

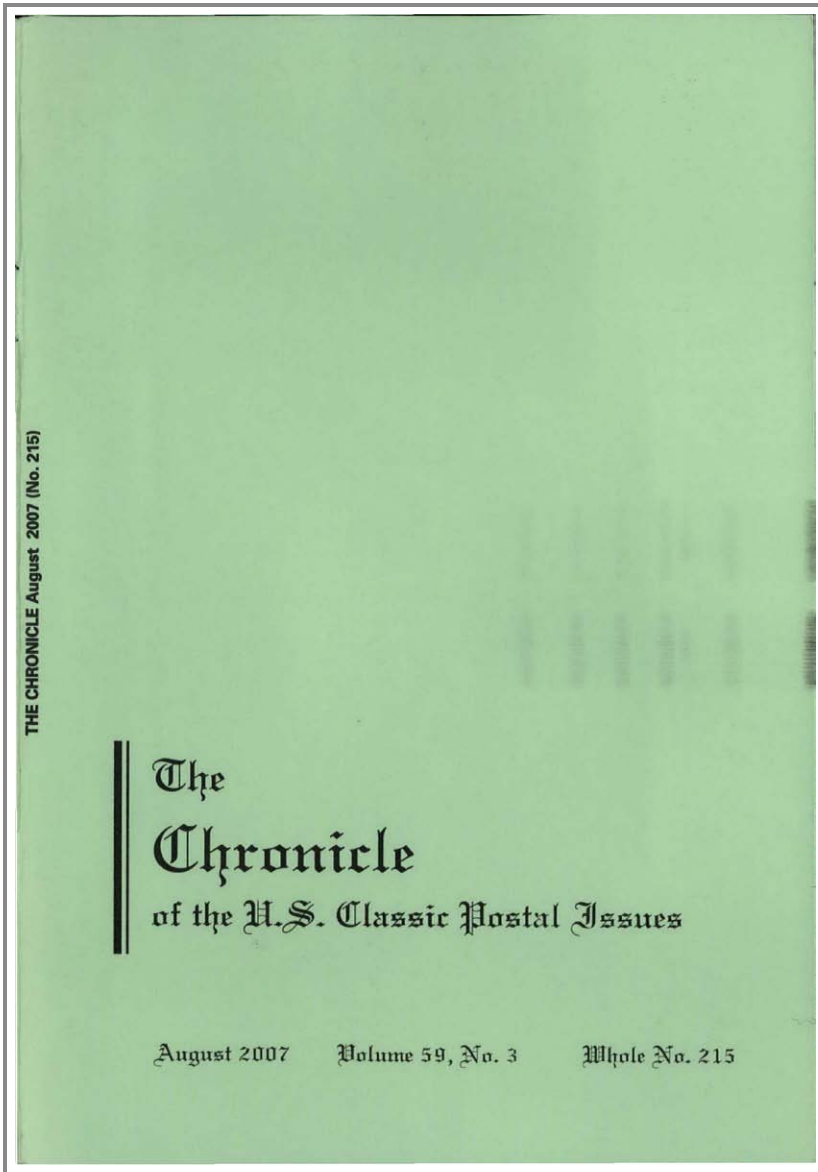


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Author(s): Floyd Risvold, Richard C. Frajola



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## **ACROSS THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS BY SNOW-SHOE**

**FLOYD RISVOLD and RICHARD FRAJOLA**

A previous article<sup>1</sup> told the story of three express operators who carried mail on skis, commonly referred to as “Norwegian snow-shoes,” across the Gibsonville Ridge between Downieville and La Porte, California, in the mid 1860’s. This article will examine the covers carried by their more famous predecessor, “Snowshoe” Thompson, in the period before 1860.

Born in Norway, Jon Thorsen Rue became famous as “Snowshoe Thompson.” His life and exploits have been extensively documented.<sup>2</sup> Thompson arrived in the United States in 1837 and he joined a Wisconsin company that traveled to El Dorado County, California, in 1851. His mail carrying activities during the 1850’s will be documented here. Later, between 1870 and 1874, he served as a government contract mail carrier on the route between Silver Mountain and Genoa, Nevada, before passing away in 1876.

This article will attempt to unravel the various mail-handling activities of Snowshoe Thompson in the context of the changing mail contracts that were in place during the 1850s. This is important because Thompson acted as an independent private express as well as a sub-contractor to George Chorpennig. Chorpennig used Thompson to handle mail on a section of his overland mail route between Salt Lake City and California during at least two winter seasons and also as a sub-contractor for the branch-line government mails that served Carson Valley, Utah Territory (Genoa, Nevada) during the period when the area was not on the overland route.

### **The Chorpennig overland mail routes**

The map in Figure 1 shows the principal Chorpennig routes between Salt Lake City and San Francisco during the 1850’s. Although Snowshoe Thompson operated primarily on the segment between Genoa to Placerville, an understanding of the larger scope of the various routes in use is helpful. Some background is also necessary.

In 1851, Absalom Woodward and George Chorpennig were awarded the contract for a monthly mail service connecting California and Salt Lake City. The eastbound service commenced from Sacramento on May 1, 1851. After difficulty crossing the snow-laden Sierra Nevada Mountains, Chorpennig arrived in the Carson valley and established a station that later became the town of Genoa. The official name of the post office, established in the town of Genoa on December 10, 1852, but serving the surrounding area, was Carson Valley,

<sup>1</sup> Floyd Risvold and James Blaine, “Across the Gibsonville Ridge by Snow Shoe Express,” *Chronicle* 213 (February 2007), pp. 71-76.

<sup>2</sup> The two most useful summaries are: “Snowshoe Thompson: Fact and Legend” by Kenneth Bjork in *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* XIX (1956), pp. 62-68; and “Demythologizing A Mail Hero: Snowshoe Thompson, 1827-1876,” by E. John B. Allen in *Postal History Journal*, No. 63, February 1983, pp. 20-24. For an excellent overview of the early history of skiing in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, from the same author, see *From Skisport To Skiing, One Hundred Years of an American Sport, 1840-1940*.

Utah Territory. In 1863 the post office name was changed to Genoa, Nevada Territory.

After setting up the station at Genoa, Woodward and Chorpenning continued on with the mail (1851-1854 route on map), arriving at Salt Lake City on June 5, 1851. Later that same year Woodward was killed by Indians. Chorpenning carried out the remaining mail contract without a partner.



**Figure 1. The Chorpenning routes between Salt Lake City and San Francisco.**

reverted again to the Old Spanish Trail Route to fulfill his overland mail contract, utilizing steamer service between San Francisco and San Pedro. Also, Chorpenning provided a branch-line mail service between Placerville and the Carson Valley post office. It is reported that Fred Bishop and "Daddy" Dritt were the first carriers of this branch mail and that in the spring of 1853 they performed the service between Placerville and Genoa utilizing Canadian style snow-shoes rather than skis over the pass.<sup>3</sup> Chorpenning employed the same system of summer mails by the original route and winter mails via San Pedro during the following year.

In July, 1854, Chorpenning secured a new four-year contract for the monthly overland mail service. A route change for both summer and winter mails was approved and the new termini were Salt Lake City and San Diego. By using the Old Spanish Trail, Chorpenning was relieved of the additional expense of the ocean link between San Pedro and San Francisco. Apparently Chorpenning retained the post office contract for the branch route between Placerville and Carson Valley.

In the winter of 1854-1855, express and probably mail service was provided, although the contractor's name is not known. It is possible that George Pierce succeeded Bishop and Dritt, who had provided service using snow shoes in 1852-1853. Another possibility is that Jack C. Johnson, who is also known to have preceded Thompson, and who is credited with opening the route called Johnson's Pass, did service on the route. These individuals are mentioned in the Appendix to Chorpenning's Petition to Congress (1889) and it would

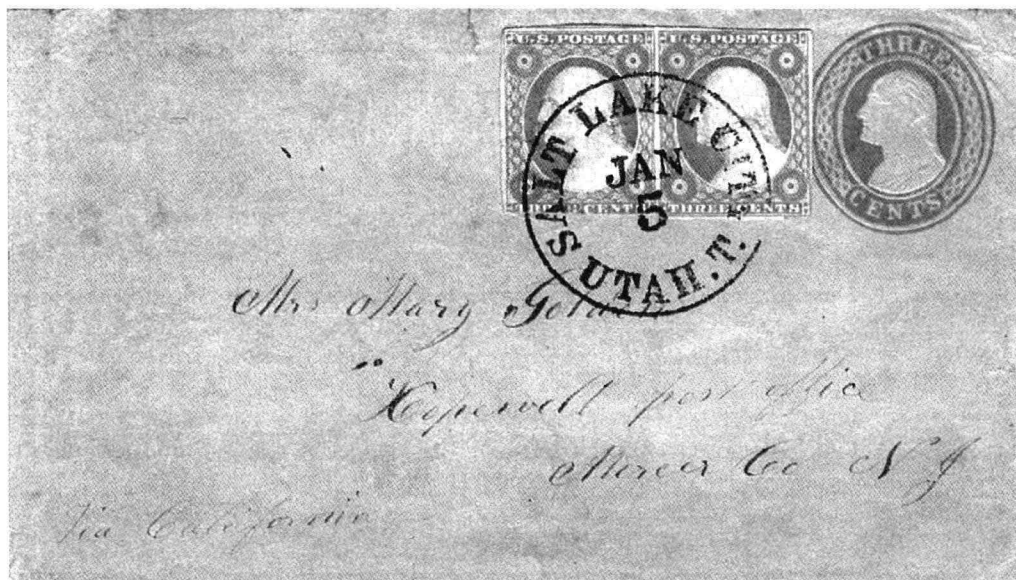
The 1851-1852 winter mails presented additional problems for Chorpenning. The eastbound December and January mails for Salt Lake City were taken back to Sacramento because of snow. The February mails finally made it across the mountains after being packed across Beckworth Pass much further north of the route to Carson Valley. After this, Chorpenning received permission from the San Francisco postmaster to send the March mails by steamer to San Pedro and thence by the Old Spanish Trail to Salt Lake City. Summer 1852 mails were again carried on the original route, via Placerville and Genoa.

When the winter season of 1852 arrived, Chorpenning

<sup>3</sup> LeRoy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail*, pg. 65 and Bjork, *op cit*.

be logical to assume that Chorpenning had sub-contracted these individuals to provide the branch-line mail service.

An example of an eastbound cover carried by Chorpenning on the Old Spanish Trail route to San Diego, and thence by steamer to Panama, is shown in Figure 2. Sent in the winter of 1855-1856, this cover from Salt Lake City to New Jersey is endorsed "Via California" and was franked at an unofficial nine-cent rate. Apparently the postmaster at Salt Lake City based his rate calculation for mail over this route as three cents for service to California (under 3,000 miles) plus six cents for the rate from California to New Jersey (over 3,000 miles). This is a 3¢ Nesbitt entire additionally franked with a pair of 3¢ 1851 stamps. Another example of this unofficial rate calculation is in the Risvold collection and is illustrated on page 327 of *Simpson's U.S. Postal Markings, 1851-61*, Second Edition, by Thomas J. Alexander. This is a double-weight cover from Salt Lake City to Washington, franked with a pair of 3¢ 1851 stamps and a single 12¢ 1851 stamp.



**Figure 2. Cover posted January 5, 1855 from Salt Lake City, "via California" and Panama to New Jersey, showing application of the unofficial nine cent rate.**

An example of a cover carried the next year in the opposite direction, on the same route via San Diego, is shown in Figure 3. This cover originated in Honolulu, Hawaii, on November 3, 1855, with Hawaiian postage paid by the 5¢ blue Kamehameha III stamp of 1853 (Scott 5). The cover was rated 5¢ due at San Francisco, representing 3¢ overland postage to Salt Lake City plus a 2¢ ship fee. It was transmitted from San Francisco to San Diego on December 1, 1855 and was carried over the Old Spanish Trail to Salt Lake City.

### **Thompson in the winter of 1855-1856**

The winter of 1855-1856 is the season that provides us with the first documented trip by Snowshoe Thompson between Placerville and Carson Valley. A *Sacramento Union* news article that appeared on January 19, 1856 notes:

"Mr. John A. Thompson, who resides on Putah Creek, in Yolo County, left Carson Valley on Tuesday morning last, and reached this city at noon yesterday. Mr. Thompson is engaged in conveying an express to and from the Valley. . . . [He] was three days and a half in coming through . . . and used on the snow the Norwegian skates, which are manufactured



of wood, and some seven feet in length. He furthermore states that he found the snow about five feet deep between Slippery Ford and the summit, a distance of eight miles, and on the average elsewhere in the mountains, three feet deep.



**Figure 3. 1855 cover from Honolulu to Salt Lake City. Prepaid with Hawaii five cent stamp for Hawaiian postage and rated five cents due in San Francisco, three cents overland postage to Salt Lake City plus two cent ship fee (courtesy Steve Walske).**

“Mr. Bishop, who carried over the Salt Lake mail in December, consumed eight days in crossing, and before getting through, was badly frozen. Mr. Thompson left Placerville for Carson Valley on January 3d, and leaves again on his transmontane trip this day.”

An additional notice appeared in the same newspaper on February 4, 1856 that the expressman (Thompson) had again arrived from Carson Valley and that: “any letters or papers to be forwarded by him should be left at the St. Charles Hotel, on I street, and in Placerville at the Placer Hotel.”

The language used in these notices, which appeared over the winter of 1855-1856, indicates that Thompson was operating as an independent expressman rather than as a government mail contractor.

### **Thompson in the winter of 1856-1857**

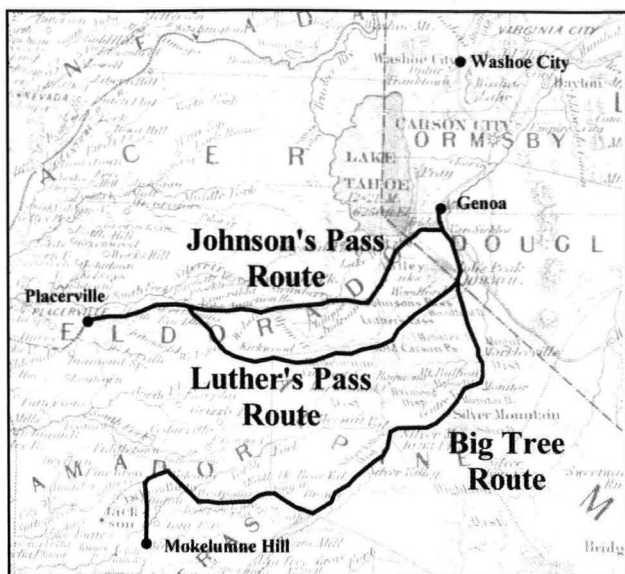
In the November 17, 1856 issue of the *Sacramento Union* readers were informed that “communications with Carson Valley will be kept open by Mr. Thompson, who will run an express all winter.”<sup>4</sup>

Allen reports that Thompson made 31 trips between Placerville and the Carson Valley that winter, and that on each trip he carried 50 to 100 pounds.<sup>5</sup> Two different routes were used, as shown on the map in Figure 4. The first route was via Johnson’s Pass directly south of Lake Tahoe; the second, slightly longer route, was via Luther’s Pass farther south.

In February 1857 Thompson submitted what amounted to a publicity release to the

<sup>4</sup> Bjork, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-68.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-24.



**Figure 4. Map of the routes connecting Genoa, Placerville and Mokelumne Hill.**

*San Francisco News Letter* and *Hutchings's California Magazine*. These early published reports did much to ignite the legend of the Norwegian who carried mail on skis. The illustrated report found in the March 5, 1857 edition of the *San Francisco News Letter* is shown in Figure 5 with the text transcribed around it.

Issues of the *San Francisco News Letter* were often sent to eastern correspondents and the folded sheet containing the Figure 5 report is shown in Figure 6. It was sent as printed matter by steamer from San Francisco via Panama to Boston, franked with a single 1¢ 1851 stamp.

MR. THOMPSON THE MOUNTAIN EXPRESS MAN, has again arrived at Sacramento City, and has forwarded to us the subjoined sketch of himself, wearing the celebrated Norwegian snow shoes, seven feet long, by which alone he is enabled during the late severe winter to accomplish his perilous journey over the Sierra Nevada, and deliver to our readers in Carson Valley the *San Francisco News-Letter*. He says the snow-drifts were 50 feet deep – but that our friends were all well in the valley.

Mr. Thompson, the Carson Valley Expressman, left Placerville on Wednesday, February 18th, on his return trip. The Placerville American says he was accompanied by an assistant, whom he found necessary to employ to relieve him of a part of his load, which the requirements of the people on the other side of the mountain had increased to the weight of eighty pounds. The only way in which the people of Carson valley can procure in the winter season, the *San Francisco News Letter*, or the *California Advertiser*, and such other articles as they may happen to need, is through the agency of Mr. Thompson. Not an individual has visited the Valley over any other route, during the present winter. Mr. Thompson, however, has made regular trips, and has sometimes carried upon his broad shoulders over the entire route a load weighing fifty pounds. Seven pounds weight being the *San Francisco News Letters*. He has heretofore performed the journey alone, except when his protection and guidance have been sought by persons desirous of crossing the mountains; but in order to keep pace with the increasing wants of the people of the Valley has found it necessary to employ an assistant.



**Figure 5. Wood engraving of a mountain skier and an account of Snowshoe Thompson's exploits that appeared in the March 5, 1857 issue of the *San Francisco News Letter*.**



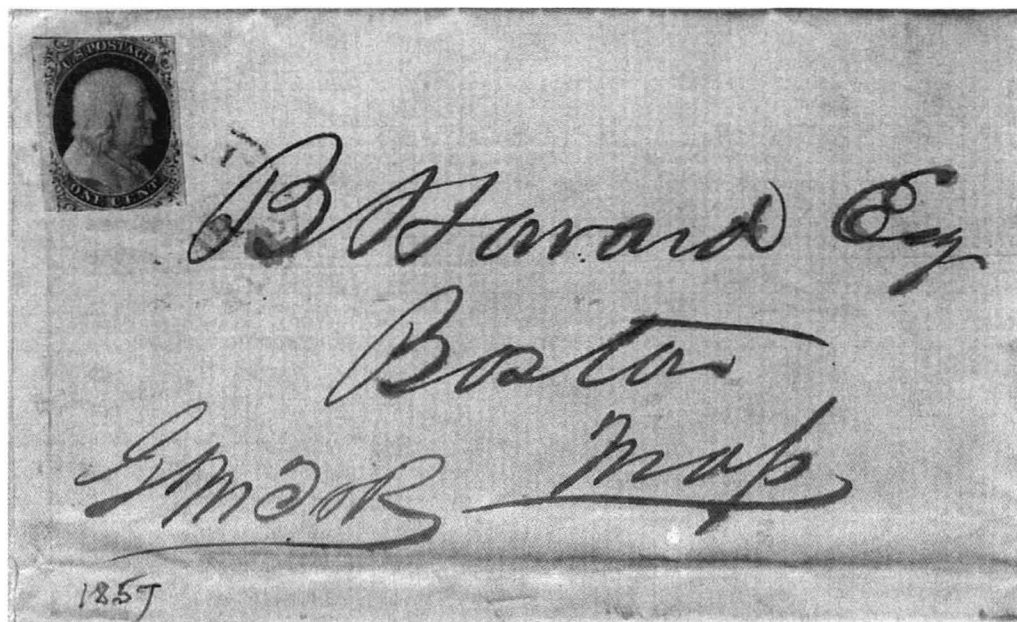


Figure 6. Address leaf of the *San Francisco News Letter* shown in Figure 5.

#### Thompson in the summer of 1857

An advertisement in the June 11, 1857, *Sacramento Union*, shown in Figure 7, announced that “Thompson’s Carson Valley Express” was starting between Mokelumne Hill and Genoa, Carson Valley, via the Big Tree Road (see Figure 4). The *Calaveras Chronicle*

THOMPSON’S CARSON VALLEY EXPRESS—The undersigned will hereafter run a weekly Express between MOKELUMNE HILL and GENOA, CARSON VALLEY, via The Big Tree Road. Those wishing to send Letters or Packages, by forwarding them through the mail or Wells, Fargo & Co.’s Express, and directed to my care, will be strictly attended to.  
J. A. THOMPSON. jll-lm

Figure 7. Advertisement for Thompson’s Carson Valley Express dated July 11 [1857].

had previously reported that the Big Tree Road between Carson’s Valley and Murphy’s Camp had been completed (August 23, 1856). This was likely a “summer” route that utilized stage coaches.

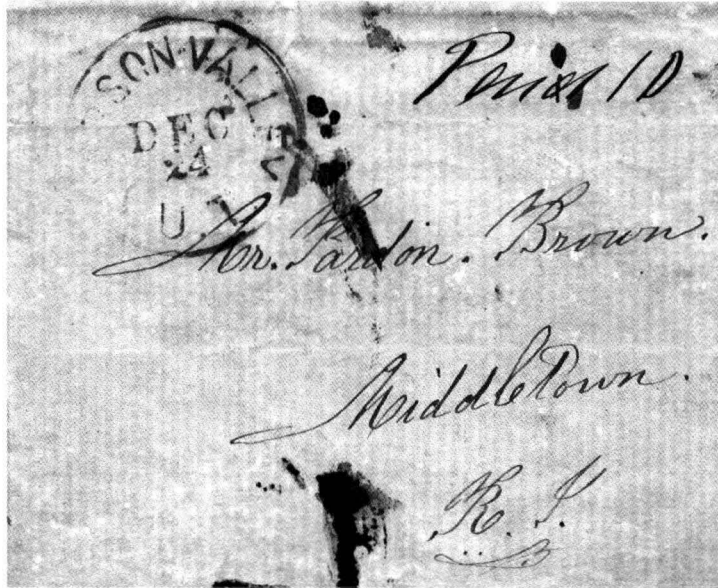
Thompson desired to expand his business and attempted to secure a mail-carrying contract from the post office for the branch service to Carson Valley. Allen reports that, according to the Post Office Department, “In 1857 he [Thompson] was unsuccessful bidder for services on Route 12573, Placerville, California to Carson Valley, Utah.” His bid was “for service on Norwegian Snowshoes from December to April and on horseback for the remainder of the year.” This was during the period that the Chorpensing overland mail route bypassed Carson valley completely.

#### Thompson in the winter of 1857-58

The successful bidder for the postal route connecting Placerville and Carson Valley is not known. However, it is probable that Chorpensing held the contract and that he sub-

contracted at least the winter service to Thompson. A first-hand account of the winter mail service arrangement is included in the letter shown in Figure 8.

This letter, from the Pardon Brown correspondence (see Richard Frajola, Inc. auction 39, 13 January 1989) is dated “Washaw [sic] Valley Utah Ter., December 17, 1857,” and mentions that “the wether now is warm and pleasant, rather cold nights, the mountains are completely closed for the season, the mail (is) fetched acrossed once in two weeks on snow-shoes”. The letter was posted at the Carson Valley post office and transmitted on December 24, 1858. It was carried across the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Placerville by Thompson on skis in his role as a Chorpenning sub-contractor. Like most of this correspondence, the letter was then carried, via San Francisco and Panama, to its eastern destination.



**Figure 8. An 1858 letter from Carson Valley, Utah Territory, to Middletown, R.I., manuscript “Paid 10” rate, carried by Snowshoe Thompson while a sub-contractor in branch-line service (courtesy Gordon Nelson).**

A notice that mentions Thompson as both a former expressman on the Big Tree route, and as a mail-carrier, dated Placerville, January 29, appeared in the *Sacramento Union* issue of January 30, 1858:

“Yarnold, the Carson Valley Expressman, arrived this afternoon, having left Genoa on Monday last, January 25. On account of the wet weather his trip has been longer than he usually makes. Yarnold says that on the summit of the Sierras the snow is now about five feet deep, but rapidly melting, and that the road will open this season much earlier than usual.

“The recent snow storm in the mountains was heavier on this side than the other, which seems to be somewhat singular. Yarnold was accompanied by Thompson, the former Expressman for the Big Tree route. They both used Norwegian skates (skis) in crossing the mountains. Thompson leaves for the Valley as soon as the Atlantic mail arrives”

The earlier of the two reported “Thompson’s Carson Valley Express” handstamped covers, sent towards the end of the winter season, is shown in Figure 9. This cover, also from the Pardon Brown correspondence, enclosed a letter dated at “Washoe Valley” on



Figure 9. Thompson's Carson Valley Express handstamp in black on ten cent entire that entered the mails at Carson Valley, Utah Territory (courtesy Gordon Nelson).

March 27, 1858 (see Washoe City location in Figure 4). It was carried to the Carson Valley post office by Thompson and bears the only reported example of the "Thompson's Carson Valley Express" handstamp applied in black. It was transmitted from the Carson Valley post office on April 26 and carried by Thompson again, this time in his role as a Chorpenning's sub-contractor for the mails, from Carson Valley to Placerville.

### Overland mail route changes in the summer of 1858

On July 1, 1858 a new Chorpenning contract with the Post Office Department went into effect. The contract re-established the Salt Lake City to Placerville route and required weekly trips until it was reduced to semi-monthly trips from July 1, 1859. In the interim, on September 15, 1858, the new Butterfield route between Memphis/St. Louis and San Francisco was inaugurated. This service, over a southern route, was semi weekly and the bulk of the transcontinental mails began to be sent by this route immediately. Mail from San Francisco to the East, unless specifically endorsed to go by another route, was also transmitted on the Butterfield route.

During the summer of 1858, Thompson was again making trips between Placerville and Carson Valley. A report from Placerville that appeared in the *Sacramento Union* of May 11, 1858, mentions: "Thompson ... left Genoa at four P.M. on May 9th, and arrived here [Placerville] this evening (May 10) at seven P.M." This trip would have been by the Johnson's Pass route and the 27-hour time span provides a useful comparison with the winter trips.

### Thompson in the winter of 1858-1859

Mack<sup>6</sup> reports that "during the winter of 1858 Thompson and J. S. Child began a new stage line between Placerville and Genoa, using sleighs between Strawberry Station and

<sup>6</sup> Effie Mona Mack, *Nevada: A History of the State from the Earliest Times through the Civil War*, pg. 340 (Glendale, California, 1936).

Carson Valley. By these means the road was open all winter for the first time.” Actually, the partner of Thompson is more accurately identified as John Chiles. Two letters in the Risvold collection, one from John Chiles to General J. W. Denver and one from George Chorpenning to Col. J. Chiles, confirm this. In addition to keeping the road open, Thompson was evidently serving as a Chorpenning sub-contractor on the Placerville to Carson Valley route. Regarding this service it is worth quoting Bjork at length:

“The [Sacramento] *Union* also stated that ‘there has been some misunderstanding between the mail contractor and Thompson.’ Because the contractor had failed to ‘comply with his portion of the agreement,’ Thompson had abandoned the road and gone home to his ranch. A correspondent at Placerville, however, wrote that ‘the failure, in this instance, was unavoidable. Thompson has just arrived from Carson Valley, and informs me that matters have been so arranged that he can immediately commence operations.’ Three days later the news appeared: ‘We are glad to learn that Thompson . . . has determined to go ahead with the contract. The difficulty about terms has been adjusted.... We do not doubt his ability to keep the road so far clear of snow as to permit stages to pass throughout the Winter. For some weeks, though, the mail and passengers may have to be carried on runners.’”

According to the *Union* of January 12, 1859: “Thompson has two sleighs and two teams of mules with which he travels the road daily. His headquarters are in Lake Valley, and his plan is to start one team west and the other east. That traveling west comes over the summit and as far as Silver Creek, where it strikes the new road down the American River. To that point wagons manage to haul goods, and there Thompson takes them on his sleigh and runs them over to Lake Valley. The next morning the team for the mouth of Carson Canon is harnessed to the sleigh upon which the goods are loaded; the other starts back to Silver creek for another load. The sleigh for the mouth of Carson Canon delivers its freight at Woodford’s, which is twelve miles from Lake Valley, and from there it is hauled to Genoa, eleven miles further, in a wagon. It is about thirteen miles from Lake Valley to Silver Creek, which makes the distance traveled on snow twenty-five miles.”

These reports are important for a number of reasons. They show clearly that Thompson was acting as a sub-contractor to Chorpenning and that different routes were used. The route by Johnson’s Pass was used on eastbound trips and the route by Luther’s Pass was used on westbound trips. Both are shown on the map in Figure 4. Later claims filed by Thompson for compensation from the Post Office Department may have been mis-directed.

The other recorded cover bearing the “Thompson’s Carson Valley Express” handstamp is shown in Figure 10. This cover, with the handstamp in red rather than black, is on a Wells, Fargo & Co. franked Nesbitt entire envelope used to Auburn, California. The 3¢ indicium is a replacement for the original. This cover was picked up by Thompson at an unknown location, probably in the Carson Valley, and carried by him to the post office. It entered the mails at Carson Valley, Utah Territory, on October 8, 1858 and was carried on the mail run to Placerville during the period Thompson was Chorpenning’s sub-contractor for the government mails on the overland route. Wells Fargo provided no service.

Bjork reports, based on an account of Dan De Quille (the pen name of William H. Wright), that Thompson carried the United States mails for two years.<sup>7</sup> If that statement is correct, those two years included the winter seasons of 1857-1858 and 1858-1859 and refer to his service as a sub-contractor to Chorpenning. The first season would have been on branch service between Placerville and Carson Valley while the second season would have been as part of Chorpenning’s overland mail route.

<sup>7</sup> Bjork, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-68.

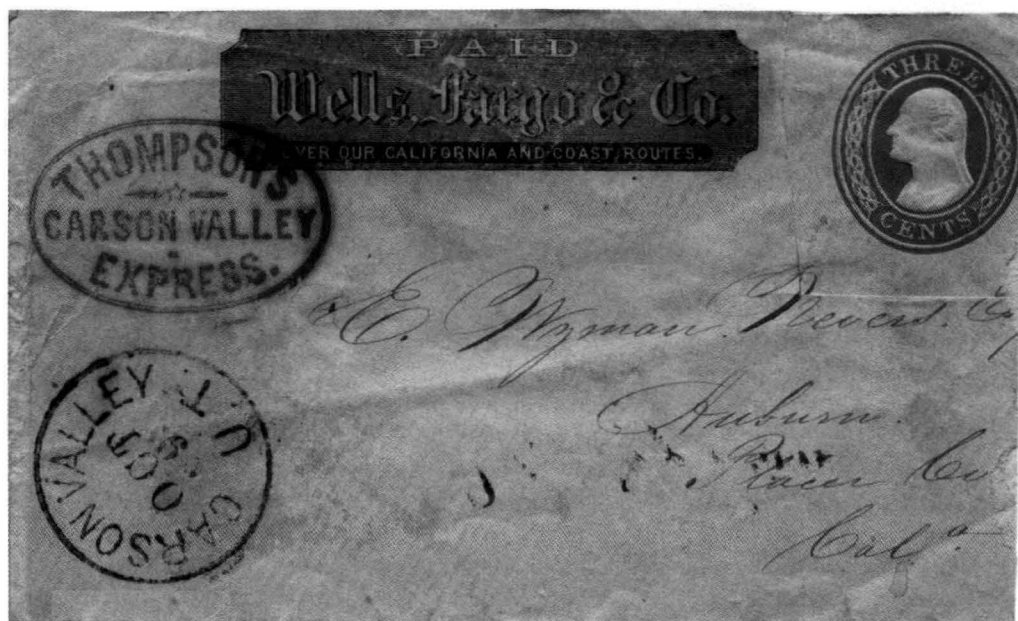


Figure 10. Thompson's Carson Valley Express handstamp in red on franked entire to Auburn, California, that entered the mails at Carson Valley, Utah Territory.

### Summary

Any covers carried on the Chorpenning overland route between Salt Lake City and Placerville during the winter of 1858-1859, as well as any covers sent between Carson Valley and California during the prior season (such as several of the Pardon Brown correspondence covers) can properly be considered to have been carried by Thompson or one of his employees.

An example of a cover that fits into the first category is shown in Figure 11. This cover

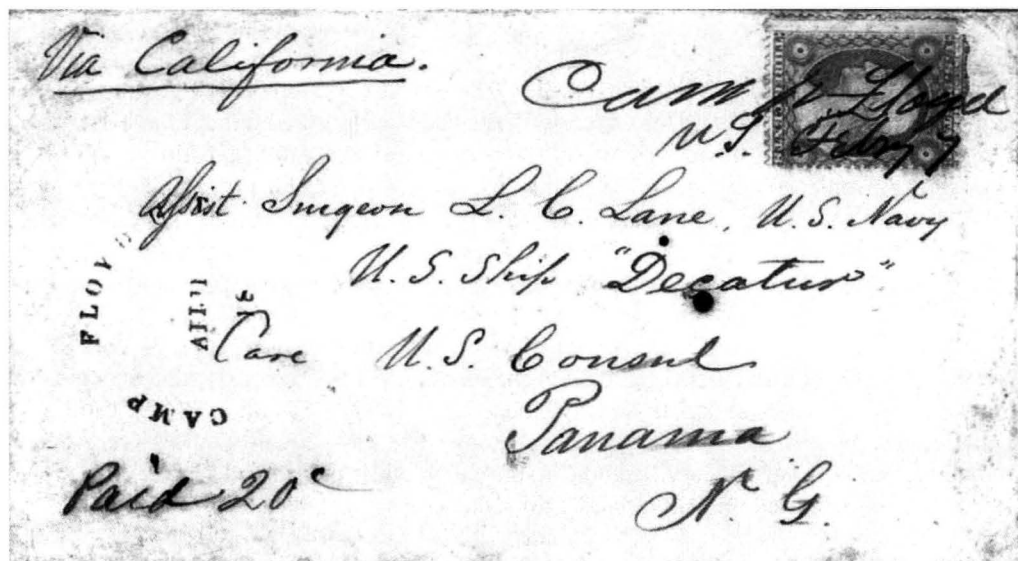


Figure 11. Camp Floyd, Utah Territory to Panama, New Grenada, handled by Thompson on the overland route between Genoa and Placerville

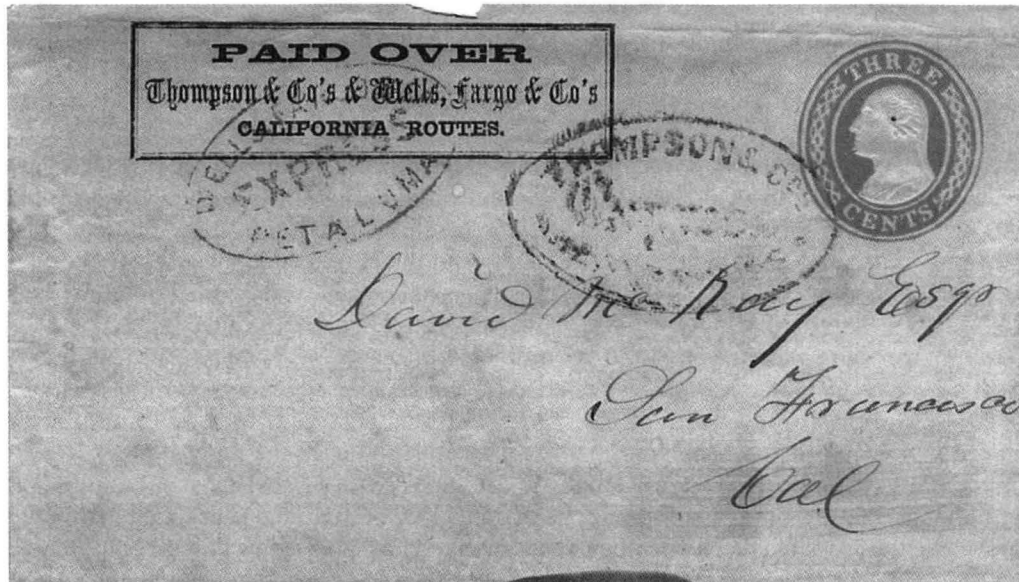


is addressed to a surgeon onboard the *U.S.S. Decatur* at Panama, New Grenada. It was originally posted with only a 3¢ 1857 stamp, which was overwritten with the manuscript Camp Floyd, Utah Territory postmark on February 7 (1859). The cover was then held for additional postage and was transmitted on April 18, 1859 with additional manuscript "Paid 20c" which reflects the correct prepayment required. At that time, the cover was struck with the newly introduced Camp Floyd handstamp postmark.

It is possible that Thompson also carried mail during the following season, but no supporting documentation has been found. The authors would welcome reports of additional covers that may have been handled by Snowshoe Thompson.

### **The other Thompson's Express**

We should note another rare California express that includes the Thompson name, but has nothing to do with Snowshoe Thompson. Figure 12 illustrates one of fewer than five



**Figure 12. Thompson & Co's Express Healdsburg oval on franked cover to San Francisco. This is not a frank of Snowshoe Thompson.**

reported covers bearing the frank of E. B. Thompson's Express. This express operated well away from Carson Valley; between Petaluma, Santa Rosa and Healdsburg. An advertisement and notice that service was commencing, with E. Swift as messenger, appeared in the *Sonoma County Journal* on July 10, 1857. This frank is incorrectly associated with Snowshoe Thompson in Jesse Coburn's *Letters of Gold* (page 218). The Figure 12 cover bears a "Thompson & Co. Healdsburg" oval origin handstamp for service to Petaluma, where it was turned over to Wells, Fargo & Co. for carriage to the San Francisco destination.

The authors would like to thank Jim Blaine for his assistance in the preparation of this article.■