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POSTAL HISTORY OF THE SUFFIELD BLOCK, SOUTHEASTERN ALBERTA

by Dale Speirs

Index Of Post Offices

Unless stated otherwise, all post office and postmaster dates are from the National Library and Archives of Canada website [1].
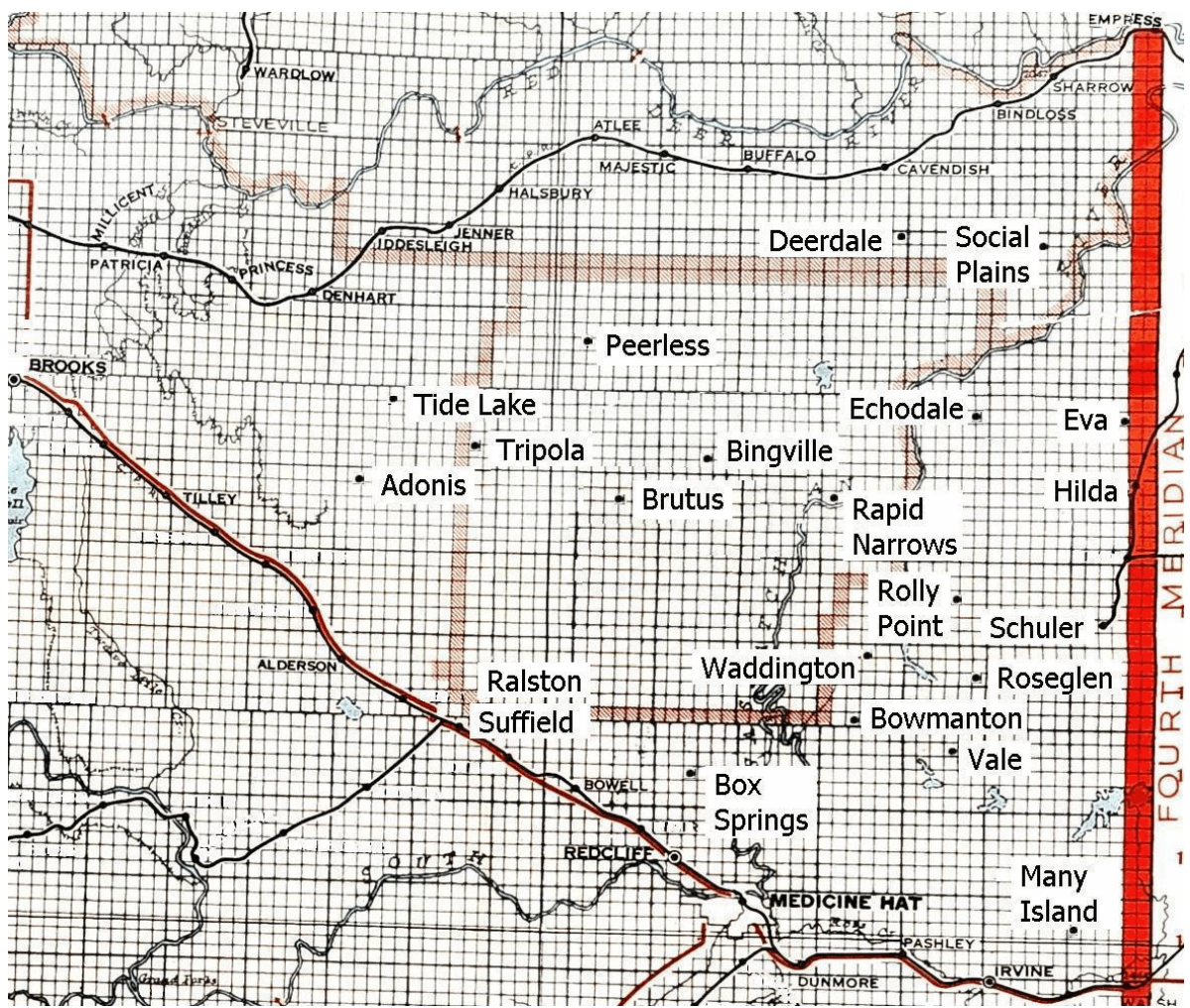
The Block.

Southeastern Alberta is desert country. The driest part is the area between the CPR transcontinental railroad and the Red Deer River, a vast triangular area of treeless flatlands. The area was originally settled in the 1890s to 1910s during an abnormal moist period. When the climate reverted to desert, the homesteaders were slowly driven off the land.

The area was ideal for military training by artillery and tanks, with large open spaces for units to maneuver and bang away with cannons without the fear of hitting anyone's house. Consequently it became a British training base, then a Canadian explosives testing facility, and back to the British, who were still there as of 2023. On the east side of the Block, roughly between the South Saskatchewan River and the provincial border, a few hamlets and ranchers remain.

The post offices, extant and extinct, that were along the transcontinental railroad, have been written up in JAPH issues #15, 29, 31, and 33. The post office of Suffield (extinct) gave its name to the area north of the tracks. The railroad is still operational and is now paralleled by the Trans-Canada Highway, a major route.

From 1942 to 1947, the military district was known as the British Block. The Canadian Forces then took over until 1971 and called it the Suffield Block. The British army returned on a long-term lease for tank training. Today the base is known as the BATUS Block (British Army Training Unit Suffield) and uses the Ralston post office. As of 2025, the British Army was considering abandoning their lease but if so, the base may be converted back to chemical warfare training by the Canadian Forces.

The map on the next page shows all the pioneer post offices that existed in the Suffield district. Only the Hilda and Ralston post offices are still in existence. The history of Ralston was written up in JAPH #33.

The bright red line is the Saskatchewan-Alberta border.

The pale pink squareish area was the Block circa 1946.

The name and the exact boundaries of the Block changed from time to time but are roughly the same as of 2025.

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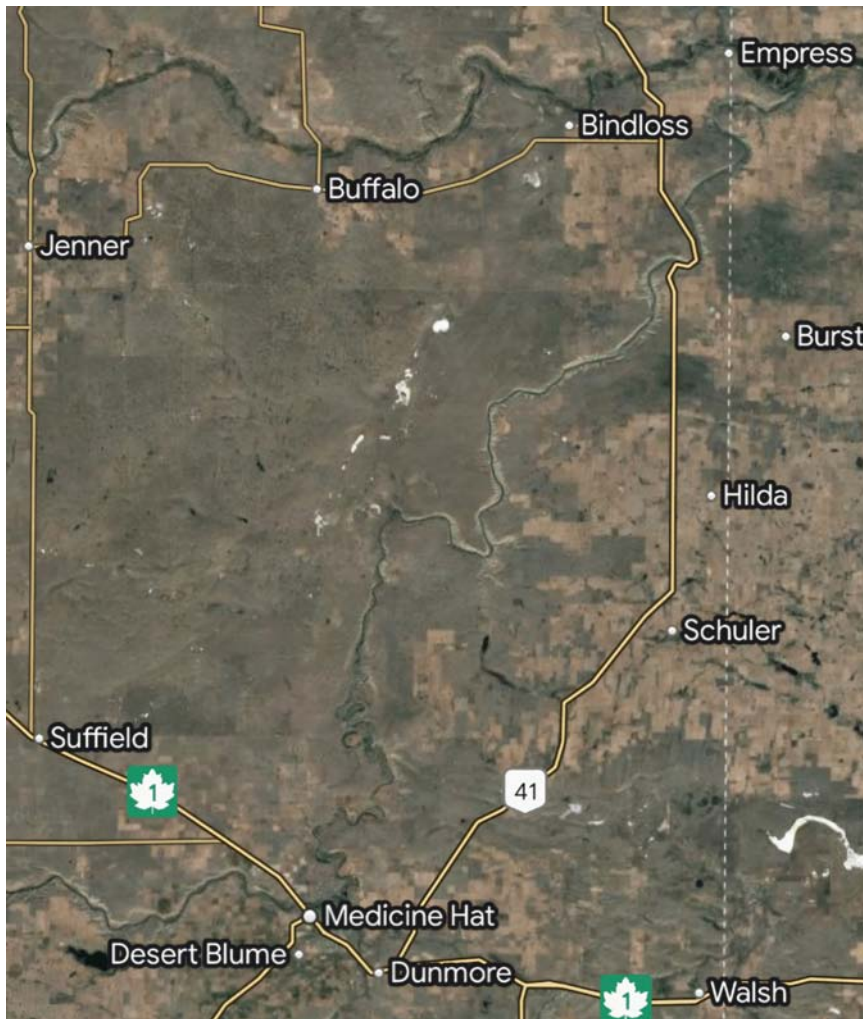
This is a Google View map showing a satellite photo as of 2024. The emptiness of the land is easily visualized.

Prior to the arrival of the transcontinental railroad, any mail would have been distributed as a courtesy by officers of the North West Mounted Police, as the Mounties were then known.

Such deliveries were few and far between. The main reason the NWMP did this was because the service enabled them to keep an eye on settlers under friendly circumstances.

The First Post Office: Tide Lake.

The name of this area is descriptive [2]. There was a large intermittent lake which expanded over the flatlands during wet years and dried up into an alkali flat during drought. The earliest settlers were Polish homesteaders who arrived during the first decade of the 1900s. They found lots of level and fertile land but no rainfall after the 1920s began [3]. Enough homesteaders arrived such that a farmhouse post office was opened on 1910-12-01, the first in the Suffield Block.

Mark C. Brown was the first postmaster of Tide Lake, serving until 1912-02-01. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

The post office then moved to the country store of Andrew A. Hogobaum. He only stayed a short time until 1913-03-20. John Koopman was the final but longest-serving postmaster, serving until the post office closed permanently on 1933-07-15. The Koopman family also had the mail courier contract.

A long-term drought began in the early 1920s. By 1925 about 90% of the homesteaders abandoned their claims. In 1929 almost all the land was converted to grazing leases by the federal government [3].

The Burstall Subdivision.

The next two post offices to open were Hilda and Schuler alongside the Saskatchewan border. The Canadian Pacific Railway built a spur line in 1923 known as the Burstall subdivision, which came off a main line at Leader, Saskatchewan. The spur angled southwest across the provincial border, then paralleled along the Alberta side.
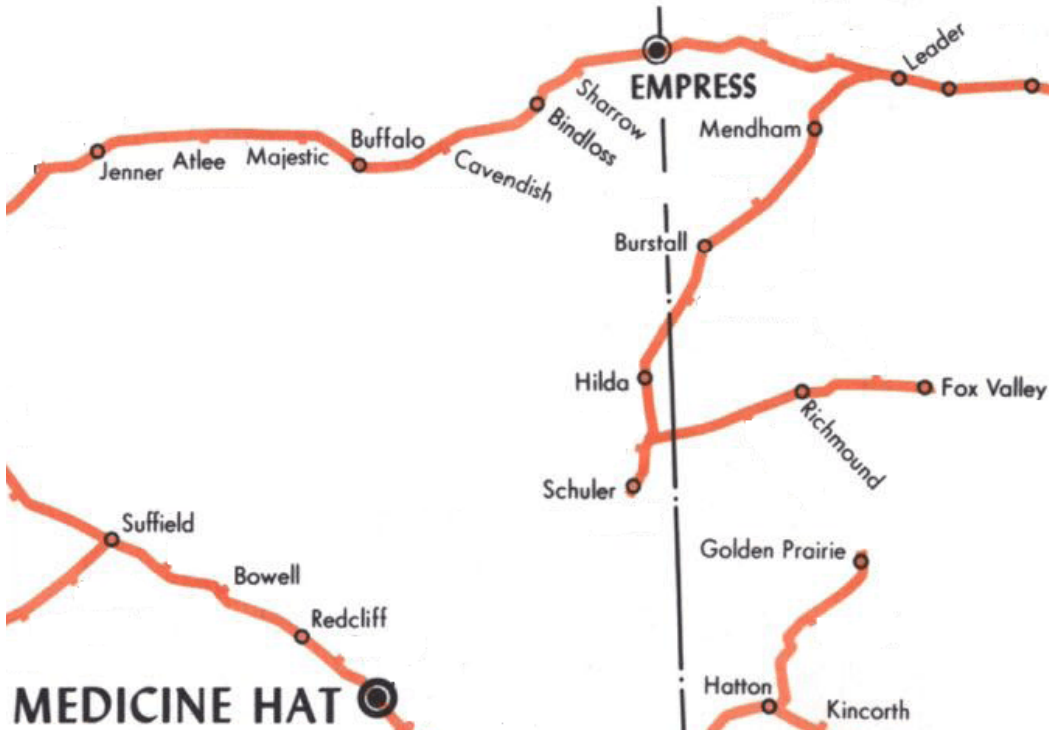
Hilda and Schuler were thus the only post offices who received regular rail service. All other post offices in the Suffield district had to haul their mail from rail lines south, north, or east.

Both Hilda and Schuler opened the same day on 1910-12-15 before the railroad came by.

Burstall Subdivision: Hilda.

The post office opened on 1910-12-15 with Samuel Koch as the first postmaster. He named the post office after his daughter Hilda [2]. Originally the post office was in his farmhouse. About a year later he added a small grocery store. He sold the homestead and moved to Medicine Hat, relinquishing the post office on 1917-10-24.

John C. Maier was the next postmaster, whose father Michael bought the Koch farm. John and his brother George carried the mail from Irvine. Business was so bad that on 1919-01-20 John resigned as postmaster and went traveling. George took over the postmastership until 1923-05-08. The post office/store was destroyed by fire in 1921 but a new building was soon erected. The proof postmarks shown below don't seem to be associated with staff changes or events.

The next postmaster was Thomas Stevenson Montgomerie, who lived in the railroad siding now named Hilda. The railroad came through in 1923. For the first time the post office was in the village, not an adjacent farm. Montgomerie was a long-server until 1946-07-29.

In 1934 the roads had improved to the point where mail service was overland from Medicine Hat. The Goodfellow family, father Amos Sr and two sons Amos Jr (Ame) and Edward, couriered the mail [4]. In summer they used a truck, shown below. Winter transport was by horse-and-sleigh and later by Bombardier, sometimes both on the same trip depending on the weather. Sleighs were used into the 1950s.
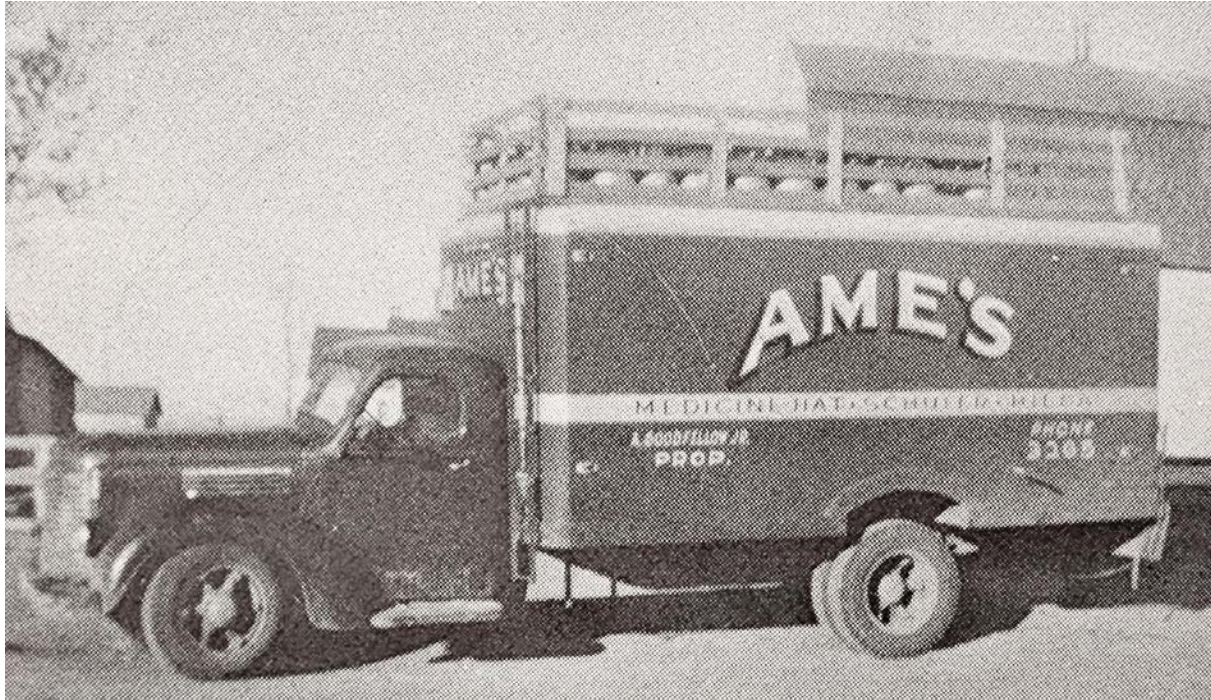
Cecil John Williams took over the post office until 1948-09-27 when John Croissant Jr became postmaster. He sold the post office and store on 1956-08-28 and moved to Medicine Hat. George Reichert was the next postmaster until ill health forced him to resign on 1963-08-12. His clerk Mrs Mary Kundert took over as postmaster until 1963-08-16.

The post office and store were then sold to the Mauch family. Mrs Lorraine Marguerite Mauch became postmaster on 1967-09-01, at which point Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws. Hughes lists her as postmaster at least until 1998 [5].

The photo on the next page shows the post office in a standalone building in 1988. The author's mother Betty Speirs (1931-2002) is seen mailing a letter in a slot cut underneath the window. The 1988 postmark on her letter is shown below.

Sometime in the early 2000s the post office moved into the Hilda Community Centre where it still operates, the only post office left in the entire district. Here are Google Street views as of 2023.

Burstall Subdivision: Schuler.

The post office opened on 1910-12-15 with Norman Banks Schuler as the first postmaster. At that time it was located in a country store on the Schuler homestead. When the railroad arrived in 1923, the terminus was named Schuler and the post office and store were moved to the tracks. The mail originally came overland from Irvine before the railroad was built [6]. At left is a proof strike of the first postmark.

Jerome Bearss (with two 's') took over as postmaster on 1924-06-12 and moved it into a new building where the post office would stay until 1981, shown below [4]. He had previously been postmaster at nearby Roseglen, about which more later.

Bearss was succeeded by Michael William Hingsburger on 1928-07-17. John Connors was the next postmaster from 1933-07-20 until 1942-02-25 when he handed over to Roy C. Hicks. On 1950-09-01 Hugo Herbert Woelfle became postmaster. At this point Canada Post records cut off due to privacy laws.

A local history book filled in some of the subsequent blanks [6]. Woelfle retired on 1977-06-21. His successor was Christine Zacker, who renovated the building. She handed over to Marlene Squire on 1981-01-16, who moved the post office into her house, shown below [6].

Jean Miller Bolen was postmaster from 1982 in her house until 1991, when a fire destroyed the place. The photo shows Betty Speirs at the post office in 1988.

Janice Austin temporarily operated the post office until 1992 in the Schuler Farm Supply [7].   On 1992-06-17 the post office was converted into a retail postal outlet [5].   The RePO was located in a convenience store with Mrs Jackie Schuler (nee Gross) as the postal manager [5]. She and her husband sold the store and post office in 1999 and Lori Jans became the next postal manager [7].   The RePO closed in 2009. Since then, mail delivery was to community boxes, with parcel pickup in Hilda.

East Of The Block: Box Springs.

This post office was located along a pioneer trail used by ox-team freighters because the location was a rare source of water for travelers. The springs were shallow and muddy, so one of the teamsters lined them with a large wooden crate to keep the water open and clear [8].

The Box Springs post office opened on 1911-10-01 with Mrs M.M. Walker as the first postmaster. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

The Walker family kept a stopping house at Box Springs, an early primitive form of bed-and-breakfast. She relinquished the post office on 1915-04-30 and David H. Williamson took over. He hauled the mail from Redcliff every Friday. The post office closed permanently on 1918-11-28 as the freighters were replaced by railroads.

East Of The Block: Tarves / Many Island

The post office of Tarves opened on 1913-02-01 on the homestead of Bernard Edward Smyth, where he also kept a small store. None of the standard place name directories of Alberta mention the source of this name. However, a local history book stated that the Smyth family was from Scotland [9]. Googling the name Tarves produced only one reference, that of a village in Scotland. Therefore almost certainly Smyth named the post office after his hometown. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at left.

On 1917-03-03, Benard gave up the postmastership and enlisted in the Canadian Army. His brother Hugh Middleton Smyth then took over the post office on his homestead nearby. He served until 1921-03-15, when both Bernard and Hugh moved to Walsh on the transcontinental railroad [9].

During Hugh's tenure the post office name was changed on 1919-10-01 to Many Island. The proof strike is shown at right. Many Island was the name of the surrounding district and referred to a large intermittent lake. In dry years the lake was marsh. In wet years the lake filled up. The topography was speckled with numerous small hills, which became islets when the lake filled. The name is a translation of the Cree name for the lake.

As the land dried out from the early 1920s until the middle 1940s, the population declined, as did the post office. Gustav Fromm was a temporary placeholder in 1921 and early 1922. Reinhold Mock was the final postmaster from 1922-06-10 until 1929-01-31 when the post office closed permanently. Thereafter mail was a rural route from Walsh.

East Of The Block: Waddington.

This post office opened on 1912-04-01 in the farmhouse of George Temple. The name is not listed in any place name directory so its origin is unknown [8]. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at left.

George died on 1913-04-11 and his widow Charlotte took over the post office. The population of the district declined as the land dried out. The post office permanently closed on 1917-01-08. A few years later the Temple family abandoned their homestead and moved to Calgary.

East Of The Block: Vale.

The post office opened on 1913-10-13 with John Evers as the first postmaster. He was a Dutchman who originally emigrated to Vale, Oregon, in 1906, then took up a homestead in Alberta in 1910. The land was uninhabited and for want of a better name the post office was named after the Oregon town [8]. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

Evers served until 1916-11-21, after which Barend Johannes Van Keekum moved the post office to his homestead. He resigned on 1920-11-04 and was succeeded by two brief placeholders who came and went. John Evers then resumed the postmastership from 1924-11-13 until he retired on 1934-03-21 and moved to Medicine Hat.

Mrs Johanna Maria Goodfellow was postmaster for a couple of months until her husband Amos McKay Goodfellow took over from 1934-05-14 until 1949-10-05. He and his sons had the mail courier contract for the post office from Medicine Hat to Hilda. The post office then moved to the house of Mrs Hazel Clara Syverson. She was a schoolteacher who had boarded with the Goodfellows before her marriage [8].

Hazel served until 1951-08-10 when Mrs Alice May Rieger became the final postmaster. The declining population led to the permanent closure of the post office on 1958-02-10.
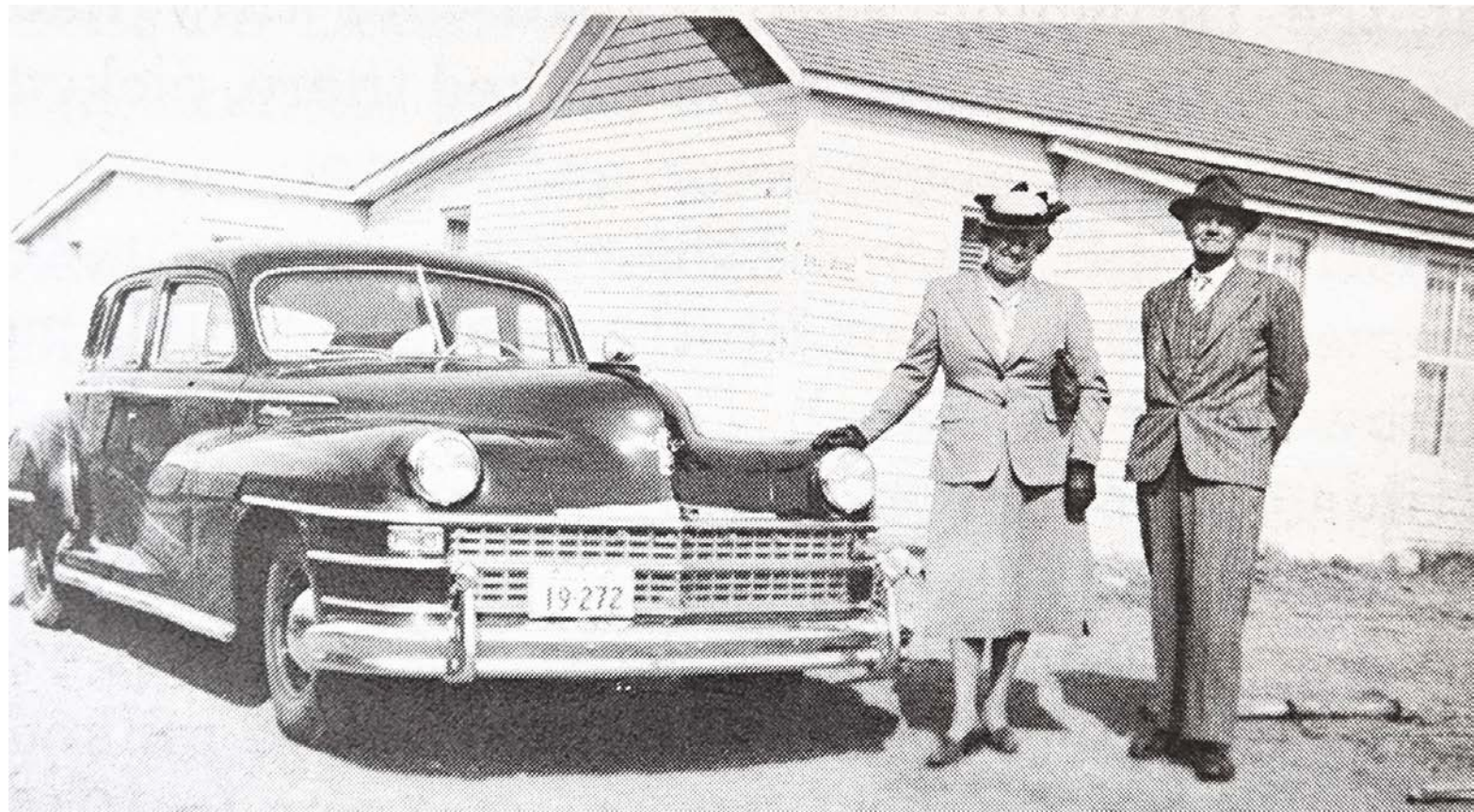
East Of The Block: Bowmanton.

The post office opened on 1913-10-13, the same day as Vale. Bruce Taylor was the first postmaster at his farmhouse. Shown at left is the proof strike of the first postmark. The post office name was the maiden name of a local resident [2].

On 1920-05-31 the post office moved to the homestead of William and Ellen Pickering. William was named as postmaster but Ellen actually operated the post office [8] William died a few months later on 1920-11-01 but Ellen continued to operate the post office. She remarried and on 1928-10-16 was named postmaster as Mrs Ellen McMann.

The next postmaster was Mrs Anna Catherine Coeburgh, wh served from 1928-12-06 until 1955-08-15. She was the daughter of John Evers, who at that time was postmaster of Vale. Mail service was from Medicine Hat, mostly with the Goodfellows as couriers.

The Coeburgh farmhouse was also a stopping place since there were no hotels within 40 kilometres. On one occasion Anna helped deliver a baby in the post office. (Pause for jokes about Special Delivery.) During the 1930s, the government distributed relief in the form of cheese wheels, bags of apples, and salted cod, which the post offices distributed to local residents in distress. The photo on the next page shows Anna and her husband Jope circa the 1950s in front of the Bowmanton post office [8].

The final postmaster was Mrs Bette Irene Davis until the post office permanently closed on 1958-01-06.

East Of The Block: Roseglen.

The name of this post office was descriptive, referring to the abundant Alberta wild roses (*Rosa acicularis*) in the valley [2]. The post office opened on 1913-10-13 with Jerome Bearss as first postmaster. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. Located in his farmhouse, the post office closed on 1918-04-24 for two years. Bearss would later become postmaster of Schuler in 1924, as previously mentioned above.

The post office re-opened on 1920-05-01 with Mrs M.M. Smith as the next postmaster. She gave it up a short while later on 1921-08-29 and handed the postmastership to William Harrison Ellis.   He served until 1927-02-11, after which Mrs Ethel Maude Daze became the final postmaster. She and her husband Joseph had ranched in several locations in the district before buying a spread at Roseglen [8].

Joseph couriered the mails between Medicine Hat and Hilda before handing that contract to the Goodfellow family. When the Dazes bought their ranch in 1927, they also took over the post office and moved it to their farmhouse. Ethel served until 1943-09-30, when the post office permanently closed.

East Of The Block: Rolly Point.

The origin of this name is unknown. The post office was named after the school district within which it was located, but that only pushed the question back one step since no one knows why the school was so named. At left is the proof strike of the postmark.

William J. Venus was the only postmaster, keeping the post office in his farmhouse from 1924-10-01 until 1926-05-34 when it closed permanently. He was an Englishman who had trained as an horticulturist, so how he ended up in the driest part of western Canada in a desert was mystifying [4]. Mail service thereafter was from Hilda.

East Of The Block: Rapid Narrows.

This post office was located on the South Saskatchewan River. The name is descriptive of a narrows in the river [2]. The only postmaster was James Dunphy, who kept the post office in his farmhouse. He served from 1914-07-01 until 1917-10-03, although the official closing date of the post office was 1918-03-28. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at left.

East Of The Block: Eva.

The post office was opened on 1915-08-01 and was named after local resident Mrs Eva Wallace, whose husband had surveyed the land [5]. James Hepworth was the first postmaster and kept the post office in his farmhouse. At left is a proof strike of the first and probably the only postmark.

Hepworth resigned on 1916-10-29 and handed over to Archie Carr. The latter resigned on 1920-11-27 and the post office officially closed on 1921-01-31.

East Of The Block: Echodale.

No references could be found as to the name origin but it was located near the South Saskatchewan River valley so this might be a descriptive name. The only postmaster of this short-lived post office was Christian Guthmiller. At left is the proof strike of the only postmark.

Guthmiller kept the post office from 1924-10-01 in his farmhouse until 1925-03-31 when it was permanently closed [4]. Mail service was via Hilda.

North Of The Block: Social Plains.

The area north of the Suffield Block looked for connections to a railroad that ran along the south side of the Red Deer River. Mail service was through Bindloss, located on the tracks. The post office was named in a spirit of fraternity among the homesteaders [2].

The first postmaster was William Fowlie Sr from 1915-04-01 in his farmhouse. He resigned on 1917-09-15 due to failing health [10]. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

M.G. Antrim took over briefly until 1920-02-07, followed by David W. McRae until 1922-01-30. The final postmaster was H.H. Tucker. The post office was closed on 1929-07-23 as the land dried out and homesteaders abandoned their claims.

North Of The Block: Deerdale.

The name of this post office was descriptive, a reference to the many deer in the area [5]. The only postmaster was Benjamin Worboys from 1916-04-01 until 1916-12-27. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark. Worboys was later driven off the land by drought. He eventually became postmaster of Cavendish, on the railroad north of the Suffield Block.

Within The Block: Peerless.

The post office opened on 1911-08-01 with Victor Jansson as the first postmaster. The name expressed the hopes of the first homesteaders. At left is the proof strike of the first postmark.

The post office was in the farmhouse of the Janssons. Victor's wife Anna actually operated the post office. On 1915-03-10 she became postmaster de jure as well as de facto, serving until 1922-01-14. That year the Janssons abandoned their homestead because of the continuing drought. The photo on the next page shows Anna standing by the mail wagon. The female passenger is unknown and the driver is Mr Websdale, the mail courier [3].

George Tribe was the final postmaster until 1926-04-16 when the post office was closed because of limited usefulness. Only a handful of people were left on the land.
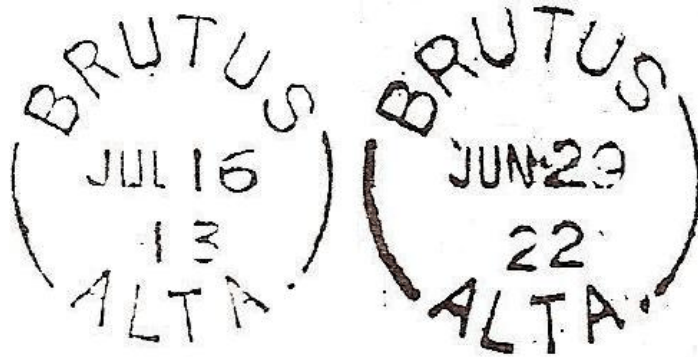
Within The Block: Brutus.

The post office opened on 1913-07-01 in the farmhouse of Jonas Brubacher Jr, who named it after his hometown of Brutus, Michigan [2]. He served until 1916-11-09 as postmaster.

The post office then moved to the homestead of Robert H. Cuthbertson until 1918-09-18. Three placeholders came and went. Luite Visscher was postmaster from 1923-02-02 until 1925-01-16. He kept the post office and a small grocery store in his farmhouse [3]. The final postmaster was Mrs Margaret Lemna until the post office permanently closed on 1928-05-18. By then almost all of the district was abandoned due to the drought.

Proof strikes of two postmarks are shown below, the first used by Brubacher and the second by Visscher.

Within The Block: Bingville.

The name came from an unusual source which deserves further explanation. The post office opened on 1914-10-15 in the tarpaper shack of homesteader Hans Peter Hansen. Out on the uninhabited flatlands with no distinguishing features, the first homesteaders held a meeting to discuss the name for the post office. They decided to draw from a hat of proposed names. Visiting at the time were two guests from Washington State. In jest they put in the name Bingville from a very popular newspaper comic at the time "Bingville Bugle". That was the name drawn [2].

BINGVILLE BUGLE

BY NEWTON NEWKIRK

Copyrighted. 1915, by E. A. Grozier.

WELL, MARCH · COME · INTO · BINGVILLE · LAST · MONDAY · LIKE · A · LION ·
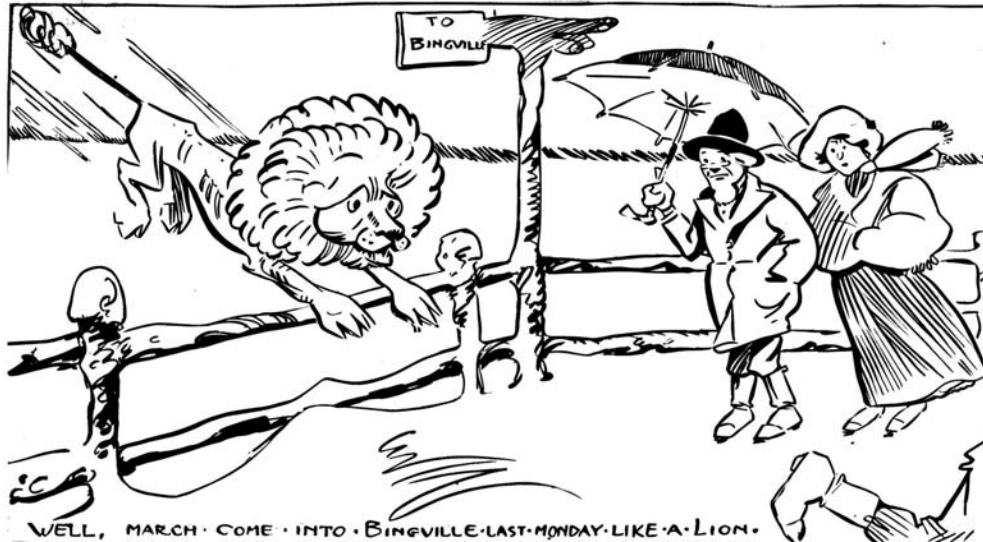
This is off topic but the story is too good not to tell. At that time there was a 10-year-old boy in Spokane, Washington State, named Harry Lillis Crosby Jr. He liked the comic so much that a neighbour began calling him Bing, although his mother always called him Harry.

Hansen resigned as postmaster on 1917-06-19, after which a brief placeholder came and went. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown below.

Knute Madsen was postmaster from 1918-03-01 until 1920-01-09, moving the post office into his farmhouse. Emmanuel Christensen then took over as postmaster on his homestead.

The post office closed permanently on 1941-08-15 when the British Block was created. The Christensens and all the other homesteaders were evicted to make way for the military [3]. All settlements and post offices within the Block were physically eradicated.

Within The Block: Hoskin / Tripola

This post office opened on 1911-08-01 under the name Hoskin, source unknown. John Coffin was the first postmaster, who kept the post office and a small store in his farmhouse [3]. The proof strike of the first postmark is shown at left.

John McIntosh was the next postmaster, taking over on 1912-08-09. During his tenure the post office name was changed to Tripola. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at right.

The name source is unknown. It was not a spelling error for Tripoli because all the postal records show it as Tripola.

McIntosh resigned on 1914-10-31 and was succeeded by Mrs K. Birce, who served until 1920-11-26. The final postmaster was Mrs Laura Ethel Potter until 1921-09-20, although the post office was not officially closed until 1922-09-30. By then a mass exodus was underway as homesteaders abandoned their land due to the ongoing drought [3].

West Of The Block: Adonis.

This post office was obviously named after the ancient Greek hero, although the reason why was not recorded. The only postmaster was J.G. Carmack, who served from 1913-06-01 until 1914-10-15. The proof strike of the postmark is shown at left.

References.

1] National Library and Archives of Canada   (downloaded 2024-11-30)   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.)

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6] various authors (1983) SAGA OF SCHULER STALWARTS, SECOND EDITION. Published by History Book Committee, Schuler, Alberta. Pages 10 to 11, 111 to 112, 129

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8] various authors (1993) WAGON TRAILS AND PIONEER TALES   Published by Bowell to Bowmanton Historical Society, Medicine Hat, Alberta. Pages 214 to 215, 231, 285 to 286, 301 to 302, 403 to 404, 415 to 416, 794 to 796, 818 to 819, 828 to 829, 836

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10] Stelter, Annie (editor) (undated book but late 1980s) DREAMS, DUST, AND DEDICATION Published by Bindloss Community Club, Bindloss, Alberta. Page 144