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POSTAL HISTORY OF THE DEL BONITA - MILK RIVER DISTRICT

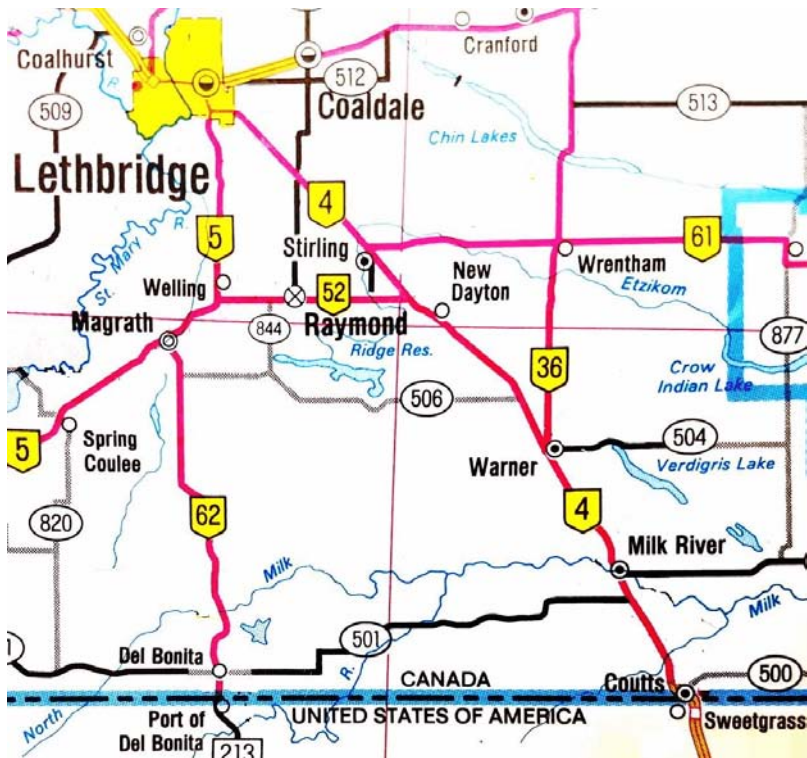
by Dale Speirs

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Introduction.

The Milk River rises inside northwest Montana, then flows through Alberta just north of the border for roughly 250 km before turning back into north-central Montana. The area was one of the earliest settled in Alberta because the North West Mounted Police, as the Mounties were then known, arrived in 1874. The land is semi-arid, with much rangeland, some irrigation farming, and dryland wheat. The Customs posts provided the only dependable employment.

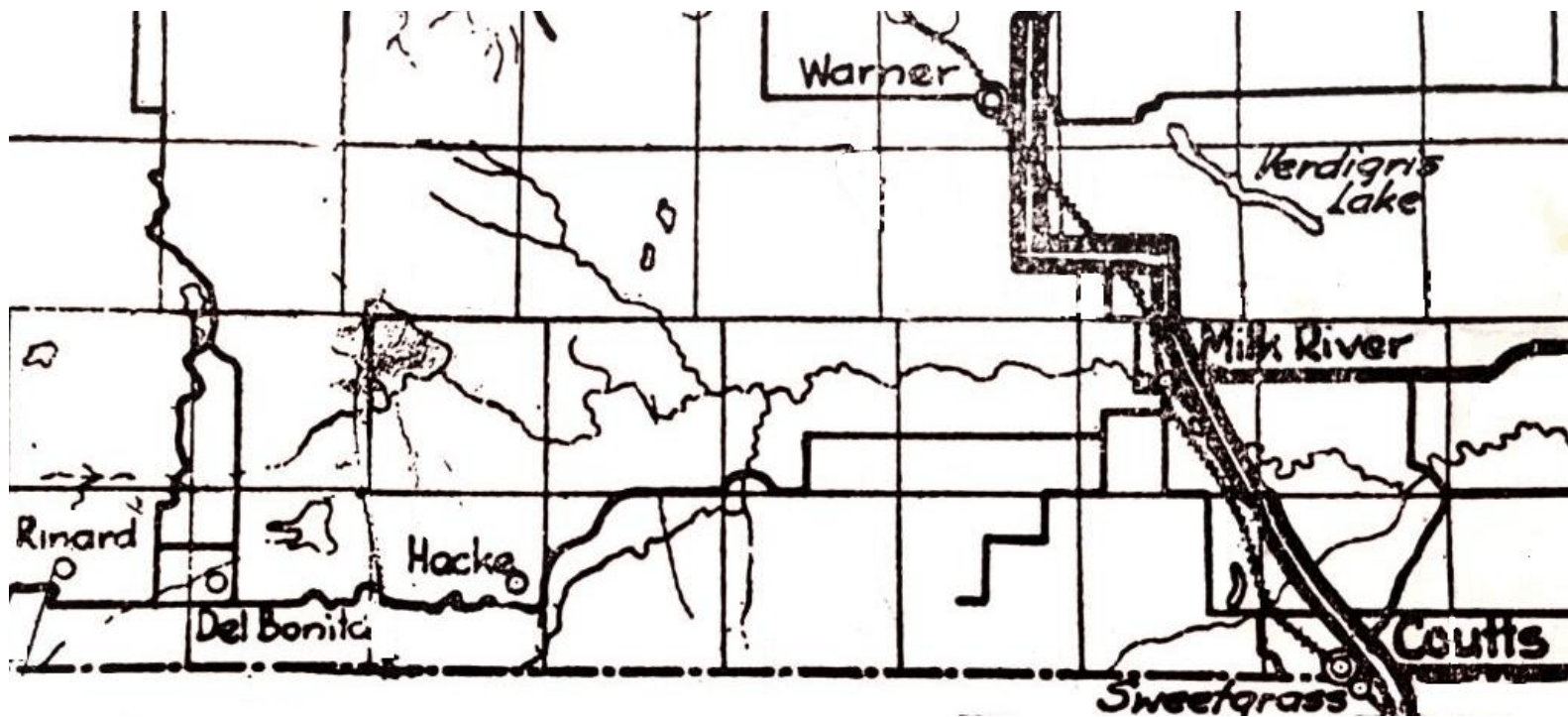


There was considerable north-south traffic across the border, not only the present-day Customs posts of Del Bonita and Coutts, but Whiskey Gap along the west side of the district. Whiskey Gap was never a legitimate crossing but its significance can be guessed from its name.

The map at left shows the modern settlements, while map on the next page is adapted from a 1933 map to show the pioneer post offices.

Dates and postmasters mentioned throughout this history are from the National Library and Archives of Canada website section called Post Offices and Postmasters [2].

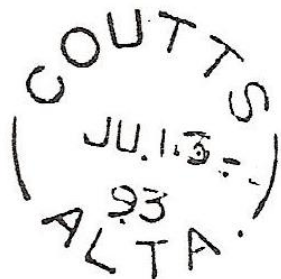
Pioneer post offices.



Coutts.

This village is a border crossing. The name was either after Sir William Bartlett-Coutts or his daughter Georgina Burdett-Coutts, possibly both [1]. They each were shareholders in the Alberta Railways & Irrigation Company, which ran a line from the border to Lethbridge. The townsite began in 1890 with the completion of a north-south railroad. The area had from the 1870s been a popular cross-border route [4].

The North West Mounted Police, as the Mounties then were, had outposts throughout the surrounding area. The railroad depot, where the mail was handled, straddled the border. Canada and the USA had a Customs post at each end of the station. The officers sorted the mail and distributed it to both sides. On the Montana side of the border was a village called Sweetgrass.



The post office opened on 1893-05-01, whose postmaster Sydney Smith stayed only a few months, resigning on September 11 that year. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

Six more postmasters came and went, each staying on the job for a year or two before moving on. Henry Tennant came from a local ranching family and took over the post office on 1901-04-01 in his general store. He held the postmastership until 1909-04-27. After a placeholder came and went, Robert M. Dickenson took over from 1910-07-30 until 1916-04-18. Once more the postmastership began flipping over almost annually, with four placeholders.

G. Hadley Roberts stopped the merry-go-round from 1920-05-15 to 1927-02-08. Miss Dorothea Claressa Jackson became postmaster on 1927-08-01 and held the job until 1937-10-04. John Henry Riley was then postmaster until 1950-05-25. During his tenure, in 1948, the post office grew to the point where he became Semi-Staff with the Canadian Post Office, which entitled him to certain benefits.

John Leister took over until his retirement on 1959-08-19. He died the following year. Mrs Janet June Lipka was appointed Acting Postmaster seven days before Leister officially retired. This suggests illness had incapacitated him on the job. At this point, Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws.



This photograph shows the Coutts post office in 1988. The woman mailing letters was Betty Speirs, the author's mother.

Below is a postmark she obtained at the time.



This is a 2014 Google Street View image of the post office. Still the same building but redecorated.



Pictorial postmark emphasizing Coutts' part in history. Postmark enlarged to better show the boundary marker inscription.



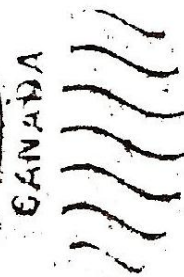
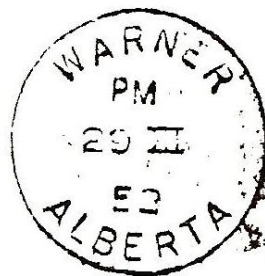
Warner.

The settlement was originally known as Brunton Siding when the railroad came through in 1890. In 1906 the settlement was renamed after land agent A.L. Warner. He worked for the Alberta Railways & Irrigation Company [1]. During the earliest days of the hamlet, the two main occupations were whiskey smuggling and cattle rustling [5]. The law and the post office both arrived in 1907.

James A. Thompson became the first postmaster on 1907-04-01, keeping the post office in his general store. His son Andy was the first mail courier. His assistant was Jack A. Jochin, who bought out Thompson and took over as postmaster on 1908-09-05. He used the name Jacob Jochem, and is so recorded in local histories [5]. The Jochin name may be a CPO error [2]. The family lived above the post office and store.

The store and post office were sold to Fred L. Shepard who became postmaster on 1909-08-04 until 1912-06-22. The frequent turnover suggests not enough settlers doing business in the area until then. Wallace Simpson bought the store and post office. For the first time the post office was separated physically from the store into a purpose-built building.

Simpson retired on 1931-10-30, at which time John Robert 'Jack' Mackay built a new post office building for his tenure as postmaster. The previous building had been destroyed by fire on 1930-12-24, hence the change in both postmaster and location. Mackay served until 1957-05-25, during which time the post office became a Semi-Staff position. Below are proof strikes of duplex cancels used during these times





Jack McKay and Assistant in old Post Office

Photo from reference 5.

After Mackay, the postmastership went to store owner Mervin Douglas Newinger, who moved the post office into his store. He gave it up on 1961-01-13 so that he could concentrate on his business.

The post office was again moved into its own building. The local barber William Wallace Witbeck was appointed postmaster but he only stayed five days.

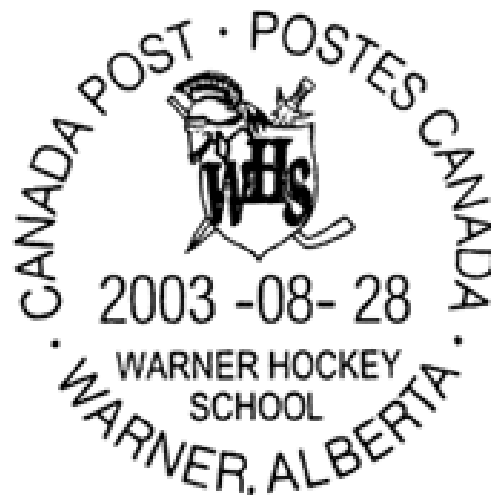
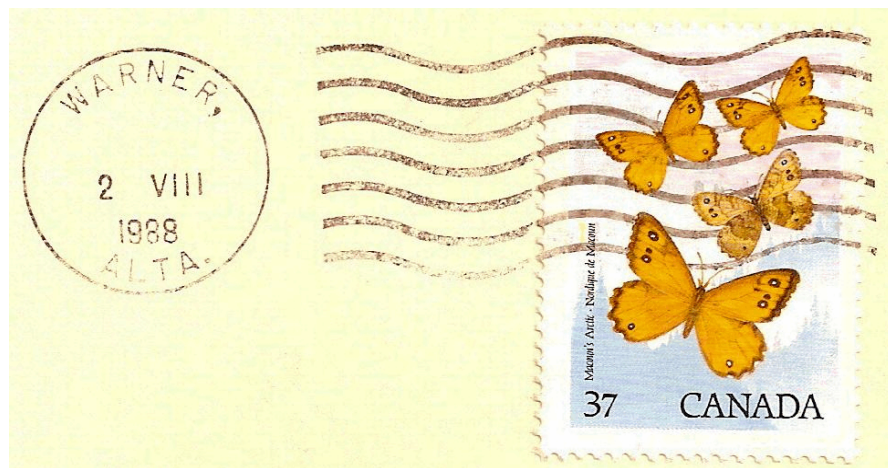
The second-place candidate, spinster Barbara Adeline Hagel, replaced him. She had been a postal clerk since Mackay's tenure and occasionally Acting Postmaster during previous interregnums.

From 1961-09-17 until her retirement on 1976-12-18, she was postmaster. The CPO had been leasing the post office building but decided to own one, which opened in April 1966.

E. Blaine Gallup succeeded Hagel as postmaster. He had previously been Assistant Postmaster at Cardston. He served until December 1982. His assistant Sylvia Krysak became the new postmaster [5]. Beyond that, I found no records due to privacy laws.



This photograph of the Warner post office was taken in 1988, with Betty Speirs mailing letters.



Milk River.

Milk River the village was obviously named after the river, which is noted for its unusual opaque white colour, caused by the sediments it carries [1]. Large-scale settlement in the townsite of Milk River, not to be confused with the general district of the same name, began in the first years of the 1900s. Mail was left at the railway Section House on a table for the settlers to rummage through for their letters [6].



Mr O. Fitzmaurice (first name not recorded in local histories) opened a general store and post office, becoming postmaster on 1908-08-01. He had enough business to pay for a postal clerk. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

The post office moved on 1910-05-26 to the drug store of H.W. McDonald, who then became the new postmaster. The store included general goods, a telephone exchange, and a doctor's office, so it was a busy establishment [6].

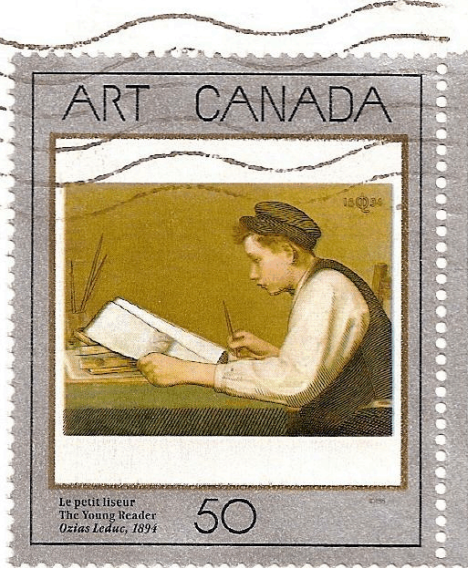
On 1917-09-10, returned veteran Sgt Alexander A. Ford took over as postmaster and telephone exchange manager. During his tenure the daily train service was discontinued and the mail thereafter came from Lethbridge by truck. Ford retired on 1945-06-29, after which four placeholders came and went.

On 1947-04-30, Earl Maroni Nielson succeeded to the postmastership. He constructed a new building with the post office in front, his living quarters at the rear, and apartments on the second floor. He served until 1953-08-28, after which a placeholder came and went. Harold Alexander Neal became postmaster on 1954-05-26 and served until his death on 1975-04-10.

Mrs Doris Michaelis had been a postal clerk since Nielson's tenure and finally became the new postmaster. After this, Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws [2].

During Neal's time the Canadian Post Office decided not to pay rent for Nielson's building. In 1962 the post office moved into a purpose-built structure owned by the CPO. The photo below shows it in 1988.





Del Bonita.

This crossroads hamlet got its name from a Spanish phrase variously translated as “of the pretty” if literal, or “beautiful valley” if figurative [1]. The reference is to the adjacent valley of the Milk River. The hamlet itself is up on a plateau on the flatlands. Settlement of the Del Bonita area began in the early 1910s. Early mail was by favour of friends from the village of Magrath further north [7].



Mrs Emma Waters received the mail at her house and other settlers came by to pick up their letters. In 1913, she convened a meeting for the homesteaders to petition for a post office. She suggested the name Del Bonita, which she translated as “beautiful valley” [7].

The post office officially opened in a farmhouse on 1914-06-01 with William Newton as the first postmaster [2]. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

In 1918, the mail route changed from Magrath to Cardston via a railroad that ran as far as Whiskey Gap before the railway company exhausted its funds. Newton died in office on 1933-05-16 and his widow Catherine Jane took over as postmaster until 1937-04-16 when she retired.

Unlike many post offices in the area which had frequent turnovers of postmasters, those at Del Bonita didn’t change as often. A brief placeholder came and went, moving the post office into his crossroads store. Celdar La Verne Collet bought the store and became postmaster on 1938-08-22 and remained in the job until December 1949. By then he and his wife Sadie had six children and were more interested in farming than shopkeeping.

They sold out to Hubert L. West who was postmaster until 1963-02-15. His wife Grace actually operated the store and post office. She then served briefly as official postmaster until 1963-05-31 when the store and post office were sold. The Henry family bought them out and Mrs Iris Henry became postmaster on 1968-08-01. Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws but a local history confirmed that as of 1981 she was still postmaster [7]. The Hughes checklist lists her as of 1998 still as postmaster [3].



Del Bonita post office in 1950.



Del Bonita post office in 1988, with Betty Speirs at the door.



I visited Del Bonita post office in June 2016 and found it little changed from when my mother visited in 1988.

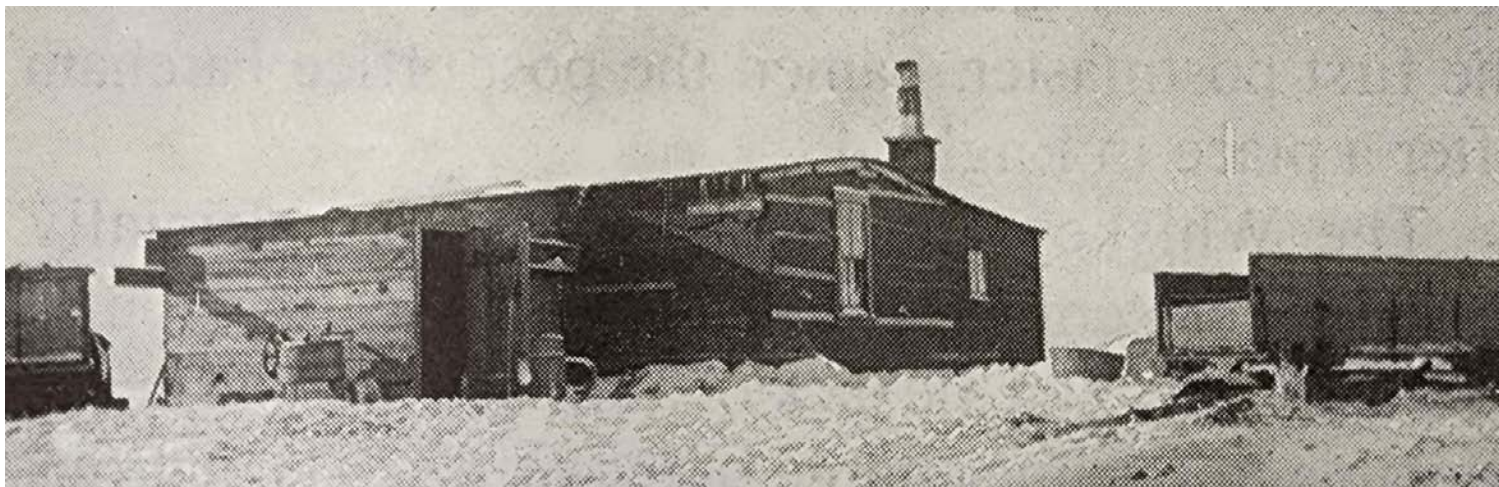


Hacke / Twin River.



The hamlet was originally named after its first postmaster William Hacke, who homesteaded there in 1912. The name was changed on 1922-07-01 and referred to the post office's location between the north and south forks of the Milk River [1]. The same day the Del Bonita post office was opened, the Hacke post office opened in a farmhouse. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left. The photo below shows the house and post office in 1914.

William Hacke was the first postmaster from 1914-06-01 until 1918-03-01, when it went to Fred Hacke, who was probably a brother. Not a son though, as William's four children were named in a local history [7]. Fred held the job until 1922-02-09 when it went to John T. Martin, who renamed the post office.



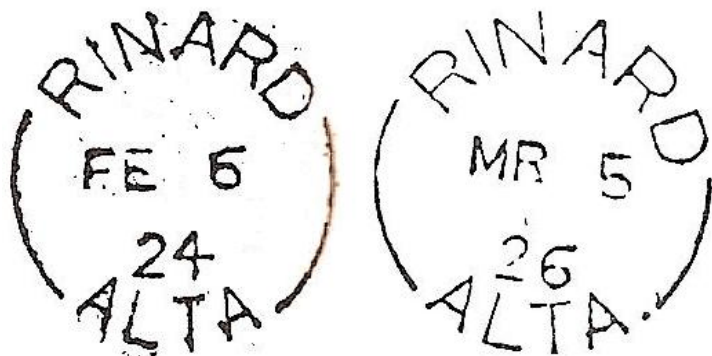
Martin died in office on 1925-03-03. A brief placeholder followed until A. Bourne (no first name given in local histories) took over on 1937-09-25. He had the post office in a store, which was then sold to Arvid John Larson. He sold out on 1944-08-07 in order to concentrate on ranching. Five postmasters then came and went until the post office settled into the Sibley farmstead.

Mrs Pauline E. Sibley was postmaster from 1951-11-30 until 1965-05-06 when she retired. The final postmaster was Mrs Helen Lorrain Jorgensen. The post office permanently closed on 1968-08-30 and was replaced by a mail route out of Cardston. Good roads superceded the need for a farmhouse post office.

Rinard.

The first postmaster named this post office after her home town in Illinois [3]. The Rinard post office was short lived, between Del Bonita and Whiskey Gap. The first postmaster Mrs R.J. Miller was a teetotaler and objected to getting her mail from Whiskey Gap. Her post office opened on 1924-03-01 in the Miller's crossroads store.

She sold out to the Curtis family and on 1925-12-07 Mrs Pearl Curtis became the postmaster. Roads had improved enough even in those days that not much mail existed for Rinard. Curtis resigned on 1927-04-08. After two placeholders came and went, the post office closed permanently on 1929-12-07. The district is today an uninhabited grazing reserve. Two proof strikes of postmarks are shown below.



References.

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