

# **JOURNAL OF ALBERTA POSTAL HISTORY**

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# **POSTAL HISTORY OF MEDICINE HAT AND REDCLIFF, ALBERTA**

by Dale Speirs

## **Medicine Hat.**

The city of Medicine Hat is the capital, as it were, of extreme southeastern Alberta, the only city of large size in an area of semi-desert and numerous ghost villages. Prior to the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway transcontinental line in 1883, there were sporadic settlers in the area, mostly random squatters rather than organized homesteading.

As the railroad approached the present site of Medicine Hat in the spring of 1883, a tent city sprang up on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. The CPR made the location a divisional headquarters and in later years several branch lines spread out from the city. Medicine Hat had ample water from the river, something that other settlements surrounding it did not, which gave it a competitive advantage. Natural gas was abundant and easy to drill for, providing cheap heat and energy for industry.

## **Before The Railroad.**

The North West Mounted Police, as the Mounties were then known, arrived in 1874. They carried mail on a favour basis for the few settlers, mainly as a friendly way of keeping track of the citizenry and visiting them at their farms. The Blackfoot Confederacy claimed most of the land but the Cree contested the Medicine Hat district and there were many battles there and in the nearby Cypress Hills.

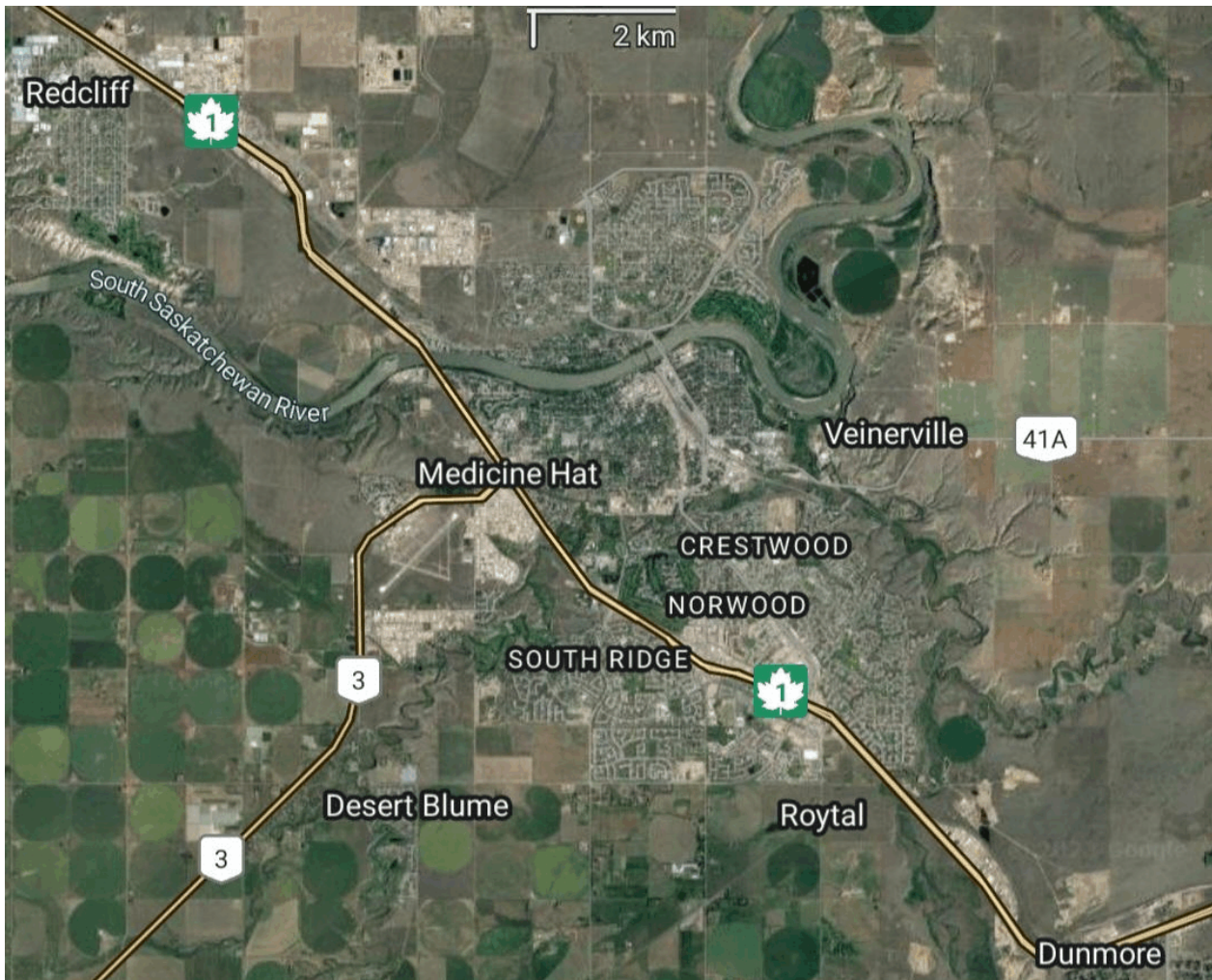
Unless specified otherwise, the postmaster names and dates are from the Post Offices and Postmasters website of the National Library and Archives of Canada [1].

## **The Name.**

The most credible and generally accepted explanation of the name Medicine Hat was that during a battle between the Cree and the Blackfoot Confederacy, a medicine man lost his hat splashing about in the South Saskatchewan River [2]. The river was the boundary between the two combatants. The battle was fought on both banks and in mid-stream. The medicine man's hat floated downstream. The Cree said it was a Blackfoot hat and vice versa.

Several other explanations have been proposed but are not accepted, some of which were outright fables and another of which was by a revisionist with an axe to grind. The first post office opened with the name Medicine Hat and so it has been ever since. To jump ahead to 1910, the second postmaster Francis Fatt helped fight off a proposed change to a blander name [2].

Three years earlier, Rudyard Kipling had visited Medicine Hat and enjoyed his time there. Fatt wrote to him and asked for his help opposing the name change. Kipling replied with a letter that was printed in the local newspaper and widely distributed in newspapers around the world. Kipling concluded with the remark: "*What then should a city be rechristened that has sold its name? Judasville.*" The name change plebiscite failed by a 10 to 1 margin, and the post office remained Medicine Hat.



Google satellite map showing Medicine Hat, its suburbs, and Redcliff.

The green circles at left and lower are centre-pivot irrigation farms. To the north and east of the city is dryland farming and ranching.

Veinerville, Desert Blume, and Roytal are hamlets that never had post offices.

The postal history of Dunmore (bottom right corner of map) was discussed in JAPH #15.

See Appendix A for listings of sub-post offices and retail postal outlets.

## The Post Office Opens.

As the transcontinental railroad approached from the east, mail arrived in the Medicine Hat area once a week from End of Tracks. Once the rails reached the townsite, mail service was daily.

Thomas L. Tweed arrived slightly before the railroad and opened a general store in a tent [3]. He became the first postmaster on 1883-06-12 when the tracks were laid through the townsite. In 1884, lumber was freighted in and the post office and stroe moved into a proper building [5]. Tweed operated the post office in his store until 1891-02-26.

The second postmaster was Francis F. Fatt. He was noted as a tall thin man whose best friend was a short plump lumber merchant named Lean [3]. Fatt resigned the postmastership on 1906-12-18 but as previously noted, kept a strong interest in the town and four years later helped defeat the proposed name change.

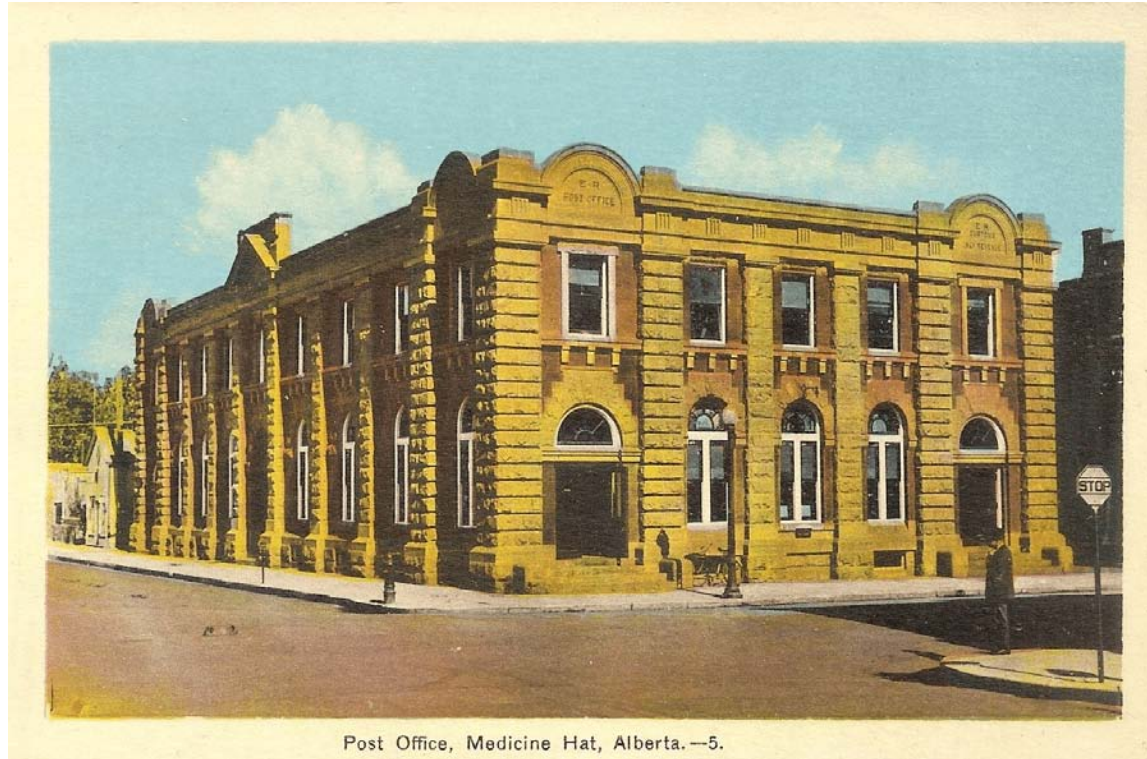
Alberta did not become a province until 1905-09-01. Medicine Hat was part of the Assiniboia district of the Northwest Territories, so the original postmark read ASSA instead of ALTA. The district boundaries lines were not the same as how the provinces were mapped. The new provincial boundary line with Saskatchewan was about 60 km east of Medicine Hat, which thus became part of Alberta.

Proof strikes of Medicine Hat when it was in Assiniboia and later Alberta.



### Subsequent Moves Of The Main Post Office.

In 1908 a new post office was built of concrete blocks at 2 Street and 6 Avenue, where it stayed until 1961. This postcard was mint and undated by the publisher. The top arch on the building has an inscription “E R POST OFFICE” indicating it was built during the reign of King Edward VII and therefore is the 1908 structure. The other end of the building was used by Canada Customs and Revenue.



Post Office, Medicine Hat, Alberta.—5.

From there, the post office moved into larger quarters in the newly-completed Federal Building [5]. The post office shared the building at 406 - 2 Street SE with Customs and other government bureaus. Based on Telus telephone directories, the main post office stayed there until 2003, when it moved to 533 - 1 Street SE. The photograph below was taken in 1988 and shows the author's mother, the late Betty Speirs, at the 2 Street SE address.



By 2014 the Main Post Office was located at 420 Kipling Street SE, a very appropriate address. The post office and distribution centre were still there as of 2023. The photo below is from Google Street View, taken in 2020.



Letter carrier service began 1913-02-08 with seven carriers. By 1967 there were 26 carriers [5].

The pictorial postmark was issued as part of Alberta's centennial celebrations in 2005.



## **Postmasters Of Medicine Hat.**

To go back and pick up the list of postmasters, after Thomas Tweed and Francis F. Fatt came W.J. McLean, who served from 1907-01-31 until 1910-07-04. He was succeeded by W.A. Burton, who served until 1912-01-01. J.H. Collier was postmaster thereafter until 1928. During his tenure, the post office was reclassified as Semi-Staff by the Canadian Post Office on 1918-04-01. This gave certain benefits to the postal workers.

Warden J. Johnson then became a long-server from 1928-05-01 until 1949-07-12. Samuel Naismith Goldie was the next postmaster but the Canada Post records are missing for his resignation. The records indicate that the next postmaster took over in 1965 and given that Goldie's birth date was in 1900, it seems probable that he was a long-server until 1965 when he would get a pension upon retirement.

P.E. Deminick was listed as the next postmaster from 1965-07-01 until early 1973. At this point the records are complicated, as E.K. Williams briefly overlapped as postmaster, then J. Wallace, then Williams again, before H.G. Schaufele was appointed on 1976-06-17. The records stop at this point due to privacy laws.

## Clerk Number Postmarks.

Medicine Hat grew enough to justify sub-post offices as the city sprawled, which were later reorganized as a system of retail postal outlets (RePOs). They were, however, late in opening, as the city did not grow big enough until after World War Two. Records of sub-post offices are spotty and difficult to obtain, so there are many gaps. These offices were in stores but Canada Post records do not record the names.

In looking at the proof strike books, I came across a set of postmarks which at first seemed to be sub-post office numbers (shown below). However, the first sub-office didn't open in Medicine Hat until 1947, so these appear to be clerk numbers. The first three are all dated the same day in 1920. There is no #4. #5 is undated in a slightly different style, suggesting it was produced in a later year.





Further proof strikes of clerk numbers followed. They can be identified because they are dated before the first Sub opened in 1947.



This clerk number was probably proofed in 1945, based on the chronological sequence of book strikes.

These are undoubtedly clerk numbers because they were proofed at the same time in 1946 before the first Sub opened.



Although Sub-Post Office #1 was open when these were proofed, they are clerk numbers, all proofed on the same day, whereas subsequent Subs opened at intervals over several years. Furthermore, there were only seven Subs, not ten. Clerk #4 postmark was once again missing.





**Sub-Post Office #1** opened on 1947-02-01 in a store with Michael Eugene Kaminsky as the first station manager. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at right. Kaminsky did not stay long in the job and on 1947-06-18 the position passed to Miss Julia Blanche Lautier. She left in 1950-08-01 and was succeeded by Mrs Verna Irene Draper who resigned on 1951-01-31. After a brief placeholder came and went, Mrs Bertha Purdy served from 1951-11-27 until 1955-08-29.



Mrs Ellen Charlotte Heffley was the next station manager until 1956-04-03. The Sub #1 then moved to a new location called Airport Hutments. It stayed there with Mrs Verna Olga Lena Woo in charge until 1957-12-27 when the Sub temporarily closed. The office re-opened on 1958-04-09 in a store at 407 - 7 Street SW with Hubert Elwyn Belsher as manager.

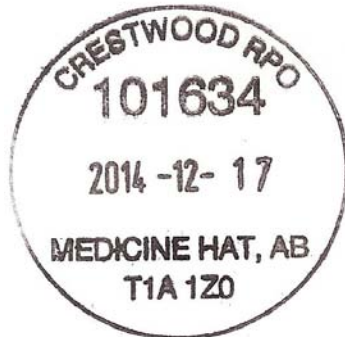
Canada Post records cut off after this point. However modern telephone directories indicate this address is today a Pharmasave drug store. Below is a sample postmark I obtained in 2014.



**Sub-Post Office #2** opened on 1953-07-15 in a store at 1320 - 9 Avenue SE with Samuel Lentz as the first station manager. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at right. Lentz resigned on 1955-08-24 and the Sub moved to MacKenzie Drugs at 2121 - 15 Avenue SE.

After a brief placeholder Stanley Alan Kosmyk came and went, Mrs Ella Doreen Stotz took over and served at the new address until 1957-05-03. Following a different placeholder, Kosmyk returned and served from 1958-05-01 until 1964-06-04. The Sub moved to 1775 Dunmore Road SE where Thomas Slobodin became the next manager.

At this point Canada Post records cut off. This address is a shopping plaza where the Crestwood Pharmacy retail postal outlet is now located. A recent postmark from there is shown below.





**Sub-Post Office #3** had two distinct listings in the Post Offices and Postmaster website [1]. The location first opened on 1954-06-01 with Victor George Hadler in charge. The address given was 403 - 7 Street SW. This may have been Boylan Drug Mart, which was listed at #407 in the 1990s, possibly as a result of expanding next door. This first incarnation of Sub #3 closed on 1956-08-31.

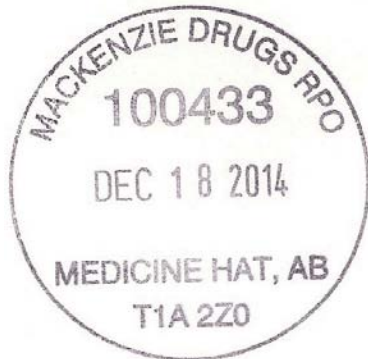
A new Sub #3 opened on 1959-12-01, with Harold Melvin Brooks in charge. The address was 25 - 8 Street NW, which was the same address as the Crescent Heights Pharmacy in the 1990s. It was operating as a RePO as of 2023.

The proof strikes of both Sub #3s were in the proof books as shown below. Below right is a modern postmark of the Crescent Heights Pharmacy.



**Sub-Post Office #4** opened on 1961-08-01 with Thomas Slobodin in charge. The store was at 423 North Railway Street SE. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at right.

Miles Maughan took over on 1975-04-08, after which Canada Post records cut off. Googling revealed that he was the owner in 2023 of MacKenzie Drugs on the same street but the building was numbered #301. Below is a recent postmark.



**Sub-Post Office #5** was opened on 1969-07-22 with Harold M. Brooks in charge. He had previously been listed as manager of Sub #3. No other information was given on the Post Offices and Postmasters website [1]. Without a street address, I could not correlate the Sub to a modern retail postal outlet. The proof strike is shown at right.



**Sub-Post Office #6** was opened on 1976-08-04. No manager was listed, only as Western Drug Mart, located at 3201 - 13 Avenue SE. There were no postmark strikes in the proof books. In 1981, Western Drug Mart merged with another company to become Pharmasave. I have a gap in my records but in 2023 the address was listed as a RePO in London Drugs.

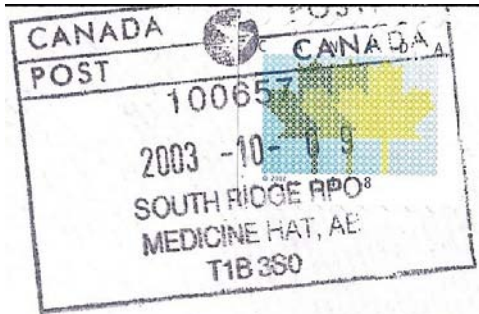
**Sub-Post Office #7** was not listed in either the Post Offices and Postmasters website or in the proof postmark books. In Robinson's checklist of Alberta postmarks, he listed #7 as open but did not provide dates or any further details.

Most of the Sub-post offices were converted to retail postal outlets. The only RePOs I have not been able to correlate with a past Sub were as follow.

Shoppers Drug Mart at 3292 Dunmore Road SE (Medicine Hat Mall) since at least 1993. The mall was built in the 1980s.



Mac's Convenience Store at 355 South Ridge Drive SE had a RePO from 2003 until sometime before 2022 when it became a Circle K store.



Original postmarks very faint,  
enhanced by computer

## Redcliff.

A short distance northwest of Medicine Hat is the town of Redcliff, population about 5,600 as of 2023. Originally it was the next station on the railroad line west of Medicine Hat, then about 10 km on the Trans-Canada Highway. The settlement has basically been an industrial district and residential suburb of Medicine Hat since 1910.

The name Redcliff is descriptive, referring to conspicuous red shale cliffs along the South Saskatchewan River. There were large deposits of brick clay, natural gas, and coal. The major industries were brick-making and greenhouse crops. The area is Alberta's sunniest and warmest area [6].

Although the railroad went through in 1883, the townsite wasn't platted until 1910 when the brick industry ramped up to full scale. Initially mail service consisted of a soap box nailed to the wall of the Davidson Grocery Store. Residents sorted through the box for their letters [6].



On 1910-11-01, a proper post office was established in the pharmacy of Cecil T. Hall, on the corner of Broadway and First Street. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. Hall held the postmastership until retiring on 1950-03-30. The post office became a semi-staff position on 1948-04-01.

On the next page is an early use of the postmark two months later on December 28. The month did not print clearly but the handwritten message is clearly dated the day before.

Dear Aunt Alice  
 I have had the  
 opportunity to write but  
 have to do so very soon.  
 Now is the best time  
 standing by the way  
 I am glad to hear  
 you are all well.  
 I hope you are all  
 well & happy.  
 I am  
 your  
 affectionate  
 nephew  
 Cliff

Red POST CARD



CLIFF  
 12/12/10  
 (MONTREAL)

This side for Correspondence

This side for Address

Mrs. Wm Pearson  
 Wolbrook  
 Ont.

Photo of Cecil Hall and the building the post office was in for the first 40 years [6, 7].





Albert Melville Collard became the second postmaster of Redcliff, serving until 1974-08-31. Records are not available to indicate when the post office moved to a new location but probably did so with Collard. Below is a sample postmark from Collard's tenure.



Collard was succeeded by Jack Henry Urdal, at which point Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws. Hughes [4] listed Urdal still in office in 1998. The photo below shows Betty Speirs in front of the post office in 1989. Google Street View and the Canada Post website both confirm the post office is still in the same location as of 2023.



A sample postmark Betty Speirs obtained during her visit. That Redcliff used a machine cancel indicated it had plenty of business.



A pictorial postmark confirming Redcliff's heritage as a greenhouse centre.



## References.

- 1] National Library and Archives of Canada (downloaded 2023-11-15) Post offices and post masters .  
<https://library-archives.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] Gould, Ed (1983) ALL HELL FOR A BASEMENT Published by The City of Medicine Hat, Alberta. Pages 1 to 12.
- 3] Wilson, L.J.R. (1983) ONTARIO ON THE PRAIRIES Published by Alberta Genealogical Society, Edmonton. Page 4
- 4] Hughes, Neil (1998) ALBERTA POST OFFICES 1876-1998. Privately published by the author, Edmonton, Alberta
- 5] Gershaw, F.W. (1967) SAAMIS, THE MEDICINE HAT Published by Val Marshall Printing, Medicine Hat. Pages 145 to 146
- 6] Hall, Cecil T. (1962) THE GOLDEN YEARS OF REDCLIFF Privately published by the author, who was the first postmaster of Redcliff. Pages 9 to 15. Available at Calgary Public Library, New Central Branch, 4<sup>th</sup> floor.
- 7] Anonymous (1962) SOUVENIR PROGRAM OF REDCLIFF'S GOLDEN JUBILEE Published by the Golden Jubilee Committee, Redcliff. Page 10. Available at Calgary Public Library, New Central Branch, 4<sup>th</sup> floor.
- 8] Robinson, William G. (1985) POST OFFICES OF ALBERTA. Privately published by the author, Vancouver, British Columbia. Page55

## **Appendix A.**

### **Sub-Post Offices And Retail Outlets.**

Records of modern-era retail outlets are fragmentary and difficult to find, especially after the Internet era began. This list is the best that could be obtained.

CPR Depot operated from 1918 to 1964 as a sub-post office [8].

### **Retail Postal Outlets: 1993 to 1998.**

These are listed in Hughes [4].

|               |                           |  |
|---------------|---------------------------|--|
| 1993 to 1998: | Boylan Drug Mart          | 616 - 3 Street SE                        |
|               | Boylan Drug Mart          | 407 - 7 Street SW                        |
|               | Crestwood Pharmacy        | 1827 Dunmore Road SE                     |
|               | Crescent Heights Pharmacy | 25 - 8 Street NW                         |
|               | Shoppers Drug Mart        | 3292 Dunmore Road SE (Medicine Hat Mall) |

### **Retail Postal Outlets: 1999 to 2013.**

These listings are from Telus telephone directories for Medicine Hat, held in the Calgary Public Library (New Central Library, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, south end, Local History section).

- 1999:   Boylan Drug Mart                   616 - 3 Street SE  
          Boylan Drug Mart               407 - 7 Street SW  
          Crestwood Pharmacy           1827 Dunmore Road SE  
          MacKenzie Drugs               301 North Railway Street SE  
          Shoppers Drug Mart           3292 Dunmore Road SE (Medicine Hat Mall)
- 2000 to 2002:    same as 1999
- 2003:   same as 1999, plus  
          Crescent Heights Pharmacy   25 - 8 Street NW
- 2004:   Boylan Drug Mart                   616 - 3 Street SE  
          Boylan Drug Mart               407 - 7 Street SW  
          Crestwood Pharmacy           1827 Dunmore Road SE  
          MacKenzie Drugs               301 North Railway Street SE  
          Shoppers Drug Mart           3292 Dunmore Road SE (Medicine Hat Mall)  
          Crescent Heights Pharmacy   25 - 8 Street NW  
          Mac's Convenience            355 South Ridge Drive SE   (postmark recorded from 2003)
- 2005 to 2008:    same as 2004

2009: same as 2004 but Boylan was bought out by Pharmasave and their name changed.

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Pharmasave                | 616 - 3 Street SE                        |
| Pharmasave                | 407 - 7 Street SW                        |
| Crestwood Pharmacy        | 1827 Dunmore Road SE                     |
| MacKenzie Drugs           | 301 North Railway Street SE              |
| Shoppers Drug Mart        | 3292 Dunmore Road SE (Medicine Hat Mall) |
| Crescent Heights Pharmacy | 25 - 8 Street NW                         |
| Mac's Convenience         | 355 South Ridge Drive SE                 |

2010 to 2012: same as 2009

2013:

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Crescent Heights Pharmacy | 25 - 8 Street NW                            |
| Shoppers Drug Mart        | 1827 Dunmore Road SE (bought out Crestwood) |
| Shoppers Drug Mart        | 407 - 7 Street SW (bought out Pharmasave?)  |
| Mac's Convenience         | 355 South Ridge Drive SE                    |

### **Retail Postal Outlets: 2014**

This was taken from the Canada Post website in 2014.

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Pharmasave                | 407 - 7 Street SW                        |
| Crestwood Pharmacy        | 1827 Dunmore Road SE                     |
| MacKenzie Drugs           | 301 North Railway Street SE              |
| Shoppers Drug Mart        | 3292 Dunmore Road SE (Medicine Hat Mall) |
| Crescent Heights Pharmacy | 25 - 8 Street NW                         |
| Mac's Convenience         | 355 South Ridge Drive SE                 |



## **Retail Postal Outlets: 2023**

This listing was from the Canada Post website in 2023.

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Shoppers Drug Mart        | 3292 Dunmore Road SE (Medicine Hat Mall) |
| Crescent Heights Pharmacy | 25 - 8 Street NW                         |
| MacKenzie Drugs           | 301 North Railway Street SE              |
| Pharmasave                | 407 - 7 Street SW                        |
| Crestwood Pharmacy        | 1827 Dunmore Road SE                     |
| London Drugs              | 3201 - 13 Avenue SE                      |