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POSTAL HISTORY OF ALBERTA: WEST CENTRAL DISTRICT, PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in JAPH issues #9, 18, and 19.]

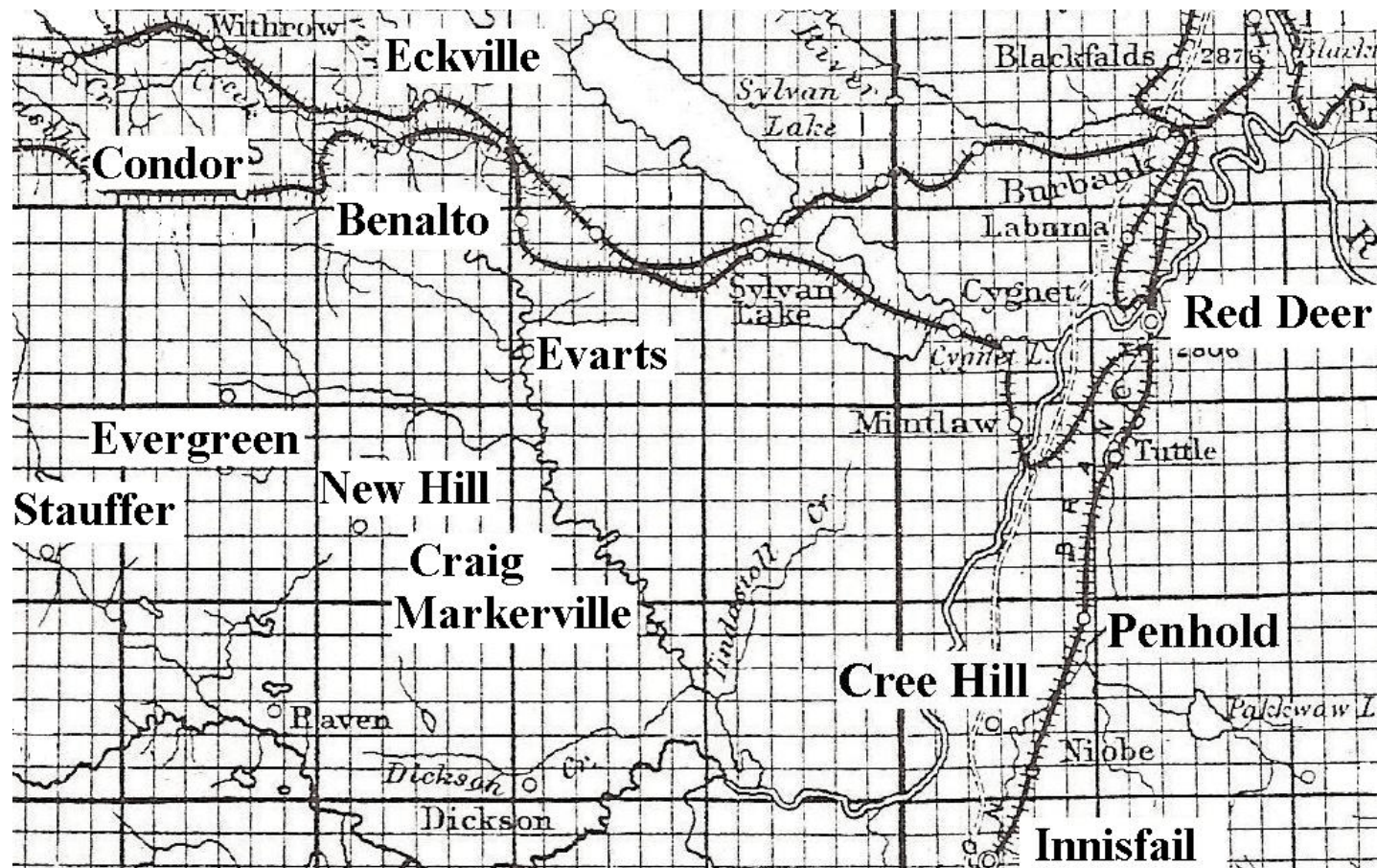
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The Medicine River flows through west-central Alberta in a generally southeasterly direction before emptying into the Red Deer River. It meanders considerably within its valley. The middle section of the valley was fertile enough and settled in the early 1900s, with several villages and hamlets established. The western side was wet and boggy, particularly in the Stauffer and Evergreen area.

Unfortunately the railroads went far north of the district, preventing any sizeable village from developing. When the automobile took over, the main east-west highway running between Sylvan Lake and Rocky Mountain House, now called Highway 11, also bypassed the district. The development of good grid roads killed the villages and their post offices, since it was much easier to drive to the bigger towns. A few hamlets survive, but postal service for the area is now one retail postal outlet and rural free delivery.

The map shows all the pioneer post offices in the area as well as existing ones.



The modern situation is shown on this map.



Evarts.

What became the hamlet of Evarts was first settled by Lucius and Listella Evarts in 1900. Their homestead was adjacent to a ford on the Medicine River, a natural crossing point. Other homesteaders followed and by 1902 there were sufficient numbers to justify a petition to establish a post office.

Peter Harold Forham and George W. Robinson opened a general store prior to the post office. The store was on the Braton homestead. It was built in anticipation that a railroad would come through Evarts. Instead, the line passed further north, dooming the settlement to nothing more than hamlet status at best. Before the post office, local settlers would sign a list at the store. Whoever was traveling to Red Deer, at that time most of a day's travel, would pick up their mail and bring it back. The letters were dumped into a box and store customers would rummage through it for their letters. Registered mail stayed in Red Deer until the addressee called for it in person [1].

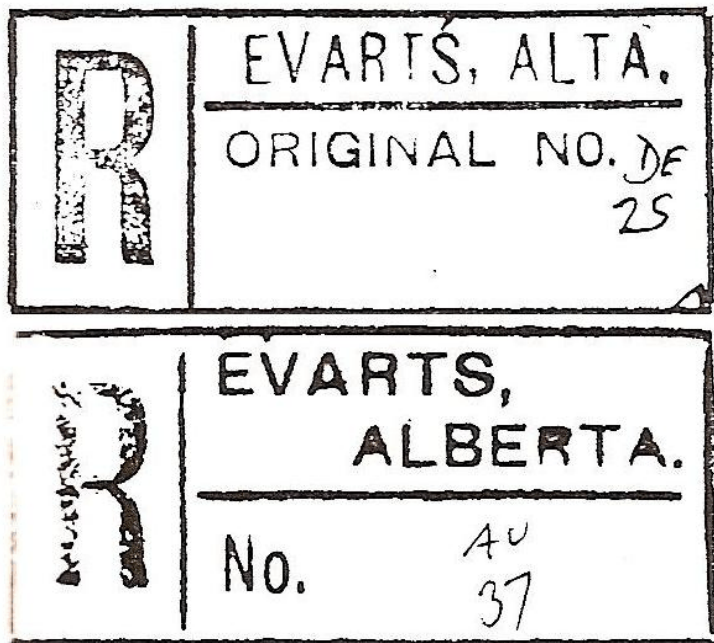
Lucius Evarts undertook the correspondence with the Canadian Post Office, today Canada Post. The settlers could not agree on a name for the post office, the two main proposals of which were Medicine Valley and Braton. The CPO officials decided to call it Evarts, since he was their contact and had been the first settler. Ironically, shortly after the post office was opened, Evarts moved to Penticton, British Columbia, in 1906 due to his poor health. He died there in 1912.

The post office opened in the store on 1903-07-01 with George Robinson as the first postmaster [2]. It was the first post office in the middle Medicine River district. Robinson sold his interest in the store to Forham in December 1903, although his official resignation date was 1904-01-15. Exactly one month after that, Robinson died suddenly while visiting family in his native USA. Forham then became postmaster until 1905-11-20.

P.H. Robinson, probably no relation to George, took over the store and post office until 1909-12-14. By then it was becoming obvious that Evarts would never amount to much. The postmastership began turning over every few years along with the store. Most of those who flipped the store/post office to someone else then migrated to Benalto and Eckville, both on railway lines, or further afield. The post office was closed between 1920 and 1925.

Andrew Love Stewart and his wife Elizabeth had opened a new general store in 1922, having arrived from Scotland. Andrew became postmaster on 1925-05-19 and served until his death on 1944-08-25, nearly two decades of stability. In 1937, the store and post office burned to the ground and both were closed for several months. Elizabeth's brother lived in Oyen approximately 300 km east-southeast of Evarts. His old law office was moved to Evarts to become the new store and post office, a remarkable achievement considering what country roads were like then.

Below are proof strikes of registration marks. They are dated 1925, when Stewart took over the post office, and 1937, obviously a replacement due to the fire.





Mail service was via the Benalto railway station and there was no rural free delivery. Occasionally during blizzards Andrew had to carry the mailbags on his back to and from Benalto because the roads were blocked by snow drifts.

After Andrew's death, his widow Elizabeth briefly became postmaster until her death on 1945-11-24. Once again the postmastership began turning over until Alfred Reeves took over on 1949-04-09.

He was a long server until 1968-03-31 when his ill health forced the closure of the store. The undated photo shows Reeves picking up the Evarts mail at the Benalto railway station.

His wife Jean acted as postmaster until 1969-06-30 when the post office closed permanently. By then, good roads had favoured Benalto because it was on Highway 11 and it was just as quick for farmers to drive there as for Evarts. Postal service to Evarts is now a rural route out of Eckville. The photo below shows the final day of the post office.



Benalto.

The hamlet of Benalto has the only surviving post office in the middle section of the Medicine River valley. It had the advantage of first being on a railroad, and nowadays on the major east-west route in central Alberta, Highway 11. The name Benalto is a compound word invented from the Gaelic 'ben' for hill, and the Latin 'alto' for high, a reference to its location on a hill. It was so named in 1911 by surveyors laying out track for the Canadian Pacific Railway [3]. Settlers began arriving in 1911.



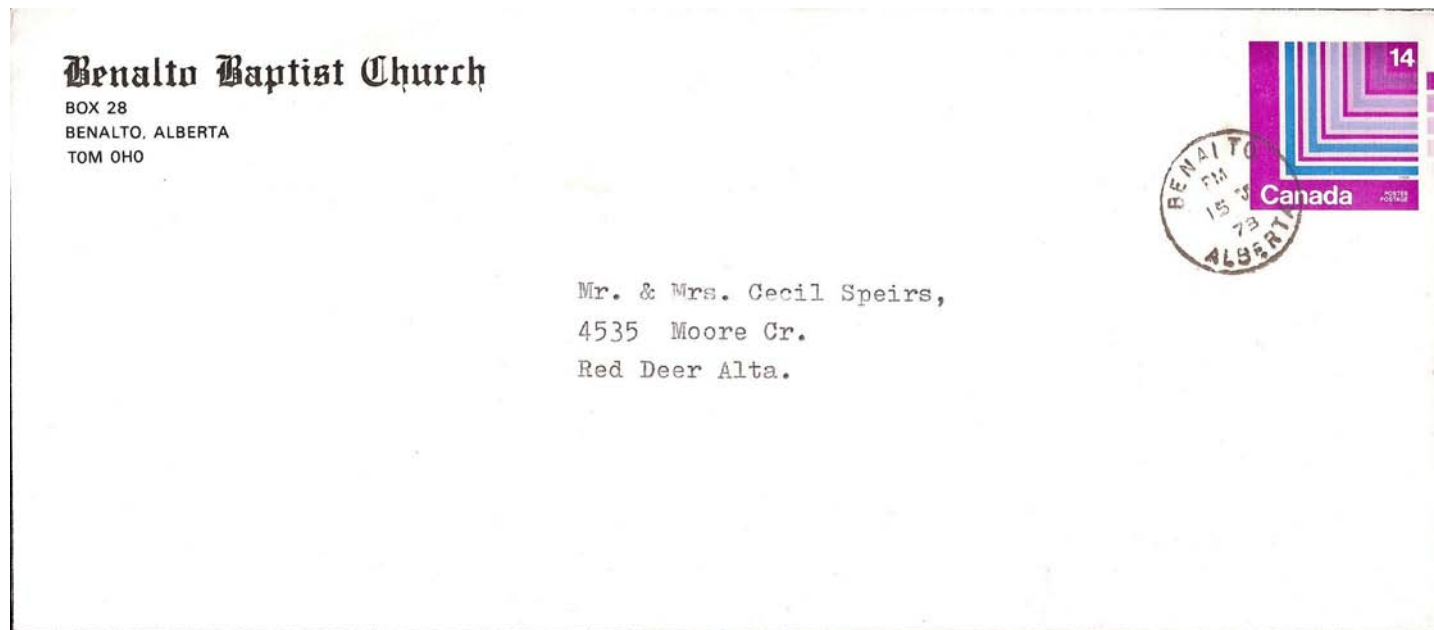
John S. "Jack" Simpson had previously briefly worked in the Evarts post office. In 1916, he saw a brighter future in the new settlement of Benalto and moved there. He built the first store and post office, which opened on 1916-07-01. Simpson then saw a brighter future as a grain elevator agent, so on 1918-02-11 the postmastership passed to William W. McRae [1, 2]. At left is the proof strike of the first Benalto postmark.

McRae didn't stay long. The store and post office went to the partnership of V.B. Buchanan and his brother-in-law Arthur Kinna. On 1919-12-05, Buchanan became postmaster. The partnership was dissolved three years later because Buchanan wanted to concentrate on his investment in the Benalto Hotel. Kinna became postmaster on 1923-10-15 when he and his wife Emma bought out the store [4].

Arthur was stricken ill and died on 1928-07-16 while still in office. His widow Emma, with two young children to support, became the postmaster and held the position until 1945-06-14. The postmastership represented a steady source of income in those days before any social programmes. Her only surviving child was Josephine Ruth, who married an RCAF veteran Donald James Gadsden Wilkes. Ruth and Don bought the store, and he took over as postmaster from his mother-in-law. Once the children were school age, Ruth became the postmaster on 1957-12-01 until the store was sold in 1963.

W. Roussel was the new owner and on 1963-02-01 his wife Flora Maude became the new postmaster. From there, George Ralph Lougheed took over on 1969-05-20, then Mrs P.J. Knowles on 1975-01-25, after which postal records cut off due to privacy laws. On 1991-31-07, the post office ceased to exist but re-opened the next day as a retail postal outlet [5]. The post outlet continued as of 2019 as part of the Benalto General Store.

This cover was sent to my parents in 1973. I was born in nearby Eckville and our family had many friends in the Benalto-Evarts area.



This cover was sent from Ponoka, north of Red Deer, on 1983-04-19 using a Red Deer meter mark, probably supplied by the ATB head office in Red Deer. It was mistakenly addressed to my father at Benalto, where we never lived. From there it was forwarded to Eckville, but we had moved to Red Deer two decades previously. However my father was well known there so the postie readdressed it to Red Deer with the correct street address but the wrong postal code.

Alberta

TREASURY BRANCHES OF ALBERTA
Office of the Inspection Department
P.O. Box 2050
Ponoka, Alberta, Canada
T0C 2H0



4535 - Moore Crescent *Jeff Schull*
Red Deer, A.B. T4N 3J3

My mother, the late Betty Speirs, posed in front of the Benalto post office in 1986. She was a postmark collector and my parents often toured the rural areas.





Postmarks from the retail postal outlet era. The photo is circa 2018 from Google Street View.



New Hill.

The New Hill district was first homesteaded in 1904. The majority of settlers were Swedish immigrants who called the district Nya Bachen. When it came time to establish a post office, the Ottawa authorities used the English translation, New Hill, which described the surrounding terrain.



The first postmaster was a Swede named John E. Falk [2]. The post office opened on 1908-08-01 in his farmhouse. On the next page is a photo of the original post office [6]. Notice the letter box by the door. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

At that time, transportation lines were to the southeast via Markerville, and beyond that to Innisfail. Roads were non-existent, so Falk walked the 20 km to Markerville once a week, carrying the mail on his back [6]. The post office was in the Falk farmhouse, and settlers called in for their mail.

Falk gave up the postmastership on 1910-09-29 to A. Johnson, who only held the position briefly. From there it went to the farmhouse of William H. Stringer, an Englishman. He became postmaster on 1913-05-28, serving until 1926-04-14, although the official closing date of the post office was 1930-12-31.

Stringer's farmhouse was half the distance to Markerville, plus the roads had gradually improved. During his tenure the railroads came through Eckville (CNR) and Benalto (CPR), while Markerville never had a rail connection. Mail distribution therefore switched to the north. After the post office closed, New Hill became a rural route out of Eckville. Good roads killed off any potential for the hamlet to grow.



Craig.

The first settlers were mostly Norwegian, arriving circa 1902. A meeting was later held to organize an application for a post office. While the settlers were discussing a name for it, early homesteader Mert Craig was seen through the house window, arriving late for the meeting on horseback. Someone suggested his name for the post office, and in the absence of any better suggestions, so it was [6].

The Craig post office was opened on 1905-08-01 in the farmhouse of Ejnar P. “Ed” Pederslie, a Norwegian immigrant [2]. The mail came from Markerville en route to New Hill, carried by John Falk. Julius C. Wilson became postmaster on 1909-04-01 and the post office moved to his house, shown below in the photo. His wife, only recorded in local histories as “M.C.”, did the actual work. Numerous crop failures due to bad weather discouraged the Wilsons. Julius resigned on 1911-12-14, although the official closing wasn’t until 1912-06-30, when it became a rural route.



Stauffer.

This area was named after C.H. Stauffer, who had a trading post patronized by the Nakoda and Cree tribes back in the fur trading days [7]. The first homesteaders arrived shortly after 1900. There were enough of them that a post office was opened on 1907-05-01 with Mrs. R. Ducommun as the first postmaster [2]. She gave up the position on 1910-06-06 and it went to Mrs. Elizabeth J. Muir, who only kept it a brief time.

From there it went to the house of Mrs. Mollie S. Leavitt on 1911-10-16. She and her husband Mazzini had settled in the district in 1907, having come from Minnesota. She gave up the Stauffer post office on 1919-03-05 when the Leavitt family moved to nearby Butte, further west and closer to Rocky Mountain House. They had a store and post office there which in time passed to their son and his wife [8, 9].

Mrs. Alice Heare took over as postmaster until 1923-03-25. They came from Missouri in 1918 and bought out the Leavitt farm, so the post office stayed in the same house [9]. From there, the post office shuffled back and forth, frequently returning to the Sparks family but with intermissions at other farm houses [2]. Mrs. Fanny Sparks was postmaster for a few months, then handed over to Mrs. L. McKenzie before taking the position back on 1926-11-01. Below left is the proof strike of a split-circle ordered in 1926 for the Sparks tenure. Below right is a postmark showing it was still in use decades later, in 1972.



The second time around, Fanny Sparks stayed with the job until 1943-10-05, keeping the post office in a store. Norman William Doll was postmaster until 1946-07-11, after which the post office went back to the Sparks, this time until 1948-04-19 with Jack Lloyd Everett Sparks as postmaster.

After a brief placeholder came and went, Marino and Mary Brandson bought the store. He was an Icelandic immigrant who had come to the district in 1922 as a teenager with his family, where they farmed and lumbered. Marino became postmaster on 1948-10-09 and Mary was the courier, bringing the mails from Condor, a village north of Highway 11. Marino stayed until 1972-02-11, when his wife succeeded him. Canada Post records cut off after this date but the post office was still operating in 1998 and must have closed a few years later [5]. Below is a photo of it in 1986 with Betty Speirs.



Evergreen.

The land was blanketed with spruce trees, hence the name for the post office. It was roughly halfway between New Hill and Stauffer. The post office opened on 1910-01-01 with William Van Horn Sr as the first postmaster. It was located in a building on his farm used as a combination crossroads store and post office. The mail came from Evarts, with his son Charles as the mail courier [9].

John A. McNeil took over as postmaster on 1914-09-02, then passed it over to Clifford H. Wheeler on 1922-05-04. The post office then stayed a while with Arthur Atkinson from 1923-10-08 until his wife Mrs. Katherine Atkinson became postmaster on 1928-05-18 until 1938-10-31 when the farm and store once more changed hands.

Joseph Ebl was postmaster until 1960-12-08. The Canada Post records list him as Ebb, but the local histories called him and his family Ebl [9]. He gave up the store and post office when he retired to Kelowna. George Kenneth Rindal was the penultimate postmaster until 1966-07-18. The last postmaster was Earl Robert Stewart. The post office closed permanently on 1969-07-07, killed off by good roads which meant that neighbouring post offices were only a brief drive away. Evergreen had never been a village, just a crossroads.

Epilogue.

The district from Benalto and Evarts westward to Stauffer presented the homesteaders with spruce forests and swamps. Drought was never a problem but drainage was, and the roads were mostly mud tracks. The development of the good graveled grid roads killed off all but one post office. The bypassing of the area, first by railroads and then by paved highways, meant that there would be no development beyond farms. Today the district is on side roads only traveled by local farmers.

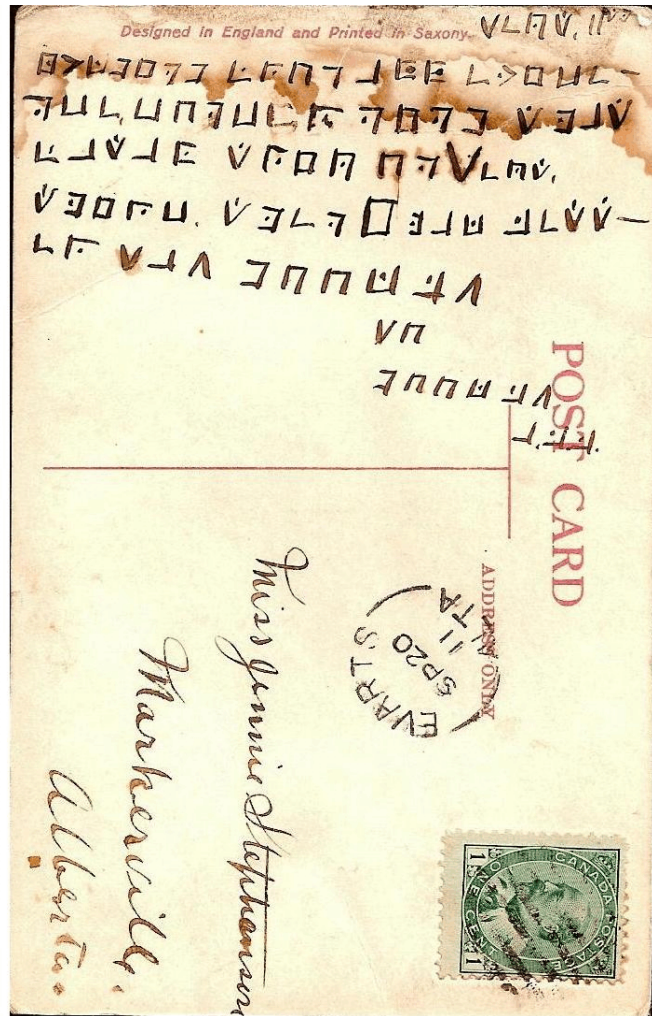
And Now For Something Completely Different.

An interesting research project of mine was a postcard sent from Evarts to Markerville. (As an aside, my mother's grandfather August Koski was the first person to carry the mails to Evarts.) The postcard has a nice Evarts postmark dated September 20, 1911, but is badly waterstained along one side. What made it worth saving is that it has a message written in pigpen cipher.

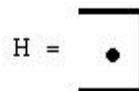
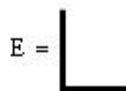
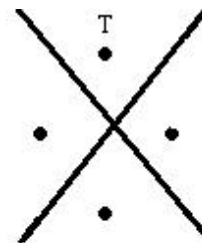
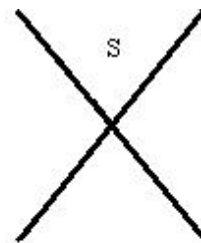
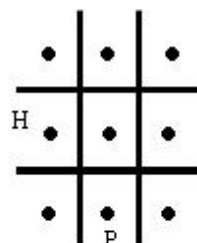
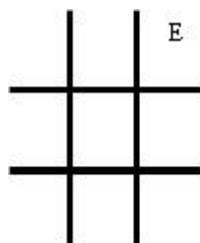
Why was it sent in cipher in the first place? It seems fairly obvious that the sender and recipient desired privacy. Then as now, Evarts and Markerville are small hamlets, the type of place where everybody knows everybody else.

The postcard is addressed to Miss Jennie Stephenson. When I first examined it, it seemed probable that someone was courting her or the sender was a close friend. By coding it, the postmasters at either end, and the paterfamilias at the receiving end, would not be able to pry into Jennie's business.

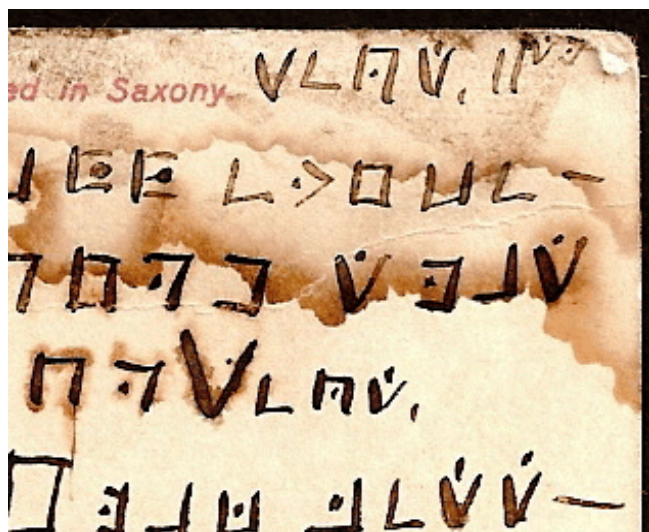
A substitution cipher familiar to our grandparents' generation was the pigpen cipher. This type of cipher dates back centuries. Instead of substituting letters, the pigpen cipher substitutes symbols for the letters of the words. Even today it is difficult to type these symbols, so the cipher is handwritten.



The basic structure of the pigpen cipher is shown at right. It was cribbing that gave me a beginning in cracking the cipher. The sender had dated the letter and the obvious translation was 'Sept 11th', as shown in the close-up. This gave me the letters s, e, p, t, and h, arranged as shown on the pigpen cipher matrix.



etcetera



After that, it got more troublesome, so I set up a spreadsheet to help me run through the permutations faster. Along the top, I set up a blank pigpen cipher. Below it, I typed the message with each cell beneath it representing that symbol. I tied the blank cell to its symbol on the blank pigpen. Then all I had to do was insert letters under the blank pigpens and the spreadsheet would automatically fill in the appropriate cells below the message. If it wasn't the correct letter, then I backspaced out the letter and tried another.

No more scribbling on endless sheets of paper trying to make it fit. If only Miss Jennie and the postcard sender could have seen me trying to crack their message on a laptop computer! I wasn't able to get a complete translation of the cipher, but I got enough to get a general idea of the message. My best effort is shown on the next page.

The sender made some typos, conflated letters with different words, and hyphenated words due to lack of space at the edge of the postcard. I corrected them the best I could. It seems that the sender mixed up C and D, which are the same symbol except that D had a dot in the symbol.

Like most codebreakers, I had to do some guessing and ignore some parts of the mechanical translation where it was obvious the sender couldn't read his own cipher. The abrupt discontinuity between the two sentences suggests to me that the sender may have intended to write more but was interrupted in the middle of his message and forgot his place when he went back to finish it.

The postcard concludes with "A.B.B." which are probably his initials. Rereading the decrypted message, I am left wondering if this was a breakup, a final goodbye between lovers or friends. But they are all dead now, and only this small piece of postal history remains to record their fleeting shadows upon the stage of life.

Decrypted postcard.

A	C	E
G	I	K
M	O	

B.	D.	F.
H.	J.	L.
N.	P.	R.

	S	
U		
	Y	

	T.	
V.		

= not used

Message

S E P. T. 11 T. H.

J. U D. G I N. G F. R. O M A L. L. E V. I C E

N. C E C O N. C K R. N. I N. G T. H. A T.

F. A T. A L. T. R. I P. O N. S E P. T.

T. H. I R. C T. H. E N. I H. A D. B. E T. T. -

E R. S A Y G O O D. B. Y

S O

G O O D. B. Y

A B. B.

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- 1] various authors (1977) *ALONG THE BURNT LAKE TRAIL*. Published by Burnt Lake History Society, Red Deer, Alberta. Pages 560 to 564, 600 to 601, 616, 674 to 677, 681, 690
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- 4] various authors (1979) *HOMESTEADS AND HAPPINESS* Published by Eckville and District Historical Society, Alberta. Page 360
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- 9] various authors (1980) *FROM HOOFPRIINTS TO HIGHWAYS* Published by Leslieville and Districts Historical Society. Pages 572, 615 to 616, and 648