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POSTAL HISTORY OF THE WRITING-ON-STONE DISTRICT, ALBERTA

by Dale Speirs

Index Of Post Offices

The Writing-On-Stone District.

Along the Alberta-Montana border in the eastern part of the Milk River drainage is the Writing-On-Stone district. In 1957, a provincial park was established to protect a network of coulees and post-glacial meltwater valleys containing important archaeological sites with ancient carvings and markings.

The general district was settled during a moist interlude in the early 1900s but eventually reverted to semi-desert conditions, depopulating the land. There are a few irrigation pivots today but the land is mostly dryland wheat or rangeland, and is thinly populated. The land is too dry to support much population.

The vast majority of post offices in this area were farmhouse operations. The few hamlets have dwindled to place names. None of the post offices in this history still exist. All mail service today is via rural routes from Milk River, Coutts, Etzikom, or Foremost. A flurry of farmhouse post offices opened in the Writing-On-Stone district between 1911 and 1913 as homesteading accelerated.
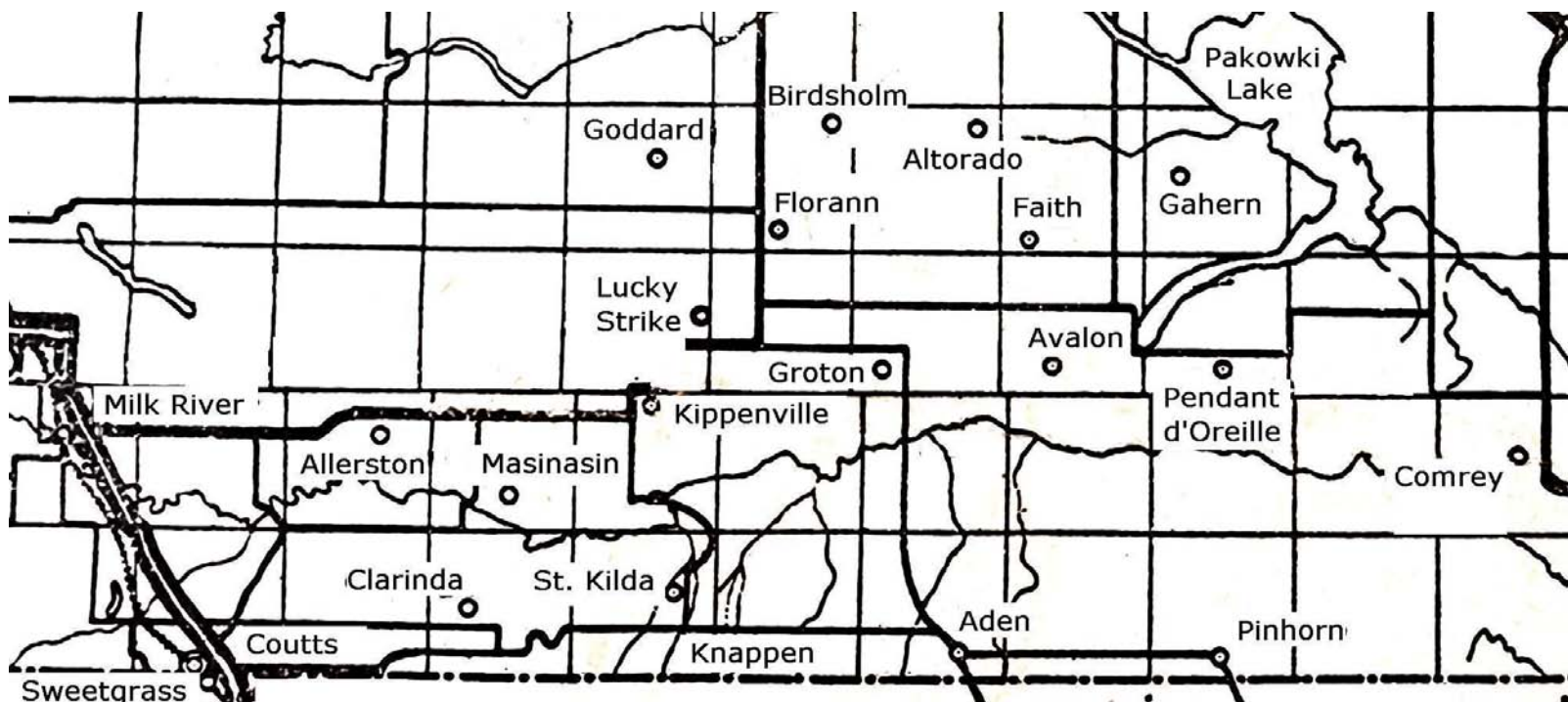
In 1957, Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park was established, acknowledging an important archaeological site in the coulees. This is the only tourist attraction in the district of any renown, and provides some non-farm trade.
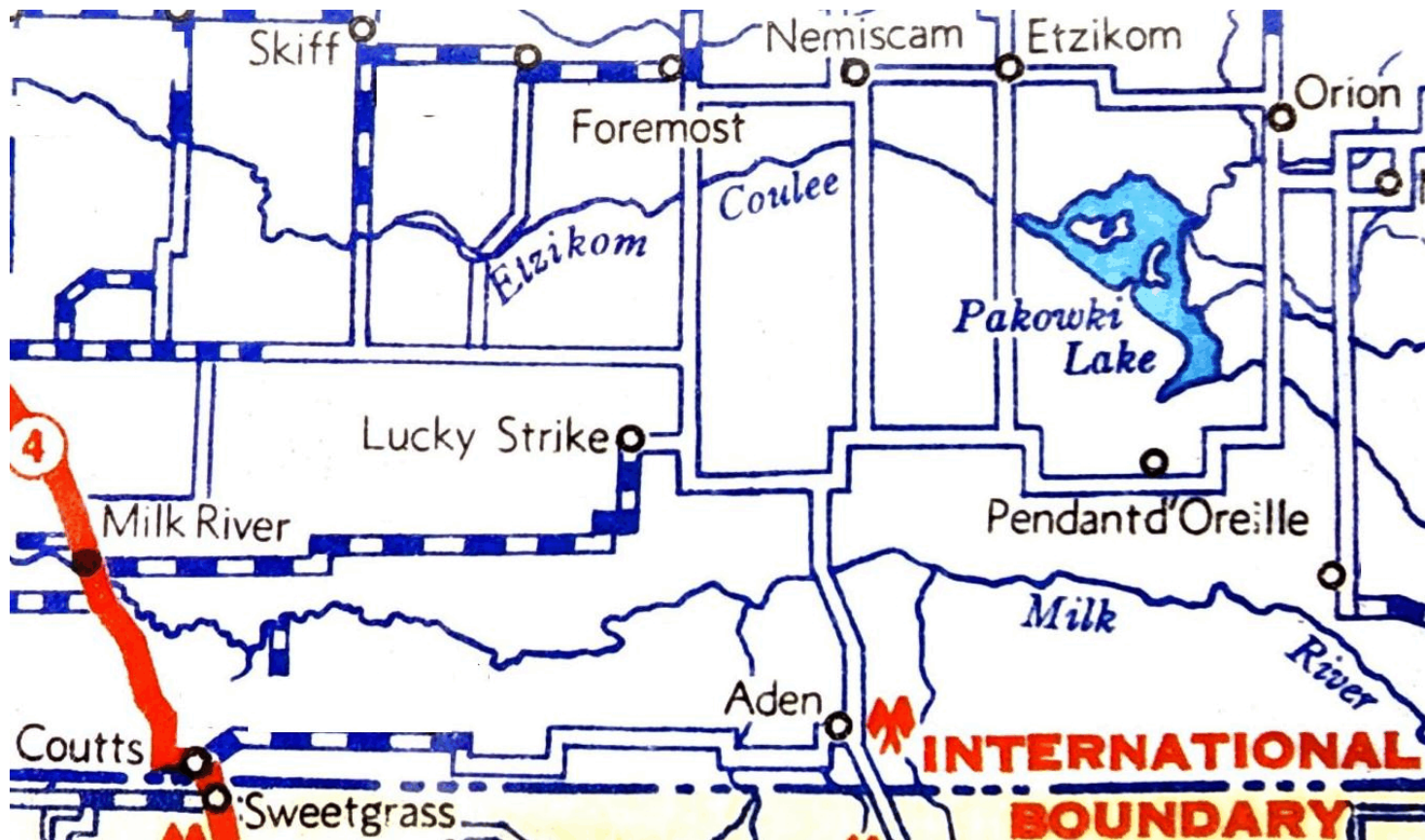
Before The Post Offices.

In this history, the dates and postmaster names are from the Post Offices and Postmasters database of the National Library of Canada [1].

In 1887, the North West Mounted Police established a post in the Writing-On-Stone district which lasted until 1918. Early mail service was twice a month by police service wagon. The first settlers would visit the post and sort through a pile of mail on a table to pick out their own. Outbound mail had to be sent postage due, since the Mounties didn't stock postage stamps [2].

This map shows the pioneer post offices of the district.

Birdsholm

Goddard

Pakowki Lake

Altorado

Florann

Faith

Gahern

Lucky Strike

Avalon

Groton

Kippenville

Pendant d'Oreille

Milk River

Allerston

Masinasin

Comrey

Clarinda

St. Kilda

Aden

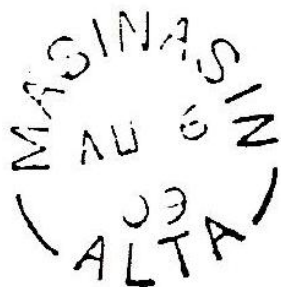Pinhorn

Coutts

Knappen

Sweetgrass

A map circa late 1950s.

The only tourist attraction in the district is the provincial park.

Masinasin.

The first post office in the Writing-On-Stone district opened on 1909-08-01 with Mrs Jamima Croucher as postmaster. She kept the post office in a corner of her kitchen. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

The post office name was suggested by a NWMP corporal and translated as Writing-On-Stone in the Cree language. This was peculiar because the district is in the deepest heart of the Blackfoot Confederacy and hundreds of kilometres from Cree territory. The two were traditional enemies [2].

William Rowley took over the postmastership on 1912-11-06. He had previously been the mail courier for the post office, hauling from Milk River (the townsite) to the Crouchers. They sold their land to him and he moved the post office into his own house.

Rowley's house was across the river from the NWMP post, so he provided mail services for them. Rowley enlisted in the infantry during World War One, so on 1918-10-25 the postmastership passed to Robert Sharpe.

Sharpe converted a small granary into a post office, with a sorting table, pigeon holes for letters, and a stove. Subsequently this building was moved every time a new postmaster was appointed, and thereafter served as the post office for many decades. The post office is shown at right [2].

The Sharpes moved to High River, and on 1921-01-14 the new postmaster was Christian J. Zorn. His house burned down in 1933 and the Zorn family lost everything.

The post office was therefore handed over to John August Blust on 1933-10-17. He was killed in a farm accident in 1934. His widow Elizabeth Margaret took over as postmaster on 1934-09-20 and kept the position until her retirement on 1953-09-23.

The final postmaster was Charles James Zorn, son of Christian. The post office closed on 1956-06-08, after which it was replaced by a delivery route from the Milk River post office.

Lucky Strike.

There are conflicting stories about the name origin, but apparently an early homesteader figured he was lucky to get the land. The post office opened on 1910-01-01 with Mrs Emma Louise Kingsbury as the first postmaster. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

Her house was a stopping place for travelers to the point where her husband Nathaniel Ira Sr built a store adjacent, which soon had a post office. Mail was couriered twice a week from Foremost, which was on a railway line [6].

The Kingsburys sold the store and post office to their son-in-law John A. Brownlee, who became postmaster on 1916-05-15. Both families moved around the district hither and yon. The Kingburys returned and bought back the store.

Nathaniel Ira Jr became postmaster on 1928-02-06, serving until 1948-03-15 when he and his wife Edith moved to Lethbridge. They sold the store to the Look family, who had a nearby homestead.

Mrs Maurine Blanch Look then served as postmaster until 1952-08-26. The store and post office building was relocated a short distance eastward near the Look farmhouse. As the land depopulated from drought and good roads appeared, the store and post office changed hands several more times.

Mrs Della Mae Walsh was postmaster from 1952-09-16 until 1960-03-01. Another change of owners made Mrs Beverly Nelson postmaster until 1964-04-17. Walsh then stepped back into the job as a placeholder until Mrs Olive Edna Fitzpatrick became the final postmaster until 1965-12-21. The Fitzpatricks closed the store and moved to Lethbridge. No one could be found to take the postmastership, so the post office closed permanently on December 30. Thereafter mail service was a rural route from Foremost.

The hamlet of Lucky Strike before World War One. At far right is the general store, second from right the Kingsbury house, third from right the Brownlee house.
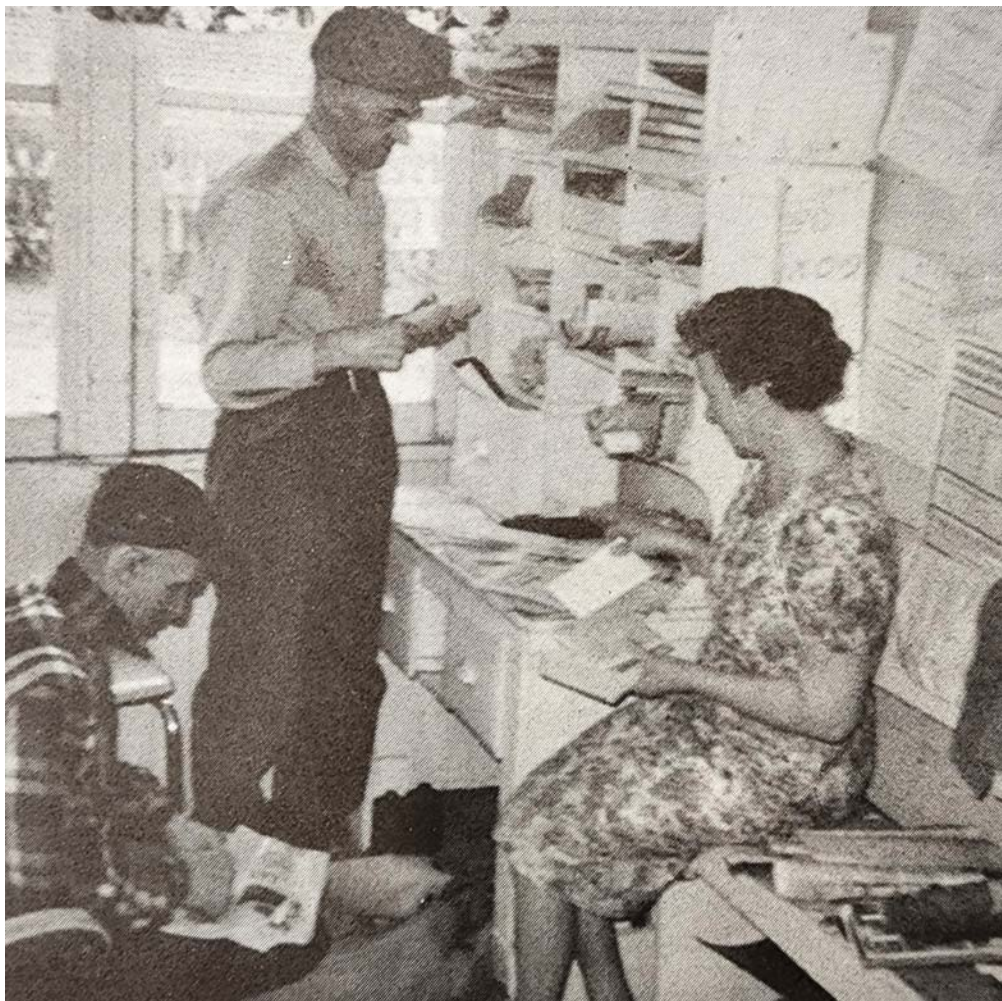
Pendant d'Oreille.

The settlement began in 1887 as a NWMP post by that name, which in turn came from the district name given by early French traders. They in turned called a Montana tribe, the Kalispel, by that name because tribal members wore earrings, which was "pend d'Oreille" in French. The Canadian settlement and NWMP post were on the very northern edge of Kalispel territory at the time [7].

John J. Wegner was the first postmaster when the post office was established on 1910-09-15 in his farmhouse. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

Initially the mail was brought down from Seven Persons once a week, which was a two-day ride by horse. In 1911, the distribution point was changed to Warner, twice a week. The railway came through Etzikom in 1917, which was the distribution point from then on [7].

Wegner resigned his position on 1917-05-11 after his wife died. He moved to Etzikom, leaving behind his son and daughter-in-law Vern and Emma to farm the land. Otto W. Heller, a relative of the Wegners, took over the post office and moved it to his homestead. He stayed on as postmaster until 1920-08-23. Thereafter the postmastership changed hands every few years through four homesteaders.

On 1934-12-22, the post office returned to the Wegner homestead, where Emma became postmaster. She held the job until 1942-07-14 when she turned it over to her sister-in-law Mrs Mary Field. The Fields moved to Lethbridge and on 1945-08-18 Mary relinquished the postmastership.

The final postmaster was Henry Nils Finstad, assisted by Margit Finstad, his sister-in-law. The post office closed permanently on 1968-03-31.

Mail service was then a rural route from Etzikom. The land was too dry to support more than a few ranchers. The population around Pendant d'Oreille had dwindled to 14 families.

The photo shows Henry (standing), Margit seated at right, and mail courier Simon Hiedrick at left, sorting the mail.

Faith.

This post office opened on 1911-05-01 on the homestead of James Sergeant. He named it after his newborn daughter Faith [8]. The first postmark is shown proofed at left.
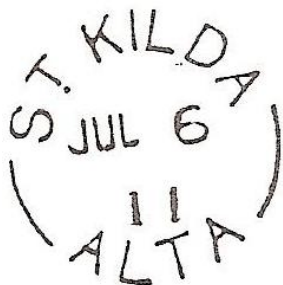
Sergeant was dismissed from office on 1913-09-02 for political partisanship. In those days, post offices could be used for patronage. James Heatherington, presumably with good connections in Ottawa, took over and moved the post office to his homestead.

Robert James Cooper became the next postmaster on 1917-07-14 until 1937-08-30 when he retired and moved into Foremost. His son Cecil Raymond took over the farm and post office. He and his wife Edna had twelve children [8]. He resigned as postmaster on 1942-07-14 as his family grew, although they stayed on the farm. Mrs Margareta Scherer was the final postmaster until the post office closed permanently on 1968-05-01 due to limited usefulness.

The photo on the next page shows the Faith post office and store in 1912. John J. Wegner, who was postmaster at Pendant d'Oreille at the time, also worked as mail courier. He and his wagon are to the right of the photo.

Saint Kilda.

The first postmaster of St Kilda as of 1911-07-01 was John A. Gilder. The post office name was after a Scottish island from which the earliest homesteaders originated [3]. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

Gilder was an Englishman born Gildersleeve but shortened his name upon emigrating to Canada. He was a carpenter by trade and moved to the village of Claresholm, Alberta, for better income.

George Ingle took over the post office on 1915-01-19 until 1922-05-14. He remained a mail courier for a year after but he and his family migrated to California. J.L. Nelson then kept the post office until 1925-06-29, having bought the Ingle farm. Hugh McLachlan Sr was the next postmaster until 1929-08-08, when the post office moved to his farm.

From there the post office migrated to the farm of William Harvie Sr, who had been the mail courier before that. His house and the post office were destroyed by fire on 1938-06-08. He rebuilt and carried on as postmaster until retiring on 1945-07-31. The final postmaster was Mrs Mabel Helene Archibald. She and her husband had bought the Harvie farm, so the post office stayed in the same location [4]. She served until the post office was permanently closed on 1968-07-04. Thereafter mail service was a rural route out of Coutts.
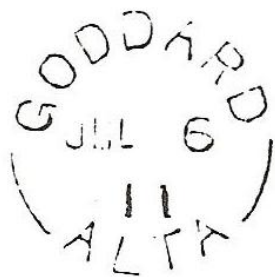
Clarinda.

The same day St. Kilda post office opened, so did this one. The first postmaster was Miss Frankie Clark, who named it after her mother [3]. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

Frankie served until 1916-08-28 when she handed over to Charles E. Coover. He died in office on 1934-01-06 and his widow Martha Maud took over as the final postmaster. The post office was closed on 1946-05-31 due to limited usefulness. Thereafter mail service came from Coutts.
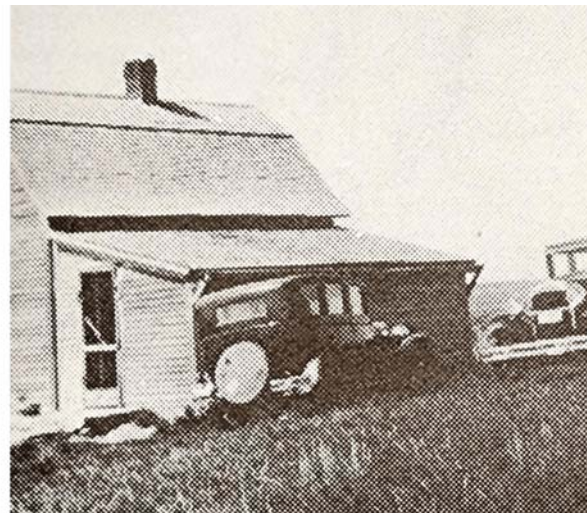
Goddard.

The same day St Kilda post office opened on 1911-07-01, so did the Goddard post office, located in a general store owned by the first postmaster Ernest Goddard. Poor health forced his resignation on 1919-09-12. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

The building was bought by Dwight Ira Powell, who operated the post office but closed the store, using most of the building as a house for his family. He resigned on 1924-10-20 owing to financial difficulties. The Powells moved to Washington State and never returned.
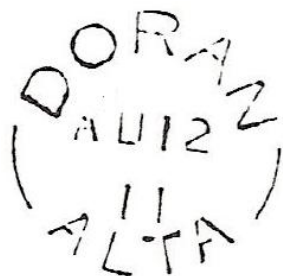
Mrs Elizabeth Coolidge, sister of Ernest Goddard, then became postmaster until 1925-10-09. She was a trained nurse and was very busy as the only medic in the district.

She handed the postmastership to her mother-in-law Mrs Ella Coolidge, who stayed until 1927-04-08. She moved the post office building to her property, as seen at right [6].

The building was moved again to the Koller homestead, where Mrs Nellie Kollar was postmaster until 1952-10-13. When the Kollars moved to Lethbridge, both the store and the post office permanently closed. Mail service became a rural route out of Foremost.

Doran / Allerston.

The post office of Doran was established on 1911-07-16, with Mrs Vedee Hierath as the first postmaster. She named the post office after her son and only child. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

The post office was in the farmhouse, which had a sliding window on its west wall where patrons got their mail. During inclement weather they were allowed to come inside the house for their postal business [2].

She eventually resigned and on 1914-01-28 the post office moved to the farmhouse of John Thielen. He quit that same year on July 3 and handed over to William Marshall, then took the job back on 1915-09-16. When Thielen first became postmaster, he renamed the post office after the Allers family, whose land he had bought. The new postmark is shown at lower left.

The second time around, Thielen stayed on the job until 1940-06-06 when he retired. His daughter-in-law Mrs Frances Mary Thielen was the final postmaster. On 1950-08-01 the post office was permanently closed, a victim of good roads. Mail service thereafter was a rural route from Milk River.

Avalon.

The post office opened on 1911-08-01 with R.R. Paul as the first postmaster. He named it after the Avalon peninsula of Somersetshire, England. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

George W. Irwin took over as postmaster after Paul moved to Etzikom and established a general store. Irwin resigned on 1917-03-13 and left his homestead to work in Paul's store [8].

The post office then moved to the homestead of Herman Brolsma. On 1920-04-30 the postmastership was taken over by returned veteran John Howard Irwin, brother of George. The post office moved back to the Irwin homestead. Mrs Agnes Edna O'Hara became postmaster on 1932-07-31 until 1954-11-09 when she retired.
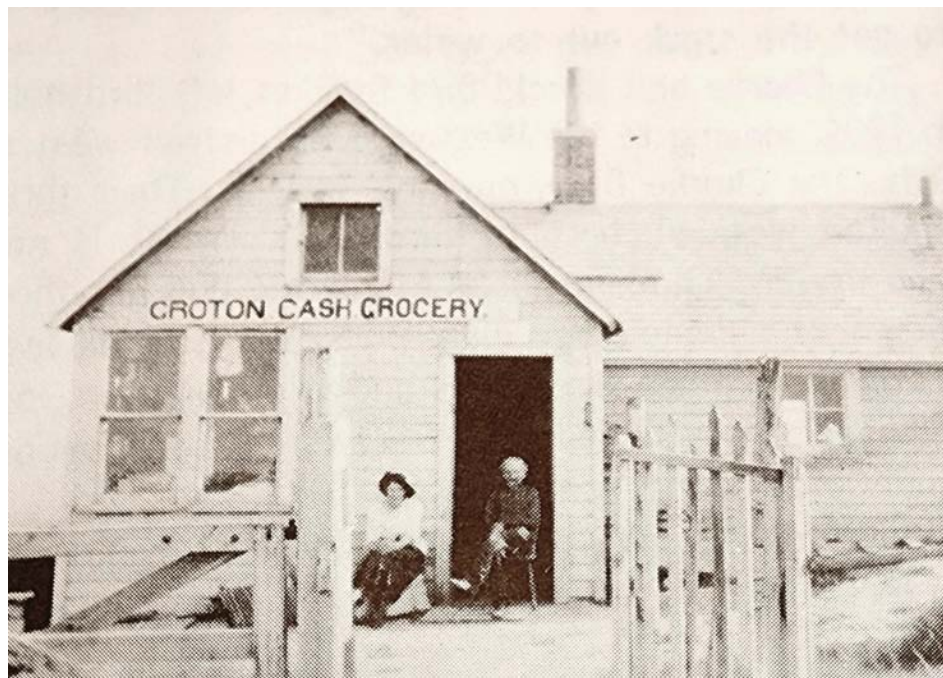
By this time the depopulation of the land and good roads meant the end was nigh for the post office. Mrs Helen Victoria Dorner was the final postmaster until the post office closed permanently on 1956-04-02. Mail service then became a rural route out of Etzikom.
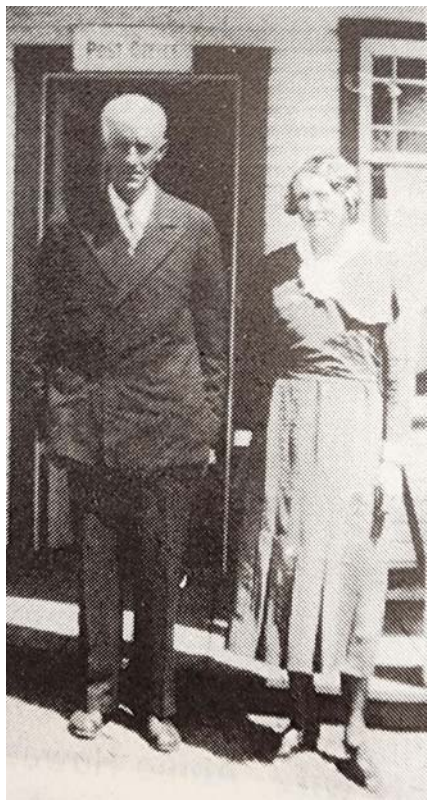
Groton.

This farmhouse post office opened on 1913-02-01 with Albert J. Peterson. He named it after his home town in North Dakota. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

A short while later, Mordecai Edward Walks built a general store nearby [6]. The post office moved there and Walks was postmaster from 1914-12-30 until his death on 1923-08-12. His daughter-in-law Mrs Alice Walks then took over until 1931-03-07. The store and post office is shown below.

From there the post office moved to the Dixon farmhouse. The name was also spelt Dixson or Dickson in local histories. I will use the post office records spelling. Mrs Stella Dixon served as postmaster until her retirement on 1956-06-26 after her husband's death. Stella was from New Brunswick where he father had been a postmaster, so she was familiar with the job [6]. The photo of the Dixons was taken in 1931 and the house/post office in 1956. Notice the sign Post Office behind the Dixons.

The post office then moved to the home of Mrs Joyce Enid O'Connell. She resigned on 1957-11-14, after which two placeholders came and went. The third time around no one wanted the job, so on 1961-02-01 the post office closed permanently. Henceforth mail service was from Foremost.
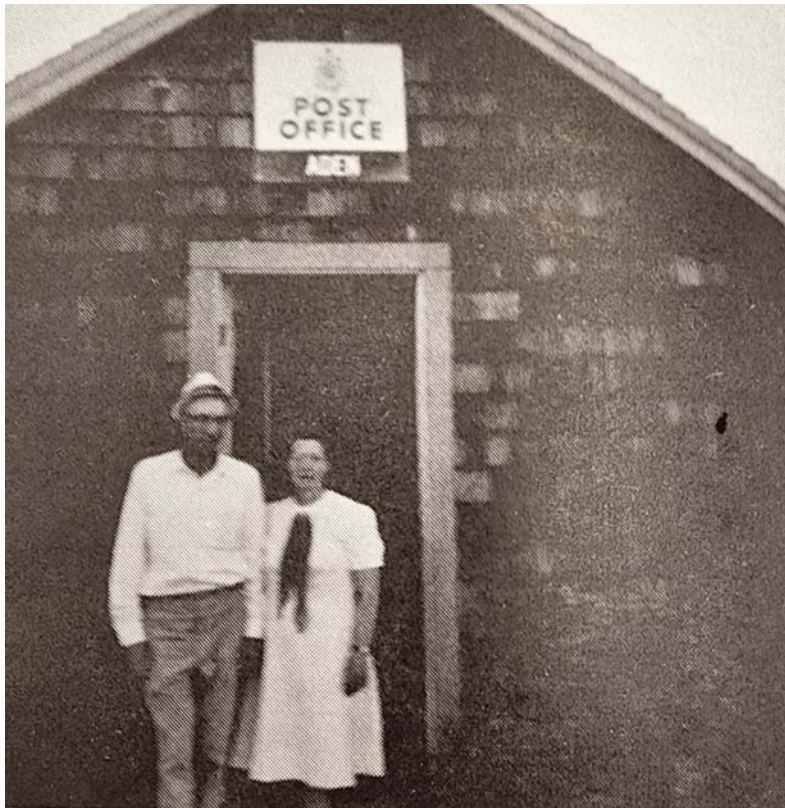
Aden.

This post office began on 1913-03-01 in the farmhouse of Herman E. Anderson. Prior to coming out west as a homesteader, he had been a sailor, mostly in the Middle East, and thereby named the post office after the Arabian district [3]. He became ill and died in 1917. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

His wife Josephine Amelia officially became postmaster on 1918-02-12. When she retired, her son Arthur was briefly postmaster but moved to Taber. The photo below shows the first post office in the Anderson homestead shack, with Josephine and her daughter standing in front.

Five placeholders then came and went, sometimes more than once. Oscar Norman Anderson, no relation to Herman, held the postmastership from 1935-09-30 until 1949-06-28. He kept the post office in his general store. After a brief change of postmasters, Mrs Dorothy Dangerfield took on the job from 1952-03-07. Canada Post records cut off after this date due to privacy laws. However Hughes records a final postmaster, Mrs R. Dangerfield, probably a daughter-in-law [5].

The post office closed permanently on 1991-08-28. The photo shows the final post office, with Alfred and Dorothy Dangerfield standing in front.

Knappen.

The same day the Aden post office opened on 1913-03-01, so did a post office in the farmhouse of Albert J. Knappen. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left. Knappen left the postmastership on 1918-04-10.

The position turned over three times among neighbours, then returned to Albert's wife Martha on 1926-06-23. William Henry Hunt took the position on 1929-10-30 until his death on 1949-08-11. His son William Archibald was a brief placeholder.

The final postmaster was Mrs Lillian May Dangerfield, who was a sister-in-law of Aden postmaster Dorothy Dangerfield. She held the position until 1968-07-03 when the post office closed permanently. Thereafter mail service was a rural route from Coutts.

Kippenville.

The only postmaster for this farmhouse post office was Duncan Kippen. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left. He operated it from its opening on 1913-10-01 until 1926-03-06, when he left the district.

Thenceforth the mail service was a rural route from Milk River. The post office was kept in a one-room shack with the only telephone in the district as an additional service [2]. The photo below shows the Kippen homestead shack where the post office was located.

Florann.

The same day the Kippenville post office opened, so did the Florann post office. The hamlet was founded in 1909 and named after sisters Florence and Anna [6]. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

The first postmaster Frank McGillen only stayed one month on the job. J.A. Westrop took over as postmaster until 1920-11-02. The post office was in his farmhouse.

The Westrops left the district and the post office moved to the Laqua farmstead. John Laqua, a bachelor at the time, was postmaster until 1927-01-24. The post office featured a toll telephone, the only radio in the district, and upstairs was a pool table and card table [6].

John's brother William Benjamin was then listed as postmaster until the post office closed permanently on 1947-07-03. In actuality, his wife Mildred ran the post office. They were originally located at John's place but in 1930 bought a farm nearby to where the post office was moved. Probably without the pool table as they had four children. After the post office closed, mail service was from Foremost.

Pinhorn.

This settlement began as a quarantine station along the American border for imported cattle. The veterinarian in charge was Dr G.C. Pinhorn, who had originally come west as a North West Mounted Police veterinarian, hence the name of the post office that opened nearby [3]. On 1914-01-01 the post office opened in the farmhouse of the first postmaster, P.C. Shaw. The first postmark is shown at left.

He handed over to Robert M. Dickinson on 1916-12-19, a bachelor out on the lone prairie. Dickinson couldn't take the isolation and moved to Coutts where he bought a store [4]. When he departed, the post office closed on 1917-05-07, after which residents had to get their mail from Laird, Montana, then later Aden [4].

The post office re-opened on 1926-07-01 with Ralph Lightizer as postmaster. The post office was destroyed by fire on 1933-05-19. Ralph died a few months later on November 8. Since the post office was in the farmhouse, there was probably a connection, and he may have died of injuries from the fire. In any event, his widow Catherine took over as postmaster and stayed until her retirement on 1947-10-22. She remarried and her appointment was changed to Mrs Catherine Yates as of 1940-01-31.

After her, the final postmaster was Robert Kunzli until the post office permanently closed on 1948-02-25. He had been a mail courier in past years. Thereafter mail service was a rural route from Aden.

Birdsholm.

The post office opened on 1914-02-01 with Archibald William Bird as the first postmaster. He built a store and post office next to his farmhouse and operated both until 1940-05-13 when he retired [6]. The photo shows the store and post office in 1929.

During his tenure he also worked on and off as a mail courier, variously bringing it from Goddard, Groton, and finally Foremost. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown below.

After a placeholder came and went, William Frederick Hedrich became the final postmaster from 1940-07-01 until 1949-05-06, after which the post office closed permanently. Mail service since then has been a rural route out of Foremost.

Gahern.

This post office opened on 1914-07-01 with Harry G. Ahern as postmaster, who named it after himself [8]. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

Fred J. Devlin took over on 1915-09-30 and moved the post office to his homestead. The post office returned to Ahern on 1918-01-08, then made the trip back to the Devlins on 1919-02-05 when Mrs Jean M. Devlin became postmaster.

The Devlins sold the farm to the Hurlburt family, of whom Mrs Hannah Hurlburt became postmaster from 1924-05-12 until 1926-09-13. They moved to Milk River and Mrs May Schlagel became the final postmaster. The Schlagels had bought the Ahern farm and returned the post office there [8]. On 1944-06-01 the post office closed for the usual reasons and mail service henceforth came from Etzikom.

Altorado.

This farmhouse post office opened on 1910-05-16 with M.E. Lynes as the first postmaster. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left. The source of the name is uncertain. Some references cite it as a variation of El Dorado, which seems more likely than an alternative explanation that it combines Alberta and Colorado, since most of the homesteaders were from North Dakota.

Mrs Jeanette F. Cooke took over on 1916-06-14 until her resignation on 1917-08-20. The post office was officially closed on 1918-02-21. Undoubtedly the arrival of the railroad at Etzikom just north of this post office finished it off. The area was henceforth served by a rural route.

Summary.

The great number of farmhouse post offices initially served a useful purpose until railroads and good roads made them redundant. Not to be overlooked is the arid landscape, often reverting to desert. Crop failures were frequent and discouraged homesteaders, as a result of which the land depopulated.

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