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POSTAL HISTORY OF THE FORTY-MILE COULEE DISTRICT, ALBERTA

by Dale Speirs

Introduction.

Forty Mile Coulee is a descriptive name of its length [2]. The district is located in one of the driest parts of southeastern Alberta, east of the coulee. The land was homesteaded at the traditional rate of one family per quarter-section during abnormally moist years. When the climate reverted to semi-desert there was massive depopulation. Today there are only a few ranchers or irrigation farmers, whose farms are measured in a dozen sections or more.
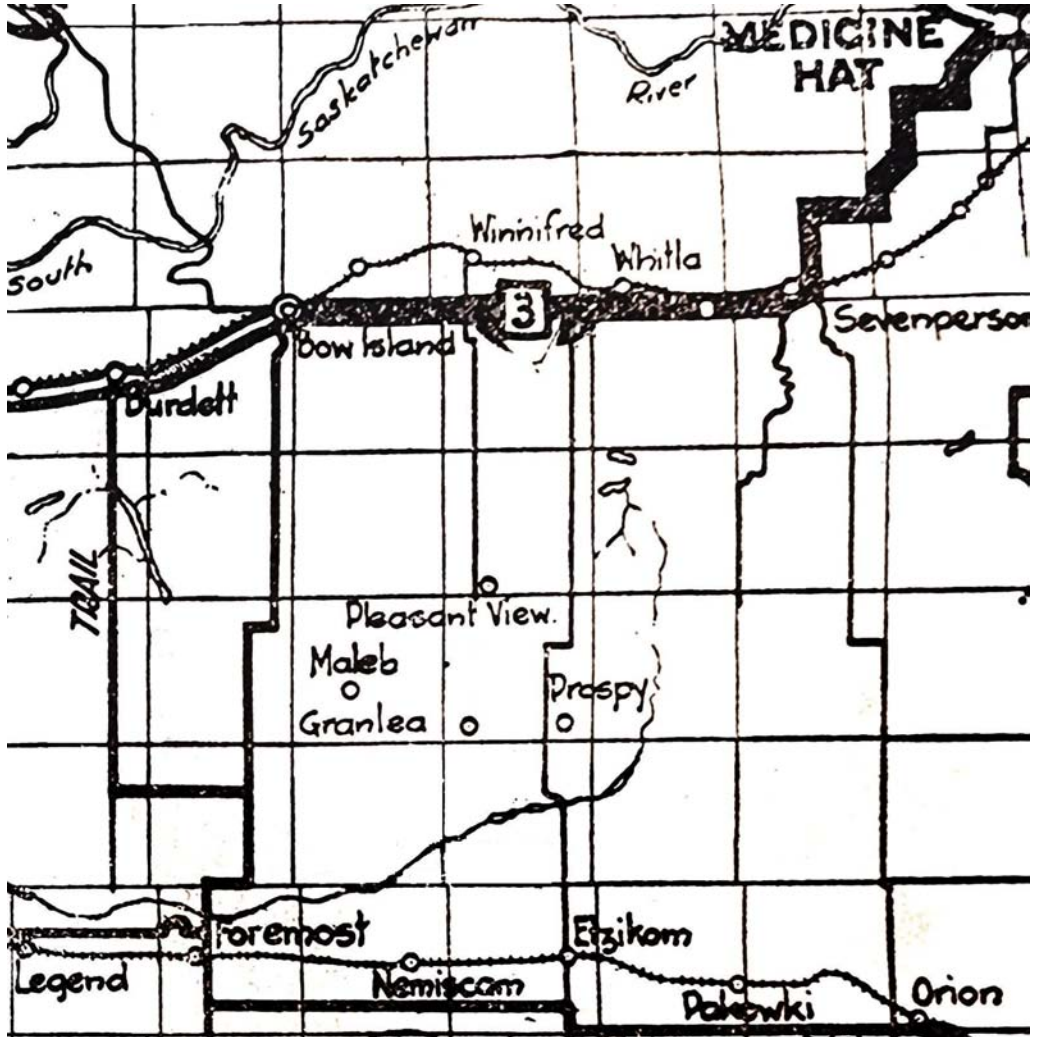
The post offices discussed in this issue were out on the drylands between two east-west chains of villages along railway lines. The squares on the map are townships, six miles long on a side.

The track running along the bottom of this map from Legend to Orion was the CPR Stirling Subdivision. That postal history is available in JAPH #28.

The railroad running from Burdett to Medicine Hat was the Turkey Track line. The postal history of that line was covered in JAPH #15.

Note the settlements of Bow Island and Winnifred along the Turkey Track. They were the distribution points for mail to and from the Forty-Mile Coulee district.
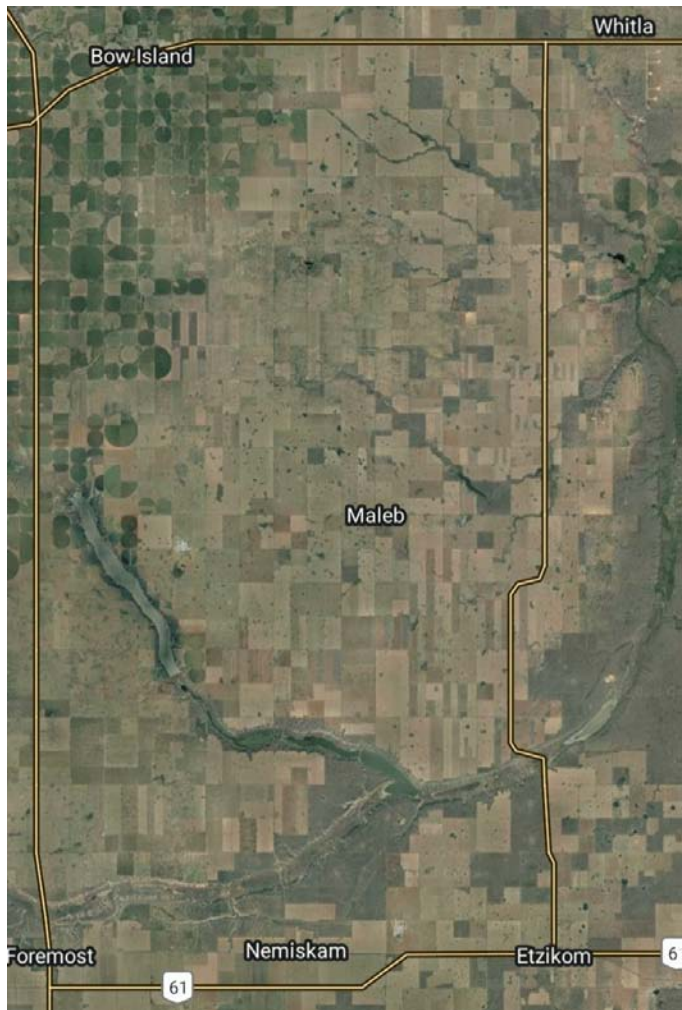
Satellite view from Google showing the district today. Forty-Mile Coulee was dammed for a large reservoir. On the image it is the linear body of water at an angle from left centre to lower centre.

The circular patterns in the upper right corner are the irrigation farms. Most of the central district is rectangles of dryland grain or rangeland.

Prelude.

The North West Mounted Police, as the Mounties were then known, would carry letters as a favour and drop them off at homesteads. This gave them an excuse to check up on residents under friendly circumstances. The NWMP arrived in the district in 1874. Mails came up from Fort Benton, Montana, until the CPR transcontinental railroad crossed southern Alberta in 1883. From Fort Benton, two or three months transit time via oxen trains was normal.

Before the arrival of the Turkey Track and Stirling Subdivision railroads, mail was carried by stagecoach. The driver dropped the bags out on the prairie at certain spots and the few homesteaders present would ride by to see if there was anything in the mailbag.

Unless stated otherwise, the names and dates of postmasters came from the Post Offices and Postmasters website of the National Library and Archives of Canada [1].

Windy Ridge / Pleasant View.

The first postmaster was Michael E. Babka when the post office opened on 1911-03-15, although his wife (first name not recorded) actually ran the operation. The name of the post office had been suggested by her brother Ed Reams, as the farmhouse was located on a ridge separating two coulees [3]. At left is the proof strike of the postmark.

In 1912, the Babkas opened a crossroads store and moved the post office there. The mails came from Winnifred along the Turkey Track and were hauled by William Parker. On 1913-09-12, Babka resigned as postmaster and Fred A. Parker took over as postmaster, moving the post office to his farmhouse. He was probably the brother of William.

During Fred's tenure the post office name changed in 1915 to Pleasant View [4]. The homesteaders agreed that the previous name would not attract settlers. At right is the proof strike of the new postmark.

J.L. Beekly took over as postmaster on 1916-02-14 but did not stay long in the position. Michael Babka took over again on 1917-10-29 as postmaster but he and his wife soon emigrated to Washington State. On 1919-10-01, H.K. Coolidge took over as postmaster but only stayed a few months. He was succeeded on 1920-08-02 by John Weigel, who kept the post office and store only until 1921-07-11.

George Henry Redknap then became postmaster, holding on until 1926-11-11. He handed over the official position to his wife Elizabeth Alice, who remained until 1928-02-05. By this time roads had improved such that after she left, there was only a brief placeholder until the post office permanently closed on 1928-08-24. Thereafter, mail service was a rural route from Winnifred.

Maleb.

The name of this district was and still is Conquerville, named after pioneer homesteader Robert Conquergood.

When the post office opened on 1911-06-01, it was given an anagram of the initials of the first postmaster Amy Elizabeth Bowen and her husband Morley Lorne [2].

The Google satellite image at right shows the modern-day Conquerville site where the Maleb post office was located.

The proof strike of the first postmark is shown below.

Morley hauled the mails from Bow Island in the north, which was on the Turkey Track railroad. The Bowens had the post office in a crossroads store on their homestead [3]. Amy resigned as postmaster on 1917-06-26 when the Bowens moved to Calgary [5]. J.M. Gibbons became the next postmaster and served until 1926-08-28. Norman McKnight came and went as a brief placeholder.

Stephen Jesse Bull took over on 1927-01-01 and served as postmaster until 1942. R.R. Nugent had the post office from 1942-01-21. He was then followed by McKnight, who was postmaster a second and longer time from 1943-11-01 until 1947-08-26.

There followed a quick turnover of postmasters. Stanley Philip Schwartzenberger served from 1947-10-11 until 1948-09-20. He kept the post office in his country store by the Conquerville school, where he drove a school bus as well. The work was too much so he was succeeded by Chris Ralph Getz until 1950-03-23. Miss Gladys Moger served a longer term as postmaster in her house from then until 1957-10-07.

Two more short-time postmasters came and went. The final postmaster was Mrs Hildegarde Barbara Bertsch, who served from 1963-10-23. Canada Post records cut off after this due to privacy laws but the post office permanently closed on 1988-10-15 according to Hughes [4].

Prospy.

Karamitsanis listed this site as name origin unknown [2]. Reference #3 listed the name as a derivative of 'prosperity', which I find contrived. The area was settled by many German and Slavic immigrants. Google Translate shows nothing as a German translation but 'prospy' is the Ukrainian word for sleep. Those who knew why the name was chosen are all dead, so nothing definitive can be surmised.

Ernest Lancaster was the first postmaster when the post office opened on 1911-08-15 although his wife (first name not given) actually ran the post office in their farmhouse. She was a paralytic according to a local history and died during the influenza pandemic [3]. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

Ernest abandoned the homestead, selling out to A.N. Springle, who became postmaster on 1919-12-12. Springle added a small general store to the operation. He sold out to Everett Melven Small on 1920-08-19 who operated the post office until 1924-12-29.

By this time the land was drying out and depopulating. Fred Penney operated the post office in his farmhouse for a year. The final postmaster was Thomas E. Hart from 1927-04-15 until the post office permanently closed on 1928-04-30. No one could be found to operate the post office [3]. Thereafter mail service was from Winnifred.

Granlea.

The post office name describes the grain fields and pastures [2]. It was opened on 1913-08-01 with Everett Langeries as the first postmaster. He and his wife were Dutch immigrants and, incredibly for the job, illiterate. The postal work was done by a local boy Oliver Hamm. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

On 1917-01-27, the boy's father Ralph took over the post office. He was postmaster for almost exactly a year until 1918-01-22.

George W. Wares became postmaster and served until 1952-09-02, keeping the post office in his farmhouse. He and his wife sold their farm and retired into Medicine Hat. George Schile was the final postmaster until the post office closed permanently on 1962-04-30, a victim of depopulation and good roads. Mail service was hence from Bow Island.

References.

1] National Library and Archives of Canada   (downloaded 2023-08-27)   Post offices and post masters .
https://library-archive.canada.ca/eng/collection/research-help/postalheritage/pages/post-offices-postmasters-canada.aspx
(In the search field, type RG3, then the name of the post office. RG3 is the database of post offices and postmasters. Without it, you will receive a large number of citations unrelated to post offices.)

2] Karamitsamis, Aphrodite (1992) PLACE NAMES OF ALBERTA. VOLUME 2: SOUTHERN ALBERTA   Published by University of Calgary Press.   Pages 47, 52, 76, 99

3] various authors (1963)   CONQUERVILLE: A GROWING COMMUNITY   Published by Conquerville Women's Institute, Alberta.   Pages 131 to 136

4] Hughes, Neil (1998) ALBERTA POST OFFICES 1876-1998. Privately published by the author, Edmonton, Alberta

5] Puffer, G.P. (1976) A GIANT AMONG PIONEERS   Published by Parkland Colorpress, College Heights, Lacombe, Alberta. Pages 25, 170

POSTAL HISTORY OF NEW DAYTON, ALBERTA

by Dale Speirs

Map of the New Dayton district circa 1915.

New Dayton is in the lower right and the big city of Lethbridge in the upper left.

The north-south CPR railroad connected them.

New Dayton.

In 1890, a north-south railroad was completed from Lethbridge to the Montana border at Coutts. Settlement got underway, mostly by Americans from the northern tier of states. A townsite was developed along the track in 1906 by David Hunter. He was originally from Dayton, Ohio, and thus named the settlement New Dayton.

The post office opened on 1908-08-15 in the general store of Leonard Basil Duncan [1]. He and his partner Frank McPherson were the first licenced embalmers in southern Alberta. They stored empty coffins on the second floor above the post office but because the population of the district was young and healthy, there was no call for their services as morticians. McPherson moved to British Columbia in search of greener pastures, or cemeteries as the case might be.

When Duncan married and began a family, he disposed of the coffins somehow and the family moved above the post office. He had other business interests including a homestead, so he gave up the postmastership on 1918-01-22. Succeeding him as postmaster was Thoma E. Skeith, who was a long-server in the position until 1957-03-08.

Below are proof strikes of postmarks. The lower left postmark was the first one issued, and the lower right postmark was from the early days of the Skeith tenure.
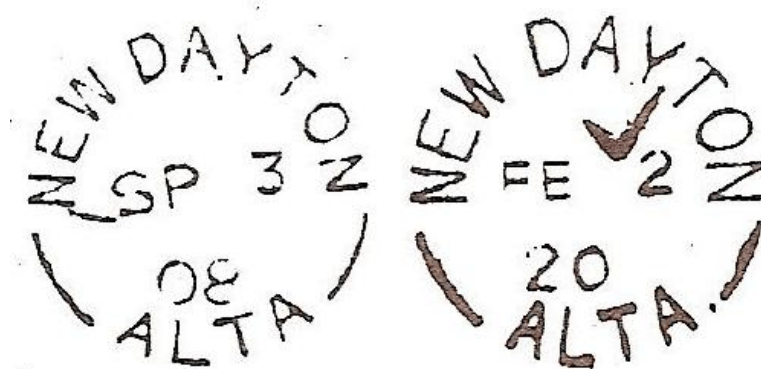
The first two postmasters of New Dayton. At left is Duncan, at right is Skeith [3].

The Skeith brothers had arrived in southern Alberta at different times and places. Thomas landed in New Dayton where he opened a general store which later contained the post office when he became postmaster. The building was torn down in 1937 and the post office moved into a new standalone facility. After Skeith retired, the post office moved to the Gorrill general store.
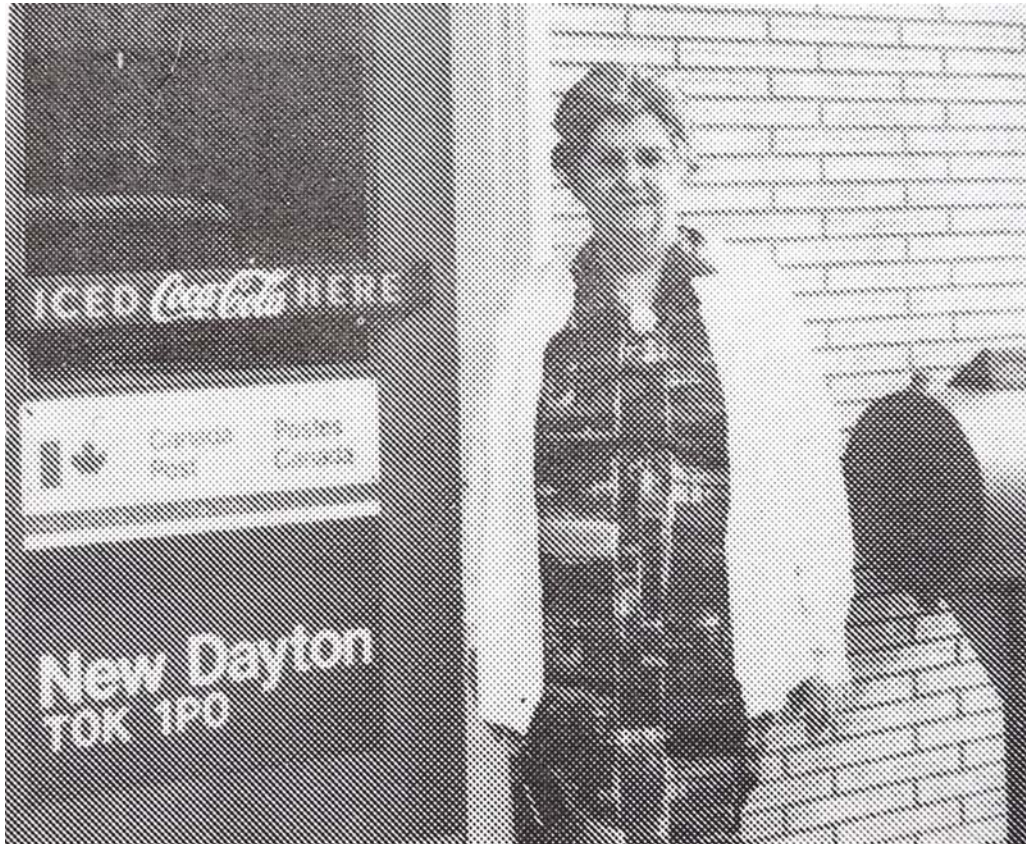
Mrs Alice Opal Gorrill became the new postmaster. The photo showed her in 1978 and is from a local history [3].

Canada Post records cut off after her appointment due to privacy laws but the local history mentioned that in 1978 she was still in the job [3].

This photograph was taken in 1988 and shows the author's mother Betty Speirs mailing letters at the post office.

At left is one of Betty's letters with the postmark as received.

Alice's son W.H. (Harry) Gorrill took over from her and as of 1998 was postmaster [2].

Modern records of post offices and postmasters are more difficult to find than older ones. I found a report on the Flickr website that on a -45°C night on 2012-01-18 the post office burned down [5]. The Internet has destroyed rural newspapers, so this appears to be the only report of the blaze. Screenshots from this report are shown on the next page.

The post office was still in existence in 2023, so evidently it was relocated to a new location.

Blakesville.

Blakesville was a farmhouse post office out in the middle of nowhere east of New Dayton. Before the coming of the east-west railroads in the 1910s, this post office served a strategic purpose as a staging point for mails from the north-south railroad at New Dayton out to the villages such as Wrentham.

After an east-west railroad, known as the Stirling Subdivision, was built through Wrentham and other settlements, the Blakesville post office closed. The postal history of the Subdivision was covered in JAPH #28.

Robert Blake, wife Joanna, and son Richard homesteaded in 1907. They opened a crossroads store and post office on their farm [4]. Robert was the only postmaster, serving from 1913-01-01 until 1916-10-25. Below is the proof strike of the postmark. He hauled the mail from New Dayton, but after the Stirling Subdivision was built, the Blakesville post office was redundant and therefore closed.
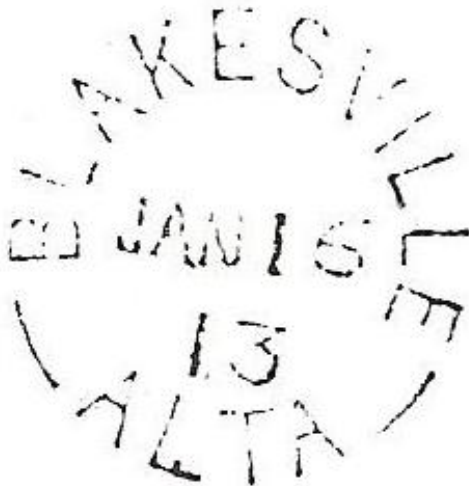
References.

1]   National Library and Archives of Canada   (downloaded 2023-10-25)   Post offices and post masters .
https://library-archive.canada.ca/eng/collection/research-help/postalheritage/pages/post-offices-postmasters-canada.aspx
(In the search field, type RG3, then the name of the post office. RG3 is the database of post offices and postmasters. Without it, you will receive a large number of citations unrelated to post offices.)

2]   Hughes, Neil (1998) ALBERTA POST OFFICES 1876-1998. Privately published by the author, Edmonton, Alberta

3]   various authors (1979) MEMORIES: NEW DAYTON AND DISTRICT 1900-1978   Published by New Dayton History Book Committee, Alberta. Pages 1 to 6, 110 to 112, 208 to 210, 281 to 283, 315 to 318, 517 to 520

4] various authors (1980) HOMESTEAD COUNTRY: WRENTHAM AND AREA Published by Wrentham Historical Society, Alberta. Pages 250 to 251

5]   The Lost Canuck (2012-01-18)   New Dayton post office/Grocery store fire. FLICKR   Published on flickr.com