

# **JOURNAL OF ALBERTA POSTAL HISTORY**

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# **POSTAL HISTORY OF CENTRAL ALBERTA: EAST OF HIGHWAY 2, PART 1**

by Dale Speirs

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Highway 2 is the main north-south route in Alberta, alongside the Calgary to Edmonton railroad, which in turn was a pioneer stagecoach trail in the 1800s. The east side between Crossfield and Innisfail, going eastwards about 40 km, is mostly flatlands dissected by post-glacial meltwater valleys. The land is the transition zone between the semi-arid southern Alberta and the parkland belt where drought was normally not a problem.

After the Calgary-Edmonton railroad was built, other north-south railroads were built 40 km or so to the east on a parallel course. In the days before good roads, 20 km was a day's round trip for grain haulers using horses and wagons. A dozen or more farmhouse post offices sprang up in the area between the two railroads to service the homesteaders. They are all gone now after paved highways east-west were built and allowed swift access to bigger towns.

Below is a map I prepared showing all the post offices east of modern Highway 2, both pioneer and modern. The small squares are a mile on a side and are called sections. Homesteaders were granted a quarter-section for settlement. Highway 2 and the Calgary-Edmonton railway wobble back and forth across the Fifth Meridian line. The Acme district was west of the Fourth Meridian, which is the Alberta-Saskatchewan border.



Figure 2 is a map of the modern district and shows the remaining post offices as of 2019. The land in between the two vertical rows of post offices is still well populated by grain farmers and ranchers. The east-west roads are paved and it is only a half-hour drive at most to a post office. That is why all of the post offices in the central area died out.



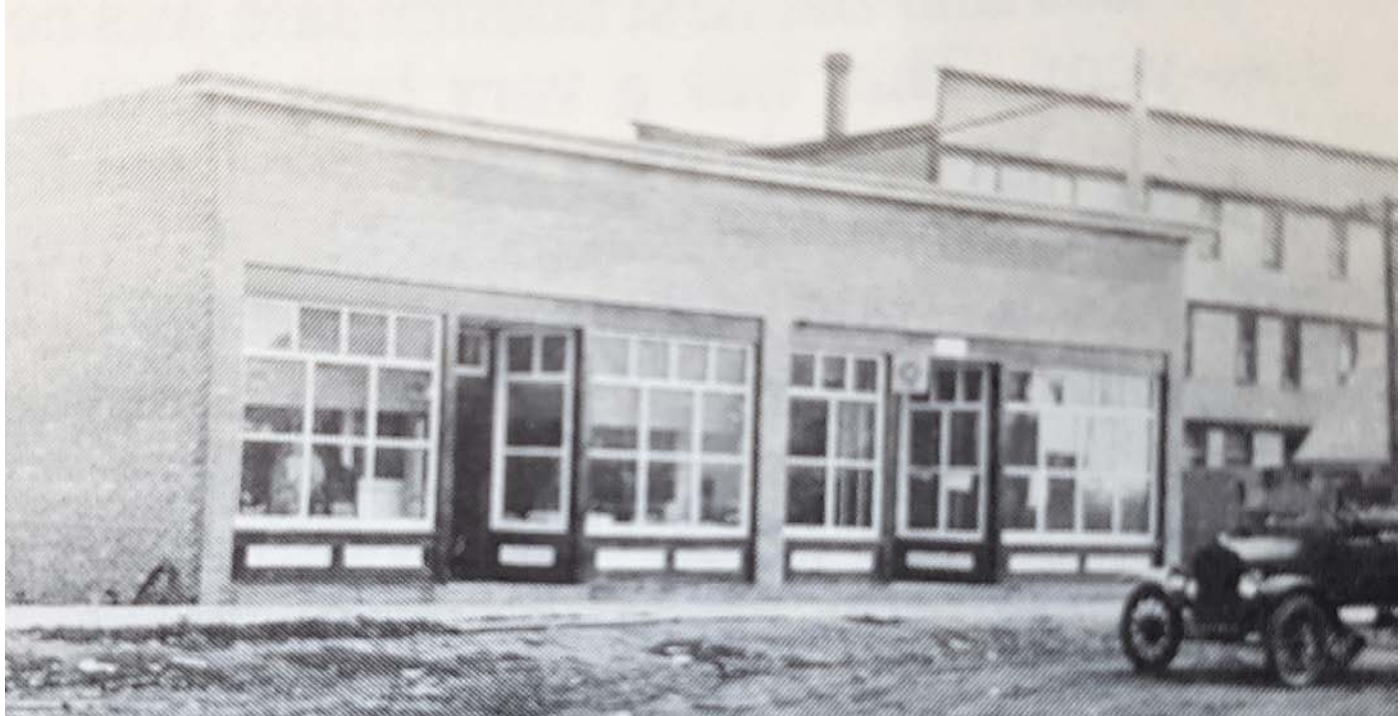
## Acme.

The post office at Acme was opened on 1905-08-01, a month before Alberta became a province. It actually predated the village of Acme, which wasn't incorporated until 1910 when the Canadian National Railway reached the settlement. The prior postal service and pioneer settlement were briefly known as Tapscott, a family name of the first postmaster, Mrs Elizabeth Ellen Stewart Smith. However, official records of the Canadian Post Office only ever called it Acme [1]. CNR executives named the new siding Acme because at the time it was the most northerly point on the line, which went no further for several years. A selection of early postmark proof strikes is shown below.



Smith was a young widow with five sons and a daughter. Almost certainly she was given the appointment as a form of social assistance. She and each of her sons had a quarter-section of land, and the post office was located on her homestead, not in the village. Her sons couriered the mail to and from Carstairs [2]. She became ill and resigned on 1908-06-15, later dying in 1910.

The postmastership then changed hands twice to short-term placeholders until Arthur Wheeler took it over on 1912-07-23 and moved the post office into his grocery store in the townsite. The photo below shows the building in 1922. Wheeler became involved in numerous business and social activities, and found the post office too much extra work. On 1936-02-22 the store and post office passed to James Sedley Meek, who had been the assistant postmaster under Wheeler [2].





Meek was a Nova Scotian who came out west for his health and did a variety of odd jobs, including postmastership of nearby Sterlingville (which see further in this article). He arrived in Acme in 1911 as assistant postmaster. Like most pioneers, he had a variety of jobs to make ends meet. He served as postmaster until 1948-10-16 when he retired on pension. In April of that year, the Acme post office became what was known as Semi-Staff, a standalone office with staff as civil servants. The photo shows the post office as it was in 1940. This was the same building as on the previous page but with awnings added.



After a brief placeholder came and went, Clarence Somerville Smith took the postmastership on 1949-03-07. He put in long service and retired on 1975-05-15. Mrs Catherine O'Hanlon Sinclair then took over. She had been the assistant postmaster since 1959. Beyond this, postal records cut off for privacy reasons. Two sample postmarks are shown below. Notice the inverted date on the 1941 CDS postmark.





During the 1970s, the post office moved into its present building, which I photographed when I visited Acme in September 2019.



## Bircham.



Bircham was never anything more than a hamlet at a railroad siding which was on a short bypass a few kilometres southeast of Acme. The origin of its name is uncertain but was probably after an English town. Although the railroad came through in 1913, the post office didn't open until 1925-04-01, with Mereal Lavoie as the first postmaster. He was an Ontario immigrant who had arrived the year before with his family and opened a general store [2]. Since the hamlet was on a main line, it had mail delivery six days a week. The proof strike of its first postmark is shown at left.

Mereal died of heart disease while still in office on 1937-09-18. One of his daughters was briefly postmaster but it was another daughter, Alice Mary, who took over on 1937-10-31 and held the position until 1942-01-14. She passed it over to her mother Yvonne Marie who kept the postmastership until 1947-02-24, when her son Leo Joseph came marching home from the war. The store closed as good roads killed the trade, since Acme was only a few minutes driving time.

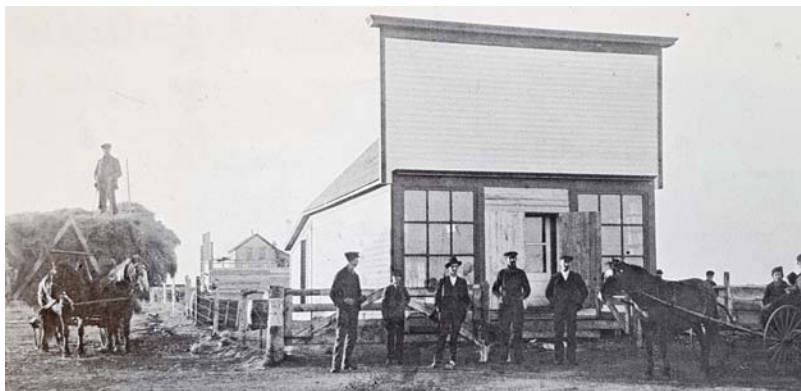
Leo became postmaster in name, but his wife Violet actually ran the post office [2]. After the store closed, Leo moved the post office into a purpose-built structure. The hamlet continued to decline, so on 1966-10-12 the post office closed permanently. Mail service is now a rural route.

## Sterlingville.



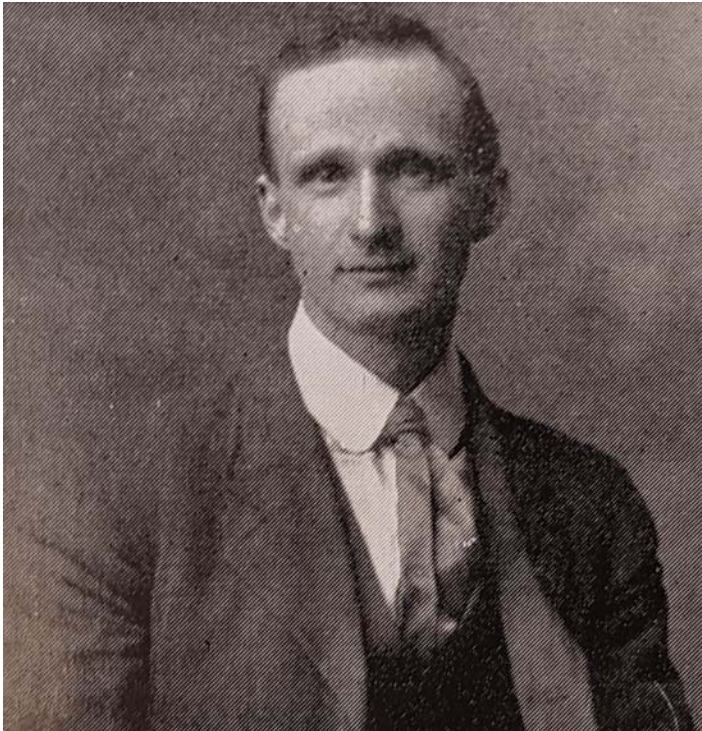
This post office was named after a pioneer family who homesteaded in the district in 1901. A hamlet developed and on 1908-10-01 a post office was opened in the general store of James Sedley Meek [1]. The proof strike of its first postmark is shown at left.

The photographs below show the store and post office in 1908. The photo at left was just after the building had been completed, while the photo at right shows it after the sign painter had come and gone.



When the railroad came through nearby Acme, a goodly portion of the hamlet's businesses moved there. Meek saw the writing on the wall and traded the store to Albert Okell for a quarter-section of land [2].

Okell was postmaster from 1913-02-22 until 1919-04-29 when he sold the store to Leonard Sterling, a son of the original homesteaders [2]. A few months later the store burned down [3]. Since the hamlet was in its death throes, Sterling never rebuilt, and the post office closed permanently on 1919-11-27. District residents either went to Acme or Carstairs for business.



James Sedley Meek, postmaster at just about everywhere in the district.



## Ena.

This district was settled mainly by Scots from Greenock. The derivation of the name is unknown but it was a common female name in Scotland, and was probably named after someone. This was a farmhouse post office, not a hamlet, in the residence of the only postmaster James Millar, a Scottish homesteader [4].



The post office was open from 1908-06-15 to 1911-11-20, after which mail delivery became a rural route out of Carstairs.

Millar was also the mail courier on two routes, one from Carstairs and the other through the equally small post office of Rumworth (next page). Below is the proof strike of the Ena postmark. The photo shows the house it was in. There is a sign above the door identifying the post office (illegible in photo).



## **Rumworth.**



The Rumworth post office opened on 1908-06-15 in the farmhouse of its first postmaster John Seville. The Seville family had emigrated from England and the post office was named after their hometown. John and his three sons each filed for a quarter-section of land. The parents returned to England in 1910 where Mrs Seville (first name never given in any local histories) died a few days after their return [2]. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

The three sons stayed on their land. One of them, Herbert, was the mail courier for many years. Crossfield was the distribution point for the mails. After his father left, Herbert moved the post office to his farmhouse. Until 1911-10-23 he was the postmaster as well as the courier. John Storey then took over and was the final postmaster until 1915-01-31, when the post office was permanently closed and replaced by a rural route. He was a blacksmith but operated from his homestead.

## **Noelton.**

This district was known as Bancroft after a school, but the first postmaster Albert Faulkner named the post office after his hometown of Noel, Nova Scotia. It opened on 1905-01-01 and was located in a crossroads store on the Faulkner homestead. It was never a settlement. Prior to the post office, anyone going to Carstairs would take outgoing mail of local homesteaders and bring back incoming mail. It would be held at someone's house and others would pick through the bag for their mail.

Faulkner sold the store to James Meek and the post office to T.C. Brown, who became the new postmaster on 1912-09-11. Faulkner then retired to British Columbia with his wife. Brown was a placeholder, and the post office permanently closed on 1912-12-31. As with the other small places, district residents then either went to Acme or Carstairs for business.



### **Siebertville.**



The Siebertville post office operated from 1908-06-15 until 1917-10-20 on the homestead of Levi Siebert, its only postmaster. It was one of three farmhouse post offices near to each other all of which opened on the same day, the other two being Ena and Rumworth. Despite its name, it was only ever a farmhouse post office, not a settlement [2, 3]. The proof strike of its first postmark is shown at left.

### **Linden.**

The Linden district was settled by Mennonites in the first few decades of the 1900s, mostly German-speaking Russian nationals fleeing oppression. The post office opened surprisingly late, on 1949-03-01, with Samuel Toews as the first postmaster [1]. It was named after the tree, common in the Old Country whence the Mennonites came.

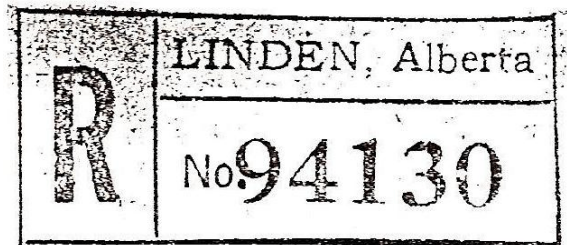
Prior to the post office opening, a group of residents took turns bringing in mail from nearby Acme, about 10 km southeast. Toews set up an unofficial post office in his shoe shop circa 1946 and rented box numbers for \$2 per year to thirty or so local farmers. He also sold stamps and Bank of Montreal money orders. Each morning a local truck driver who made a daily run to Calgary would halt in front of the store and beep his horn. Toews then ran outside with a handful of letters for the driver to mail in Calgary [5].

Because Linden was not an organized settlement and the day of farmhouse post offices had passed long ago, the residents had difficulty getting approval for a post office instead of a rural route out of Acme. Just as World War Two began, a cheese factory and general store were established and Linden began to develop. This helped the residents convince the Canadian Post Office to open a local post office.

Samuel Toews resigned as postmaster on 1958-01-27 and another family member, Harvey Reimer Toews took over for about a year. From there it went to Alvin Milton Toews on 1959-04-29, followed by Alfred Jacob Esau on 1963-07-01, and Mrs. Joyce June Penner on 1966-05-15. It returned to the Toews family when Alva Toews became postmaster on 1968-06-11, after which Canada Post records cut off because of privacy laws. The photo below shows the author's mother, the late Betty Speirs, at the post office in 1989.



The Linden post office remained open as of 2019.



Proof strike of the registration marking.



## Stern.

This farmhouse post office was just a few kilometres northeast of modern-day Linden. The origin of the name was never given in any local histories nor were there any homesteaders by that name, so it must be assumed that it is the German word for 'star'. This is not an unreasonable guess because German was the primary language of the Mennonite diaspora who dominated that area until about the 1920s when the English language became dominant as the younger generation began to come of age [2, 5].

The only official postmaster listed was Jacob F. Friesen from the opening on 1907-11-01 of the post office to 1908-04-13, when the records have a cryptic mention 're-appointed'. The proof strike of its postmark is shown below. The post office, however, was not closed until 1916-07-31. Friesen was away from the district for long periods of time. He moved to Didsbury in 1911, then to Acme in 1916, and often resided in California [2]. Cornelius F. Toews couriered the mail and Peter W. Toews acted as unofficial postmaster during Friesen's absence [5]. After the post office closed, the residents had to get their mail from Acme.



## Sunnyslope.



Continuing further northwest of Acme, the Sunnyslope post office opened on 1903-12-01 with Peter P. Griesbrecht as the first postmaster.

He named it Sonniges Thale but the Canadian Post Office translated it into English as Sunnyslope. It was not an exact translation but both names described the physical landscape [5].

During Griesbrecht's tenure the post office was on his farm. It did enough parcel business that he constructed a separate building for it because the house was too full. Griesbrecht was also the mail courier, originally getting the mail from Didsbury.

The photograph showed the original post office building as it was in the 1970s, during its final decay.



When the railroad arrived at Acme in 1910, the distribution point changed over to there. In the later era of good gravel roads, the mail was couriered from Three Hills, further to the east. The photo shows Sunnyslope in 1910 at the height of its prosperity.







Colin McArthur took over as postmaster on 1905-10-01, moving the post office into his general store in the hamlet proper, which was beginning to prosper. He gave up the job on 1907-09-16 and the post office went through four postmasters in the next few years. Elvin Cyril White stopped the turnovers when he became postmaster on 1916-02-15 and moved the post office into his hardware store. He served until 1945-11-24 when he and his wife retired to Calgary. The postmark at left was from the White tenure. Notice the inverted date.

Howard Roy Frizzell was the next postmaster, serving until 1957-07-30. The railroad had come through Sunnyslope in 1929 but as postwar traffic shifted to roads, the hamlet began declining because Acme and Didsbury were favoured as business centres. The postmastership again began turning over every few years. The final postmaster was Elmer Stanley Davis from 1962-04-01 until the post office permanently closed on 1966-08-22. It was replaced by Three Hills rural route #1.

### **Neapolis.**

Thomas McKercher built a combination crossroads store and creamery, with family living quarters on the second floor, just after the 1900s began [6]. The post office opened on 1903-03-01 with himself as postmaster. The name translates into English as “new town” but it never developed beyond the store. McKercher soon sold the store but kept the postmastership for a few more years. The store owner flipped it for a homestead from H.L. Reimer, who then became postmaster on 1908-12-18.

Reimer sold out to Alva Edward ‘Ted’ Lyons, who became postmaster on 1911-02-14. He gave up a short while later and moved to Edmonton, selling out to the final postmaster A.T. Procit, who served from 1912-04-16 to 1914-02-10 when the store burned down. By then it was obvious that Neapolis would never succeed and the location was abandoned.

## **Lone Pine.**

This post office was opened on the banks of a creek of the same name. It should not be confused with a more famous location to the northwest called Lone Pine Stopping House, which was on the old Calgary to Edmonton pioneer trail and which never had a post office. Peter Friesen opened a country store at the creek location and served as postmaster from 1909-05-01 until 1911-11-09, when he sold out to Peter G. Johnston. (Not Johnson as in postal records [1].) The mail came via Didsbury.

The store couldn't survive, so the post office moved to the farmhouse of Hugh McLean. He was the final postmaster from 1913-06-24 until 1916-08-31 when it permanently closed. It was replaced by a rural route out of Didsbury.

Shown here is the proof strike of its postmark.



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