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POSTAL HISTORY OF THE
STANDARD-HUSSAR-ROSEMARY DISTRICT IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA

by Dale Speirs

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POSTAL HISTORY OF THE STANDARD-HUSSAR-ROSEMARY DISTRICT IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA
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About 75 km east of Calgary, in the general area between the Trans-Canada Highway and Deadhorse Lake in southern Alberta is a stretch of farmland that has managed to maintain a population living on dryland and irrigation crops. There were a number of post offices established in pioneer time, which dwindled as paved roads reduced the necessity of hamlet and farmhouse post offices.
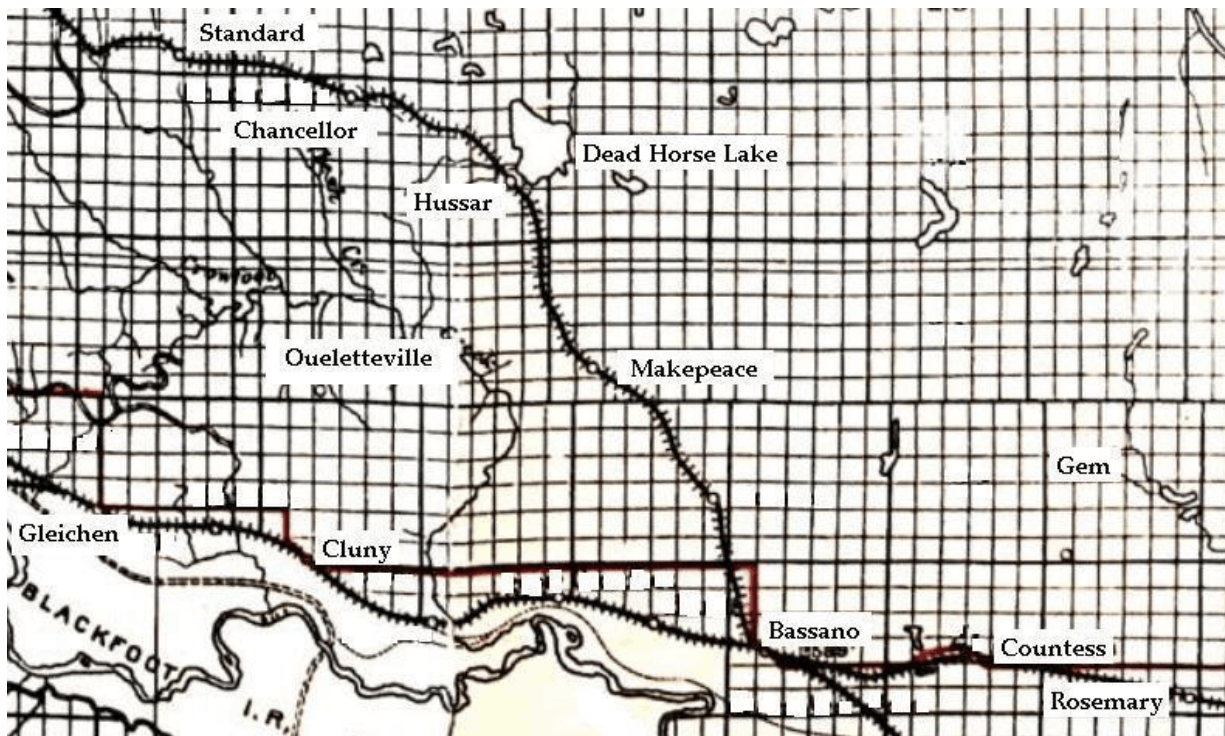

The district is fairly compact and travel between each extinct and/or current post office is only 10 or 15 minutes on good roads. This map is based on a 1922 map and shows the pioneer settlements, most of which were railroad sidings.

Each small square is a section of land, one mile on a side. Homesteaders claimed quarter-sections when they settled.

This map shows the modern day district.

Ouelletteville.
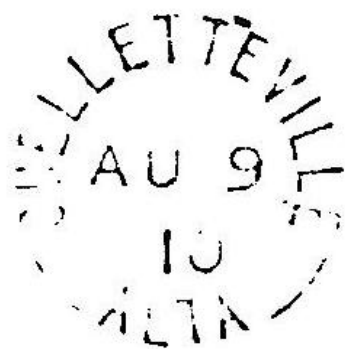
The first settlement in the district to have a post office was founded in 1907. It was a colonization project financed by francophone Roman Catholics based in Edmonton. Recruitment of homesteaders from France and Québec, their transportation, and settlement was under the direction of Father Alberic Ouellette. Once there were enough settlers, the post office opened on 1910-08-01 with Louis Simonin as the first postmaster [2]. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

Louis and his wife Sophie were French immigrants who had first settled in Saskatchewan in 1893, then migrated to Ouelletteville in 1908. The post office was on their farm. Twice a week Louis drove south to Cluny to pick up the mail. After his sudden death, the postmastership was transferred on 1912-11-16 to his son Henry.

Sophie took over on 1914-02-08 and was the final postmaster until her retirement on 1923-08-04, after which she moved to nearby Bassano. The photo on the next page shows her standing by the farm post office, probably in the early 1920s judging from the car [3]. The official closing date of the post office was 1924-02-20. By then, good roads had made the post office redundant. The mail could be quickly delivered on a rural route from Cluny, which today is on the Trans-Canada Highway.

Standard.

The area around what is now Standard was settled by Danes in 1909. The place was originally called Danaview. The name was already in use further east on the railroad in Saskatchewan. When the post office was opened, the name became Standard, in reference to the Danish flag, the oldest European standard flag in continuous use to modern times [1].

The post office was established on 1912-04-01 in the general store of George Day, who was also the first postmaster [2]. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. The mail originally came by his wagon from Gleichen before the railroad branch line reached Standard in 1911. Day hauled the mail as a courtesy for his customers. Once the tracks were laid through Standard, he became official. Mail service then became daily.

Day was a widower Englishman who came to Canada with five daughters. Detraining at Gleichen, he heard about a new settlement then called Danaview and set up shop-keeping there, knowing the railroad was en route. His first store, which contained the new post office, was the first building constructed in Standard. The photo on the next page shows the store under construction in 1911.
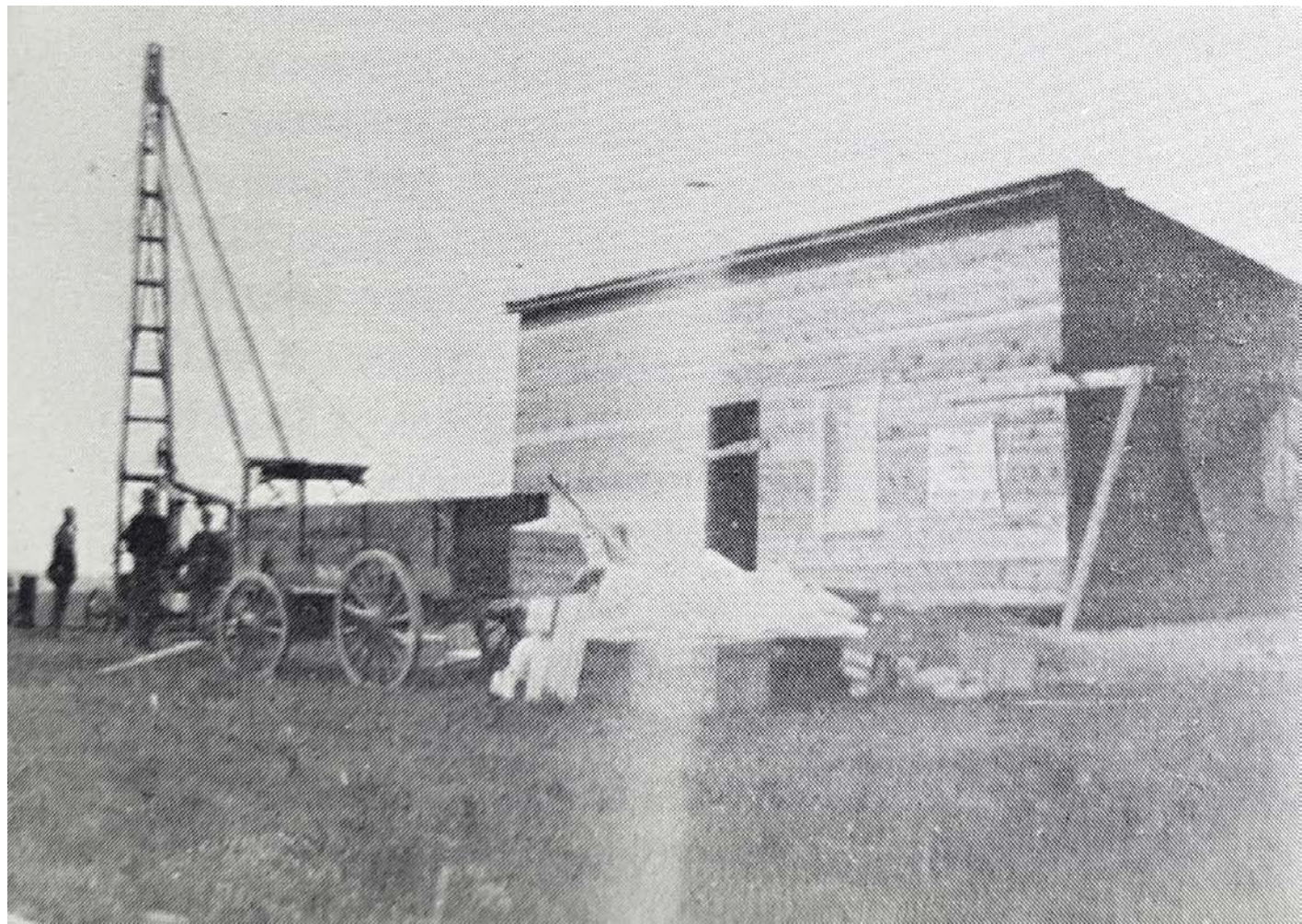
The business and post office moved several times into bigger and better buildings as the village grew [4]. The photo at left shows a later version, with living quarters above, and one of his daughters standing at the door [4].

His five daughters, not all at once, helped him run the post office. When he retired in 1921, the family moved to Calgary and scattered into various careers.

Alfred Messenger took over as postmaster on 1921-03-10 and ran the post office attached to a restaurant on the main street. He resigned on 1924-01-02 and Otto S. Jensen was briefly in charge. Francis Messenger, brother of Alfred, took over on 1925-09-10 and stayed until 1938-04-29.

The next postmaster was Mrs Dora Augusta Marie Petersen, nee Hansen, and later remarried as Podemphant, after which she moved to British Columbia. She resigned her position on 1951-05-01. Mrs Edith May McGowan took over as postmaster.

During her tenure the post office moved into a new building in the early 1960s. She retired on 1971-03-31 and was succeeded by Mrs Mae Westergard. After this, privacy laws kick in for Canada Post records.

This photo shows the post office as it was in 1989. The woman standing in front is my mother Betty Speirs.

I visited Standard in 2015 and re-photographed the post office, as seen below. Not much structural change but certainly a fresher-looking appearance.

This is the pictorial postmark used by the post office. The countryside is prosperous farmland and a tribute to the pioneers.

CANADA POST · POSTES CANADA ·
· STANDARD, ALBERTA ·
2004 - 10 - 31
Heart of
Wheatland

Hussar.

This area was settled by German colonists in 1910, many of whom had served together in the German Hussars regiment [1]. They were interned when World War One began and their lands were confiscated. Surprisingly though, the name Hussar was retained for the post office. The CPR established a siding at the site in 1912 and a village grew up by the tracks. Adjacent was Dead Horse Lake, which dried up in the 1930s. While it is still shown on modern maps in blue (see page 4), it has been an alkali flat for decades.

The post office opened on 1914-03-16 with Fergus Oliver as the first postmaster [2]. The proof strike of its first postmark is shown at left. The post office was located in Oliver's general store, which he sold the following year to Andrew A. Clifgard. In turn, Clifgard became postmaster on 1915-05-03 and held the position until 1926-10-21. His wife and older children helped run the post office and the baby was kept in a crib behind the counter [5]. When Clifgard took over, the post office served nine families. By the time he resigned, there were fifty families plus the village businesses.

Mrs Violet Pearl LeGrandeur became postmaster shortly after giving birth to her youngest daughter. She served until 1952-07-02. The post office burned down in 1920, 1929, and 1932 due to village fires. As was the custom in those days, prairie businesses built shoulder-to-shoulder in cheap wooden structures. As a consequence, whenever a building caught fire, it burned like a Roman candle and the fire quickly spread [5].

The widow Mrs Lottie Amelia Sanders bought the store and post office to survive on, becoming the next postmaster. She died suddenly of a stroke on 1953-12-13 and the postmastership passed to her daughter Elsie. She had to raise her siblings and run the store and post office to keep the family together. Elsie resigned on 1959-05-20 to raise her own children.

Mrs Dorothy Joyce Annie Law took over the postmastership and served until 1980. During her tenure, on 1966-10-01, the post office became a Semi-Staff operation run by Canada Post in its own building. Because of privacy laws, official records cut off after this date. However, a local history book reported that Anita Hall was the next postmaster and served until 1983.

After two short-term appointments came and went, Lila Collett, who had been Law's assistant, became postmaster and was still there as of 1994 when the book was published [5]. Elsie Van Hereweghe nee Sanders returned to the post office as Collett's assistant. Below left is the postmark used during Collett's tenure. In the run-up to Alberta's centennial in 2005, all the provincial post offices received pictorial postmarks. The Hussar cancellation is shown below right, a direct reference to its German heritage.

This photo shows Betty Speirs at the post office in 1989.

This photo shows the post office in 2015 when I visited the area.

Makepeace.

This was a CPR siding built in 1911 and named after the English novelist William Makepeace Thackery [1]. Evidently somewhere in the CPR hierarchy was a man who was well-educated in literature. The grain elevators at the siding didn't follow until 1916. Settlers began to fill the quarter-sections and were enough to justify a store and post office. Alfred Bolsvert became the first postmaster when the post office opened on 1917-07-01 in his general store. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

For the remainder of its history the post office stayed in the store, while various owners came and went. Bolsvert didn't stay long and sold out on 1918-06-19 to Warner and Mabel Lake. She was postmaster until 1923-05-09, when Peter Holtan took over. He was a Norwegian immigrant who originally homesteaded nearby, tired of farming, and bought the store in 1923.

Holtan decided to restart farming in 1929. During the 1920s the climate had been good but just as he went back on the land, the great droughts of the 1930s began. The store and post office kept the Holtan family solvent to a degree, but in 1937 they gave up and migrated north to Westlock in central Alberta, where there were no droughts [6]. The photo on the next page shows the store/post office as it looked sometime in the 1930s.

The Campbell family bought the store. Ellis and Opal were the elderly parents and their son Verl and daughter-in-law Doris helped out. Verl was listed as postmaster from 1937-11-01 until 1942-12-28 when his father Ellis took over. The senior Campbells were of an age to retire, and because Verl had a trucking business, they sold out to the Wismers [6].

The next postmaster was Clarence Arthur Wismer, from 1945-07-23 until 1946-12-16. The store and post office weren't for them, so they sold out to Edwin Schaffer. Good roads had made the post office redundant, so on 1951-10-26 it permanently closed. Mail service then became a route out of Cluny [2]. In 1960, the store/post office building was sold and hauled away to a farm for other uses. Nothing remains.

Chancellor.

The place was settled by Germans in 1912. When the post office opened in 1918, it was named after Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg, the chancellor of Germany at the time [1]. Considering that World War One was only just winding down, one wonders how the settlers convinced the Canadian Post Office to allow that name. Perhaps the Ottawa bureaucrats thought it referred to the British term Chancellor of the Exchequer.

By 1918 there were enough settlers to justify building a general store at the railroad siding. The owner and first postmaster as of 1918-10-01 was Walter T. Campbell [2]. He was an Englishman whose parents had gone out ahead of him and were then followed by the rest of the family [4]. At left is a proof strike of the first postmark.

Campbell sold out to W.T. Malcolm, who became the next postmaster on 1919-08-14 and stayed until 1923-07-23. The photo on the next page shows his store, wherein was contained the post office [4]. Thereafter a succession of store owners and postmasters came and went, changing every two or three years. The problem was that Chancellor was halfway between Standard and Hussar on the railroad, both of which drew away the trade. The hamlet was too close to better places and therefore struggled economically.

The turnover slowed when Jonathan Morris Wheatley took over as postmaster on 1938-02-02. The post office moved into the family's hotel. Jonathan was very active in politics and on 1948-07-25 handed over the postmastership to his wife Millicent Hannah. She kept the position until 1957-09-30.

Mrs Mary Annie Pedersen then became postmaster until 1966-09-08. The final postmaster was Ronald Felix Corbiell. On 1970-01-19 the post office closed permanently. The wonder was that it had survived as long as it did in such a fading hamlet.

Rosemary.

The village was named after Rosemary Millicent, daughter of the Duke of Sutherland, who owned a large farm nearby [7]. The area of settlement was within the Eastern Irrigation District, owned by the CPR, who sold quarter-sections to homesteaders. The first settlers arrived in 1913 and thereafter various waves of ethnic or religious groups arrived to try their hand at irrigation farming.

The first major group of settlers were Quebecois, but they were city slickers unprepared for farm life, much less breaking ground for a new homestead. Within a few years most of them returned home. Another wave was more successful, that of the Mennonites, who were agrarians and understood farm life. The Mormons came up from southwestern Alberta in another wave. They were experienced irrigation farmers who did well. Soon there were enough inhabitants to justify opening a post office.

Emile Pinsonneault became the first postmaster on 1919-11-01, locating the post office in his general store [2]. The building was adjacent to the railroad siding, so the mail service was frequent. Below is the proof strike of the first postmark.

The photo below left shows the store within which the post office was located [7]. Notice the French signage. The photo below right shows Pinsonneault by the entrance, with a Post Office sign above the door. He and his family couldn't take life on the lone prairie and in 1922 they returned to Montreal.
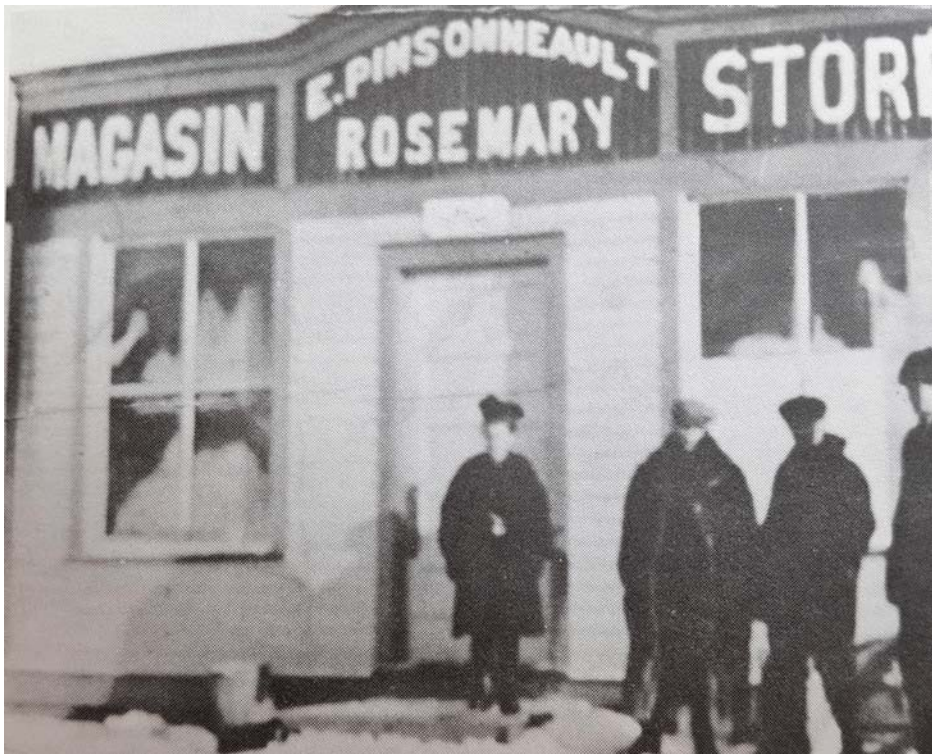
There was a steady turnover of stores and postmasters, beginning with E.T. Waddell, who took over the job from Pinsonneault on 1922-09-06. He was followed on 1927-05-17 by William D. Elliot.   Rosemary had more than just the one general store most villages had, probably because of francophones versus anglophones. The Conn brothers, who had a different store, then took over the post office, with Louis as postmaster from 1928-09-21 and Joseph from 1929-07-22.

Joseph Chabot bought the Conn store in 1930 for 72 pigs, but the postmaster was Mrs Blanche Charlotte Narum [7]. This photo shows the store and post office [7].

Sometime during Narum's tenure the post office moved into its own building and the operation became a Semi-Staff position. During this time, a grain scoop was kept in the post office lobby because of all the mud tracked in from the unpaved streets. Mailbags were carried in a wheelbarrow from the railroad station, not an easy job during wet weather when the streets were pure gumbo. On one occasion a horse was hitched to the wheelbarrow but took fright and ran away [7]. The wheelbarrow was battered to pieces by the time the runaway horse was caught.

Narum served until 1946-06-25 when the post office but not the store was transferred to Glenn Munham Stanford. He traded his house in Calgary in exchange for the post office building, which had living quarters attached. He was listed as postmaster but his wife Mary actually ran the post office. Mail arrived twice a week by train.

Stanford built a new post office building in 1952, then sold out to Arlo Palmer, who became postmaster on 1953-06-01. Palmer had previously been Assistant Postmaster at Raymond in southwestern Alberta. Palmer's tenure was short, as he died of a heart attack on 1953-09-20. His widow Zina then became postmaster and kept going until 1959-03-09, when she sold out to Delay F. Seely. Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws but a local history book mentioned that in 1977 Seely was still postmaster [7].

On 1988-10-01, the post office was converted into a retail postal outlet and still is today. The photo on the next page shows Betty Speirs at the RePO in 1989. The close-up of the window sign indicates the RePO was in the Westwinds Variety Store.

When I visited Rosemary in 2015, the post office was still in the same building but now shared with a bank, as seen below.

At the time of Betty's visit, she left some covers to be mailed. They were postmarked with a duplex canceller, an unusually late use of what by then was an obsolete style (below left). The proof strike of the duplex was dated 1946-09-23, just after Stanford took over, suggesting the original split-circle canceller was too worn by then to suit him. When I visited and got sample postmarks, they were plain rectangles (below middle). As with all other Alberta post offices, Rosemary received a pictorial canceller in 2004 in anticipation of Alberta's centennial in 2005 (below right).

Countess.

This village was the next stop west of Rosemary on the railroad line. The post office was named after Countess Bassano. Her husband, the Marquis de Bassano of Italy, was a shareholder in the CPR, and had the village of Bassano named after him, one more stop further west on the railroad. The post office opened on 1924-08-01 in the newly built store of William Jardie [2]. Since it was on a railway main line, the mail service was excellent. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

Jardie only stayed a couple of years, then sold the store and post office to Adam M. Anderson, who on 1926-05-20 became the next postmaster. The store changed hands again and the new owner Basil Dewey Benjamin became postmaster on 1932-10-08. The store struggled during the Great Depression [9].

Alfred Lauren Cador was the next store owner and postmaster as of 1935-12-28. Luck was with the Cadors, as the original route of what is today the Trans-Canada Highway passed by Countess, so their service station had some steady business from motorists. In the 1950s, the highway was re-routed through a cut-off further south, just at the same time that passenger trains began to disappear. The end times of the post office were in sight.

The Cadors retired to Bassano and their daughter Mrs Pauline Alfreda Landry became postmaster on 1945-04-01. She and her husband flipped the store to Lyle Keats, who took over on 1946-12-01 as postmaster. He couldn't make a go of the operation and sold out to John Norman Dalsto, who was postmaster from 1950-01-16 until 1957-11-18. The photo on the next page shows the store/post office as it declined during the late 1950s and early 1960s, down to one fuel pump.

The final store owner and postmaster was Darrel Stephen Gamble [9]. The store was badly damaged in a fire in August 1968. Combined with the slow and inevitable death of the village, and its easy proximity to Bassano by good roads, there was no point in carrying on. The post office closed permanently on 1969-04-15. Little remains of what is now a hamlet, left on back roads that few people have reason to travel.
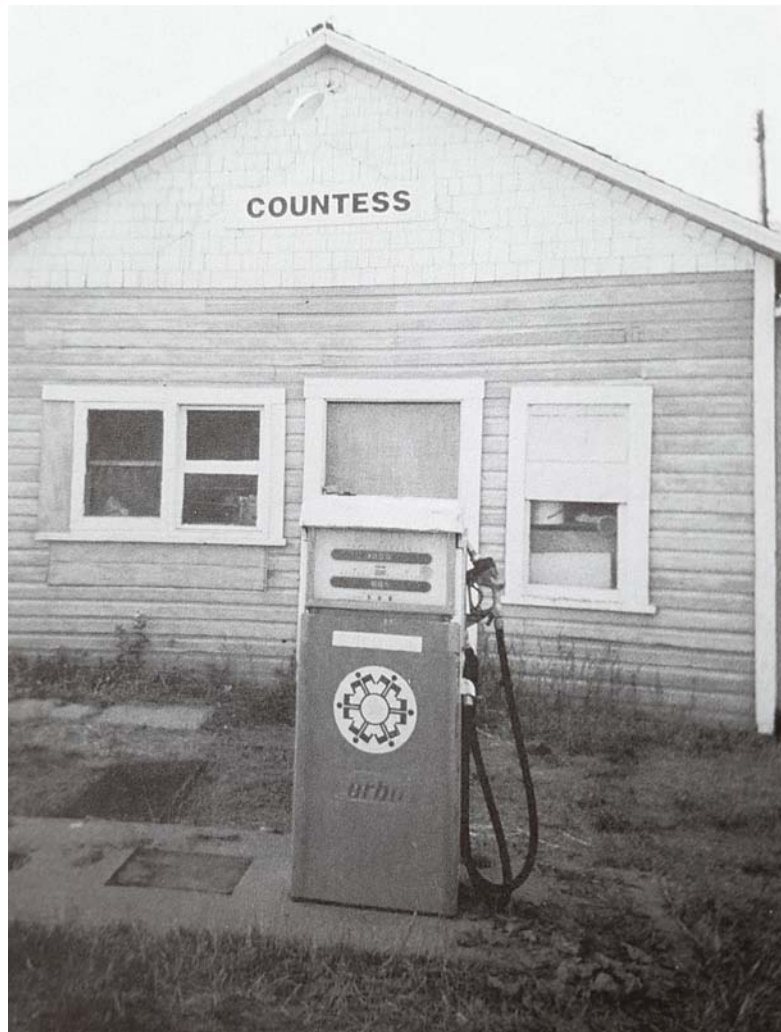
Gem.

The name of this settlement was given by settlers who thought it a good descriptor of the land [1]. The soils were sandy and the climate was dry but the advent of irrigation made it a fertile land, as it is even today. In 1914, Gem area farmers became the first to receive water from the Eastern Irrigation District [10].

The post office opened on 1914-08-01 in the general store of S.A. Wilson, who became the first postmaster [2]. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. Mail service was twice weekly by horse and buggy from Bassano. In 1927, the CPR built a spur line from the mainline to Gem, which increased mail frequency [9, 10].

The general store and its post office changed hands frequently, and consequently so did the postmasters [2]. R.A. Elliott took over as postmaster on 1916-07-15 but only lasted a couple of years. After a turnover of two more short-term postmasters, Maurice Atkins stayed 1923-08-22 until 1931-12-29. Leonard David Standen then held the postmastership until 1942–08-05, when the store was sold.

John Bell Wallace held the job during the war years, until 1945-08-31, when he handed over to Ray Lovelle Wilfley, another short termer. The position stabilized with James Bain Spark, who lasted from 1946-11-17 until 1951. Joyce King Purcell took over on 1951-05-01 and lasted until 1968-06-28.

The final postmaster was Mrs E.K. Seely, who took over, after which post office records cut off due to privacy laws. However the post office continued under three more postmasters until its end. The phot on the next page shows the post office in 1989, with Betty Speirs in front.

On 1992-11-25, the post office closed permanently. It was replaced by a retail postal outlet run by Ron Galarneau, which on 1995-03-22 closed in turn [8]. The hamlet is today on a side road, and the railway tracks were lifted decades ago.
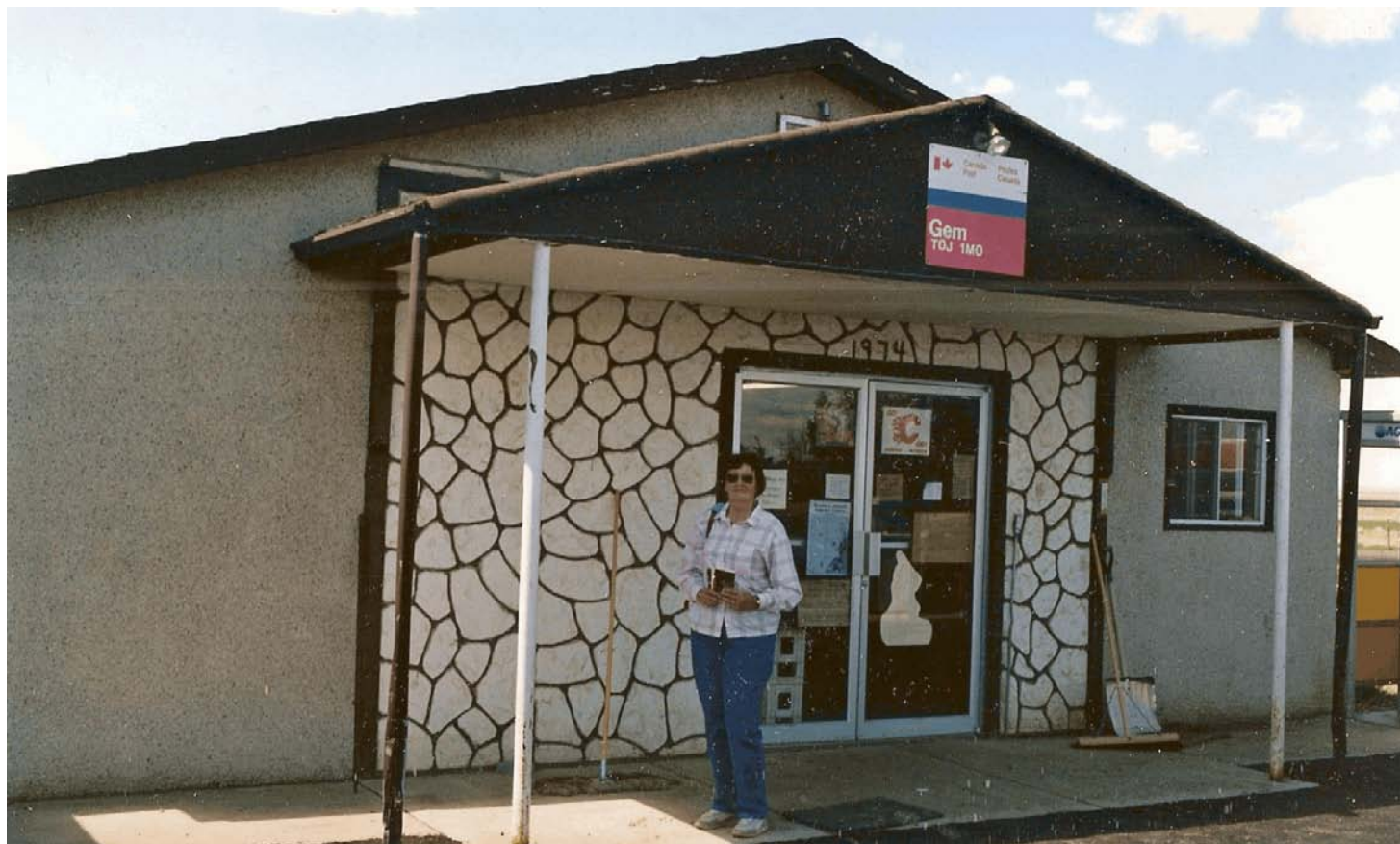
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4] various authors (1979) FROM DANAVIEW TO STANDARD Published by the Standard Historical Book Society, Alberta. Pages 5 to 6, 13 to 15, 21 to 23, 83 to 84, 164 to 165, 230 to 232

5] various authors (1994) HUSSAR HERITAGE Published by Hussar Historical Book Committee, Alberta. Pages 19 to 28, 53, 211, 227 to 228, 385 to 386, 634 to 635

6] various authors (1991) MAKEPEACE: ECHOES FROM THE PAST Published by Makepeace Women of Unifarm, Bassano, Alberta. Pages 6, 110, 86 to 88, 136 to 137, 244 to 245, 261, 268

7] Easter, Roselynn (editor) (1977) ROSEMARY: LAND OF PROMISE Published by Rosemary Historical Society, Alberta. Pages 9, 19, 21, 199 to 201, 130 to 136, 340 to 341, 368 to 369

8] Hughes, Neil (1998) ALBERTA POST OFFICES 1876-1998 Privately published by the author, Edmonton, Alberta. Pages 64, 140, and unpaginated supplement

9] Hein, Barbara (2005) BEST IN THE WEST BY A DAMSITE Second edition. Published by Bassano Historical Society, Alberta. Pages 101,208 to 209, 213 to 214

10] Anonymous (1960) THE HISTORY OF THE EASTERN IRRIGATION DISTRICT Published by the Board of Trustees, Eastern Irrigation District, Brooks, Alberta. Pages 28 and 30.