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POSTAL HISTORY OF CENTRAL ALBERTA: EAST SIDE OF HIGHWAY 2, PART 2

by Dale Speirs

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Introduction.

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, with rolling hills further east. The land is the transition zone between the semi-arid southern Alberta and the parkland belt where drought was normally not a problem. Below is a scenic view I photographed on 2020-06-24 about halfway between Wimborne and Torrington, along Highway 805 looking east. The entire county looks the much same everywhere else.



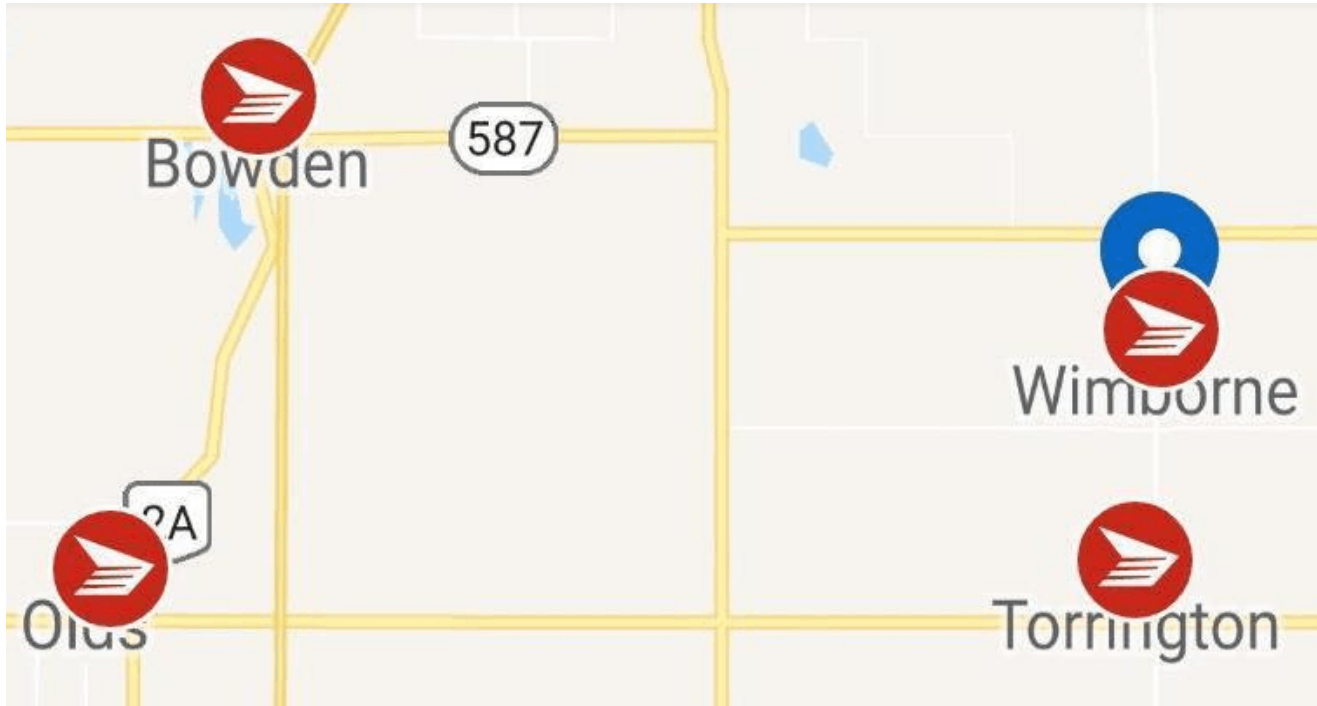
After the Calgary-Edmonton railroad was built, another north-south railroads was built 50 km or so to the east on a parallel course. In the days before good roads, 20 km was a day's round trip for grain haulers using horses and wagons. A dozen or more farmhouse post offices sprang up in the area between 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.



At left is a map showing 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. The Roman numerals across the map indicate the range numbers of the townships.

Highway 2 and the Calgary-Edmonton railway wobble back and forth across the Fifth Meridian line, west of which the range numbering started over from 1. This district was west of the Fourth Meridian, which is the Alberta-Saskatchewan border.

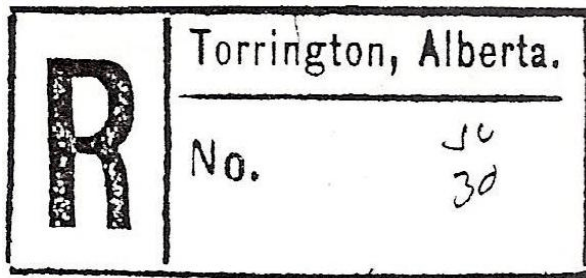
Below is a map of the modern district and shows the remaining post offices as of 2021. The land in between the two vertical rows of post offices is still populated by grain farmers and ranchers. The east-west roads are paved and it is only a half-hour drive at most to a post office.



Torrington.

Torrington was late coming into existence. The townsite was not established until 1929, when the Canadian Pacific Railway built a track through the district. The grain elevators came first, and over the next few years several more businesses located at the siding. The hamlet was far enough away from Olds that it was easier to shop locally, but nonetheless it never had enough business to grow indefinitely. The townsite is on a gentle slope facing to the west, with beautiful vistas.

The post office opened on 1930-07-01 with Asa Delbert Waterman as the first postmaster [1]. Below is a proof strike of its registration marking. Waterman and his extended family came up from Iowa in 1902 and homesteaded in the district. The railroad built a siding adjacent to the Waterman homestead, so the family established a drug store with a post office. Asa died on 1948-04-02 while still in office. His son Leoran Allen Waterman took over as postmaster until 1950-04-29, staying on mainly to settle his father's estate. After selling out, he moved to Washington State [2]. Shown on the next page is a cover sent by him shortly after taking over as postmaster.



L.A. Waterman,
Torrington, Alta.



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Mrs Agnes Grace Hazel then succeeded as postmaster. She was the widow of a homesteader and, as was often the custom, given preference for the job as a form of social assistance. The post office moved into her residence. On 1959-06-12, she retired and Mrs Nora Scheurer took over as postmaster. Canada Post records cut off after this point due to privacy laws, but she was postmaster at least until the 1970s [2]. During this time the post office moved into a standalone building. The photo below shows the author's mother, the late Betty Speirs, at the post office in 1989.



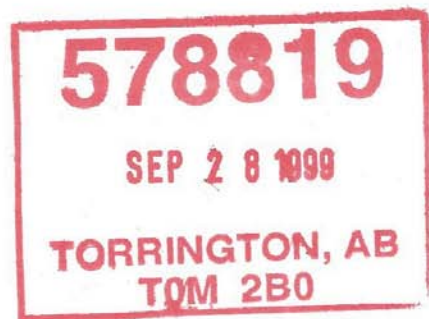
The economy declined as the grain elevators concentrated elsewhere and rail traffic fell off. As part of its struggle for economic survival, Torrington became the location of the Gopher Hole Museum, which opened in June 1996. It featured dioramas of stuffed gophers (actually Richardson ground squirrels) dressed up in various poses. The hamlet adopted Clem T. Gopher as its motto. The museum was sufficiently novel that it received national attention [3]. The post office had a pictorial postmark depicting Clem T. Gopher. Normally a rectangular handstamp was used, a sample of which I obtained in 2020, shown below right.



I had previously visited Torrington in 1999 and from the museum gift shop bought a set of postcards depicting some of the dioramas. The postmaster at the time was Donna Manion, who was depicted on one of the postcards. I mailed one to myself, the two sides shown on this and the next page.



Greetings from "The Gopher Hole Museum"
Torrington, Alberta, Canada



R*Star Photos - Olds, Alberta



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Although the museum still exists, the village ran into financial trouble and lost its incorporated status in 1997. It is now legally an unincorporated hamlet within Kneehill County, with no separate government.

The post office is now in the county fire hall, which I photographed on 2020-06-24. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the gopher museum was closed, so I was unable to check for new postcards.

Allingham.

The Canadian Pacific Railway extended its line north from Acme to Wimborne in 1929. One of the sidings was named Allingham. The origin of the name is unknown. Since most of the surrounding settlements were named after British towns, at a guess the name came from there.



A grain elevator was established and local settlers began buying lots for assorted businesses. The post office opened on 1930-08-15 with Gilbert Millar McCulloch as the first postmaster [1]. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left. McCulloch had homesteaded further south in various localities, specializing in breeding work horses. As the decade-long drought of the Dirty Thirties began, he was more prescient than most, and moved north to the parkland district, which was not as severely afflicted. Although he stayed on the land until 1958, he gave up the post office on October 1 after a few months [4].

Alexander Evan McDonald took over the post office on 1931-01-01 and moved it to his farmhouse. After him, the postmastership transferred on 1935-05-08 to Victor James Simpson, who moved it into his store in the hamlet. He and his family lived above the store. The bright lights of Calgary beckoned, and Victor handed over the store and post office to his brother Oscar Edward Simpson, who assumed the postal duties on 1937-12-10 and moved his family above the post office.

The hamlet was hit hard by the abandonment of railroads, the advent of good roads, and rural free delivery, all in the post-WW2 era. The latter meant that farmers no longer had to come to the hamlet for their mail. When the grain terminal closed in 1951, the final decline began. The Simpsons abandoned the store in 1962 and moved to Calgary [4]. On 1962-08-16, the post office permanently closed [1]. Allingham became a rural route out of Three Hills.

Wimborne.



This hamlet was named after a town in Dorsetshire, England [6]. Homesteaders began arriving in the first decade of the 1900s. A farmhouse post office opened on 1909-04-01 with Mrs H.M. Harrison as the first postmaster [1]. She only stayed in the job a few months. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. The postmastership was transferred to J.H. Prendergast on 1909-07-22 and the post office to his general store.

On 1912-11-26, Ernest W. Meers took over the job when he bought the store. He was an Englishman who had initially settled nearby in the Innisfail district before taking up a homestead near Wimborne [7]. When the railroad came through in 1929, he moved the store and post office to the hamlet location.

Mail delivery and freight for the store was on Fridays, which made for hectic business on those days. Meers retired just before World War Two. He sold the store and post office to his son-in-law Herbert Wagner, who became postmaster on 1939-03-01 and served until 1950-02-11.

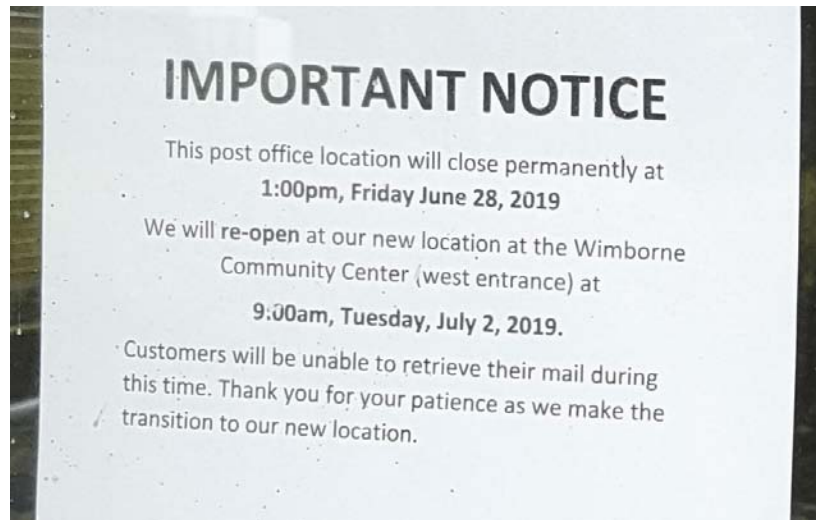
After a brief placeholder came and went, Mrs Rose Mary Violet Dipalo Benedict became postmaster. She served until 1968-05-10 when she became postmaster of Mynarski Park, today the village of Penhold, about 60 km east-northeast of Wimborne. The Benedict family had arrived from Missouri in 1903 and homesteaded in various places of the Mayton and Wimborne districts. Mrs Emma Ehrman took over but Canada Post records cut off after this date.

Susan Hastie was the next postmaster [5], keeping the post office in her house. Below is a photo taken in 1989 with Betty Speirs at this post office. On the next page is a Google photo taken in 2018, a year before this location closed.





After Hastie retired, the post office moved into the Wimborne Community Centre. I visited Wimborne on 2020-06-24, but because Canada Post hadn't updated its online post office locator, I went to the house and found the post office gone. Below is a photo and enlargement I took showing the signage redirecting customers.



The relocated post office is in a cubbyhole in one corner of the building. It was only open weekday mornings and the lunch hour, with 75 box numbers and a small counter. Torrington is only a five-minute drive away and has the advantage of being on a main highway, so it is surprising that the Wimborne post office was kept open by Canada Post. My photos below show the new location of the post office.



While I was there, a customer came in and mentioned that she had a telephone call from Statistics Canada, who said they had mailed her a form to fill in. The postmistress told her the only mail accepted was to a box number. Anything addressed to a street address in Wimborne hamlet was automatically bounced back to the sender. I obtained a sample of the pictorial postmark.



Curlew.

This farmhouse post office was named after the bird, common along the many sloughs in the district. It opened on 1906-08-01 with Jacob Flaig as the first postmaster [1]. George Brinson took over the postmastership on 1908-08-22, followed by C.D. White from 1911-04-09 until 1912-08-20.

Cal M. Garvey was the next postmaster from 1913-06-18 until 1914-07-08, moving the post office into his general store [2]. Curlew had grown from a place name to a hamlet, which was to prove the height of its glory. There was also a small hotel, livery stable, and blacksmith shop. The mail distribution was from Trochu further east rather than Olds to the west, which was a two-day trip across muddy trails [1].

E. Wallator was then postmaster for a year until 1916-03-21. He was followed by Mrs Elizabeth Platt, who was a long-server until 1928-02-03. By that time the railroad was approaching Torrington and Curlew was doomed. The hamlet was too close to justify its existence halfway between Trochu and Torrington, both of which were now served by railroads.

John Esler McCleary was the final postmaster, who served only until 1930-01-31 when the post office permanently closed. Mail service became Rural Route #1 from Trochu. The buildings were moved to nearby villages such as Torrington and nothing remains of Curlew today. I drove the area on 2020-06-24 and found no trace.

Mayton.

Mayton was roughly halfway between Wimborne and Olds. The first homesteaders named the district after their origin in May City, Iowa [6]. The railroads helped kill it off and good roads finished the job. Nothing remains of the hamlet but there is an historical marker which I photographed in 2020 June, shown below. The hamlet had been established in the expectation that the railroad would come through it on the flatlands but instead the railway chose a different route through Wimborne [8].



Amos Brubaker and his family homesteaded in the district in 1900. He opened a crossroads store and on 1902-03-01 became postmaster. He didn't stay long and resigned on 1903-05-16. The postmastership turned over twice in the next two years with short-term servers before C.A. West took over the post office on 1905-08-01. He died in office and was succeeded on 1908-04-22 by W.L. Fischer.

Fischer bought the store from Brubaker [2] and moved the post office back in, serving as postmaster until 1910-09-14. After him came J.H. Cameron, who ran the post office until 1922-05-10, then Mrs Florence P. Chase until 1929-12-09. The Great Depression began to bite, and the post office remained closed for two years. It didn't help when the railroad bypassed Mayton. The final postmaster was Mrs Martha Emma Tovell, who was postmaster from 1932-01-05 until 1932-10-31. After that, mail was delivered via Olds Rural Route #1.

Below is a proof strike of a postmark dated 1930. This suggests that there was optimism about keeping the post office going, although in actual fact there was a lengthy hiatus. This postmark was proofed while the post office was still closed.



Hunterville.

This settlement was never more than a hamlet at best, and its industrial district consisted of a creamery and a general store within which the post office was located [2]. The population slowly faded away as other villages had better access to the railroads or good roads. The post office opened on 1908-04-01 in the general store of its namesake and first postmaster George A. Hunter, who kept both until 1916. The mail route was from Olds twice a week.

Clarence Henry Stuart took over on 1916-08-29, moving the post office into his house. He was one of many homesteaders from Iowa and originally settled further south in 1904 at Neapolis. He held the job until 1918-08-25, also having the only telephone in the district. Reading between the lines of local history [2], he was diverted by the 1918 influenza pandemic, administering to his many neighbours. The post office went into abeyance and was finally closed on 1920-05-18. It may be reasonably surmised that the pandemic killed the post office, although Stuart lived to an old age.

Knee Hill Valley.

The Knee Hill Valley post office was one of the older ones in Alberta, opening on 1894-07-01 with William Gunston as the first postmaster. His successor was W.L. Gillet, who took over on 1901-03-01 but only stayed two months. Two more placeholders came and went before the post office stabilized with George R. McLaren, who became postmaster on 1903-11-01 and stayed until 1910-10-18. Shown below is a proof strike of a split-circle postmark used during his tenure.

Thereafter followed a long list of postmasters, few of whom held the job for more than two or three years [1]. The Shaefer and Thurston families provided most of the postal services over the years. The final postmaster was Mrs Irene Fay Thurston from 1950-10-23 until 1969-09-25 when the post office closed permanently. Thereafter the mail was delivered on a rural route out of Innisfail.



Horseshoe Lake.



This was a farmhouse post office not far from the shores of Horseshoe Lake, with Robert Smith as the only postmaster from its opening on 1913-08-01 until it closed on 1927-01-31. At left is the proof strike of its first postmark. Since then the mail has come on a rural route out of Innisfail to the northwest.

Milnerton.

The origin of this farmhouse post office name is unknown. It opened on 1903-11-01 with C.E. Peters as the first postmaster [1]. He was succeeded by George Thurslow, who operated the post office in his house until 1921-03-31, when it closed permanently. Beyond that, nothing is known in local history books.

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