. Since then mail delivery has been by a rural route from Innisfail.

This photograph shows Markerville circa 1910. At left is the Benedictson store where the post office had been located. Next to it, second from left, is the Johnson store where the post office was at the time the photo was taken. Fourth from left, at the far end of the street, was the Johnson house where the post office was between 1957 and 1970.



Betty Speirs posing in front of the Bradley house in 1989, the final location of the Markerville post office.



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