

A Store & Pack Mule Express on the Feather River Route (Defining the word “Express”)

I have wondered how many expresses carried letter mail during the gold rush days in California. Obviously, an unknowable number without first having a working definition of exactly what is considered an express. Maybe a definition should include only those individuals or companies who advertised in a newspaper to carry letter mail or express goods. If a more inclusive definition, including all known individuals or companies that carried letter mail in return for a payment are included, I would expect that the total number of expresses that operated would easily double. But, even with that increased number of express operators, the few that we can document outside of published advertisements would be very small number.

The cover below, carried by an otherwise undocumented carrier, may be correctly included in that small number. The cover addressed to Bremen, Germany is endorsed at left by the sender, “Paid L & E, Smith’s Bar, July 4th, 1858.” It was placed in the government mails at Marysville on 10 July 1858 and was prepaid 30 cents for the correct Prussian closed mail postal rate to destination. The carriage from Marysville to Germany was rather routine in comparison to the journey prior to entering the mails at Marysville.

Some quick online newspaper research discovered that the “L & E” notation was almost certainly a reference to “Love & Evey” who are found to have been store owners in the boom town gold mining area of Smith’s Bar (located on the southeast branch of the North Fork of the Feather River about 30 tortuous miles north of Marysville). Given the “Paid” of the endorsement, and the fact that the cover required a further 30 cents postage to be paid when it was mailed at Marysville, the logical conclusion is that the sender paid Evey & Love for the postage as well as some payment for carriage from Smith’s Bar to Marysville rather than simply handled as a favor.

Still not convinced about the Love & Evey’s bona fides as an express operator, I dug a little deeper into Google books and discovered a nugget, “History of Butte County, California” by George C. Mansfield published in 1918. This book included the following:

Supplies were carried into the mountains by immense lines of pack trains. The North Californian in 1857 referring rather enviously to the mountain trade that went past Oroville’s door into Marysville asserted that at certain seasons of the year these pack trains formed almost a continuous linen for miles. Mrs. Sarah Whipple, whose husband kept the hotel at Peavine also tells of the tremendous trains of pack mules that went by their place carrying everything from a needle to a stove. Robert Love alone is reported to have had one hundred and seventy mules engaged in packing goods from Marysville into the mountains.

So, with visions of this cover being carried in a twenty mule-team train heading down the

Feather River the 75 miles between Smith's Bar and Marysville, a drop of some 2,000 feet in elevation, I wonder how long the journey should take. A near consensus of opinion regarding mule travel speed indicates that they travel about 20 miles a day. So, the trip from Smith's Bar to Marysville should have taken about 4 days. With the cover dated July 4th at origin, hat left plenty of time to make the Saturday, July 10th mail departure from Marysville to San Francisco.

After the mail arrived at San Francisco, it was carried on the PMSS steamer *Golden Age* that departed 20 July and arrived at Panama City on 3 August. After a short train ride across the Isthmus of Panama the same day it departed Aspinwall on the USMSC steamer *Star of the West*. After a coaling stop at Key West, the steamer arrived New York City on 12 August. This was in perfect time to make the weekly Saturday departure of the American Packet. In this case, the Vanderbilt Line steamer *Vanderbilt* that departed for Europe on 14 August 1858. Although on alternate weeks this Line went to Bremen after a stop in Britain, this week the final destination was Havre, France. So, when the cover was postmarked at New York City with date of departure, it was rated with 7 cents credit on the Prussian Mail rate of 30 cents. Steamer *Vanderbilt* arrived at Southampton on 25 August and continued to Havre where it arrived later that same day. After a trip by rail through Belgium and Prussia, the cover arrived at Bremen two days later. Given the modes of transport employed, 55 days seems in transit does not seem terrible for 1858.

Notes on the persons involved:

1. The sender – One good guess is that this cover enclosed a letter from (J.F.C.) Waltemath, apparently also known as Ludwig. After advertising for information regarding the whereabouts of his newly arrived wife, Ann Mary, in June 1852 he next appears in the news in May 1854 as the owner of a "lager beer saloon" in Sacramento on south side of "J" Street near 8th Street. On 28 April 1858 his name appears on the Sacramento Post Office list of unclaimed letters and a later reference includes a death notice for a J.F.C. Waltemath, 57 years old, from Bremen, who died 7 September 1859 at Sacramento.
2. Store / Express Owner – Robert Love first appears in the newspapers available on 10 October 1853 as having checked into the Oriental Hotel in Marysville. The report lists his residence as Junction Bar. This location is about two miles downstream from Smith's Bar. In July 1854 he was elected as an alternate delegate to the Whig State Convention from Plumas County and his residence is listed as "North Fork of the Feather River." A 26 July 1858 newspaper article, the same month his cover was sent, mentions, "On Smith's Bar that are doing better than they have for a long time back (the bar claims below Love & Evey's store)." The 1860 census report lists Robert Love, age 33, birthplace Pennsylvania, residence as Rich Bar, Plumas County (adjacent to Smith's Bar), occupation as General Merchandise, and value of his personal estate is \$20,000. A death report of 2 November 1870 states that Robert Love, brother of John S. Love, of Mansfield, Ohio, aged 42 years, died near Quincy (Plumas County) in a mine cave-in.

3. Store / Express Owner – David Evey is presumed to be the correct name of the co-owner of the store at Smith's Bar. The 1860 census lists him as occupied as a merchant and living at Rich Bar, Plumas County (Rich Bar was located adjacent to Smith's Bar).