Postal Services

In the early 1900's several rural post offices were established in this area, which cut the distance the homesteaders had to travel to receive their mail. The mail was sent by a mail carrier to the various rural post offices; there was also out-going mail service from these offices.

There has been a marked improvement in mail service since the first pioneers came to Baby Mine (Sims). Mrs. Anna Ramsland Larson, who came in 1881, told how the mail from the train was left along the railroad track, to be picked up by the residents. I'm sure many pieces of mail never reached their destination. Shortly after, a post office was established there (Baby Mine) with Robert McKee as acting postmaster. Homesteaders, farmers and ranchers in this area traveled by horse or foot to get their mail at Sims. They usually delayed going for their mail until their need for groceries and other supplies warranted a trip to town. In some cases their trips to town were very few and far between, maybe only two or four times a year. The mail was the only means of keeping in touch with the rest of the world. Weekly newspapers that were popular with the Scandinavians in this area were the Dacorah Posten and Skandinavian. We kids, and grownups, as well, rushed to read the comic strip, "Ola and Per." The Mandan Pioneer and Bismarck Tribune replaced the foreign language papers when the pioneers learned to speak and read English.

A rural post office was established at DeVaul (about seven miles north of present day Flasher) in 1905. Ole Mortenson was contracted to deliver the mail to DeVaul from Sims, which was a distance of about 18 miles. The Post Office was located in Elmer H. DeVaul's general merchandise store. Otis Malone was the last postmaster there. The bridge across the Heart River near there is known as the DeVaul bridge.

The Heart Post Office was most likely started at the same time as DeVaul and served by the same mail carrier, Ole Mortenson. This office was located on the Anton Johnson farm, on the Heart River, with Anton Johnson as Postmaster. Melvin Olson told me that during the winter when he was the mail carrier on that route, Johnson would offer him a fresh team of horses to go on to the Carl post office, about eight miles further southwest. There was always hot coffee waiting for him at Johnsons.

In 1915, North Dakota Governor Hanna invited Anton Johnson to accompany him to Norway to present a sculpted bust of Abraham Lincoln — a gift from the people of North Dakota. It was with deep regret that Johnson was unable to accept the honor. (We have seen the statue in Oslo, Norway.)

After the Almont Post Office was established in 1906, the mail to Heart and DeVaul was dispatched from that station instead of Sims. The first mail carrier on the Star Route out of Almont was Hogan Anderson, followed by Ben Bird. Joe Hoovestol carried the mail in 1910-11 and in 1918, Rudolph Olson was the carrier, with Melvin Olson as substitute in the winter months. The Heart office discontinued in 1922 and moved to Carl, which had been established in 1910 and was first operated by Carl Thompson.

The Kenyan Post Office was located about 11 miles south of Almont and operated only during the summer of 1912. John Kennedy was Postmaster...Noel Post Office was located about 14 miles southwest of Almont on the Heart River and also discontinued in 1912. Jessie Harper was Postmaster. These two stations were also on the Star Route out of Almont.

St. Joseph Post Office, near St. Joseph's Catholic Church, west of Almont was established in 1907, with Frank W. McDonald as Postmaster, and was discontinued in 1919. The mail was delivered from Glen Ullin — with horses most of the time.

Kurtz, west of Almont on the NPRR, had a Post Office from 1888 to 1890. Joseph Billings was the Postmaster.

The people living near Curlew (west of Almont on the NPRR) petitioned for a Post Office in 1911. The petition was signed by 22 interested parties, but the request was not granted by the U.S. Postal Service. There was a depot at Curlew at that time with a depot agent and two telegraph operators. The depot closed in 1920.

When Rural Free Delivery established services here in 1919, there was no further need for rural post offices. Farmers and ranchers could set up individual mail boxes on a rural mail route, and receive their mail daily. At that time rural residents represented 54% of the nations population (now we are down to 2%). Rural Free Delivery stimulated the improvement of roads and much money was appropriated for bridges, culverts and general improvements.

Cornelius Knutson was the first RFD carrier out of Almont; his daily route covered the area southwest of Almont. He continued to serve patrons on this route for 35 years. Joe Hoovestol got the Star Route contract in 1926. This route served rural folks south of Almont, and across the Heart River. He retired in 1972. Both routes were more than 30 miles in length, and both carriers used horses when roads were impassable for a car. "The mail must get through," was their motto. Sometimes it would take two days to make their route. Joe, being a mechanic and repairman, improvised a snowmobile; he also had a half-track machine. They were not trouble-free, but Joe was clever enough to make them work. Cornelius and Joe also brought groceries and other goods for their patrons, and also transported people in need of a ride. Such favors would not be allowed now (maybe they weren't allowed then either!).

I'm sure mail carriers could write a book on their experiences and the favors asked of them by their patrons.. One mail man was asked by a patron if he would stop and

feed the chickens when he went by, as he was going to be gone a couple days. Another lady patron, who had received a package from Sears Roebuck, had this request. "Please wait a few minutes while I try on this dress." The dress didn't fit — it was sent back with the carrier. Many carriers were asked to write letters for their patrons. One such request was to write to a daughter. When the mailman asked if there was anymore she wanted written in the letter, her reply was, "Yes. Add a P.S. Please excuse the poor handwriting and misspelled words!"

Mail rates have gradually increased through the years. In 1893, postage on a letter was 2¢; in 1932 it increased to 3¢; in 1958 the cost was 4¢. From then on the raise has been on two or three year intervals. In 1936 it was possible to send a sealed letter locally for 1¢. We have saved such a letter that Marge received when she worked in the Almont Post Office. It was an unusual letter as there was no name on the envelope — just a musical staff with notes. The notes translated to the tune "Margie," so the letter was hers. Lucky she could read music! It was sent by the local banker, who was a musician.

Penny postcards, as we called them, did not increase in price until 1952; since then there has been a gradual increase. Marge used to write a 1¢ postcard to her mother (in Almont) every mail day, and her mother did the same. They got a lot of words on each card, but the writing was so small it was hardly readable. It doesn't seem that long ago that we could write a card for 1¢ and send a letter for 3¢. Quite an inflation jump from 3¢ to 29¢ — and no better service.

Postmasters serving Sims were: Theodore Shenkengerg, 1883; Michael Hoke, 1885; Cyrus H. Thompson, 1886; Michael Hoke, 1886; William W. Nutting, 1887; Frederick Meyer 1888; Frederick Holritz, 1889-94; John M. Wadeson, 1894-89; August Timmerman 1898-1913; Andrew Holritz, 1913-1923; Nellie Gray, 1923-42; Simon Johnson, 1942 and Ervin Olin until service discontinued in 1947.

Almont's Postmasters were Egbert Templeton, 1906-13; Cornelius Knutson, 1913-18; Clifford E. Kelsven, 1918-33; Otis Malone, 1933-45; Ben Ramsland, 1945-75; Marvin Olson 1975-78 and Goldie Renner from 1979 to the present. Our Almont Post Office is quite unique — since Marvin Olson was Postmaster there has been an open basket of candy on the P.O. counter for kids (big kids, too!) — a treat from the Postmaster, not the Postal Department.

Roads and Trails

The wagon trails of yesteryear were located wherever the terrain was most suitable. When real estate owners started fencing their property, it became necessary to lay out roads as nearly as possible to the property lines.

The government survey through this area had been completed in 1897, but section lines were not considered when the trails were started. The easiest route, eliminating as many hills and creek crossings as possible, was considered when making a road. Quite a number of those old trails are still visible. Several creek crossings were necessary, due to the meandering of the streams. Until bridges were built, rock crossings served the purpose. One such crossing is visible directly east of the Sims Lutheran Church — the larger rocks are still there. The trail then swung north, going between the track and the brickyard clay hill. A railroad crossing was also at that location. After a bridge was constructed ½ mile south of the townsite of Sims, the crossing was no longer necessary.

Sims Civil Township purchased a road grading machine in about 1910, to use for grading roads in the township. It was pulled by eight horses — four in the lead and four behind. Two teamsters sat in front, and the operator of the blade stood at the rear of the machine. A 4-horse push cart was also used in heavy going. The Almont streets were graded with such a machine. The original township grader can be seen in Almont Heritage Park. Center dump wagons, road plows, 4-horse fresnos and horse-drawn road drags were also used for road building and maintenance. Replicas of that equipment are also at the Heritage Park in Almont.

Young men in the township would try to get a couple days of road work before the 4th of July so they would have some spending money for the holiday. Rickart Olson, who was road boss for many years, usually found extra road work to be done at that time.

In the late 1920's, the County Commissioners took over road building and maintenance in Sims Township. A mucker, drawn by a caterpiller tractor, was then used for road building. The mucker had a large disc blade which loosened the soil and moved it onto an apron, which elevated the dirt to the center of the road. Walter Timpe and my brother, Ralph, operated the county mucker for a few years in the early 30's. The county also purchased maintainers and dump trucks which have proven to be more efficient in building and maintaining roads.

Scoria was used quite extensively for surfacing county roads as it is plentiful in this area. There are out-croppings of it on many of the hill tops . . . It is not as durable as gravel as it will pulverize and disappear after a few years of traffic.

Scoria is the burned clay which covered the veins of coal. Through the centuries, the exposed coal veins have been ignited by lightening or possibly prairie fires, heating the clay to the extent that it formed a red scoria. In some cases the heat was so intense it formed clinkers. These clinker-type

rocks can be found in the Sims area.

When I was a boy living in Sims, there was a burning coal vein south of the old brick yard. The steam from the heat of the burning coal would be noticed in the winter, especially on cold, frosty mornings. That vein evidently burned out, as we haven't noticed any steam from that area for the past 50 years.

All east and west auto traffic went through Almont and Sims. The road followed the railroad as much as possible, making a loop between New Salem and Glen Ullin, with Almont at the bottom of the loop. This was a state road and was named The Red Trail, so named most likely because the problem places in the road were surfaced with red scoria. I remember that cinders dumped at Sims from the railroad locomotives, were also hauled to the muddy spots in the road. This was all the surfacing there was on the road. I'm sure the tourists didn't travel the length of North Dakota in a few hours, as they do now, but they were able to enjoy the scenery (if they weren't too upset over the roads — especially if they were muddy). Marge remembers an auto trip with her grandparents to Baker, Montana in 1925. They left at 4 a.m. and didn't arrive at their destination until that night. Driving through the Badlands was pretty scary.

The Red Trail was under the North Dakota Good Roads Association until 1923. The North Dakota Highway Department was organized in 1917, and then gave the Red Trail a new title, "No. 3" which extended from Fargo to the Montana line. In November, 1921 the highway was assigned a new number, "US 10," but retained No. 3 with US 10 until 1927. The new grade between New Salem and Glen Ullin, which cut off Almont from No. 10, was surfaced with gravel and scoria in 1927 — it was paved with asphalt in 1938. Our road from Almont to No. 10 was built in 1934 but wasn't blacktopped until 1972.

We've come a long way from those first rutted trails to our present I-94.

Country Doctors & Home Remedies

According to newspaper articles, doctors and surgeons from Mandan were called to Sims to treat the sick and perform surgery at the Brick Yard Hospital. There were few prescribed medications in the early days, but many home remedies.

The 1885 Sims Census shows that Dr. W.H. Hanis served the residents of Sims. We know nothing more about him. Dr. Nutting doctored in Sims for a few years before moving to Glen Ullin where he practiced for several years.

Resident doctors in Almont, at different times during the early years were: Dr. W.T. Cain, Dr. G.G. St. Clair and Dr. Julia Keats. Dr. Barton, who had his office in the Thompson home at the Heart River, also came to Almont to practice.

Dr. O.C. Gaebe of New Salem, served the Sims-Almont area for many years. He started his practice in 1910 and retired in 1961. All the above mentioned doctors were the true family doctors who would call on patients in their homes at any hour of the day or night and were very concerned about the patient's well-being.

Dr. Gaebe served this area the longest time and was considered a family friend. Weather, roads or distance did not stop him from answering a call. When roads were impassable for an auto, he would hire a man from New Salem, who had a team and buggy or sleigh, to take him to his destination. Many babies in this area were delivered in their homes by him. Marge remembers of Dr. Gaebe making two trips, by sleigh, to their home in Almont to deliver her sister Frances — one was a false alarm!

There were few prescribed medications in the early days, but many home remedies. There were also over-the-counter "cure all" medicines such as Watkins Liniment, Lydia Pinkham Liver Pills, Dr. Curico's Cure-alls, Blairs pills for gout, and several others. Later Mentholatum and Vick's Vaporub salves were used for colds. For infection of sores, we used Hessel Rot salve, which would draw out the infection — it was used a lot at our house. Some have said that fresh cow manure would do as well — but you can't prove it by me — I never tried it.

Home remedies were used a lot. One that I still believe in, and is still endorsed by medical circles, is chicken soup or broth for colds or the flu. During the flu epidemic of 1918, Valborg, Barney and I were all down with the illness, which claimed several lives in this area. Our neighbor Nellie Olin brought us hot chicken broth, and I'll never forget how good it tasted, and how much better we felt. Another cold rememdy we used was hot lemonade. Some claimed a shot of whiskey in a hot drink was a sure cure. Soaking the feet in hot water and then getting into a warm bed that had been heated with hot bricks or flat irons to induce sweating, was another remedy. It wasn't too pleasant, but it did the trick. Some mothers pinned a wool rag, sprinkled with turpentine, onto the child's underwear over the chest. This was not a very popular remedy as the smell was very strong — I'm not sure it cured the cold but it sure isolated the kid from others in school.

I was bothered with warts when I was a boy and was advised to get some ripe juice from Grandpa's pipe to apply on the warts. I did — and the warts disappeared. Other

cures for warts was to burn them with a hot iron, or tie a string around the base of the wart until it fell off.

Neither Sims nor Almont ever had a dentist — fathers and brothers were the tooth pullers for the younger set. Some used a pliers but others would tie a string around the base of the tooth, fasten the other end of the string to the door knob, and then quickly slam the door shut — which was the quickest and least painful method of extracting a tooth. Without the services of a dentist, teeth didn't last too long. Some only went to the dentist when they needed false teeth, and many had poor fitting plates which bothered them a lot. After a few drinks in a saloon, some would take out their teeth and place them on the bar — oftentimes forgetting them there — which would discourage some fellow drinkers from another round.

On Saturday night, after our weekly bath (in a wash tub in the kitchen), we'd get our heads worked over with a fine-toothed comb to check for head lice. My mother put a lot of pressure on the comb — it felt like the comb was scalping me — but she wanted to be sure she was doing a good job. I don't remember that she every found any, but it was not uncommon in those early years for school children to have lice.

We used to be bothered a lot by poison ivy, especially during berry picking time. Some people were more susceptible to it than others. Barney's body would sometimes be completely covered with the itchy sores. Dr. Gaebe suggested using lard to cover them, and it seemed to help. After Barney started smoking, he was never bothered by poison ivy — so smoking has it's good points, too!

We have been told that Indians would go to the Painted Woods area on the Missouri River, south of Washburn, to pick certain plants, roots and herbs to use for medicinal purposes. This was neutral ground so all tribes would come to the area for that purpose. I was told by an old-timer from there that the woods were painted with animal blood to assist the Indians in finding the area. (That is probably why it was called Painted Woods.) I have read where an Indian Medicine Man recommended that pregant women drink a mixture of crushed rattlesnake rattles and water to induce labor — the pains would start in 10 minutes.

The era of country doctors is past history — and also the use of home remedies, which were probably as effective as some of the expensive prescription drugs today. I don't think any of us would want to go back to those "good old days" though!

A miraculous healing occurred in our family during the polio epidemic of 1910. Several children in the community were stricken with the disease, including my sister Valborg. She was 3-years-old at the time, very ill, and her legs were paralyzed. During a severe thunderstorm that summer, as Valborg was lying on the couch in the living room, a bolt of lightning threw her on the floor. Mother put her back on the couch, there was another flash of lightning, and again, she was thrown on the floor. Mother picked her up a second time and cradled her limp and unconscious body. The pastors wife stopped in to see how we survived the storm, but was sure Valborg was dead. Mother refused to believe this and continued holding her until she regained consciousness — the crippling disease left her — and she could walk again! A miracle! There was no visible effects of the polio, but she could not do strenuous exercises, or play basketball in high school. I believe in miracles!

The Village Blacksmith

"Under the spreading chestnut tree, the village smithy stands" — a poem we all learned in school. I don't know whether Sims or Almont's smithy stood under a tree to work, but we do know how important the blacksmith was to the pioneers who did not have access to tools and implements.

It was interesting to watch a good blacksmith shape iron, with the use of a forge and anvil. Welding took a special know-how; when two pieces of iron were heated to the precise heat, they were quickly fused together. The electric welder has made that task much easier. The tempering of chisels, plow points, etc. also took experience. When the heated point cooled, to show just the right color, it was put in water to harden.

Wagon wheels often needed a blacksmith's expertise to tighten the rims which would loosen from the shrinkage of the wood. The iron rims would be taken off, heated to a red hot degree, and shrunk in a shrinker for that purpose. This had to be a very accurate process. We would sometimes, instead of shrinking, swell the wood by turning the wheel in a trough filled with linseed oil, kept hot with heat from the forge.

G.G. Chamberlain - blacksmith — 1910.

Horse and oxen shoes were also made by the blacksmith, and they also had to be shaped to fit the various animals hooves.

Most farmers had a blacksmith shop for sharpening plow shares and making repairs. Even I sharpened plow shares during the noon hour when my horses were resting. My dad and Thorleiv were also good in the shop.

I heard much praise for A.P. Nelson, the first blacksmith at Sims. The Almont blacksmiths were G.G.Chamberlain, Angus Gillis, Tom Miller and McDugal. My uncle Abe, a very good blacksmith, had a shop on his farm which he later moved to Almont. When he retired his son Ole took over. Abe's son Alvin demonstrates blacksmithing every year at our Labor Day Reunion. It's almost a lost art.

The Old Milk Cow

The milk cow played an important part in the life of the pioneer. Some families who came to this area in a wagon train from the east, brought their milk cow with them. Besides providing milk for the family, she was sometimes used to provide power for pulling a wagon or plow.

Before the introduction of cream separators, the milk was left to settle overnight so the cream could rise to the top and be skimmed off. The cream was usually left to sour and then churned into butter for family use. Some families churned enough butter so some could be sold to private parties or local merchants. The butter was usually kept in crockery jars — and some was formed in one-pound molds. Cheese was also made for family use and to be sold. The Timpe family tells of how their mother made a cake of cheese every week which she sold to the store for resale. I remember seeing and smelling the kettle of sour milk which set at the back of the stove, until it turned into cottage cheese.

Quite a number of Sims and Almont residents owned one or more milk cows. Nearly every home had a barn, and a fenced back yard for the cow — and probably a horse, chickens and a pig or two. Some cows were in partnership. Marge remembers her grandparents having a cow in partnership with someone else in the community. I suppose one party milked the cow in the morning and the other at night. There was always a problem when the cow went dry. Until your cow bore a calf, and could be milked again, you had to get milk from a neighbor who had more than they could use. Milk couldn't be bought in stores. Marge (who was a town girl) remembers when farmers living close to town started peddling whole milk in quart glass milk bottles. I believe Bob Atkinson was the last Almont milk man, and I think he sold it to the stores, too.

Town cows usually had a pasture close by, or would be herded on open land. I remember herding cows with Barney and our neighbor, Englund Bakken, on the Ramstown area of Sims. Sometimes Englund would bring along some tobacco he had swiped from his uncle Sven Johnson — and we all tried it. I was quite young at the time and got very sick from the stuff — that cured me from either chewing or smoking tobacco.

Almont cows were taken to a pasture at Lovers Cliff. Laurin Hyde, whose legs were paralyzed (from polio), rode a shetland pony named Skoggy, and was responsible for bringing the cows to and from the pastures.

Milk varied in taste, especially in the spring, when there were wild onions and various weeds for the cows to graze on. There were times when we couldn't drink the milk, nor eat the butter as the taste, and sometimes the smell was so strong. Thinking about the unsanitary conditions when milking by hand, I sometimes wonder why we weren't all sick. We would be, if it were now.

The first milk cows used in this area were not Holsteins but were more the dual purpose beefy type. When cream separators became available, the farmers increased their milk cow numbers; the milk cow then became the most reliable source of income. The cream separator was quite a machine; it had to be cranked by hand — the milk would go through a bowl of disks and come out of two spouts — one was skim milk and the other cream. The skim milk was usually fed to the "pail calves" (weaned from their "milk cow mothers"), and the cream was stored in cream cans to be sold at a creamery or cream buying station.

The Almont Creamery Co. was organized in 1908, and a creamery was built one mile south of town. The organization was headed by Hogan Anderson, president; B. Schmitz, vice president; E.M. Willman, secretary and N.E. Becklund, treasurer. Louis Larson from Winthrop, MN was buttermaker.

After the creamery "folded up" (I don't know how long it was in business), farmers could sell their cream to local cream buying stations. These stations would weigh the cream, which was in 5, 8 or 10 gallon cans, then stir the cream well and take a sample to test for butterfat content. (Sometimes

the stirrer would run into some foreign objects!) The farmer would receive a check for the cream and it was usually cashed for groceries that day. The cream buyer would ship the cans of cream by rail to a creamery in either Mandan or Bismarck. Some farmers preferred to ship their cream directly to the creameries, by-passing the middle man, as they could get more money. The disadvantage of this was that their cream check wouldn't arrive for several days. Those checks were important!

Another product of milk is ice cream — which dates back to the Roman Empire (more than 2000 years ago). In the early 1800's ice cream parlors were introduced, but no ice cream cones until 1904. (Remember the 5¢ ice cream cone?) Almont's first Ice Cream Parlor was opened in 1924 by C.E. Kelsven, who was the Postmaster. It was located in the same building as the Post Office and was open for business every day. It was especially a popular place to congregate on Sunday afternoon while waiting for the mail to come in. (Yes, we had mail on Sunday, too!) When Marge worked in the Post Office, she served as both postmistress and "soda jerk." (This was before we were married — in those days a woman didn't hold down a job AFTER she was married!)

We were making homemade ice cream at home before it was available on the market. Nothing can beat homemade ice cream! We had an ice cream freezer, lots of cream and eggs for the batter and ice from our ice house for freezing it. Cranking the freezer was the hardest part, so Thorleiv rigged up a tumble rod by jacking up the back wheel on the old Model T. All we had to do was sit back and watch the process. We had to stake down the freezer to keep it in place. Incidently, the tumble rod was the same one we used to crank the Fordson tractor on a cold morning.

Old bossy's importance on the farm has been replaced by the long dairy cases we find in every grocery store today — another sign of the changing times.

Ben Olson - Cream buying station — 1920's — Almont.

Sims Houses

There were many houses in Sims at one time — but what happened to them? I've been asked that question many times. Most of them were moved into the surrounding areas, and some were moved quite a distance.

Moving houses at that time was not easy. The house would be jacked up high enough to slip two wagons and timbers under it; then the house had to be snubbed down to prevent tipping. In most cases it took eight horses to pull the heavy load. In the moving process the chimney and plaster would crack or fall down, so would have to be replaced. Sometimes the chimney and plaster was removed before moving to reduce the weight.

Jonathan Pederson's house on Bluff Dale Stock Farm was moved from Sims. It was a heavy load, as it was insulated with coal slack. Otto Feland's house also came from Sims; taking it across the creek must have been a problem. Mrs. Olivia Lotspiech moved two houses to Almont from Sims. The one is now the Wesleyan parsonage and the other is the house adjacent to it. The later house at one time was located across the road from the Sims Church, and occupied by our family. All of us six kids were born in that house. The little blue house on Hyde Street also came from Sims; it was occupied by the Ben Bird family.

Harry Wadeson took his house down in sections, loaded it on a freight car and moved it to Hebron. Our family farm house was also from Sims. Paul Rusch said that when he was very young (living in a sod house north of New Salem), he saw a house coming over the hill, drawn by horses; it had come from Sims. I'm sure there were many that were relocated in the New Salem area.

This accounts for but a few of the many houses that made up the village of Sims. I am sure that many were taken down and the lumber salvaged for other buildings. Much of the lumber was of full demension; a 2x4 measured a full 2x4 inches and the boards were a full 1 inch thick. There were 16 inch wide boards that we do not see any more on the market. All nails were square.

Gray house in Sims. Built by Andrew Anderson about 1890 and occupied by the Anderson family. The Tom Gray family moved into the house in about 1910 and resided there until about 1930. School teachers boarded there. Sims school in background.