

Lea County post offices leave stamp on area history

MARIE WADSWORTH
NEWS-SUN

There are many different ways of looking at history.

Schools, businesses, churches and post offices can give perspectives about the history of an area. Post offices often were a community's link to the outside world. If you knew what post offices existed, they'd tell about the individuals who lived in the community and how the community has developed.

"Much of the history of the area would have been lost without Wade's (Shibley's) work. There's no way for us to predict how valuable this information will be in the future," said Jim Harris, director of the Lea County Museum in Lovington.

The first thing settlers did was build a store and then put a post office in it, according to Ray Drummond, former postal dispatcher and local historian. Before the town could have a post office, it had to have a name.

Lovington stamp collector Wade Shibley exhibited his collection of Lea County postmarks at the Lea County Museum in Lovington two years ago. He recreated the map from "The History of Lea County Post Offices," pinpointing where all the Lea County post offices were.

"You can look at the map and see how populated Lea County was and how far you had to travel between post offices," Drummond said.

According to "The History of Lea County Post Offices," the first mail route was established in what is now Lea County with the opening of the Swamp Post Office in 1894. The route was probably a two or three day a week special supply route from the Carlsbad Post Office. This route was abolished when the post office closed in 1897.

There were four post offices established in the area in 1908. To provide mail to Lovington, the route was extended through Knowles. The Nadine Post Office received mail from Monument three days a week and Pearl was added to the route between Carlsbad and Monument.

Six more post offices were established in Lea County in 1909. All of these new offices received their mail twice a week. The Tatum, Scott and King post offices were added to the route out of Lovington. A

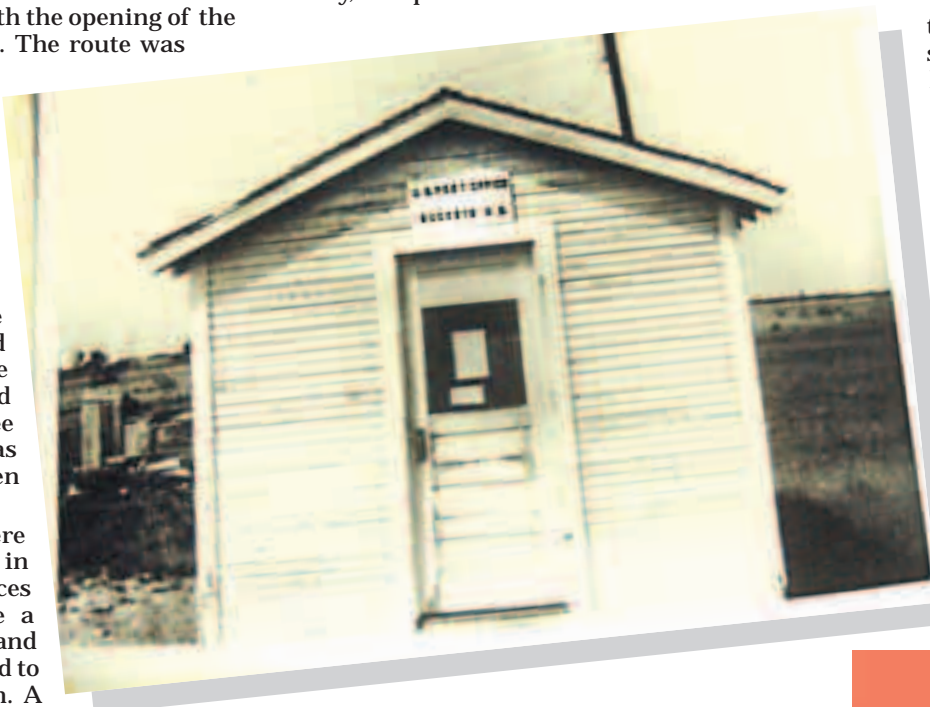
new route from Monument delivered the mail to Eunice and Henry.

In 1909 the first automobile was used to deliver mail between Carlsbad and Lovington.

Except for adjustments for newly established or discontinued offices, the routes remained the same until the completion of the Texas-New Mexico Railroad in 1930. Major changes were made to the Star Routes serving the county. A route was established between Clovis and Hobbs to provide mail exchanges with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and the Texas-New Mexico Railroads. This route carried mail to Crossroads, Tatum, McDonald, Lovington and Hobbs.

The Texas-New Mexico Railroad mail service was discontinued in the late 1940s. The Post Office Department extended the Carlsbad to Hobbs Star Route into Texas to replace the rail service.

Zip codes were created in 1963 and a nationwide campaign began to have the public include the code in their addresses. Roswell became the Sectional Center Facility responsible for processing and delivering mail with the 882 zip code area. This included all the offices in Lea County, except Crossroads.



Collector

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Shibley and his wife traveled across New Mexico visiting old post office locations and taking photos of the buildings.

"We've seen almost as much of New Mexico as anyone," he said.

In 1995, Shibley sold his extensive collection but kept the Lea County letters, postmarks and stamps. He believed he had reached the end of what was available. Many collectors had died and their collections had been sold, so finding more goodies became almost impossible.

But he and his wife spent much of their time traveling across the country to stamp shows hoping to find new collectors and leads.

"There's a lot more joy in finding than owning. It excites me to find something that no one has before," he said. "If there's anything new to find, I'll be looking for it."

Rare postmarks

Shibley has a set of microfilms from the postal service, which he has used to find some of the more obscure Lea County territorial postmarks. This was how he and Jim Harris located Micho, 12 miles southwest of Tatum. It gave a legal description from the postmaster's application for the post office.

There was no known postmark from Swamp located on Swamp Angel Ranch, owned by longtime Lea

County rancher Giles Lee. Shibley and his wife did extensive research to locate the Swamp post office.

Some of his other unheard of Lea County postmarks include Henry, five miles southeast of Eunice; Scott, six miles east of Tatum; and Jenkins, six miles northwest of Crossroads. These towns have virtually nothing there nowadays.

Shibley's favorite is the only Hobbs territorial postmark sent Dec. 29, 1911, to Samantha Bilbrey in Nadine. The letter was written by Winnie Hobbs, of the family for whom Hobbs was named.

Bilbrey had a motel in Crossroads. Shibley stayed at her motel while doing pipeline work in Crossroads; Bilbrey gave him six-eight postcards including a rare one from Lea County — Pearl.

In addition to his Lea County postmarks, which were exhibited at the Lea County Museum in Lovington two years ago, Shibley has some notable international postmarks in his collection. His elementary school teacher, Mr. W.E. Willis, took a trip to Europe and sent him postcards from England, France, Germany and Italy.

He and his wife have also done some traveling abroad. He sent himself letters from the Palmer Station, British, Polish and Argentina bases in Antarctica.

"I've met tons of people doing this and I've enjoyed learning some history along the way," he said.

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