Verde Heritage: 1885 mail route adds Cottonwood, Aultman, Cornville

By Glenda Farley

In connection with a contract for mail and passenger transportation between the Camp Verde Post Office (established March 14, 1873,) and the Jerome Post Office (established Sept. 10, 1883,) there were three new Verde Valley post offices established on July 9, 1885.

"MAIL: Notice To Contractors: Post Office Department, Washington, D.C., Feb. 2, 1885: Proposals will be received at the contract office of this department until 4 p.m. of April 11, 1885, for carrying the mails of the United States upon the routes, and according to the schedule of arrival and departure specified by the department, in the Territory of Arizona from July 1, 1885, to June 30, 1886. Lists of routes, with schedules of arrivals and departures, instructions to bidders, with forms for contracts and bonds, and all other necessary information, will be furnished upon application to the second assistant

postmaster general. Frank Hatton, Postmaster General." (Wkly Az Miner; Prescott; Feb. 27, Apr. 19, 1885, etc.)

Central Verde (the older name) or Middle Verde would have a place called the Aultman Post Office. Lower Oak Creek would have a place called the Cornville Post Office. Upper Verde would have a place called the Cottonwood Post Office.

The date a Post Office is established is generally considered to be the date the town was founded. [These dates are: Cherry, March 3, 1884; Montezuma, Oct. 20, 1892; Equator, Dec. 12, 1899, and nearby Macdonald, April 4, 1904; Sedona, June 26, 1902 and West Sedona, Feb. 15, 1971; Rutherford, Sep. 14, 1907; Clarkdale, Feb. 8, 1913; the United Verde Extension Mining Company received approval for the Verde Post Office Oct. 10, 1917, which was renamed Clemenceau on April 21 or May 21, and officially became the Clemenceau Post Office July 4, 1920; Rimrock, Feb. 14, 1929.]

Local residents named Aultman and Cone had post offices named for them. The second post office in the Verde Valley was located in the adobe store built during 1875 by George Hull near the river bordering the Camp Verde Military Reservation (now, near the I-17 bridge). The Verde Post Office was established June 24, 1878, and had been discontinued on Sept. 21, 1880. Nearby, the Aultman Post Office was located where the road from Cherry Creek crossed the Verde River and was later moved across the river. The application for the "Coneville" Post Office was incorrectly written by the postal department so the official name and certificate were for the Cornville Post Office.

Several places in Arizona Territory were named "Cottonwood." In Pinal County a Cottonwood Post Office had been established Nov. 9, 1881, and discontinued Feb. 4, 1884, when the mail was sent to nearby Florence. Cottonwood Station was located south of Prescott on Big Bug Creek at the intersection of the Black Canyon and Peck Mine Roads. William H. McMichael was the station keeper and became the postmaster when the Cottonwood Post Office was established March 6, 1879, and discontinued June 4, 1880. The name "Cottonwood" was available for use again.

("Catch the Stage to Phoenix;" Leland H. Hatchett, Jr.; 1998; p. 155; "Arizona Territory Post Offices and Postmasters: 1863-1912;" John and Lillian Theobald; pages 93, 73; "History of the Cornville Post Office;" compiled by Judith H. Miller; etc.)

Read the rest of the story at VerdeNews.com.

In the Upper Verde, "the historic grove of cottonwoods extended almost half a mile from the banks of the river" past what became Cottonwood Bridge to near where the "Charles D. Willard barn" would stand. The grove was used as a camping ground and gathering place along the river. In 1875, the Strahan family began farming land below the grove and the Casner brothers claimed land above the grove which was farmed by the James O.

Bristow family who traded it to Jim and Ed Van Deren. (Verde Copper News; Jerome; Jul. 11, 1922; Wkly Az Miner; Prescott; Jun. 13, 1879.)

The Willard brothers bought "improvements" from the Van Deren brothers in 1884 and moved to the west side of the river with their mother. The 160-acre parcel included most of the historic cottonwood grove. George MacDonald "Mac" Willard suggested the "Cottonwood" name and became the first postmaster. Flooding of the Verde River began to wash away the cottonwood grove until there were only a few trees left. A 1920 flood "washed out a cottonwood tree which was an old landmark and for which the town was named, leaving 1 tree standing." The last cottonwood tree was lost in the next big flood. (Coconino Sun; Dec. 5, 1919; Verde Copper News; Feb. 26, 1920.)

Post Office Department certificates were issued to each of the 3 new postmasters on July 9, 1885, however, some time would pass before the new post offices were operational. "Mac" Willard received his certificate after August 13, 1885, and it was hung on the wall of a small building located west of where a brick residence for his mother would be built.

A building at each location was the stage stop, post office, and a small store with a barn, corrals, and fresh horses. Leaving Camp (or Fort) Verde early in the morning, the stage (usually an open wagon) would stop at Aultman, then be at Cornville about noon. Fresh horses were hitched to the wagon; food and "conveniences" were available for the stage driver and passengers. Samuel Cotton Dickinson, the postmaster for many years, had a vineyard and made good wine (which made the rest of the trip more enjoyable for some of the passengers). The next stop was Cottonwood, and then Jerome would be reached late in the day. Stages with mail and passengers traveled northward one day and southward the next day, except Sunday. From Jerome, "mails go to Cottonwood, Cornville, Aultman, Camp Verde, etc. every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, returning Monday, Wednesday, and Friday," (Jerome Chronicle; Mar. 23, 1895.)