Mails of the Westward Expansion, 1803 to 1861

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Preface

This book was inspired by the research and collection of Floyd E. Risvold, whose extraordinary "American Expansion & the Journey West" postal history collection was sold by Spink Shreve Galleries in January 2010. Floyd epitomized the postal history collector. His collection was formed by the pieces of paper carried by long ago mail systems, but his real passion was the history behind those pieces of paper. In this way, for example, he could bring to life the travails of a pony express rider in 1860. In addition, his generous sharing of his discoveries with other collectors was legendary.

Postal history is the study of postal routes, rates, frankings and markings. The best postal history reference sources are official postal documents and contemporary newspaper reports. However, the official record is invariably incomplete, so the examination of surviving pieces of mail, or covers, from the period can fill in the gaps by showing patterns of postal use. The combination of surviving postal artifacts with postal documentation, historical events and geography can be used to accurately re-create the details of a mail delivery system. This is the approach employed in this book.

The transcontinental mail systems described in this book crossed or touched the Rocky Mountains, either over them or by route around them. As further described in this book, these systems evolved because the restless spirit of the 19th Century American created a series of westward emigrations that populated the West and raised the need for communications with those who remained back East.

The United States Post Office Department was slow to extend its services westward, so the first U.S. contract postal routes did not start until 1850. Prior to that, a combination of private and semi-official mail services inadequately addressed the need for communication. Accordingly, this book is organized by western destination prior to the commencement of post office service, and by transcontinental route after 1849.

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