

PONY EXPRESS HISTORY VS. WELLS FARGO

by Raymond W. Settle



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One of the first things the discriminating searcher for bonafide historical truths learns is that his labors are often complicated, and sometimes frustrated, by pure legend. From the earliest colonial days American history has been a prolific breeding-ground for this type of hardy, flourishing folk-lore. A classic example of the story of how youthful George Washington tested the edge of his hatchet upon one of his father's cherry trees. Since these historical fungus growths cluster about every historical personage and subject, the

truth involves a process of selection and rejection that is neither pleasant nor easy. Generally, they are also the subject of heated debate between those who believe them and others who do not.

The celebration of the Centennial of the famous Pony Express focuses the spotlight of inquiry upon certain controversial periods and phases of its history. Expressed in the form of questions some of these are, "Who conceived the idea?" "Who carried the first eastbound *mochila*, (Mail bags) from the door of the *Alta Telegraph* office to the steamer *Antelope*, in a symbolic ride of a few blocks in San Francisco, April 3, 1860?" "Who was the first west bound rider out of St. Joseph on the same date?" And "Did Wells, Fargo & Company own, operate, and manage the Pony Express from April 15, 1861, until it was discontinued on October 24, of the same year?" Answers to all of these questions, as well as others have been made, with the result that debate and partisan feeling runs sufficiently high to becloud the Centennial celebrations.

So controversial has the latter question become that two associations holding sharply divergent views upon this latter question are busy with separate plans for celebrating the Centennial. One of these is the National Pony Express Centennial Association, of which Colonel Waddell F. Smith of San Rafael, California, great grandson of William B. Waddell, is president. The other is the Central Overland Pony Express Trail Association of San Francisco, headed by Mr. Bartlett Boder, of St. Joseph, Mo.

The background for debate on the ownership of the Pony Express in 1861 is found in events occurring in Washington and elsewhere that year. At that time the Overland Mail Company held a six year contract, with two years yet to run, to carry United States mail overland to California over what was known as the Southern Route. This line ran in a great curve from St. Louis, Mo., to San Francisco by way of Little Rock, Arkansas, Memphis, Tennessee, El Paso, Texas, Yuma, Arizona, and San Diego, California.

While the 36th Congress was debating the Annual Post Route Bill in February, 1861, news reached the capital that the Overland Mail Company line had been broken up and the stages stopped by Confederate forces in Texas and Southern Missouri. That being true, with the Civil War already in progress, something had to be done to maintain communication between the East and California.

At the same time the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company, financed and operated by the freighting firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell, of which William H. Russell was president, had two minor contracts for carrying the mail overland to California by way of Salt Lake City. This company also operated the Pony Express from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, California as an entirely private enterprise.

Upon receipt of the news of the Overland Mail Company disaster the Postmaster General, members of Congress, and various committees thereof, William M. Dinsmore, president of the Overland Mail Company, and William H. Russell of the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company went into a huddle and worked out a plan to meet the crisis.

In brief that plan involved the

bodily removal of the Overland Mail line from Southern to the Central Route, with pay of \$1,000,000 per year, the change-over to be made on July 1, 1861. The company was required to operate a Pony Express until the completion of the transcontinental telegraph line, which was under construction at that time. These requirements were embodied in a bill which quickly passed both Houses, and was signed by President Buchanan March 2, 1861.

Technically and legally the passage of this war time measure, which is sometimes called a contract, annulled the contracts held by the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company and put it entirely out of business. However it was not planned to do so, and did not happen that way. On March 16th Dinsmore and Russell signed a contract whereby the later became a sub-contractor on the eastern half of the line from St. Joseph to Salt Lake City. That portion of it from Salt Lake City to Placerville, California passed to the management of the Overland Mail Company. The Pony Express was to be managed jointly, with each Company paying the expenses of its part of the line. The receipts were to be equally divided.

In preparation for the change-over and the withdrawal of his company from the western half the Central Route Russell ordered J. W. Brown and J. W. Coleman, his agents in San Francisco and Sacramento, to transfer their offices and functions to Wells Fargo, which was appointed temporary agents in their stead. Its term of service, would, of course, terminate on July 1, 1861, when the Overland Mail Company took over the western end of the line.

On April 15, a joint announcement of the transfer and appointment was inserted in the *San Francisco Daily Bulletin*, signed by Brown, and Wells

Fargo & Company as agents. On May 16 the same announcement was made in the *Sacramento Union*. At the same time a reduction in the Pony Express rate from \$5 per half ounce to \$2 was ordered by Russell. Credit for this has been erroneously claimed for Wells Fargo.

There are several things about these announcements which are worthy of special mention.

First, Wells Fargo signed them as "agents."

Second, their service in that capacity would of necessity terminate on July 1, 1861, about ten weeks hence, when the Overland Mail Company took over the management of the Western half of the Central Route mail line.

Third, nothing whatever in these announcements can be interpreted as meaning that title or ownership of the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company or the Pony Express had been acquired by Wells Fargo.

Fourth, these announcements simply cannot be interpreted in any way except that Wells Fargo was succeeding to the same duties and functions Brown and Coleman had hitherto performed as agents.

Just here it may be said for purposes of clarification that when the Overland Mail Company moved onto the Central Route on July 1, 1861, and the western terminus of both the mail line and Pony Express was changed from Sacramento to Placerville in keeping with the stipulations of the Overland Mail Bill, the Overland Mail Company appointed Wells Fargo as its agents in San Francisco and Sacramento.

Thus it is plain that the only connection that company ever had with the Pony Express was as agents, first for the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Pony Express Company for about ten weeks, and second for

the Overland Mail Company for a little less than four months from July 1, 1861 until the ponies quit running on October 24th of that year.

The Russell-Dinmore contract, which is one of the most important documents relating to the Pony Express ever found was brought to light by your speaker in 1942, but was not published until April, 1959, in his *Pony Express Heroic Beginning-Tragic End*.

There was no misunderstanding of Wells Fargo's status on the part of the Overland Mail Company when its appointment as agent was made. On June 21, 1861, Frederick Cook, treasurer of the Company, forwarded a sample envelope bearing a ten cent U.S. postage stamp and a Wells Fargo stamp to the Postmaster General. Accompanying it was a letter which said the Overland Mail wished to use the Pony Express letters. "You will see it has a government 10 cent stamp," he said, "and also *the stamp of our agents, Wells, Fargo & Co. upon it.*"

The purpose of the communication was to ask for a ruling on whether such an envelope could be carried from New York to St. Joseph, Mo. in the United States mail then by Pony Express to Placerville, and there put back into the United States post office and carried on to a California address without additional postage. The reply was negative.

Two vital facts should be borne in mind here. The first is that the sample envelope was prepared by the Overland Mail Company and not by Wells Fargo. The second is that in his letter Cook referred to Wells Fargo as "our agents." If that Company had acquired title to the Pony Express why did it not ask for the ruling itself?

If Wells Fargo owned the Pony Express on June 21, as the devotees of the legend now proclaim, how could Cook and his associates in New

York speak of that company as "our agents?"

Furthermore, if it were true, that Wells Fargo owned the Pony Express, Cook committed an unpardonable blunder in referring to that great company as "our agents."

The solemn truth is that Wells Fargo did not own the institution, and under the terms of the Overland Mail Act, no one, not even William H. Russell had any right or authority to take up matter of policy or procedure with the Post Office Department except the officials of the Overland Mail Company. Wells Fargo was not officially known in the Post Office Department in Washington.

It is a fact that even the most ardent enthusiasts of the Wells Fargo legend have, so far, failed to produce any documentary evidence showing when, how, or from whom title was acquired, or how much was paid for it, etc. Not until such evidence can be produced should anyone be asked to believe that such a transaction occurred.

Since the act of Congress providing for the removal of the mail line from the Southern to the Central Route simply provided for the operation of a Pony Express, the Overland Mail Company could have organized a new one, had it chosen to do so.

Both Dinsmore and Russell of course knew that the days of the Pony Express were numbered, and the end was not far off. A race was on between construction crews on the eastern and western ends of the transcontinental telegraph line to arrive in Salt Lake City, the half-way mark. Actually, as later events proved, the remaining life span of the Pony Express was a few days less than four months.

Dinsmore therefore adopted the wisest, most economical course and made arrangements with Russell to continue the organization which had

already been in operation more than a year. In view of the sheer folly,

In bringing the discussion of this phase of the subject to a close it is only necessary to repeat that neither the Overland Mail Company nor Wells Fargo ever owned the original Pony Express. It remained the property of the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company from beginning to end.

The Act of Congress for the removal of the Overland Mail Company to the Central Route and the western terminus from Sacramento to Placerville left a forty-nine mile gap in the Pony Express line. To close it and continue the same service between the latter town and San Francisco, Wells Fargo, planned a short Pony Express line of its own between Sacramento and Placerville.

On June 26 this line was announced in the San Francisco *Daily Bulletin* as beginning service on July 1, 1861. Eastbound Pony Express mail would leave San Francisco at 3:45 o'clock on Wednesday and Saturday of each week and connect 'with the Overland Mail Company's Pony Express at Placerville,' which was the original organization. Westbound mail was carried over the same line from that town to Sacramento and San Francisco.

It will be observed that this announcement was signed as "Wells, Fargo & Co.," which was correct. Some kind of arrangements were made by that company to take over stations, equipment, and some of the employees of the old Pony Express. Incidentally this short line was extended to Carson City and Virginia City, Nevada in 1862 after the original Pony Express was suspended. Bear in mind, therefore, that the ownership and management of this line rested exclusively with Wells Fargo & Company. Although the facts regarding it are clear, many writers

have ignored them and others point to them as evidence that Wells Fargo "took over" the whole Pony Express line from Placerville to St. Joseph, Mo.

The statement that this line would connect "with the Overland Mail Company's Pony Express at Placerville" is highly significant as documentary evidence that Wells Fargo itself did not pretend to own the Pony Express. If it did, would it not have said "our Pony Express at Placerville," or something equivalent to it?

So far as is known to your speaker not a single one of those who contend that Wells Fargo "took over" the Pony Express has ever specified just how much of the line they got, what they paid for it, or from whom they got it. They are content with vague generalities and mere statements which they insist are facts. The Overland Mail Company did not own an inch of the original Pony Express line, although according to the Russell-Dinsmore contract it did, as before mentioned, operate and manage it, share and share alike, on the western half of the line. But what of the eastern half of it? Did Wells Fargo take that over also. The answer it did not. Not only that, but it could not "take over" any part of the line without voiding the 4th clause in the Russell-Dinsmore contract of March 16. This clause may be taken as an admission by Dinsmore that the Pony Express belonged to the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company.

1. The officials of the Overland Mail Company never said directly, indirectly or by implication that Wells Fargo ever owned the Pony Express.

2. Neither did the officials of Wells Fargo of that day ever say directly or indirectly that they did.

3. Pony Express advertisements and announcements concerning the

original Pony Express from April 15, to October 24, 1861, were always signed "Wells Fargo & Co., agents."

4. Frederick Cook's letter to the Postmaster General on June 21, 1861, spoke of Wells Fargo as "our agents."

5. A brief listing in the San Francisco Directory, 1861, read "Pony Express, (semi-weekly Wells Fargo & Co., Agents, N. W. corner of Montgomery and Cal."

6. The correspondent for the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* in St. Louis, Mo., reported under date of April 17, 1861, that "Wells Fargo & Co. and not the U. S. Express have been appointed agents of the Pony Express" in that city.

7. Beginning July 1, 1861, Wells Fargo began an intensive advertising campaign in eastern cities in behalf of the Pony Express. It is highly significant these advertisements were signed "Wells, Fargo & Co., agents." Is it not inconceivable that a great and powerful organization operating from coast to coast would sign its advertisements as mere "agents" if that were not its true status?

8. It is a noteworthy fact that Edward Hungerford, leading transportation historian, author of *Wells Fargo: Advancing the American Frontier*, (1949), and former executive of that company, made no claim that it ever owned or operated the Pony Express in 1861. He did say however, that when Wells Fargo took over the Ben Holladay staging empire they became actual owners of whatever was left of the Pony Express. This transaction took place in 1866, five years after the Pony Express suspended operation.

9. For forty-seven years, and not until about 1908, did anyone claim ownership of the Pony Express by Wells Fargo.

10. One of the curious things about this controversy is that no advocate of the Wells Fargo ownership idea ever has quoted William H. Russell,

Alexander Majors, or William B. Waddell in sport of it. Suffice it to say that in Russell's numerous letter to William B. Waddell in 1861 there is not the slightest mention of anything that would indicate that ownership of the Pony Express had passed to Wells Fargo or anyone else. On the other hand, there are a number of references which may be taken as substantive proof of the contrary.

Interesting and profitable though the pursuit of an inquiry in this direction may be, we must now turn our attention to developments of the Wells Fargo legend during the last thirty years.

By the way of introduction it may be said that through those years motion picture producers, radio and TV script writers, advertising departments of great business concerns, author of books for both juvenile and adults, writers of magazine and newspaper feature articles made many contributions to that legend.

These have been so successfully exploited, twisted, and misrepresented that the names of William H. Russell, Alexander Majors, and William B. Waddell were slowly fading from memory and that of Wells Fargo becoming more prominent every year.

As by common consent all means of communication and instruction including our public schools, seem to have been dedicated to thrusting Russell, Major & Waddell into the background, magnifying Wells Fargo, and perpetuating the legend.

For three decades that bit of fiction flourished unchallenged, at least in print. Writers and historians seem to have been content with a game of follow the leader. Then a counter-offensive which has reached every corner of the nation, was launched under the devoted leadership of Colonel Waddell F. Smith. Lack of time prevents mentioning what has been done, but your speaker

can assure you that public interest in presenting the truth and giving credit to whom credit is due is most gratifying and encouraging.

The first statement relative to Wells Fargo legend known to me was made by William Lightfoot Visscher in his *The Pony Express*, 1909, fifty-two years ago, when he said, "The remnant of it was transferred by Russell, Majors & Waddell to the Wells Fargo Company." In making this claim he was in error on two counts. First, there was no remnant left when the Pony Express was suspended on October 24, 1861. It was immediately disbanded, and second, Wells Fargo & Co., who were agents at that time, had no claim on anything pertaining to it.

Next in the line of succession of Pony Express narratives was Victor M. Berthold's "William H. Russell, Originator and Developer of the Famous Pony Express" in *Collectors Club Philatelist* for January and April, 1929. Neither he nor H. C. Needham, who wrote an introduction to the serial, say anything of importance on the subject of the legend.

The author when went all out in promoting the Wells Fargo ownership was Arthur Chapman. Since his famous book is regarded as a sort of basic gospel by writers and historians special attention is called to certain passages in it. He says that the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company and the Central Overland Pony Express Company lost their identity in a merger with the "Butterfield-Wells Fargo interests in forming the Overland Company. In making this sweeping statement Mr. Chapman makes three errors. There was no separate organization such as the "Central Overland Pony Express Company", there was no merger of the Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company with the Overland Mail in

1861 as implied, and the latter had borne that name since 1857.

Mr. Chapman further says Russell, Majors and Waddell were relieved of active management of the Pony Express before the change over from the Southern to the Central Route went into effect on July 1. By this he means April 15, 1861. As proof of this he cites only the upper one fourth of the announcement of Brown and Coleman, leaving out the part bearing the signature "Wells, Fargo & Co., Agents." Then Mr. Chapman adds that Russell, Majors & Waddell passed out of overland transportation, meaning that Wells Fargo had "taken over" the Pony Express.

With the popularity and public interest in the Pony Express mounting, and historians and writers declaring that Wells Fargo "took over" the organization in some unnamed manner, and became the owners and managers in 1861, it is understandable that Wells Fargo Bank & Union Trust Company of San Francisco should adopt it for advertising purposes. In justice and fairness it should be again said that Wells, Fargo & Co., organized a pony express of its own between San Francisco and Placerville, which went into operation on July 1, 1861, and was extended to Carson City and Virginia City, Nevada, in 1862. Without a doubt the organization and operation of this line has led many writers and historians to confuse it with the original Pony Express.

That line, however, was not a part of the original Pony Express, although it cooperated with it in handling that type of mail. The issue therefore is not whether Wells Fargo owned and operated a line of that type, but whether it "took over," and operated the original Pony Express.

Unfortunately advertising writers and others connected with Wells

Fargo Bank & Union Trust Company have made far more sweeping claims than documentary historical facts justify. In a brochure, apparently issued about 1937, and entitled "*A Brief History of Wells Fargo*," and speaking of the difficulties and hazards of the original Pony Express it says: "But the mail went through. . . first in 1860 under the original projectors. . . then, in 1861, under the management of Wells Fargo."

On June 3, 1952, I. W. Hellman, President of Wells Fargo Bank & Union Trust Company, in an address before the American Newcomen Society in San Francisco, said, "The Pony Express that ultimately became a Wells Fargo enterprise was almost put out of business by storms and Indians, and the promoters of it were ruined. Wells Fargo Took over the line."

This general statement requires no further comment.

Misled by Mr. Chapman's error newspaper and magazine writers made the same mistake. In the February, 1939, issue of the American Bible Society *Record* the Rev. Ralph W. Bayless remarked in an article titled, "The Pony Express Rider and His Bible," that from the very first (i.e. April 3, 1860) the express and hauling firm of Wells, Fargo & Co., acted as agent for the Pony Express. Later in the mid-career, Wells Fargo operated the Western division of the route from Salt Lake City to Sacramento."

Wells Fargo *did not* act as agent for the Pony Express "*from the first*," and *did not* operate the western division in its mid-career i.e. in 1861.

A photograph of a painting of a Pony Express rider by Howard Dixon, 1925, is used as an illustration. In the background is a Wells Fargo express office, and the rider's saddle bags are labelled "W.F.&Co., Pony Express." If the painting refers to the

Pony Express owned and operated between Sacramento and Carson City and Virginia City, it was properly used. Since it is tied in with the article it must be considered as a part of it, and therefore is misleading.

In August, 1939, Wells Fargo & Co., created an organization called the Wells Fargo Carloading Company with headquarters in New York. In the September issue, 1943, of the Pony Express Courier an advertisement of this Company appeared bearing a small Pony Express emblem and underneath it the legend "The Original Pony Express."

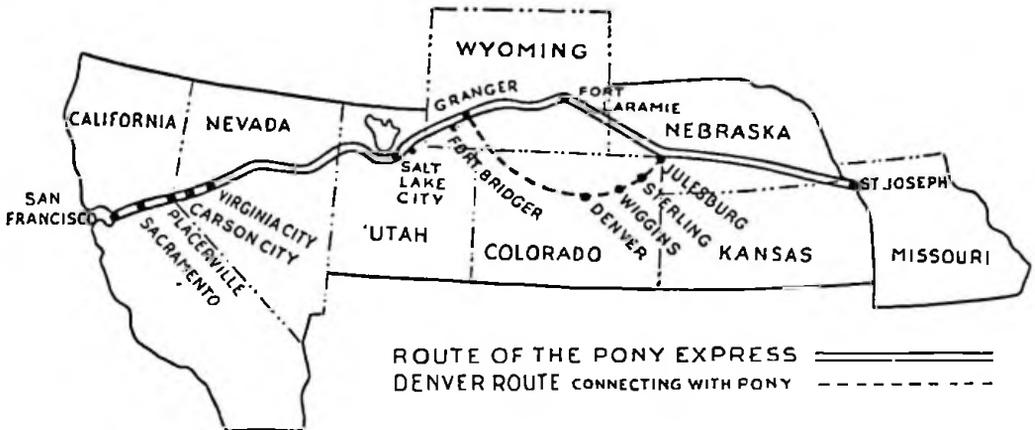
This requires no comment, for the tie-in of the name Wells Fargo with the original Pony Express is obvious. Certainly it does not refer to the Wells Fargo Pony Express line to Virginia City. If it did the caption beneath the emblem would read differently.

Some years ago the Wells Fargo Bank & Union Company prepared a chronological Chart of Wells Fargo Bank's history since 1852, including institutions which joined with Wells Fargo & Company and Wells Fargo

Nevada National Bank, ultimately forming Wells Fargo Bank & Union Trust Company. The Pony Express is shown to be one of these, having "joined" in 1860-61. This chart, which was widely circulated, and a copy placed on the walls of the Wells Fargo Bank and Union Trust Company History Room, very definitely credits Wells Fargo with having "taken over" the Pony Express from Russell, Majors & Waddell in 1860-61.

In 1936 Mr. G. E. Dawson, a member of the Wells Fargo Bank & Union Trust Company organization, in an address before the Oakland, California Philatelic Society, said, "Wells Fargo was to operate the Pony in the declining third of its glorious existence." Again he said, "During the closing third of the Pony's career, Wells Fargo operated the western division from Salt Lake to Sacramento.

In the June number of the Pony Express magazine, 1944, it was said that Wells Fargo "took over" the Pony Express in March, 1861. The same statement is made in January and June issues of 1949, and on other



Map showing original Pony Express Route April 3, 1860—October 24, 1861 from St. Joseph, Mo. to Sacramento, Calif. (Courtesy Fred and Jo Muzzala)

subsequent dates in one way or another. Lack of time forbids mentioning all of them.

In 1950 Colonel Bartlett Boder, Pres. of the Central Overland Pony Express Trail Association, and Pres. of the St. Joseph, Mo., Museum, said "these debts (of Russell, Majors & Waddell) could not be met as they fell due, and Holladay and Wells Fargo took over the Pony Express." Again he said "The Government, March 2, 1861, gave the \$1,000,000 contract to the Butterfield, Wells Fargo interests." The Pony Express riders continued under the management until the completion of the telegraph lines more than seven months later."

An illustration of what some writers for the radio are saying today is seen in Wendell Robie's broadcast over station KA-HI January 7, 1960. "Wells Fargo," he said, "rescued the Pony Express from bankruptcy and enabled it to stay in operation after March, 1861, to the end of its service in late October, 1861. . . Throughout the east and west the offices of Wells Fargo & Co., became the operating agencies of the Pony Express."

One more illustration of how the Wells Fargo legend has become fixed in the minds of writers and historians, then this discussion will close. This is a quotation from the *Sacramento Union* of Dec. 21, 1959.

"In view of the senseless contro-

versy which has been allowed to develop. . . maybe it is time to refer these matters to dedicated historians, to the end that the true record may be authentically preserved. . . *The Sacramento Union* suggests. . . that a panel of historians be created to dig into and—once and for all—settle some of the points of the controversy.

"Let the Wells Fargo Bank, whose claims over a 30 year period have beclouded Pony Express history, come forward and present their evidence. Let those who maintain that Wells Fargo functioned, not in a managerial capacity, but only as agents for the original Pony Founders, bring forward records to prove their point."

Your speaker heartily concurs in this suggestion, and has so written the editor of the *Sacramento Union*. We hope those who hold opposite views will likewise concur.

Although many other illustrations of the Wells Fargo legend of ownership of the Pony Express might be presented we conclude with these. For myself I wish to say my sole motive in presenting this subject is to give credit where credit is due, and protest against the misguided efforts of those who would deprive Russell, Majors & Waddell of their rightful, well-deserved historical birthright.

If my analysis throws any light upon the subject I am grateful. At least I hope I have not confounded confusion.

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