

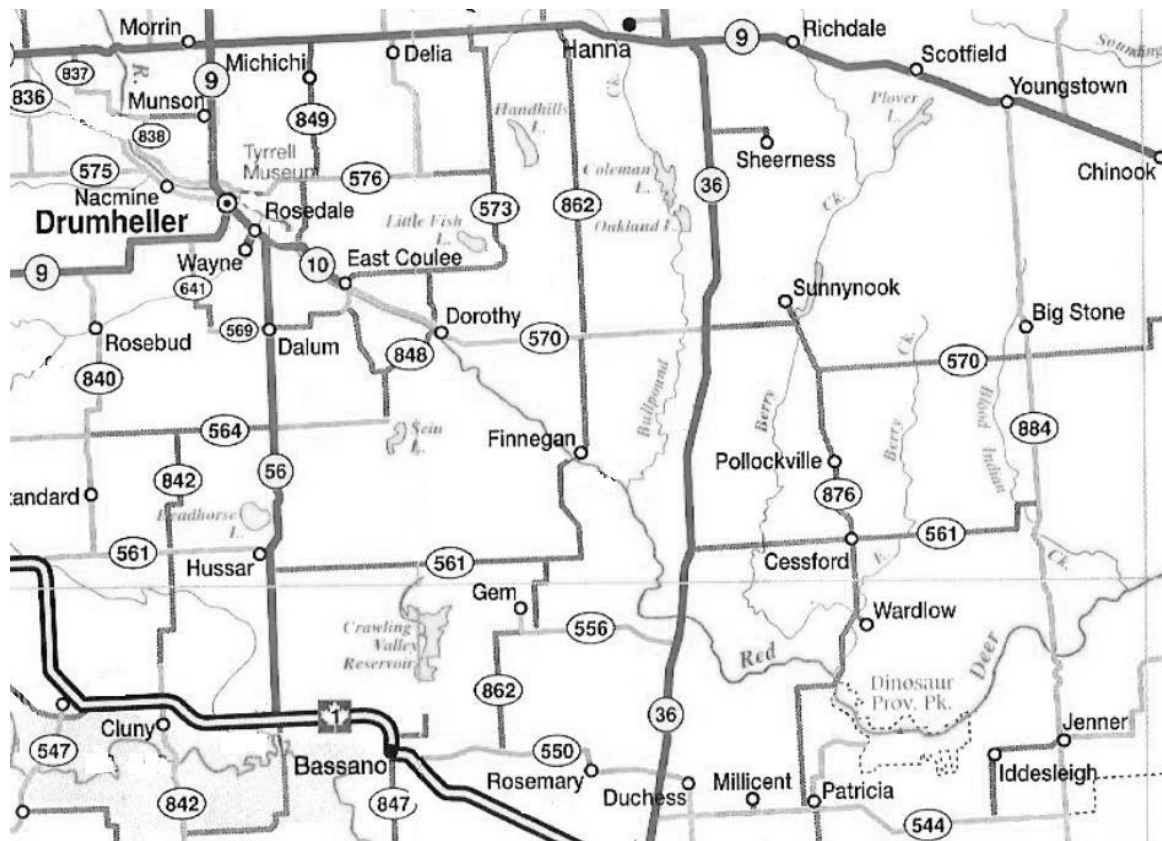
JOURNAL OF ALBERTA POSTAL HISTORY

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POSTAL HISTORY OF RED DEER RIVER BADLANDS: PART 2

by Dale Speirs



This issue deals with the northern section of the Red Deer River badlands of south-central Alberta from Kneehill canyon to Rosedale. The badlands portion of the river stretches for 200 kilometres, gouged out by glacial meltwaters. The badlands are the richest source of Late Cretaceous dinosaurs in the world.

Originally settled by homesteaders, the coal industry dominated from the 1920s to its death in the 1950s. Since then, the tourist industry has grown, with petroleum and agriculture strong.

Part 1 appeared in JAPH #13.

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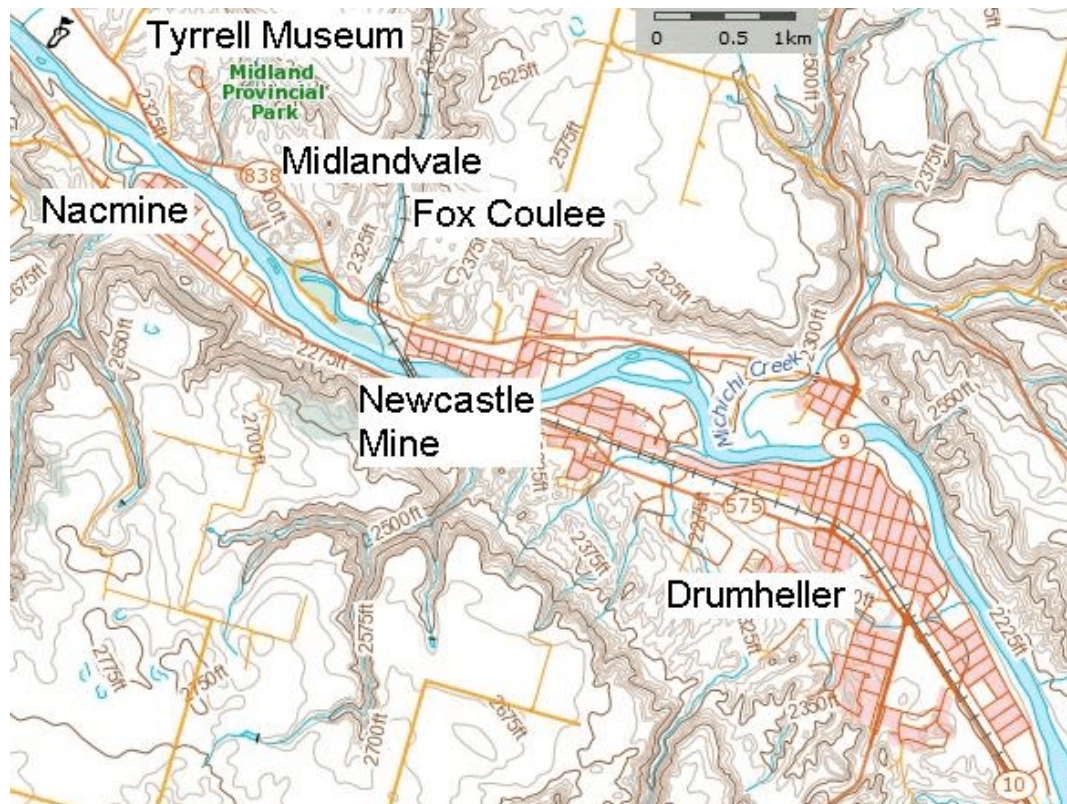
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DRUMHELLER MUNICIPALITY

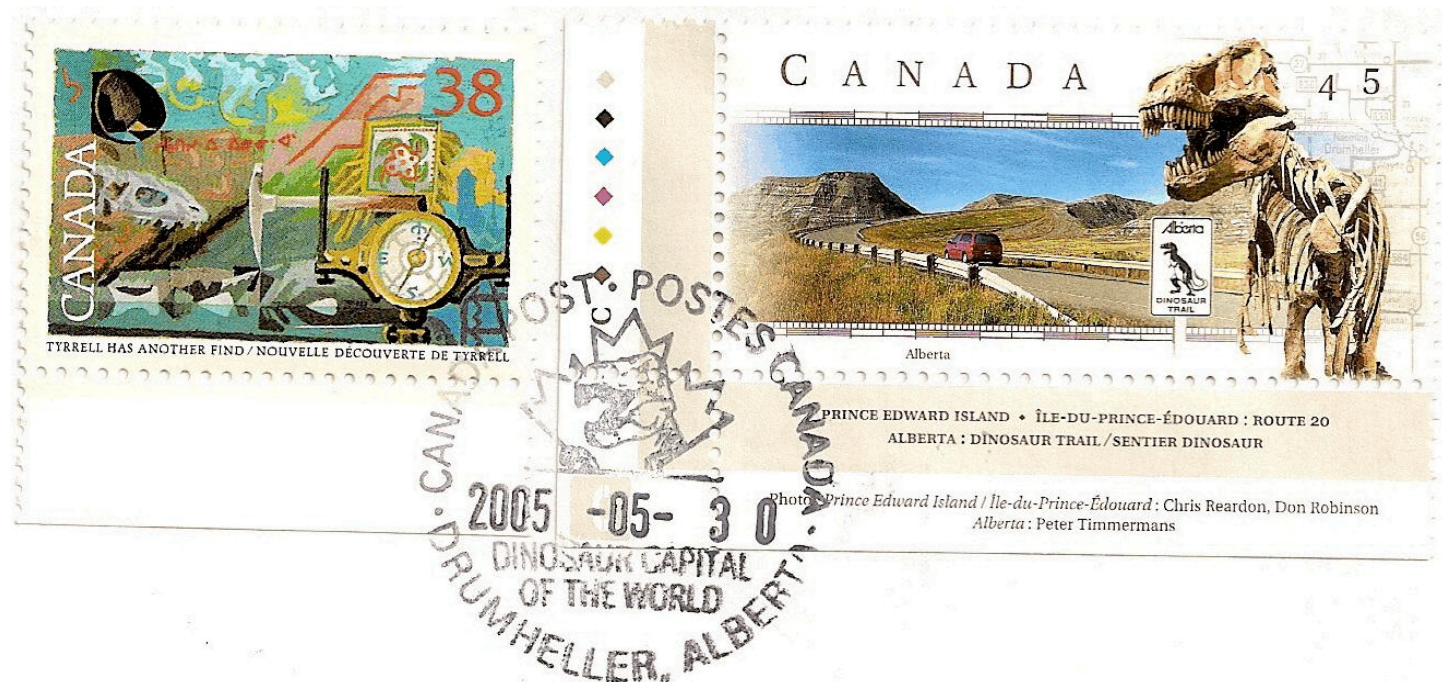
The economic centre of the Red Deer River badlands is Drumheller, with a population of about 8,100 circa 2016. Below is a modern map of the area, showing Drumheller's central position in the badlands. It began in 1911 as a coal mining village and grew rapidly during the heyday of coal. After World War Two, when railroads converted to diesel and buildings were heated with natural gas, Drumheller went into a decades-long decline. The economic slump was finally reversed by the construction of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, the world's largest fossil museum and a major international tourist destination. Today the largest component of Drumheller's economy is tourism, both the museum and the badlands up and down the river.



Drumheller is in the bottomlands of the valley and is a linear town on both banks of the river. Below is a topographical map of the town in modern times, taken from the Atlas of Canada [1]. The town has grown mostly upriver, annexing several hamlets as it grew. Running upstream from Drumheller, then crossing over the river before looping back to the town on the other side is the Dinosaur Highway, which leads to the museum, through the badlands, and past other tourist attractions.



The Dinosaur Highway is a scenic route and was honoured by Canada Post on a stamp. The scan shows the stamp (at right) along with Drumheller's pictorial postmark and a different stamp (at left) honouring pioneer fossil collector Joseph Tyrrell, after whom the museum was named. The Tyrrell stamp, by the way, is a design error. Look closely at the compass and you will see that the east and west compass points are on the wrong sides.



Drumheller.

Settlement in the area began in the 1890s up on the flatlands above the Red Deer River valley, first with open-range cattle ranches, then with homesteaders. The river was an obstacle to new settlers heading east, so several ferries began operating along the river. At what is now the town of Drumheller, the Russell ferry began operating in 1896 just upstream of the townsite and the Greentree ferry in 1902 just downstream. Both were named after their operators.

The flatlands being treeless, homesteaders dug coal out of the badlands for personal use, whether by the bucket or wagon loads. It wasn't until 1911 that commercial coal mining began. By the time the coal industry died in the 1960s, there had been more than 125 mines in the Drumheller area, with about thirty or so operating at any given moment.

Two cousins from Washington State, Samuel and Jerome Drumheller, came out to homestead in 1910. On their first day in the area, they noticed a neighbour using coal for his fireplace, and found he was getting it from a two-metre thick seam nearby. The cousins forgot about their original idea of homesteading and instead rushed to file mineral claims in the badlands and open a coal mine. Sam Drumheller later bought Thomas Greentree's land and ferry for a townsite. They tossed a coin to see if the post office would be named Greentree's Crossing or Drumheller, and obviously Sam won the toss [2].

Adjacent to the ferry was a general store operated by an English immigrant named N.S.L. Brownjohn, who on 1911-04-01 became Drumheller's first postmaster [3]. He was a restless man who had business interests all over southern Alberta, as well as being a town councillor and school board trustee. He sold the store and post office to R.J. Steens, who took over as postmaster on 1914-06-10. That same year, the toll ferry was replaced by a free bridge, which cemented Drumheller's economic strength as a crossroads. The coal boom of the 1920s further boosted the town. Shown on the next page is a real-photo postcard showing Drumheller about this time, postmarked 1923 on the back.



RED DEER RIVER
DRUMHELLER ALTA.



The store and post office changed hands again, with W.E. Fairbairn as the next postmaster from 1918-05-02 until 1928-02-17. Drumheller and its post office were both doing well enough that the postmaster became semi-staff at the turnover, and the post office became a standalone operation. At left is a sample postmark just after this transition.

Wilfred Gapper Ferrey succeeded Fairbairn and stayed until his retirement on 1946-04-01. Frederick Starchuk was the next postmaster. In 1948 the post office and all its staff became full civil servants within the Canadian Post Office. Due to privacy laws, the records cut off after this date, but a local history mentions that sometime before 1973 Starchuk moved to the Calgary post office as a supervisor.

As of 2016, there was the main post office and a retail outlet in a Shoppers Drug Mart one block away, as seen on the next two pages. The postal clerk in the Shoppers outlet told me it opened in April 2014. Notice the dinosaur statues in front of the two buildings. There are dozens of these statues throughout the town in front of all kinds of businesses, in playground parks, and on boulevards. Drumheller citizens know who pays the bills, and go full out celebrating the dinosaur connection.



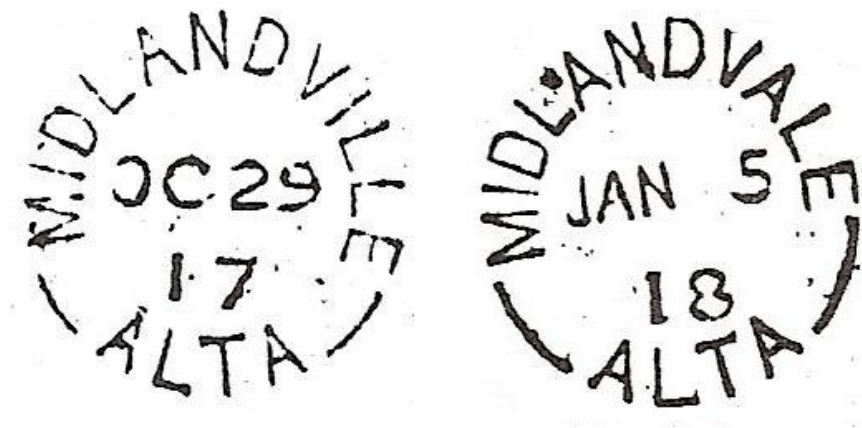


Below are some additional pictorial cancels used for the first-day of the 1993 stamps. Two of these were subsequently used as regular cancels for tourists and philatelists.



Midlandvale.

This post office opened on 1917-12-01 as Midlandville, but the name was corrected a month later on January 1 to the intended Midlandvale [3]. It was an understandable mistake by the Canadian Post Office, probably because of bad handwriting on an application form. Below are both the error and the corrected proof strikes of the postmark. The “-vale” part of the name refers to the hamlet being in the Red Deer River valley badlands. The sole reason for its existence was the Midland Coal Company [4, 5].



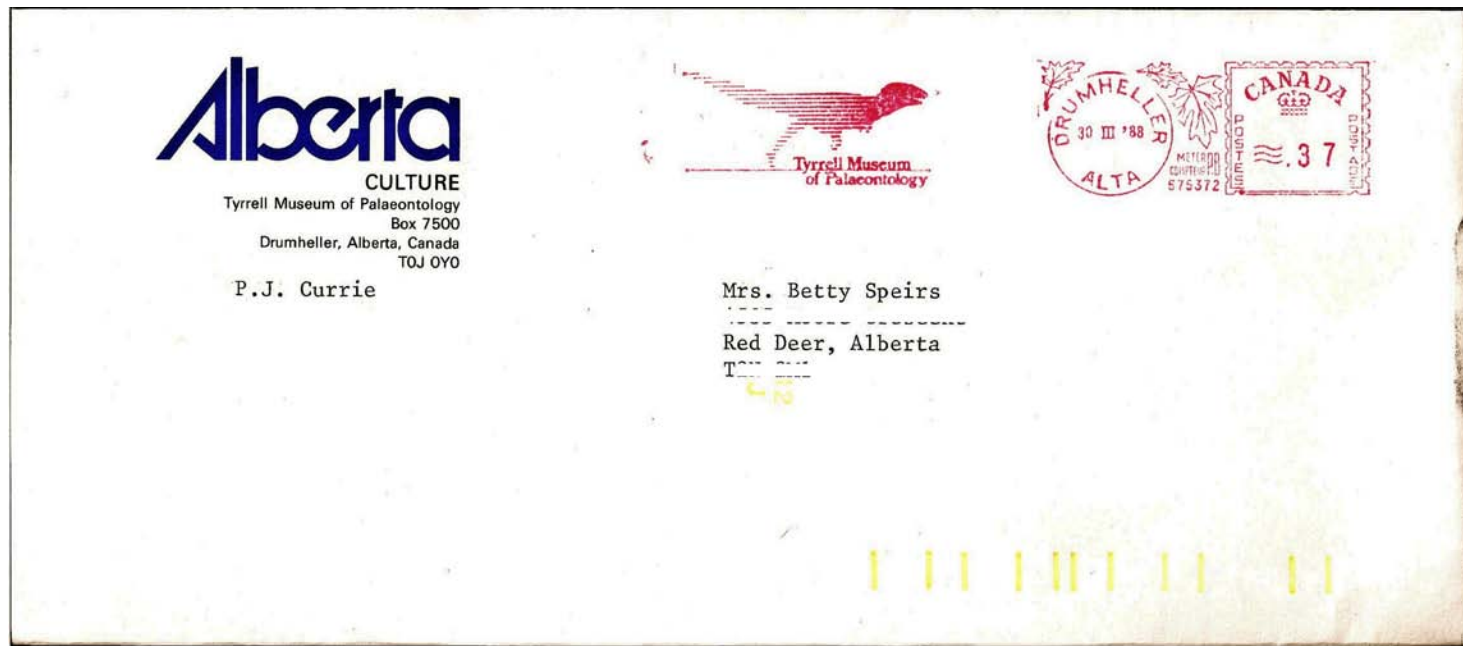
The first postmaster was T.G. Jeal, who only stayed a couple of months until 1918-02-14. Six more postmasters came and went almost annually until 1927. This post office was created for the mine and its employees. The postmastership was either assigned to a mine supervisor on top of his other jobs, or else to someone in the company store. Staff changes would have triggered postmaster changes.

Arthur Henry Jones took over on 1927-12-01 and provided some continuity for almost a decade until 1936-05-13. A brief placeholder came and went but Elijah Williams took over on 1936-06-16. He went into uniform during the war and on 1943-09-17 his resignation was accepted. The next two placeholders were sisters-in-law but only stayed briefly. Elijah's daughter-in-law Mrs. Evelyn Williams ran the post office from 1944-01-19 until 1958-06-10. By that time, Midlandvale was in its terminal phase as the coal industry declined. There was a final placeholder postmaster and then the post office permanently closed on 1958-12-12.

Midlandvale lived and died with coal, and the hamlet was abandoned. It was absorbed into Midland Provincial Park. The only remnant is the mine office, which has been converted to a parks building. Below is the mine office/post office as it was in August 2016 when I visited the park.



The primary attraction of the park is the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, an international tourist destination a few minute's walk north of Midlandvale. Dinosaur Trail runs through the park, passing alongside where Midlandvale once was. (The mine office was photographed from the shoulder of the highway.) The economic impact of the museum on Drumheller cannot be overstated, and it is why the town prospers today. It opened in 1985 under the leadership of renowned dinosaur collector Dr. Philip Currie. Below is a 1988 business cover with the Museum's meter mark, from Currie to my mother Betty Speirs (1931-2002). She was a philatelist but in this particular case it was official business, for she was also a field palaeontologist and supplied the museum with some of its fossils.



Newcastle Mine.



This village on the banks of the Red Deer River was established in 1911 when the Newcastle coal mine began production. The postwar boom increased the population to the point where a post office was justified. It opened on 1923-01-01 with A.S. Ransom as the first postmaster. At left is the proof strike of its first postmark.

In 1924, labour unrest erupted throughout the Drumheller valley, not only strikes against the mine owners, but there were two unions battling it out for supremacy among the miners. It was worst in Newcastle Mine, where violence and gunfire were common enough to give the area the nickname The Western Front [2, 4, 5]. Postal operations were occasionally interrupted by the fighting, and a changeover in postmasters was triggered. G.A. Larochelle was the acting postmaster in part of 1924, until John Preston took over the job on 1925-03-09. He served until his death on 1928-01-23.

Two placeholder postmasters then came and went. Mrs Anna Marie Druart settled in on 1929-11-01 as postmaster. She was dismissed from office on 1936-11-03 for political partisanship, an unusual procedure at that time [3]. Social Credit had just taken power in Alberta the year before and political tensions were high. She may have been a Socred or may have been involved in coal mine labour struggles. During her tenure, the village of Newcastle ran into financial trouble as the Great Depression ground it down. It dissolved its legal status in 1931 and was henceforth an unincorporated community. Only the continued existence of the post office gave the place any recognition.

Thomas Femet took over as postmaster after Druart was dismissed, staying until 1938-09-07. James C. Charleston then took over for a decade until 1949-05-30, when he was succeeded by William Charleston. The latter in turn handed over to Mrs Susan Charleston on 1966-07-01. Shortly after she took over, Newcastle was annexed by Drumheller on 1967-01-01, and the writing was on the wall for the post office. She retired on 1975-08-20, and S.A. Bell was the temporary postmaster until the post office permanently closed on 1975-12-30. Newcastle today is a suburb of Drumheller, with only a few coal mine exhibits to remind people of its past.

Nacmine.

Further upstream, about 5 km from Drumheller's core, was a company town that took its name from the North American Collieries. Both the coal company and the village were originally named Monarch when the mine opened in 1913. By the time the post office opened on 1919-04-01, the names had changed [5]. There is an unrelated post office in southwestern Alberta named Monarch, and postmark collectors should be careful not to confuse the two. Below is a photo taken a year or two after the mine opened. The mine buildings can be seen at right and the miners' houses, all owned by the company, at left.





The first postmaster of Nacmine was T.B. Lett, who served until 1933-09-01. A proof strike of the Nacmine postmark during his tenure is shown at left. He was succeeded by Mrs. Sarah Molyneux, who resigned in 1943-04-08. Over the next two decades the post office began alternating between the Livingston and McKinnon families, switching back and forth every few years. The turnovers came to an end on 1964-12-09, when Mrs. Margaret McKinnon died in office [3].

The post office remained closed until 1965-09-18 when Joseph Stastny re-opened it, staying as postmaster until 1973-12-26. The last owner of the coal mine had shut it down in 1961, but because the hamlet was so close to Drumheller by modern roads it didn't die, instead becoming a suburb [4].

Nacmine was an unincorporated hamlet within a rural county until it was annexed by Drumheller on 1998-01-01. The post office continued on, with three more postmasters before finally closing. Mrs R.M. Smith was the final postmaster from 1977-01-20.

On the next page is a photo of the Nacmine post office in 1990, with Betty Speirs standing at the mailbox. By then the post office had moved into a house. Its sign is faded almost to blankness from years of direct sunlight. Hughes lists the Nacmine post office as still open in 1998, but I suspect it did not live long past that date [6]. Normally when a small post office is annexed by a bigger town, it is usually shut down.



Fox Coulee.

Fox Creek empties into the Red Deer River just upstream from Drumheller, draining the plateau to the northeast. The coulee was noted by pioneers for its foxes [5]. At the top of the coulee, where it originates from the plateau, is the hamlet of Munson, which in pioneer days was briefly known as Fox Coulee. However, the name had changed by the time the Munson post office opened in 1911. The Alberta Midland Railway ran from Drumheller up the length of Fox Coulee to Munson and points north.



Fox Coulee was a short-lived post office that opened on 1909-04-01 in the farm house of Robert O. Gore. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at left. In addition to being postmaster, Robert and his brother Olly were the mail couriers for the district. The mail did not come from Drumheller as one might expect, but from Carbon, about 15 km west-northwest of Drumheller on the far side of the Red Deer River.

Gore only stayed in office a short time until June 27, before handing over to Mrs. O. Gore [3]. Local histories are unclear as to whether she was his wife or sister-in-law. With the coming of the railroad to Drumheller, the Fox Coulee post office permanently closed on 1911-02-28. It is only a few kilometres from Drumheller, so it was no longer necessary. The post office also served the homesteaders to the northeast around Munson, but when that settlement got a post office on the same railroad line, it took away the rest of Fox Coulee's business.

Fox Coulee is now part of Midland Provincial Park. On the next page is a photo I took in August 2016, looking towards the coulee in the distance. The creek is only a metre wide, easy enough for someone to jump over. It is manure-brown in colour, too muddy to drink and too thin to walk on. There is no signage of any kind, and I had to search for a while, using a topographical map to locate the site. The railroad tracks were lifted in the early 2000s. No trace of human habitation remains.

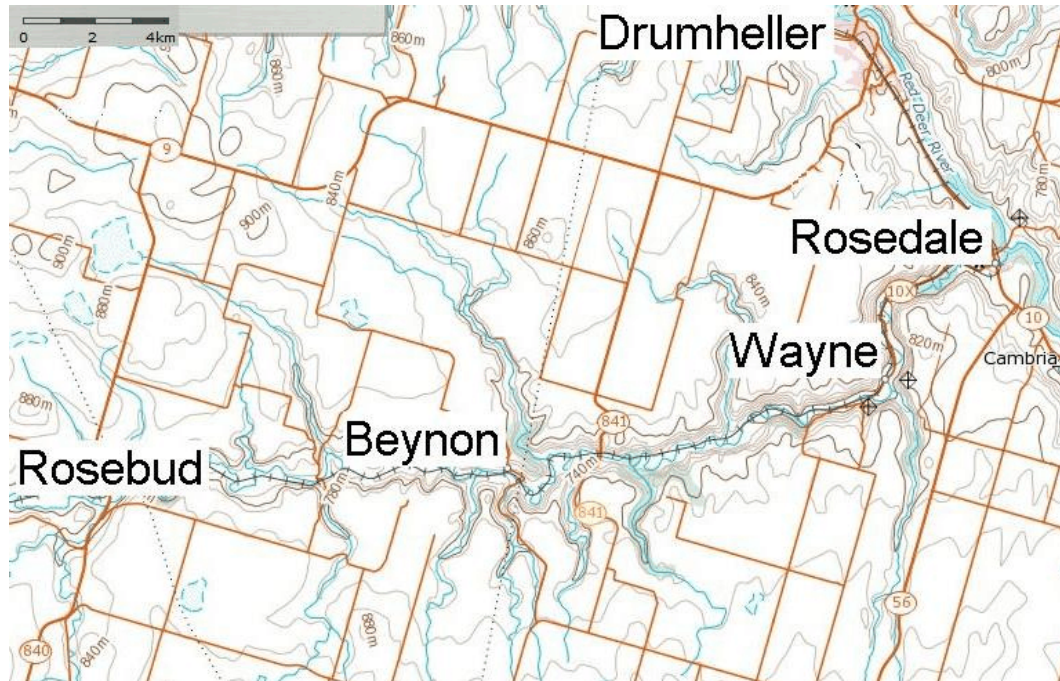


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- 5] Karamitsanis, Aphrodite (1992) PLACE NAMES OF ALBERTA. VOLUME 2: SOUTHERN ALBERTA. Published by University of Calgary Press. Page 48, 81, 85, 86
- 6] Hughes, Neil (1998) ALBERTA POST OFFICES 1876-1998 Privately published by the author, Edmonton, Alberta.

ROSEBUD RIVER CANYON

The Rosebud River rises in west-central Alberta, meanders southeast for about half of its length, then flows due east until it reaches the village of Rosebud, before turning northeast until it empties into the Red Deer River. Its name is a translation of both the Cree and Siksika tribal names, who noted the abundant wild roses along its banks. For most of its length it travels through rolling hills or flatlands, but just downstream from the hamlet of Rosebud it develops into badlands, basically a side branch of the Red Deer River badlands. Below is a topographical map of the Rosebud River canyon from the Atlas of Canada [1]. The three principal settlements of the canyon, going upstream from the Red Deer River, are Wayne, Beynon, and Rosebud.



The Alberta Midland Railway came down from Drumheller in 1912, and at Rosedale made a right-angle turn to the west, going up the Rosebud River canyon on its way to Calgary. The canyon is narrow enough in some places that one can throw a stone across it, and because the river meanders extensively, the railroad was infamous for its numerous bridges, now converted to road bridges (photo below).

Between Rosedale and Rosebud, about 30 km apart, there were 42 bridges. That number was after the river had been dredged in many locations to straighten it, a tunnel dug, and canyon slopes reworked to prevent landslides. How the railway could make money with those capital costs is a mystery. In the post-war era, when both train services and coal mining died out, the railroad was abandoned.



Many of the railroad bridges were converted to one-lane automobile bridges and still serve that purpose today. A typical example, which I photographed at Wayne in August 2015, is shown below.

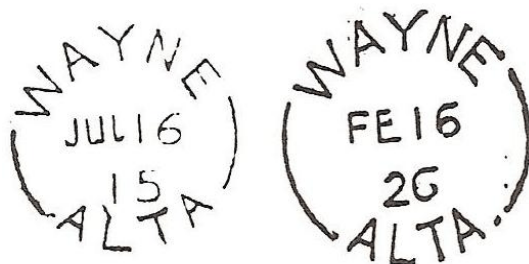
The railroad removal did not leave a road between the three settlements, so they were disconnected from each other and no longer have much in common. Wayne is a short distance from the main valley of the badlands and catches some of the tourist trade coming or going via Drumheller, but Beynon and Rosebud can now only be approached by north/south grid roads, and only connect to small towns up on the flatlands, not to each other.



Wayne.

The first coal mine in the canyon opened in 1912 and soon there was a string of coal mine camps along the canyon. Wayne was never an organized settlement such as a hamlet or village, but took its name from the post office. It was named after a boy whose surname has long been forgotten. Wayne was without a mayor or council, and the coal mine companies ruled the area. Everyone lived in company houses and shopped in company stores, and the mine supervisors were the governors of the canyon. The only access was via the railroad until the late 1920s, when a wagon trail was blazed alongside the track, many years later to become a road.

George V. Tupper was the first postmaster, opening the post office on 1915-08-01 and giving the place its name [2]. Below are the proof strikes of the first two postmarks.



This was the post office as it looked in 1924, in a building on the banks of the Rosebud River. Note the uniformity of the business signs; the landlord was almost certainly one of the mining companies. The post office also included a telephone exchange.



On 1929-02-08, Joy Morton States took over the postmastership (a man, despite his first name). The post office was completely destroyed by fire on 1936-10-28, and had to move twice in the next few weeks before it found a new home. By then, the glory days of coal mining in the Wayne area were over as the Great Depression bit into the business. Wayne's population had peaked at about 2,000 but began a long decline that would see it drop below 100 by the 1950s.



States retired after the war, and on 1947-04-01 his postal clerk Miss Cynthia Elenia Henderson took over as postmaster. She had also been the switchboard operator. The photo at left shows her at the board in her younger years.

Cynthia retired on 1963-06-06 when she was replaced by her sister-in-law Mrs. Helen Henderson. By this time, the coal mines were dead and the canyon was depopulated [3]. Helen retired on 1971-09-28 when she and her husband moved into Drumheller.

Mrs Hendrina T. Dayman took over but postal records cut off at this point because of privacy laws. The Hughes checklist [4] lists Trudy Luckiw as the final postmaster before the Wayne post office closed on 1983-06-30.



My mother, the late Betty Speirs, visited Wayne in 1989 and talked to some of the locals about the post office.

One of them rummaged around and found the old sign. He is seen below holding it up at the last location of the post office. Wayne survives today on tourism, as it is only a short drive from Rosedale on the main highway.

Beynon.

This post office opened on 1914-09-15 after the railroad came through. Hugh Beynon Biggs was the first postmaster, although his wife Mabel (nee James) did the actual work. The post office was in the Biggs ranch house. Their spread, the Springfield Ranch, had been settled by him in 1893. Originally he was squatting on railway land but eventually it was opened up for homesteading and Biggs got clear title [5].

The postmastership passed on 1920-03-18 to Guy L. Hanson, who had opened a general store on land he rented from the Biggs. Below left is a postal card sent from Beynon in 1922 with the original Beynon split-circle cancel. Below right shows the reverse side, with the signature of H.B. Biggs at the bottom as an observer. Hanson kept the job until his death on 1936-11-06.

CANADA POST CARD

THE ADDRESS TO BE WRITTEN ON THIS SIDE.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
RECLAMATION SERVICE

To the CHIEF HYDROMETRIC ENGINEER,
RECLAMATION SERVICE,
Department of the Interior,
CALGARY, ALTA.

SEP 19 1922

CALGARY, ALTA.

Postmark: BEYNON, SEP 18 1922

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—RECLAMATION SERVICE. H2.

OBSERVATIONS OF GAUGE HEIGHT

On Monday (CREEK) on SW 1/4 Sec 29 Tp 27 Rge 26 W 4 Mer. allg.
(RIVER) at Beynon Prov. of allg.

Month	Day	WATER HEIGHT ON GAUGE				Mean Height	REMARKS ON CHANGES OF RIVER HEIGHT
		MORNING		AFTERNOON			
		Time	Height	Time	Height		
Sunday	10	7	2.07	7:30	2.06	2.06	+05
Monday	11	6:30	2.12	7	2.12	2.12	
Tuesday	12	6	2.14	about	2.14	2.14	
Wednesday	13	about					
Thursday	14	7	2.24	7	2.24	2.24	
Friday	15	7	2.15	6	2.14	2.14	
Saturday	16	7	2.13	7	2.12	2.12	

Under the head of remarks, give any facts on rain, snow, change of weather, and other occurrences liable to affect the height of the river. In floods, note the rate at which the water rises in one or more hours, also extreme height, and time of day. If river is dry, state this fact, or note whether the water is standing in pools.

I certify that the above observations were actually made by me and are correct.

Examined by..... (Sign) H. B. Biggs..... Observer.

Two placeholders came and went before William Alexander (Bill) Bell bought the store. He took over as the official postmaster but then a complicated turnover of staff occurred. Bill went into uniform in 1941, and his widowed mother Elizabeth Dickie Bell took over the store and post office. Over the next few years, the postmastership shuffled back and forth between her, her other son Stuart Inglis Bell, and Mrs. Amandabelle (Mandy) Whittaker. Mandy and her husband Ora leased the store until after the war, when Elizabeth Bell took over again. Ora operated an open-pit coal mine nearby.

When Bill came marching home again, instead of returning to Beynon he went south to Duchess, a village up on the flatlands just southwest of Dinosaur Provincial Park. In Duchess, he worked in a store and also behind their post office counter. His mother, meanwhile, returned to the Beynon postmastership until 1949-12-12, when she moved to Duchess to live with her son. All of them later moved to Calgary, where Elizabeth worked in several sub-post offices. The Bells, mother and son, sold the Beynon store and post office to the Biggs family.

After the war, it was obvious that Beynon was dying. The Biggs family gradually accumulated the surrounding land as others sold out, and continued to operate the Springfield Ranch. Edward LeHuray James, an in-law of the Biggs, served briefly as postmaster. On 1950-09-23, Miss Myrtle Agnes Beynon (Bud) Biggs, spinster daughter of Hugh and Mabel, became the final postmaster. The post office closed permanently on 1978-04-14, by which time the Biggs family were the only ones left in the canyon. Bud was an artist and naturalist and kept the Springfield Ranch in as near a natural condition as she could. She converted it into a private ecological preserve, and it still is today. No random visitors are allowed and the land is posted. Bud died in 1998 but the family still operates the ranch.

Mail service to the few surrounding ranchers switched to a rural route out of Drumheller, with cluster boxes on Highway 9 up on the flatlands, several kilometres north of the canyon. On the next page is a photo I took in August 2015 from the escarpment of the canyon looking south, down at the Biggs farmstead where the hamlet once was. The forested canyon is a dramatic contrast to the semi-desert flatlands up on top. The road winding through the homestead is the only public area in the preserve.



Rosebud Creek / Rosebud.

A post office named Rosebud Creek opened on 1901-03-01, not in the canyon but up on the flatlands. It was located in the log house of Cleophas and Mary Beauchemin, both originally from Montreal. Mary was the postmaster and Cleophas was the mail courier. Mail service was once a fortnight from Gleichen, a village about 50 km south, located on the transcontinental railroad. Mary ran off with another man a few months after becoming postmaster, and the postmastership became vacant on 1901-11-25. Cleophas, a broken-hearted man, abandoned his homestead and went back to Montreal.

David Charles Wishart reactivated the post office on 1902-04-01 and moved it into his house near Redland, the next hamlet west of Rosebud townsite, and which is outside the canyon. His wife Maude (nee Vigar) ran the post office while Dave carried the mails to and from Gleichen. He built up a livery stable business in Gleichen that did so well that he sold the homestead and the family moved there.

Maude's brother, Frank C. Vigar, became postmaster on 1906-10-15. The post office moved into his house at Rosebud townsite, finally matching its physical location with its name. The bright lights of Gleichen lured him away, and on 1909-11-01 his brother Alfred E. Vigar assumed the postmastership. Alf kept the post office in the kitchen of his house until 1917-04-09, when he handed the job to his uncle Cecil Arthur Vigar. Cecil had just built a new hotel in Rosebud, and put the post office into the parlour.

The post office became a standalone operation when Horace Thorne took over on 1922-10-13 as postmaster. A month later, on December 1, he shortened the post office name to Rosebud to match the townsite name. Thorne was a long-server, retiring on 1950-03-31 as postmaster.

In the earlier days, his young son Frank helped him sort the mails. One day when Frank was twelve years old, the Post Office Inspector caught him working behind the counter. It is a serious offence for a non-postie to handle the mails, much less a child. The Inspector was a kind-hearted man who knew the realities of rural mail service. Instead of putting Horace on report, the Inspector swore in Frank as possibly the youngest Assistant Postmaster in Canada's history.

After Horace Thorne retired, Burton McKenzie Parker stepped into the job. He had several other businesses on the side. In 1962, the end of the railroad through the canyon was nigh when passenger service was discontinued. Seeing the future, or rather the lack of it, in Rosebud, Parker sold out everything and moved to Edmonton. Ronald Lloyd Bertsh was more of an optimist, and bought the Parker businesses, becoming postmaster on 1962-11-01. His parents Arthur and Alvina Bertsh homesteaded just north of Rosebud up on the flatlands. When his father died, Ron gave up his businesses in July 1967 to take over the farm, while his mother took on the post office. Alvina retired to Edmonton in 1970, and Ron's wife Vivian then managed the post office. Ron remained as official postmaster even though his mother or wife ran the post office [4, 5].



Lloyd and Mildred Bjorgum bought the Bertsh house in 1980, and Mildred became the final postmaster. On the next page is a photograph of the Rosebud post office in its final days when it was in the Bjorgum house. The woman in the photo is Betty Speirs. A postmark from one of the covers she mailed at the time is seen at left.



Rosebud never fell to a hamlet but was nonetheless a small village. The post office closed permanently on 1991-02-06. Mail service today is by supermailboxes on a rural route to the village of Standard, about a half-hour's drive south of Rosebud up on the flatlands. Below is a photo of Rosebud that I took in August 2015. I dropped a self-addressed envelope into the supermailbox and it was returned to me with a Standard postmark.



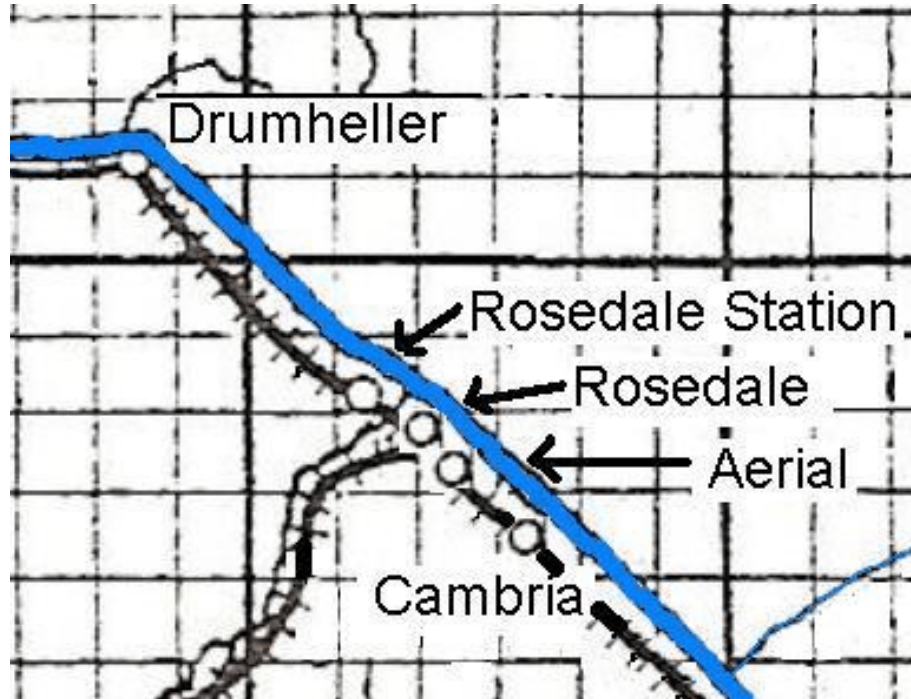
Postmark collectors should be careful because there was another Rosebud post office just south of Calgary in a ranch house [6]. That one was originally named Grierson after its first postmaster and operated under that name from 1890 to 1896. The next postmaster renamed it Rosebud from 1896 to 1898, before handing it back to Grierson, who reverted the name back to his until the post office permanently closed in 1908. Check the dates on the postmarks to be certain which one is which.

References.

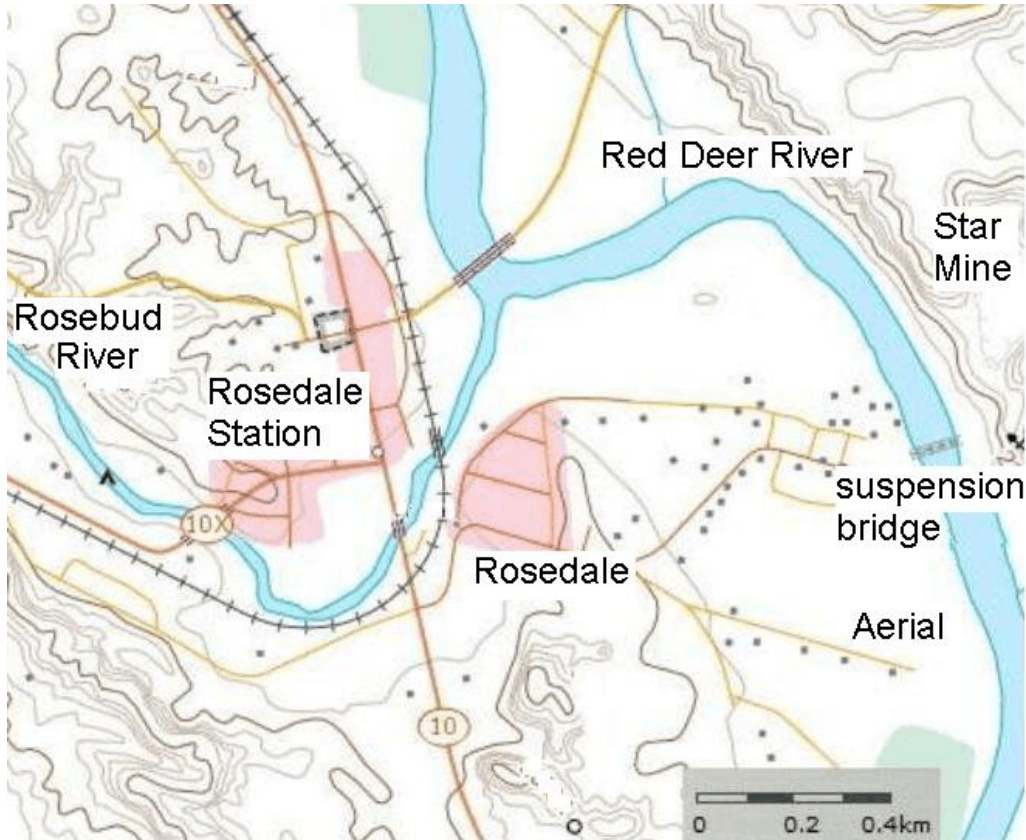
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ROSEDALE DISTRICT

A short drive south of Drumheller is the village of Rosedale, in the badlands on the west bank of the Red Deer River at its junction with Rosebud River. Settlement began in the 1920s as coal mining boomed, and declined 90% after World War Two when trains and building furnaces converted to petroleum. The decline began to reverse itself in the 1980s as dinosaur tourism began. The village now supports itself with tourism and oilfield servicing. It was on the railroad, since removed in the early 2000s, and is on Highway 10, a major route for tourists visiting the badlands. The highway follows the old railroad route. Below is a map of the general area. The small squares are a mile on each side.



The post office nomenclature is a bit confusing. Rosedale the present-day village is on both sides of the Rosebud River. The village has always been called Rosedale by everyone and never by any other name. However, at one time it had two post offices, Rosedale and Rosedale Station, as well as a nearby office called Aerial. Below is a close-up map showing the three hamlets that made up Rosedale.



Rosedale Station is the only surviving post office today, located directly on the highway. It still uses that name even though the railroad is long gone and the residents and all the road signage call it just plain Rosedale.

The name Rosedale was after the first coal mine there, in turn named because of all the wild roses growing in the valley. The Rosebud River also takes its name from the wildflower.

Rosedale.



William Rose Fulton was the first postmaster of Rosedale from 1913-03-01 until he resigned on 1914-12-03 due to work overload [1]. The post office was named after the Rosedale Colliery, and his middle name was just a coincidence. The post office was located on the south bank of the Rosebud River. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

Fulton was a storekeeper who, after opening the Rosedale general store and post office, then opened another store at Nacmine hamlet and two clothing stores in Drumheller, both upstream on the Red Deer River. He decided to relocate to Drumheller, where he later became mayor in addition to his three stores [2].

J. Frank Moodie, a coal mine owner, took over until 1915-04-16 as postmaster. He had encouraged Fulton to come out from Ontario to the Red Deer River valley. Moodie was a geologist of all parts, and while continuing to operate the Rosedale Mine, he became involved in the Turner Valley petroleum fields on the other side of the province. After two placeholders came and went in the post office, Moodie resumed the postmastership on 1918-05-02 until 1920-09-16. James Ross Murdoch was the final postmaster until 1940-03-12 when the post office burned down. Since the Rosedale Station post office was open on the opposite bank of Rosebud River and still is, there was no need for the Rosedale post office to be rebuilt.

Rosedale Station.

The Midland railroad came through the area but instead of continuing south down the Red Deer River, turned west at Rosedale and went up the valley of the Rosebud River, thence to Calgary. As the name suggests, this post office was on a railway siding and received its mail by train. A local storekeeper named William D. Spence became the first postmaster on 1921-04-01 after the railroad came through. Spence's store burned down and the post office moved to a confectionery store, with Mrs. Margaret Mitchell as postmaster from 1925-04-10 until 1930-08-08. Her daughter Myrtle was the postal clerk. The Great Depression had a severe effect on the Red Deer River valley. The Mitchells decided to relocate down the river to East Coulee where prospects seemed better, and went into the hotel business [1, 3].

Ernest George Bailey then took over the post office. He had been farming nearby but it was hard on his health. He moved to Rosedale and took up the postmastership, retiring on 1946-08-31. Ivor Rees Matthew then served until 1957-06-30, followed by his wife Shirley. After this, Canada Post records cut off due to privacy regulations.

The post office is now in the front half of a house directly on Highway 10, shown here in a photograph I took in 2015.

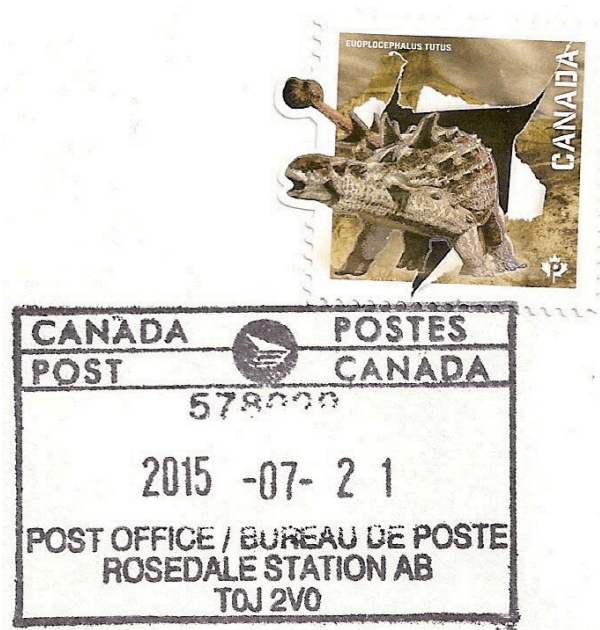
When I write “directly”, I mean that if you park in front of it, check your outside rearview mirror before opening the car door, lest a passing vehicle rip it off the hinges. The railroad tracks that gave the post office its name have been lifted and the right-of-way converted to a gravel footpath.



I took this photograph in July 2015 just down the highway, showing the recently removed tracks and the adjacent highway in the badlands.



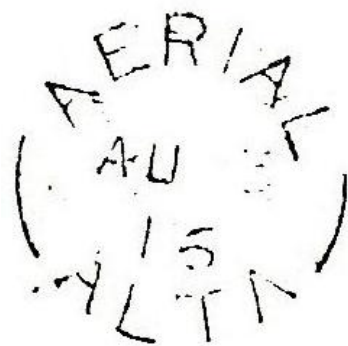
This was the regular business postmark.



Aerial.

This hamlet was named after an aerial tramway that crossed the Red Deer River to connect with the Star Mine on the east bank. It was later replaced by a pedestrian suspension bridge, still in existence and a thrilling tourist attraction because of its propensity to sway wildly. The hamlet was just southeast of Rosedale on a railroad that was subsequently built south along the river from the Midland turnoff. A multitude of coal mines developed along the badlands further south to take advantage of the railroad. Most of those mines were small ones, commonly referred to as gopher holes, and which were the first to die off after World War Two.

The Aerial post office had a high turnover of postmasters in its early years. The post office was part of the Star Mine's company store, and both were delegated to a company manager. They were only open in the evening hours after the miners were off duty. Initially there were few women in the hamlet, so the company man had to go into Drumheller during the day to buy shelf stock and pick up the mail. With the Rosedale post office a short walk nearby, there wasn't a real need for Aerial to have one, but as was the case in many other locations, this may have been for the convenience of the major employer in the area.



The post office opened on 1916-08-15 with Robert Hood as the first postmaster. The proof strike of its first postmark is shown at left. Hood gave up the postmastership on 1917-06-05 to Herbert Ruston, who only lasted a few months before handing it back to Hood. On 1918-07-10, Frank W. How took it over but left after two months. The musical chairs stopped for a while with Adam Sandilands, who was postmaster until 1920-04-02. These were all mine employees doing the job in addition to their other duties [1, 3].

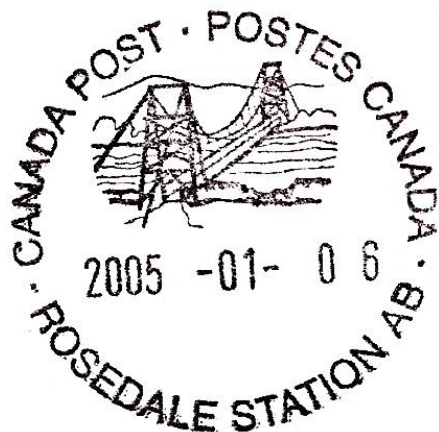
Joseph D. Thomas was the next postmaster. He was an investor in the Star Mine and operated another nearby coal mine in his own name. It seems likely that he would have delegated the postal duties to a clerk or possibly his wife. Thomas died on 1929-10-29 in his own personal coal mine when an electrical fire broke out. While trying to stop it, he was electrocuted by a 13,000-volt underground power line.

The post office went back to the Star Mine, who delegated Frederick Gorbous to run it as part of the company store again. The population of Aerial had grown to the point where Gorbous was able to buy the store and post office from the Star Mine and run it himself as an independent businessman. In 1946, he sold the store and moved to Vulcan, in southwestern Alberta, where he opened an appliance dealership. George Joseph Ruskin became the new store owner and postmaster on 1946-06-30, serving until 1955-12-31.

Robert Tremblecky was the next postmaster but by then the coal industry was dying. The final postmaster was Mrs. Georgina Gawdun, who only served briefly from 1963-07-01 until 1964-12-25, when the post office closed permanently. The Rosedale Station post office had no difficulty taking over the workload. The whole area, from Aerial to Rosedale to Rosedale Station, was amalgamated into a single village, not more than a 15-minute walk from one end to the other.

At left is a pictorial postmark of Rosedale Station depicting the suspension bridge. It is modern Rosedale's only tourist attraction other than the badlands.

On the next page is a photo I took in 2015 just before crossing the bridge. At left in the photo on the far side of the Red Deer River are the cliffs where the Star Mine once was. When the mine was closed, the entrances were dynamited to collapse the cliff over them and prevent people from entering the abandoned drifts (horizontal shafts). The piles of shattered rock at the base of the cliff mark the entrances. Behind the camera to the right is Aerial, and behind it to the left is Rosedale.

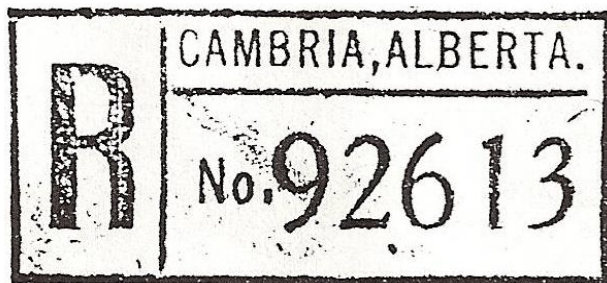




Cambria.

Cambria was a coal-mining hamlet a couple of kilometres downstream of Rosedale. The first coal mine, opened in 1935, was owned by Welsh immigrants, who named it Cambria after their homeland [4]. Its post office opened quite late in the history of the area, on 1942-09-01, with Mrs. Agnes Irene Westcott as acting postmaster. She only stayed a couple of months until her husband returned from overseas duty and was re-posted to New Westminster, British Columbia [1, 3]. Below is the proof strike of the registration cancel.

Mrs. Helen Lacey took over until 1944-03-11, followed by Harold Brooks until his retirement on 1957-04-21. Surprisingly, the post office managed to hang on until 1969-11-29, with Mrs. Mary Ann Young as the final postmaster. The coal industry was almost completely dead by the early 1960s. The hamlet still exists, mostly as a distant suburb of Drumheller, or possibly for those who find the pace of life in Rosedale too fast.



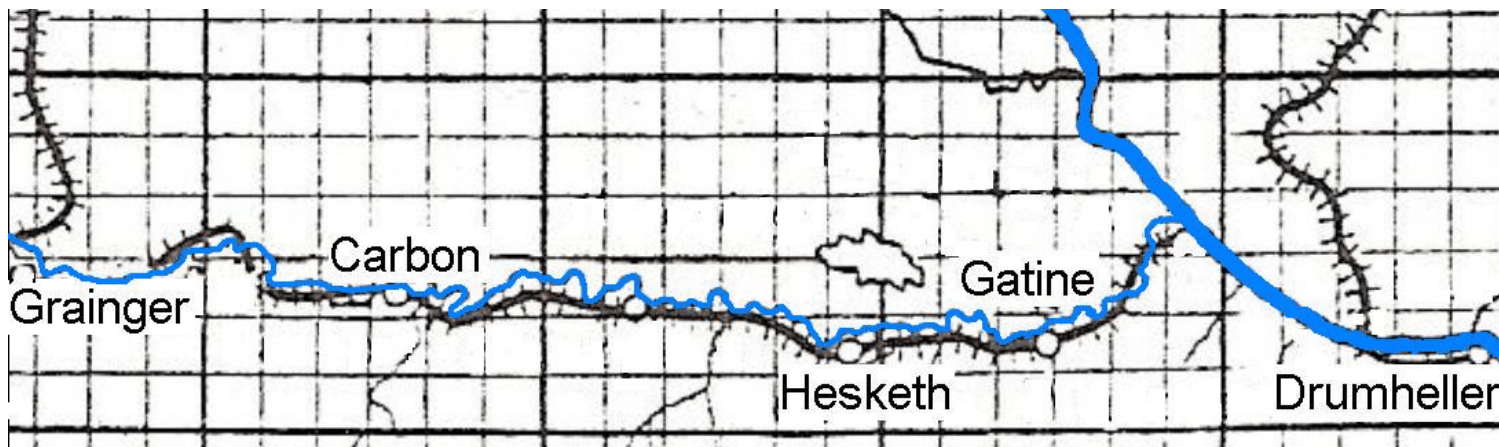
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KNEEHILL CREEK CANYON

Northwest of Drumheller is a side branch of the Red Deer River badlands,. Along the bottom of it flows Kneehill Creek, from out of the northwest. The Canadian Pacific Railway drove a railroad down this canyon in 1921, which had several hamlets living off coal mines and ranching. The flatlands above the canyon are dryland wheat and ranching. Settlement was always thin to begin with, and when the coal industry died in the 1950s, that left only a few scattered ranches.

The only post offices in the canyon, going upstream from the Red Deer River, were Gatine, Hesketh, Carbon, and Grainger, shown in the map below (the small squares are a mile on each side). Grainger was at the head of the railroad where it connected to north-south lines. There were a few other hamlets which never had post offices but they are not mentioned here. Carbon has the sole post office today, and the land is mostly depopulated.



This is a modern map of the area.



Gatine.

The first homesteaders along the Kneehill Creek canyon were a group of Frenchmen who arrived in 1901. They were not prepared for the cold winters and dry flatlands, and within three years almost all of them had departed. One Frenchman who stuck it out was Rene Charles Gatine, who stayed until the 1920s. By 1908, a primitive postal service was established in the area. A mail courier coming from Munson, to the northeast of Gatine, would drop a mail bag on a hill on the north side of the canyon. The Gatine sons would pick it up and distribute the mail, then add outgoing letters from ranchers and drop it back on the hilltop for the next exchange [1].



A post office was opened in Gatine's ranch house on 1910-02-14 but lasted only a brief time until 1912-12-31 when it permanently closed due to depopulation of the area [2]. At left is the proof strike of its postmark.

Subsequent mail service for the handful of remaining homesteaders was with rural routes via Munson to the northeast, Carbon to the west, or Drumheller to the southeast. When I visited the area in August 2016, I was unable to locate the site.

Below is a photo dated 1919, shows the ranch buildings where the post office was located, down in the badlands [1]. The Gatine family abandoned their ranch a few years later.



Hesketh.

Proceeding upstream, the next post office was Hesketh, a railroad siding named after a CPR manager [3]. The post office opened quite late, not until 1921-12-01 when the railroad came through. It was in the general store of Jonathon C. (Jack) Chittick. He was raised in Calgary, served in World War One, survived the Halifax Explosion, and returned home to take over his father's store in Hesketh. The store and post office were destroyed by fire on 1927-09-26, which disheartened Chittick. Instead of rebuilding, he gave up the postmastership and moved to Drumheller to operate a bulk fuel agency [1]. Below are proof strikes of both the original postmark and a replacement hammer ordered after the fire.



After a brief placeholder came and went, Arthur Stevely Hunter opened a new store and became postmaster on 1928-01-31, but was wiped out by the Great Depression, giving up on 1933-03-15. The store and post office began changing hands every few years during the hard times. Five postmasters came and went between 1933 and 1945.

This photo shows the hamlet of Hesketh at its maximum size circa the 1920s, not a particularly inspiring sight.



Reginald William Steward took over as postmaster and mail courier on 1945-09-27, being a returned veteran. He found the store life too quiet. He much preferred the outdoor life and went into farming [1]. Steward resigned on 1948-11-25. After him, two short-term postmasters came and went. Mrs. Alice Permann became the final postmaster. She served from 1953-09-01 until her death in 1969. By then, the hamlet was terminal and the post office had been carrying on more from inertia than any real need for it. On 1969-05-14, it was permanently closed.



At left is a photo of Hesketh that I took in 2016. The buildings in the previous photo are all gone save for the one shown here, which was once a service station and was now just filled with junk.

There are a few modern houses, just enough to qualify the place as a hamlet. Agriculture and oil-field servicing are the only two economic activities.

Carbon.

This settlement was originally called Kneehill Creek, and is down in the valley on a wide bottomland. Carbon, once on the railway line, is now off on a side road. There is an extinct post office called Knee Hill Valley, but this was far to the northwest from the badlands, near the source of Kneehill Creek, east of Innisfail in west-central Alberta. It was on the more fertile prairie flatlands and was not related to the badlands post offices, but might confuse postmark collectors. When the post office opened, the name was changed to reflect the importance of the coal mining industry in the area [3]. It should not be confused with the village post office of Carbondale, which is just north of Edmonton.

Before the Carbon post office opened, ranchers had a gentleman's agreement to haul a mail bag back and forth between Calgary and the Kneehill district. The Calgary postmaster at the time was George C. King. He knew several of the ranchers personally, and on their word of honour would give them mail for the district. Service was irregular and depended on when a rancher was headed in to the city. Anyone heading to Calgary would spread the word a few days ahead of time. The mailbag would be left at an agreed-upon spot out on the lone prairie, and residents would drop their letters into the bag [4].



In 1903, E.J.C. Davey arrived from Rosebud just south of Carbon where he had been running a stopping house. He began agitation to get proper postal service to the Kneehill district. He opened a store the following year and became the first postmaster on 1904-10-01 when Alberta was still a territorial district. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

Prior to the arrival of the railroads, the mail was carried from just about every point of the compass, depending on the individual courier. In 1909, the first railroad passed by to the west, at the town of Acme, then Grainger, at the head of the Kneehill Creek canyon. Those two places became the mail distribution points in turn. Finally, in 1921, when the CPR built a line down the canyon, Carbon became a railway stop with direct mail delivery.

Davey sold the store and post office to Colin McPherson, who on 1906-01-21 became the next postmaster. He was a man of many trades, a veterinary surgeon and a bookkeeper. But he was a restless soul. Shopkeeping was not his trade and he left a year later on 1907-03-25. Archie Johnstone McLeod took over and expanded the general store into an extensive business that occupied two adjacent buildings, as seen below. He stayed as postmaster until 1912-04-08 when Joseph Fortier took over the store and post office. There was a Great Fire in 1913 which wiped out the entire business district, Fortier among them. He gave up, although his official resignation as postmaster didn't go through until 1914-07-25.

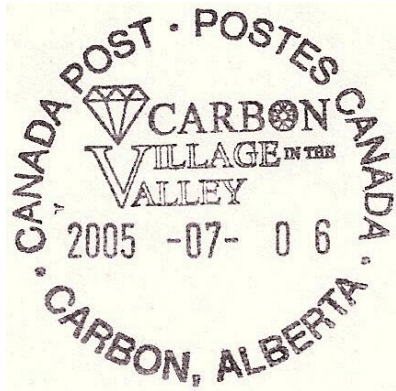


Henry Newton Elliott became a long-server as postmaster, taking up the position on 1914-08-27 and stayed in the job until his death on 1937-02-17 from a heart attack. He had originally operated a creamery in the village but it didn't do well. After the fire, he took the opportunity to open a general store and assume the post office. During his tenure, he put up a purpose-built building for the post office, constructed from brick, seen below. After his death, his widow Mabel was briefly the postmaster until 1937-09-30, by which time she was able to settle the estate and move to Vancouver.



Archie McLeod returned as postmaster. In the interval, he had been farming but his wife hated that life. When he came home and told her that they were moving into town to take over the post office, she took the butter churn she had been working and kicked it down the hill. He became a long-server and stayed in the job until 1965-09-30 when he retired. In 1948, the postmastership became a civil service position [4]. After his retirement, a succession of civil servant postmasters followed him but Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws.

In 1971, the post office moved into a new structure, ironically located on the lot where Elliott's unsuccessful creamery had been. The photo below right shows that structure in 1989. The woman standing in front of it is the author's mother, the late Betty Speirs. The post office looked the much same when I visited it in 2016, with only the wheelchair ramp removed and the sidewalk leveled to the door instead. Below left is a modern pictorial postmark of the village. Carbon seems to be surviving because it is spaced far enough away from Drumheller and Acme that local residents find it easier to drive to it for shopping. The village seemed prosperous, and the houses and buildings well kept.



Grainger.

The post office was named after Frank William Grainger, who arrived from England in 1904 and homesteaded in the area [3]. He made a brief visit back to his native England in early 1912. He was scheduled to return to Canada via the Titanic but was delayed and missed the sailing. He had to book another ship. The hamlet in Kneehill Creek canyon would have had a different name if he had made the Titanic on time. Grainger was quite prosperous in its early days because it was a trans-shipment point from the head of the railroad. In 1921, the CPR extended the line past Grainger all the way through the canyon and on into Drumheller. That finished Grainger and it became just an ordinary siding [5].

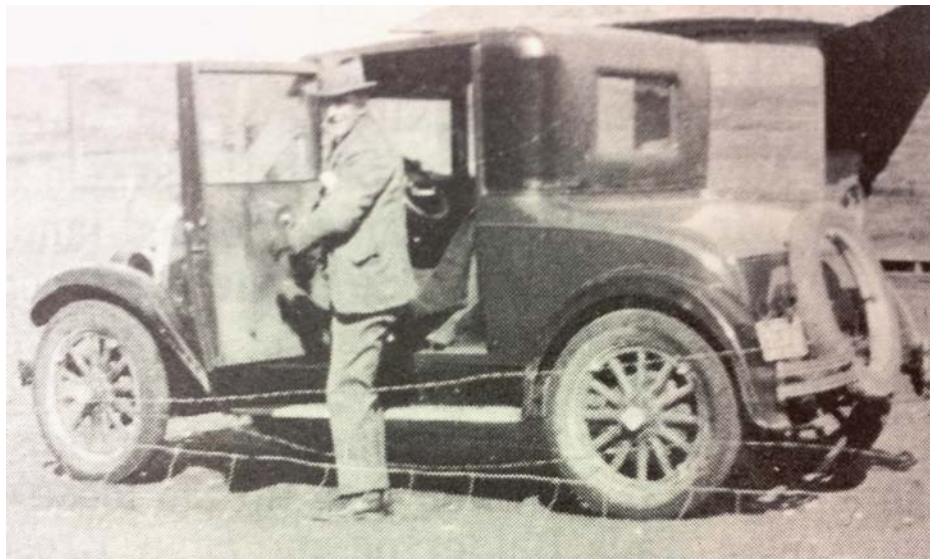
The post office opened on 1912-12-01 with Wilbur L. Tolton as the first postmaster. An Ontario man, he came out west in 1909, first as a railroad contractor, then as a homesteader. He gave up the post office on 1916-12-18 and moved to the nearby town of Acme, further to the west, where he later became its mayor. The post office was located at the railway depot and opened under the name of Grainger Station. Below are proofs of its first postmarks.





The next postmaster was L.E. Snell, until 1919-03-28. He moved the post office from the railway station into his general store. He was briefly succeeded by William Harrison. The second word wasn't dropped from the post office name until 1923-08-06, when someone finally noticed it was no longer in a station. A proof strike of its new postmark is shown at left. An Irish immigrant named Joseph O'Connor became postmaster on 1924-11-16 when he bought the store. Grainger was declining by then because of the railroad bypass.

Michael Joseph O'Ryan, who became Mike Ryan when he arrived from Ireland in 1928, moved to Grainger in 1930. He worked for O'Connor as a shop clerk and assistant postmaster before buying the store from him. He became Grainger's longest serving postmaster on 1932-06-08. A bachelor, he could just scrape by on the \$600 postmaster salary, plus the small profits from the store. The photo shows him on a mail run in 1935.



Between the Great Depression and the railroad bypass, it was a wonder that the hamlet survived as long as it did. Ryan became ill in 1959 and surrendered the store and post office on April 13. He went into a nursing home and died a year later. The post office had two more brief postmasters before it was permanently closed on 1966-01-05 due to limited usefulness.

Epilogue.

When the railroad was abandoned along the valley, traffic switched to grid roads. The problem is that the main highways are up on the flatlands and bypass all the settlements. They are now isolated on side roads that only locals travel. There is no road along the length of the valley bottomlands. When I visited the area in 2016, I had to drive a zigzag route back and forth across the valley to reach the settlements, and often double back to the main highway to get to the next place. The land has depopulated considerably. Coal mining has been gone for decades. Dryland wheat, ranching, and oil-field servicing are low-population density occupations which provide the only economic activity.

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