The "Jackass Mail" Mystery

The first mail contractors in the Far West risked lives and fortunes between Salt Lake and California

by Roy D. Tea

In the wake of the gold rush of 1849 families and friends were separated by a continent, and communication between the eastern United States and California demanded a more timely mail delivery service than that provided by way of the Isthmus of Panama. In the decade that followed the Post Office Department was faced with the challenge of providing mail service to locations where costs far exceeded income generated by postage.

The debate both within and without the federal government regarding the demands of the citizenry for service and the role of the post office was intense. Political intrigue and a lack of understanding in Washington regarding the difficulties faced by the mail contractors in the Far West would ruin many companies and investors. Contracts were cancelled, requests for reimbursements were ignored or denied. And the men who undertook the task of transporting the mail risked, and sometimes lost, their lives.

The westernmost mail service was the most challenging of all. The Post Office Department contracted the first mail service between Independence, Missouri, and Salt Lake City in 1850. It was extended west to Placerville, California, in 1851 when Absalom Woodward and George Chorpenning, Jr., were awarded the contract based on their low bid of $14,000 to transport mail once a month between both points.

This noteworthy enterprise was nicknamed the "Jackass Mail" because of the mules which were used.* The method of operation generally consisted of two parties of five men each on horseback, and enough mules to carry the mail and supplies. One party was to leave Sacramento, California, and the other Salt Lake City, the first day of each month.

On the first trip in May 1851 Chorpenning and his party beat a path through deep snow over the Sierra Nevada and followed the Humboldt and the Salt Lake Cutoff to the City of the Saints. During the summer of that year the contractors began experiencing Indian attacks. Two mail carriers were killed in September. The eastbound train in October was driven back by Indian attacks.

In November 1851 two parties of heavily-armed men with mail and supply-ladened mules departed on their journeys from either ends of the route. The eastbound party, led by Woodward, met the westbound group on the desert east of the Sierra and conversed. The parties separated and proceeded on their way. Woodward and his men never arrived in Salt Lake. Speculation was rampant regarding what had happened to them, where and why.

George Chorpenning would continue to fulfill his

*The southern route across the West, the San Antonio-San Diego route, also bore the moniker "Jackass Mail."

The Salt Lake Cutoff leading from Salt Lake City into northern Utah and southern Idaho.
Unless otherwise noted, all photos in this article are courtesy of the author.

mail contract for the next nine years. The loss of his partner was only one of the obstacles which he confronted. Snow in the high mountain passes, Indian depredations, annulment of contracts, lack of understanding by postal authorities in Washington, D.C., of the actual situation on the ground, and political intrigue all created financial difficulties which would eventually ruin him.

The untimely disappearance of Woodward, which presaged the ongoing difficulties of his partner, has never been satisfactorily addressed. It is a mystery which has continued to puzzle historians for more than a century.

The Mystery

An article by Frank Mensel appeared in the Salt Lake *Deseret News* dated November 2, 1955, headlined:

UTAHN BELIEVES SKELETON, PISTOL
SOLVES MYSTERY OF 1851 MAIL RIDER

On a bleak day in November in 1851—one hundred four years ago [from 1955]—tragedy overtook a band of five men on horseback and their string of mail-laden mules in the desolate western Utah desert.

An Indian war party trailed the mail riders—who carried the "Jackass Mail" between Sacramento and Salt Lake City—into Utah from Nevada and ambushed them in Shortcut Pass (also Dugway Pass).

Four riders died in a hail of flint tipped arrows. Their bodies were found the next May by other riders sent into desert to solve the mystery of the absent November mail.

But in solving one mystery they were left with another. What happened to the fifth rider?

History records at least two theories on the fate of the fifth rider. A third possibility came to light last week [October 1955] when a Salt Lake hunter, Lloyd Butcher, and his son, Ray, found a human skeleton and a badly corroded pistol in Johnston's [Johnsons] Pass west of St. John's.

In the opinion of James P. Sharp, a leading Utah authority on pioneer trails, the skeleton furnishes the first "logical" solution to date in mystery of the Shortcut pass incident.

For years, Mr. Sharp said, the Indians lost the rider's trail in a snowstorm. The story identifies the lone survivor as the man who headed the mail train—Capt. Absalom Woodward.

Two Versions

An early West Coast newspaper account of the incident reported Capt. Woodward escaped to "Deep Creek, 40 miles west of Salt Lake City," and died there.* Later a historian wrote the grave of the captain "who died in a skirmish with the Indians" was found on the Malad River, near Garland, Box Elder County.

Mr. Sharp said he has never been able to accept either of these version. On the other hand, he said, the possibility that Woodward died in Johnston's [Johnsons] Pass is highly probably.

The idea that the wounded rider rode into the Garland country, in a snowstorm, when help was as close as Salt Lake City, seems very illogical, Mr. Sharp said.

Erroneous In Part

And the newspaper version is erroneous, in part at least, because the Deep Creek Station on the western trail is not 40 miles, but 190 miles west of Salt Lake City, he said.

The hunters find in Johnston's Pass is a "logical" solution, Mr. Sharp said, for these reasons:

1. This pass would have been a likely escape route for a "Jackass Mail" rider fleeing from the Indians at Shortcut Pass.
2. The corroded gun found with the skeleton apparently was a 36 caliber cap-and-ball revolver. Such guns were popular sidearms among the mail riders.

Undoubtedly Capt. Woodward realized it would be folly to retreat along the "Jackass Mail" route, around Indian Mountain and into Red Pine Pass. The route was well known by the Indians, and the first trail they would take to hunt him down.

The captain's best hope of escape lay in taking another trail. Had he struck out on a direct route from Shortcut Pass to Salt Lake City, over the Dugway Desert, it would have taken him into Johnston's [sic] Pass, two mountains north of Red Pine Pass.

Another pass lies between Red Pine and Johnston's Sharp said. But it was not until later that this pass—Lookout Pass—came into use as the Pony Express trail, he added.

The "Jackass Mail" was organized in June 1851, to run once a month both ways between Salt Lake City and Sacramento, Mr. Sharp said. It continued until 1854, when a three year contract on the run expired. Capt. Woodward was a party to the original contract, he said.

*Throughout this article, all bold words and sentences in the text are emphasized by the author. R.D.T.

The case made for the location of the route and site of Woodward's death in the above article refers to an area south and west of Great Salt Lake. See the section on "Three Routes" below.

James Sharp's account

James Palmer Sharp, cited as a trails expert in the article above, was born on August 17, 1877, in Vernon, Tooele County, Utah, a community that his parents founded. Vernon is some thirty-four miles south of Tooele City, the county seat. Mr. Sharp was an authority on Utah history and a contributor to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. He had been a consultant on and writer of many articles about early pioneer Utah and Pony Express history, and had written many stories about the West

A retired rancher, he was a director of a canning company, served as a county commissioner, and was also affiliated with a bank and furniture company. He died on Monday, December 30, 1968, at the age of 91.

Sharp prepared an article for the *Salt Lake Tribune* which was published on May 22, 1960. The article, printed here in its entirety, was entitled:

THE MYSTERY OF THE JACKASS MAIL.

The newspaper headline, on Oct. 27, said "Hunter discovers Mystery Grave." The article told of a father and son discovering what apparently had been a grave, while deer hunting on Johnston's [sic] Pass. The son, picked up a very old, rusty revolver and reported that "all the bones were there but scattered around."

An expert said the weapon was from 91 to 105 years old. Could this discovery have been a grave, or the place where Absalom Woodward had died in November, 1851? Could this be the final resting place of one of the founders of the famous "Jackass Mail"? Let us turn back the pages of time and see what the facts are.

In the spring of 1851, a contract was awarded to Major Charles *[sic]* Chorpenning, Jr. and Captain Absalom Woodward to carry the mail one trip each way each month between Salt Lake City and Sacramento, Calif. They were to receive $14,000 yearly and the contract was to terminate June 30, 1854.

The trip which concerns us is that which left Sacramento on Nov. 1, of that year in charge of Capt. Woodward. He had with him John Hawthorn, Harry Bensen, John Hamilton and another man by the name of Kennedy. They rode horses and drove seven mules laden with mail and supplies.

Considerable snow trouble was encountered in the Sierra Nevadas and when the mail did not arrive in Salt Lake on time, Maj. Chorpenning started the westbound mule train, in charge of John Smith.

The two groups met at Fish Springs, about 150 miles west of Salt Lake City and exchanged notes. There, Woodward told Smith that he had trouble with Indians the day before and warned him to be on the lookout for them.

The two trains went their different ways. The California mail arrived, but that destined for Salt Lake City did not, and several theories and versions of what happened have been published since.

Let us consider a few:

1. Chorpenning, in May, discovered the fate of his partner. Woodward's remains were found and the means of his death established.

2. In November, Woodward was killed by a war party west of Malad River.

3. At first, the four companions of Woodward were killed and the captain, himself badly wounded, escaped with two horses. He rode to Deep Creek, 40 miles west of the Salt Lake settlement.

Now for a bit of comment. No one claims to have seen or talked to Woodward after the two parties had left Fish Springs, so no one but the Indians could have known what happened.

Regarding the first statement, no record can I find of Chorpenning telling where he found the body of Woodward, or how he could identify it, after it had been out in the desert for five months with hundreds of hungry coyotes and other predators ready to eat any and everything they could find.

As for the second statement, to get to the Malad River, Woodward would have to have ridden through Salt Lake City and then gone north more than 100 miles.

And for the third statement, how could he ride to Deep Creek, 40 miles west from Salt Lake City when Deep Creek is 200 miles west, and is 50 miles west from where he and Smith had parted?

In order to get the story straightened out it will be necessary for me to give a bit of my personal history.

One fall, in the 1890s Dick Moon Eye, a desert Ute, from over on Hickman Creek came to hunt deer. He had taught me, when I was 13 years old, how to hunt deer Indian fashion. He was an old man, but spoke good English. We always looked forward to the fall hunt.

Well, this time we both got our bucks and after hanging them, we sat down on the sunny side of the hill to rest. I asked him, "Dick, you know anything about those four men killed long time ago on Dugway?"

"No don't. That Goshute land. Hear many stories. Why not get Ibapah Jack tell it to you story. He there. Get him talk. No whisky, for Indian drink whisky, tell lot big lies." I didn't even get a raise out of him—or did I?

In 1897-99, father had three herds of sheep which he summered up in the northwest corner of Utah and in Idaho and he sent me up to take charge. One of the men working up there was Harry Bates, from Deep Creek, and one day an Indian rode up to Bates and talked with him for some time. Then Bates told me the Indian was Ibapah Jack, who wanted to work for me. "He is a good herder," he said, "and absolutely honest."

I looked at the Indian who was quite grey, but straight as an arrow, then said, "He looks too old to herd sheep."

"You don't understand, Jack brings his whole family up here every summer and has two married boys, Wild Cat and Jimmy, and some other children, Jack just supervises."

I was at his camp one day, and took him a can of tomatoes, getting quite friendly with him.

On my next trip to his camp I played my trump card—four cans of tomatoes. He saw them but I didn't take them from the pack bag. I sat down and asked him:

"You savvy Peah-Namp?"

"Peah-Namp squaw killed Simpson, two papooses?"

"Yes."

"Me known 'em."

"Well Jack, I am glad you and Antelope Jake killed those four soldiers and the station man at Canyon Station for they were the ones who kill squaw and many children."

"How you know?"

"Wood-leg Davis tell me." (D. E. Davis, the first telegraph operator at Simpson, had a wooden leg. He was very friendly with the Indians.)

"Davis no lie."

I took a can of tomatoes from the bag and he opened it with his knife, and pulled out a spoon he always carried in his pocket. Then I asked: "Why you, and Antelope Jake, kill four men with mules at Fish Springs?"

"No Fish—Dugway," he replied, and at last I had an opening. Jack ate about half the tomatoes and I asked him again:

"Why you kill 'em?"

"Yes. No. Me—I runno (don't know)."

"Sure you know," I said. "I tell no one." Then he made me promise that I would never tell anyone as long as he or his two sons, Wild Cat or Jimmy, lived. I promised. Then Jack told me the story, but I dare not tell it the way he did, for it would be embarrassing for women to read, so I'll write it in my own words.

Antelope Jake, the chief, had taken all the bucks and squaws and boys on an antelope hunt to get meat for the winter, leaving the old squaws and young girls (like Susy, his girl about 16 years of age) to take care of the children. They had been gone six days and entered the Deep Creek Valley late in the afternoon with "much meat" which they carried.

They noticed some horsemen riding over the low hills to the east of the valley. Some of the young girls, seeing the chief, came running out and began to talk, but Jake told them to let the old women talk.

He gathered the men of the tribe in a circle and called the old women. The oldest told the story and the others said it was true. Then he asked the young girls to talk and they corroborated the old women.

Five men with five horses and seven mules had come to the camp about noon and asked for some meat. The squaws could not understand, but the men pointed to a deer carcass, and squaws shook their heads. Then one man looked into the teepee, and seeing the young girls there, called to the other men. Let us end that part of the story for you can guess what happened.

The council met, and at dark six Indians started out on the trail of the white men. It was a dark night and they did not catch up with them until morning. Armed only with bows and arrows, while whites were carrying revolvers, the Indians circled the man [men] at the foot of the Lava mountain, but were easily driven back by four men on horses, for a mile or two. Then the men rode up to the other, who had been ahead with the mules.

The Indians watched until the men had gone around Fish Springs Point, and kept watch from afar until the men made camp.

The Indians then circled the camp and went on

ahead to the foot of Dugway Mountain where they stopped for the night. Next morning they could see the men coming—one in front, leading a mule, the other mules following, and the four other men, riding single file, bringing up the rear.

Jake's party had not figured on making an attack until the mule train reached the thick junipers at Judd Creek, where an ambush could be sit up, but it began to snow hard, so Jake decided to attack there and then.

The trail crossed a dry ravine which had a few bushes in it and then led up an open hill. Jake placed two of his men on one side of the trail and three on the other. Four were to shoot, and if any missed, the fifth was then to fire. The sixth Indian was sent on ahead to kill the man leading the mules, and head off the mules and horse.

The rider leading the mule train apparently became suspicious when the mules balked at following him, so rode to one side of the trail. He was hard for the Indian to [see] him through the snow, but he shot once. The rider hesitated. The Indian fired another arrow, and the man rode off over the pass and down the other side.

Meanwhile the ambush in the ravine worked, the riders were killed and the horses and mules caught and driven back. One of the mules, loaded with mail, was stripped of the mail bags and the letters dumped out for the wind to scatter. The Indians stripped their victims of every stitch of clothing and the bodies were dragged down another ravine.

That is the story Ibapah Jack told me. Now let us surmise what could have happened to the survivor of the ambush.

He would have crossed Skull Valley, gone between Simpson Buttes and Davis Mountain and would have had a level way until he climbed to the pass. Of course he would have had to stop to let his horses eat some of the grass, for 69 miles would be too far to go without rest. But say he stopped for an hour between the Buttes and Davis, then the horses could have easily reached the pass, and then he would have been only 55 miles from Salt Lake City.

From Dugway Pass to Johnston Pass is about 45 miles. Had I been the wounded man, knowing the country and the Indians as I do—and as Woodward must have known them—I never would have traveled the regular trail, for I would have known the Indians would take that road. Instead I would have taken a direct route to Johnston's Pass. Old timers always carried a compas[s] and had Woodward set his course a little east of north, he could have made it if not too severely wounded.

Were the remains found in 1955 those of Woodward? Did he stop there and unsaddle his animals, which wandered away while he camped? Or had he died from the wounds received in the ambush? Here are questions which apparently will never be answered.

Fascination with the Story

For years this author has been fascinated with this story. I even tried to find the boy who found the rusty pistol but without success. I talked with Mr. Sharp to find out the veracity of his newspaper article. I was convinced that what he had written was true, but how could we definitely prove or disprove the facts of the story?

I was in the process of writing up the information I had collected on this story for the *Overland Journal* when I mentioned the Jackass Mail to another trail historian, Marie Irvine. She said she had some information on Chorpenning, so we met and discussed the story. As it turns out, she provided me with the written proof of the actual fate of Absalom Woodward and his outriders.

She had a copy of an article written by John M. Townley entitled "Stalking Horse for the Pony Express; the Chorpenning Mail contracts between California and Utah, 1850-60" (*Arizona and the West,* 1982, pp. 229-236). Mr. Townley had extensively researched newspapers of that era and, apparently, he also had found the redress submitted to Congress in 1856 by David Barclay on the behalf of George Chorpenning for the losses of property and animals he sustained as a mail contractor. The following is copied directly from Mr. Townley's article:

> In 1850 the Post Office Department issued the first contracts for overland mail service between Independence, Missouri, and Salt Lake City, Utah. The

following year, it extended postal delivery west to Sacramento, California. From 1851 to 1860 George W. Chorpenning, Jr., an energetic Pennsylvania entrepreneur, controlled the Utah-California segment of the overland route. For nine years, he surmounted successive disasters, only to fall prey to congressional squabbles, a skinflint postmaster general, the machinations of the Pony Express, and his own cupidity or inadequacy. Benignly ignored by Congress and the post office, Chorpenning nonetheless fulfilled his contracts and demonstrated the efficiency of a direct central overland route to and from California. Despite its ultimate failure, Chorpenning blazed a trail for the Pony express, the Union Telegraph, and the Overland Stage Company.

Prior to 1850 argonauts to the California gold fields received their mail by steamer from the East Coast, via the Isthmus of Panama. In July of that year, the post office granted a contract to Samuel H. Woodson for monthly service between Independence and Salt Lake City. The following January, the department invited low bids on Mail Route 12,801, the second leg of the overland mail. In April of 1851, Postmaster General Nathan K. Hall awarded a contract to Absalom Woodward and George Chorpenning, Jr., partners in Woodward & Company, to carry mail across the seven hundred miles of mountains and desert between Salt Lake City and Sacramento, California.

Little is known of Woodward and Chorpenning prior to their receiving the mail contract. Chorpenning was born on June 1, 1820, at Somerset, Pennsylvania, where he apparently managed a store in the 1840s. In 1849, he left Somerset with several relatives and a friend for the California gold fields. At Sacramento, Chorpenning joined Woodward in business, evidently as a junior partner. Woodward's antecedents are an almost complete mystery. He was also a native of Pennsylvania, and was approximately forty-nine years old in 1851.

The terms of Woodward and Chorpenning's contract were simple. Mail would depart simultaneously from Sacramento and Salt Lake City at six a.m. on the first of each month and would arrive in the opposite city within thirty days. James M. Goggin, special agent for Pacific Coast mail service, expected the first mail to leave Sacramento for Salt Lake City on April 2. It was the first week in May, however, when Chorpenning, with a party of seven men, picked up some 200 pounds of sacked mail at the Sacramento post office and started east.

The initial mail was delivered without incident. After two weeks hard going through the snowbound Sierra Nevada, Chorpenning arrived in Carson Valley where, on May 22, he staked out 160 acres. Because of the ready availability of wood, water, and native hay, Carson Valley was an obvious choice for a station. Moreover, its proximity to the Sierra Nevada passes made it an ideal point for recruiting men and stock before crossing the deserts to the east. Chorpenning left the valley during the third week of May and, after forcing paths through deep snowfields in the Goose Creek Mountains, reached Salt Lake City on June 5. There he quickly arranged with Brigham Young for riders and assistance in transporting the mail, and returned almost immediately with the westbound post.

Woodward & Company's unchallenged passage of the Great Basin was short-lived. Hostility between Indians and emigrating whites along the western half of the California Trail soon affected mail riders on the Humboldt Road and Salt Lake Cutoff. Mules and horses, seldom guarded by more than a half-dozen men, particularly attracted stock-poor Shoshonis and Paiutes. Skirmishes between Indians and mail company personnel began in July, when stock disappeared from the Carson Valley station and several mail carriers were wounded by long-range rifle fire as they crossed the Utah desert. A serious incident occurred in mid-July when a mail carrier, bearing the post from Salt Lake City, was compelled to fort up at Carson Valley until the arrival of California militia to escort him to Placerville.

Also during July, Woodward made his first passage over the trail packing mail to Utah. On July 18 he was attacked in Thousand Spring Valley by two well-armed and mounted Indians. At the time of the ambush, Woodward was riding alone some ten miles ahead of the main party. Only a fast horse saved him from the warriors, who fired from less than thirty

Granite Pass, in southern Idaho on the Utah Border near Nevada.

yards and pursued him to within sight of the escort. Following his narrow escape, Woodward with the mail arrived safely at Salt Lake City before the end of July.

The return to Sacramento in August was even more hazardous. Woodward and a nine-man escort apparently left Salt Lake City on August 1, and followed the Salt Lake Cutoff, via Granite Pass and Goose Creek, to the Humboldt. On August 10, two of the escort were fired on by six or eight mounted Indians between Wells and Elko, Nevada. Two days later, near Carlin, Nevada, the party was awakened at dawn by rifle fire from the willows along the river, as Indians attempted to stampede the stock. One man and three animals were wounded when the carriers hitched up the mules and fought a slow retreat up Emigrant Pass. In the broken terrain at the summit of the pass, a second band of Indians ambushed the mail party but failed to prevent its escape southwest toward Gravelly Ford. On August 15, Woodward met a courier named Henderson with the August 1 mail from Sacramento. Henderson had also been the target of several long-range attacks on the previous day. Doubting that Henderson could fight through to Salt Lake City, Woodward ordered him to accompany the westbound mail to Carson Valley. Enroute, the combined mail parties were joined by six survivors of a fourteen-man emigrant train that had also been attacked by Indians. Woodward left Henderson at Carson Valley and brought the Utah mail into Sacramento on August 31. The July and August passages erased early hopes for peaceful relations with the Humboldt Valley tribes.

Despite the Indian menace, Woodward & Company's initial trips to and from Utah indicated possible profit in express and coach service. Within a week of Woodward's return to Sacramento at the end of

August, he and Chorpenning bought seventy-five pack animals and expanded their business to include freight and passengers. The *Sacramento Times and Transcript* announced on September 11 that the partners contemplated starting a train for Carson Valley on the thirteenth, and that they were prepared to accommodate fifty to seventy-five passengers, at seventy-five dollars each. Woodward & Company also planned to enlarge the Carson Valley station into ranch and trading center, stocked with California merchandise. Although the proposed expansion apparently failed to materialize, a post office was authorized for Carson Valley at the end of September.

Meanwhile, the passage to Utah became increasingly difficult. Indians attacked the eastbound September post near Goose Creek, killing two carriers The survivors arrived safely in Salt Lake City with the mail sometime after October 1. The October mail left Sacramento on the first but, like the August delivery, was delayed at Carson Valley because there were not enough carriers to risk the trip farther east. The westbound October post, escorted by eight men, left Salt Lake City by wagon on the first. Several hundred warriors attacked the mail party just west of the Goose Creek headwaters, driving off the carriers and looting the wagon. Reduced to a ration of one cold biscuit per day, the men spurred their mules on to Carson Valley, where they arrived nine days later. By way of welcome, the Washos burned the pastures surrounding the station. The October party finally made its way to Sacramento, without the mail, by November 1.

When word of these disasters reached Sacramento in late October, Woodward realized that his and Chorpenning's contract was in jeopardy. On November 1, he personally took charge of the eastbound Sacramento mail and arrived in Carson Valley a week later. There he found reason for optimism. A company of miners had left the station on October 10 and apparently had made their way safely east to the Wasatch. While his stock recuperated from the late fall crossing of the Sierra Nevada, Woodward on November 12 chaired a public meeting to create a "squatter" government for the lawless Eastern Slope until Congress could authorize territorial status. As a prominent property owner, he was elected to the executive committee which exercised judicial power over the proposed territory. Soon thereafter, Woodward and his carriers left for Rag Town and the Humboldt River. They were last seen midway up the Humboldt, before they vanished into a Great Basin winter.

Left in Sacramento to supervise winter mail crossings, George Chorpenning faced a cascade of calamity and unforeseen emergencies. November passed without word from Woodward and without mail from Utah. Mail left Sacramento on December 1, only to return when the riders failed to gain the mountain summits. By January 1, 1852, the situation seemed perilous. California mail had not reached Salt Lake City since November, and the last mail from Utah had arrived at Sacramento in August. Chorpenning himself set out for Salt Lake City with the January mail, but returned after a week, defeated by massive snow falls blocking Carson Pass. Finally, about January 9, Samuel Hanson and five companions straggled into Sacramento with the November sacks from Zion. Hanson had been on the road over two months and had talked with Woodward in late November near Emigrant Pass. At Carson Valley on December 9, Hanson had found almost 100 men holed up for the winter. Failing to cross Carson Pass, his party had finally ridden north through Truckee Meadows, over Beckwourth Pass to Sierra Valley, and then followed Jamieson Creek west to Sacramento.

The awesome hardships described by Hanson convinced Chorpenning to seek an alternate winter route over the Sierra Nevada and across the Great Basin. The December and January mails still at Sacramento were redirected to San Francisco and sent by ship to San Bernardino. From southern California, couriers followed the Mormon Trail to Salt Lake City, where the mail arrived on March 7. February 2, Edson Cady and two riders left Sacramento, crossed the Sierra Nevada through Beckwourth Pass, and made a slow and brutal trip along the Humboldt River to the Goose Creek range. When the mules froze to death in blizzards, Cady divided mail sacks and slabs of frozen mule meat among himself and his companions, and continued east on foot. The mail party arrived

Emigrant Canyon, west of Carlin, Nevada.

without loss in Salt Lake City about March 25. A third mail reached Zion via San Francisco and San Bernardino on April 21.

Although Chropenning had demonstrated the feasibility of regular winter mail service, the April mails met with disaster. The Sacramento party took weeks in crossing the Sierra Nevada, while the Utah carriers were unable to surmount the glacial reaches of Granite Pass. Desperate for news of his partner and of affairs in Salt Lake City, Chorpenning set out in May with the Sacramento mail. Leaving Carson Pass, he overtook the April mail party near Carson Sink and pressed on along the Humboldt River.

The discovery of Woodward's remains in early April of 1852 begat one of the Great Basin's most durable and confused mysteries. Woodward and four men left Carson Valley on November 14, 1851, with the mail from Sacramento. Because he intended to winter in Utah and purchase fresh stock before returning with one of the spring mail parties, Woodward also carried a large amount in gold coin. Near Emigrant Pass on November 28, he met Samuel Hanson and informed him that the eastbound party had been fired upon the day before, a routine experience for the mail riders. That was the last time Woodward was seen alive.

Woodward and his companions apparently were first attacked by Indians about November 20 near Stony Point. Possibly reduced by two wounded or dead, the party made its final stand somewhere between Stony Point and Goose Creek. Mounted on a large "American" horse borrowed from Chorpenning in the event that he might have to outrun smaller Indian ponies, Woodward escaped the ambush and fled east until he succumbed either to exposure or wounds at Deep Creek Ford, some 100 miles north-northwest

Stony Point is the point of the mountain at the left center of the photo.

of Salt Lake City and only a few miles from Snowville. Edson Cady and an escort of Ogden Saints, sent to recover bridles and harnesses from the mules abandoned in March, discovered Woodward's remains in early April: His horse's bridle was still tied to a scrub thicket, where he had secured the animal. Woodward's watch, letters, and other personal efects were undisturbed, but no saddle, weapon, or mail was found. The body had been dismembered by coyotes, and Cady apparently buried Woodward where he fell.

With Woodward dead, Chorpenning faced alone the challenge of meeting the terms of their contract. Disheartened by the loss of his friend and associate, Chorpenning arrived at Salt Lake City on April 13. Woodward & Company's ready cash had been lost with Woodward, and it would take months to obtain advances on the contract's quarterly payments. Even the steadfast support of the LDS church faltered. When he was unable to find riders for the westbound journey, Chorpenning on July 1, loaded the mail and provisions on mules, and set out alone for Sacramento, where he arrived in about three weeks. He attempted to subcontract the mail service, only to find that no one believed that regular monthly deliveries were possible over the central route, particularly in winter. Moreover, the contract fee was miserably inadequate for the risks involved.

Chorpenning's commitment to fulfilling the mail contract toughened as summer passed and carriers resumed monthly deliveries. On November 14 he wrote Special Agent Goggin for permission to again re-route winter service via San Bernardino and bypass the snowclad Sierra Nevada. By adroit jawboning and creative credit arrangements, Chorpenning rehired riders and replaced stock until the financial crisis appeared solved. Service, however, continued intermittent throughout the closing months of 1852. Only two mail deliveries were mentioned in the Salt Lake City *Deseret News* and none in the California press.

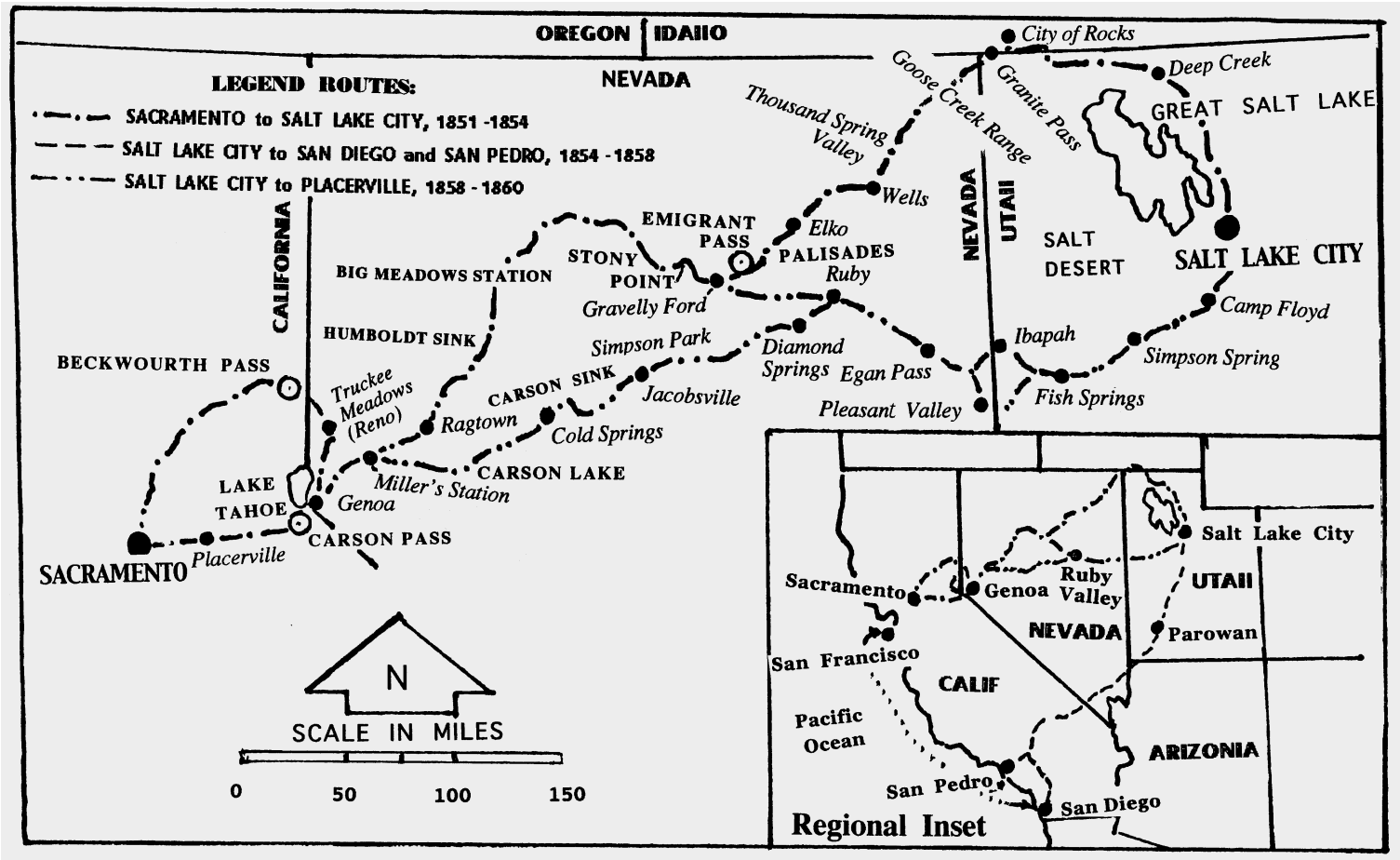
Unbeknown to Chorpenning, on November 18, 1852, Postmaster General S. D. Hubbard cancelled Woodward & Company's contract and transferred the route to William L. Blanchard.

Three Routes

Much of the confusion over the attacks on and eventual fate of Chorpenning and his party comes from from the variety of routes used for mail service. Chorpenning eventually used three different routes to carry the mail between Salt Lake City to Sacramento. These routes have created confusion in solving the mystery of Woodward's disappearance. The first route, used from 1851-1854, took the Salt lake Cutoff northwest from Salt Lake City to the City of the Rocks and then along the Humboldt River on the California Road to Carson City, then over the Sierra to Placerville.

The second route, used from 1854-1858, took the Mormon Trail south from Salt Lake City to the Spanish Trail, followed that route to Los Angeles and San Pedro, and then went by ship to San Francisco and on to Sacramento.

The third route was explored and laid out by the Mormon frontiersman Howard Egan, improved and revised by Captain James H. Simpson, and eventually would be known as the Central Overland Route. It



The Chorpenning Mail Routes, 1851-1860

Deep Creek on the Salt Lake Cutoff, northern Utah.

was used by Chorpenning from 1858 to 1860, and was then taken over by the Pony Express and the Overland Stage Coaches. This trail goes south from Salt Lake and southwest across the southern tip of the Salt Desert to Fish Springs, across the center of Nevada to Carson City, and on to Placerville. (See the attached map.)

We need to straighten out some geography. Utah has two Deep Creeks: one in northern Utah by the Idaho border near the community of Snowville, and another on the Utah-Nevada border by Ibapah. Both of these Deep Creeks are on different routes of the Jackass Mail, which no doubt caused the confusion and different stories about the demise of Woodward and his four men.

Mr. Townley, from his meticulous research of newspapers accounts and other primary sources, provides us with the pertinent information that Woodward died at Deep Creek, in northern Utah near Snowville, where his personal effects were found and his remains were buried.

George Chorpenning, in one of his long dissertations to Congress, also gives his account and knowledge of the events before and after Woodward's death. The following is copied from Mr. Chorpenning's redress to Congress in 1874:

THE CASE OF GEORGE CHORPENNING
VS THE UNITED STATES.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FACTS,
BY THE CLAIMANT.

Although my claims against the Government have occupied a large share of public attention for many

years, still it is not only singular but, to me, deeply painful, to see how very imperfectly they are understood, and how sadly I am misrepresented in connection therewith.

The slanders, vituperations, falsehoods, and misrepresentations which have been hurled against me by the united press of the country, seeking not only to rob me of my character, my property, and the most sacred rights guaranteed to me by the Government, but also to entail upon my wife and children a blight that would follow them to their graves, have, perhaps, scarcely ever been paralleled in the history of this country. . . .

Believing the time has arrived in the progress of my case when reason and justice will hold sway over blind prejudice and wrong, I have chosen the hour to lay before Congress and the world a plain, truthful history of my labor and efforts in connection with the opening, settlement, and development of a large portion of our far western territory, and the practical, establishment of overland lines of travel and communication between the Mississippi and Pacific coast countries, which forms the basis of my claims against the United States Government. Sustained, as this statement will be, mainly by record and sworn proofs, I claim a fair, unbiased perusal, and will cheerfully abide the result.

In April, 1851, when all that vast expanse of country between the of California and Salt Lake City, in Utah was a wholly, unknown wilderness, inhabited only by strange and consequently hostile Indians, I contracted, in company with Absalom Woodward, to carry the United States mail between Sacramento city and Salt Lake once a month each way, through in thirty days, for sum of $14,000 per annum, commencing May 1, 1851, and ending June 30, 1854.

The practicability of such an enterprise as this was at that time entirely unknown, no white men. having ever attempted a passage through the country during the winter season. The route itself had only been established by act of Congress approved September 27, 1850, and was designated as Mail Route No. 5066, extending from Fort Bridger by Salt Lake to San Francisco. So little was known by the Government of the country west of Salt Lake, that Congress designated no point at which the route should touch between there and San Francisco; hence the Post Office Department was left free to adopt, for the safest and best transmission of the mails, such route between the points named as might be found by experiment to be most practicable. Congress had also made provision. for the appointment of a special agent in California, who was authorized to let contracts, establish post offices, appoint postmasters, pay contractors, and to do in general for a term of years all such things as the Postmaster General himself could do for the interest and benefit of the postal service in that country.

The route over which I contracted to carry the mail was, by the then traveled trail about 910 miles long, extending across the Sierra Nevada mountains in their rugged portions, and through what was then and for some years after known as the "Great Unexplored Basin," stretching from the western slope of the Rocky mountains to the Eastern foot of the Sierras; and presented natural difficulties, from deep snows and swollen streams together with constant hostility from Indians along the line, that rendered the enterprise one of far more magnitude and importance than was in that early day appreciated and is in this late day comprehended and appreciated by the country generally.

Want of space on this occasion preclude a detailed narrative of my difficulties and encounters with the Indians while traversing that country, as these alone would perhaps make a volume of more than one hundred pages. Suffice it to say for the present that, during the ten years I was engaged with the mails between Salt Lake and California, I lost, at the hands of the Indians, (as the proof show,) some 16 men, upwards of 300 mules and horses, together with numerous wagons, coaches, harness, saddles, and other outfit, as also several thousand dollars in gold coin. . . .

On the 1st day of May, 1851, I left Sacramento city with the first United States mail bag that ever crossed the continent: as if to remind the government and the people of the east that civilization had now reached the western shore; a return movement that was soon to unite the two extremes seemed here to manifest itself in the inauguration and beginning of this enterprise from the Pacific coast eastward.

At this time I met no man in California who gave me encouragement, or who believed that the mails could ever be carried over this route with any degree of regularity, and, of course, my movements were watched with more than ordinary interest. On the third day after leaving Sacramento, I struck the first snow in the Sierra Nevada, and did not reach Carson Valley, some 180 miles by the then traveled trail, till the 22d day of the month. A detailed history of these trips in the snow would, of themselves, also make quite a volume. The hardships and fatigues endured are almost indescribable. Frequently we could not make more than two, and seldom over seven or eight miles a day, owing to the great depth of snow. During a period of 16 days and nights we did not find sufficient bare ground to camp on.

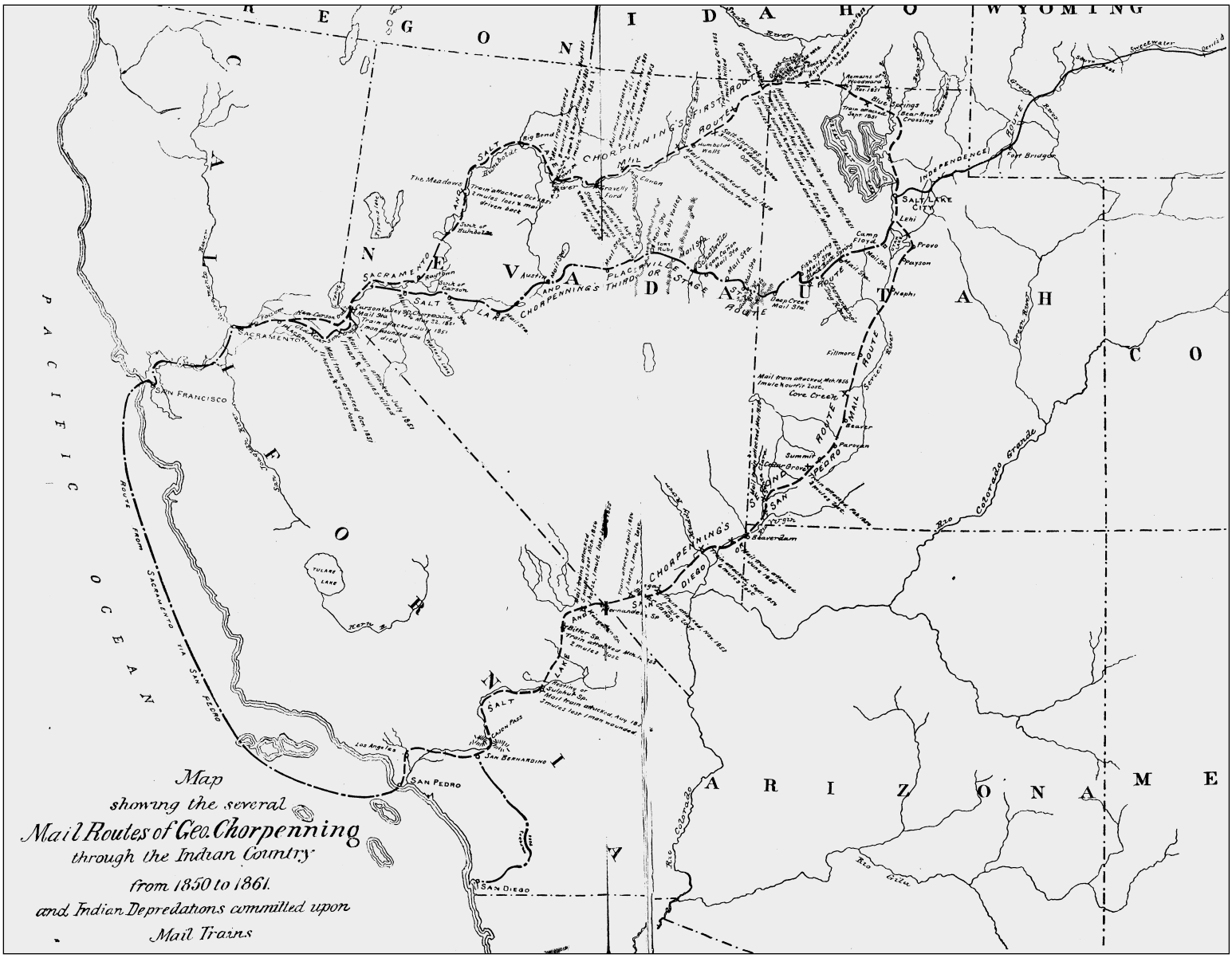
On my arrival in Carson Valley, I staked off a quarter section of land and commenced a permanent settlement. At this time there was not a single white man, except my own party, within what is how the "State of Nevada," but which was then the western portion of Utah Territory. During the summer, buildings were erected, mines were discovered in the region of the now celebrated "Comstock Lode," and began to gather in around our post. Among the first of these were John Reese, an old trader from Salt Lake, Nathaniel Haskell, Jack Redding, and numerous others. We soon got a post office established, and by winter we had sixty one inhabitants in the Territory. And from the 22d day of May, 1851, dates the beginning of that far-famed and wealthy State. The land to which I then made claim now contains the town of Genoa. When I settled in that valley I met an old Indian known among his people as "Captain Washoe," who with his band, comprising some sixty or seventy warriors, occupied a valley some 25 miles north of me. To this valley we naturally gave the name of Washoe's, or Washoe Valley, from which the now famous mines of that vicinity derived their name. Thus I might go on filling page after page of facts and incidents relative to the opening of that country, were the space allotted me.

Scarcely a train escaped difficulty with the Indians during the summer months although there was a large emigration moving through the country. On the 1st of November following, which was the beginning of winter, and the season wherein the severest trials were to come, my partner, Mr. Woodward, took what money we could raise, and, with an escort of four experienced mountain men, started with the mail for Salt Lake, where he purposed stopping for the winter to purchase stock, wagons, &c.

The train with the November mail from Salt Lake to California (which did not reach Sacramento till the latter part of December, having been out about two months) met Woodward and his party at Willow Springs, on the Humboldt river, about midway of the line, and brought me word of a severe struggle he had encountered with the Indians the day previous, which was the last heard of him until we found his remains in April following.

Meanwhile I remained at the California end of the route superintending matter there. Later experiences showed me that the snows in the Sierra Nevada mountains began to fall so as to impede progress from about the 14th to the 20th of November; but not having yet learned this, I sent a train out on the 1st of December, which, after some ten days, was compelled to return, finding it impossible to get through.

I now began to realize more fully the magnitude of the enterprise I had undertaken. No tidings from the train I knew must have left Salt Lake with the November mail, no word from Woodward's party having been received and the great Sierra Nevada looming up an impassable barrier between me and them, as well between me and my post in Carson Valley, left me (with the press and even many friends ridiculing the enterprise) in no enviable position. My mind and efforts were at once all turned to the single idea of finding a more practicable route for getting through the mountains during winter. Meanwhile the November train from Salt Lake arrived, crossing the Sierra Nevada by what was then known as the northern, or Feather River Pass; but it having been upwards of thirty days crossing, demonstrated to me measurably the impracticability of that route; and on the 1st of January I sent another train out by the regular or Carson Valley trail. In due time, however, they also returned, making affidavit to the impossibility of proceeding. As this month wore on, and still hearing



Map from *The Claims of George Chorpenning against the United States* [1889].
Courtesy of the collection of David A. White.

nothing from Woodward and party, I decided to send the train for February out, in charge of Edson Cady, to force, if possible, a passage by the Feather River route, so as to follow in the trail of Woodward, and see what, if anything, could be learned in regard to him or his party. Much excitement by this time began to manifest itself concerning the Woodward party. Having meanwhile reported regularly all the facts and conditions to Mr. Goggin, the special agent in California, I asked and obtained from him permission to take the March mail down the coast, five hundred miles, to San Pedro; thence, via Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and the Cajon Pass, to Salt Lake. I accompanied this party myself through the mountains—which I there found almost entirely free from snow—after which I returned to Sacramento, where I found still more excitement over the supposed fate of Woodward and his men. On the 1st of April I dis-

patched another party of my best men by the Northern or Feather River route. Towards the close of this month my courage was well nigh crushed out. My trains were all out, my means were gone, and, in the eyes and opinion of the public, my enterprise was a failure. The community now seemed satisfied that all my brave men were sacrificed, and seemed to act and talk as though I was individually responsible for their loss. Almost penniless, with no one to encourage me, and scarce a ray of hope for success left, I resolved, between myself and my God, that I, too, would lay my life on the Altar, or I would surmount the barriers, bring relief to my men, and fulfill my contract with the Government. And from that hour, for several years, I had no more concern or care for my life than if I had been in my father's house in Pennsylvania.

In this frame of mind I waited eagerly for the 1st of May, which was to commence the second year of the work; and on that day I started in charge of a train for Salt Lake by the direct or Carson route. Sixteen days of fearful struggle again in the snow brought me to my post in Carson Valley, where the party leaving Sacramento on the 1st of April previous had just arrived the day before, having been forty-six days in the mountains. From this party and my own I made up a new one, and proceeded to my destination. On my way there I met some of Cady's men, who had gone out in February, on their return. Cady's part was nearly sixty days reaching Salt Lake. While in the Goose Creek Mountains, all their mules were frozen to death in a single night, and they were compelled to travel on foot, carrying the mails on their backs about two hundred miles through deep snow, subsisting meanwhile on flesh taken from their frozen mules. Having rested a few days in Salt Lake after their arrival, Brigham Young sent an escort back with them to bring in the saddles and outfit left with the frozen animals; and on this trip they discovered the remains of Woodward. While I had for some time feared this, and indeed felt it was so, still a verification of it, out on the plains as I was, bore heavily upon me. I found on my arrival at Salt Lake a deep gloom over the community in consequence of this sad affair, and the apparent failure of an enterprise that was more cherished there by the people of that country than would be the success of a steamship line to Europe by the people of, New York now.

Here I found myself again not only without encouragement from anyone, but alone, not even my partner left, with all my means gone, and my pet project again regarded as a failure. My friends were deeply earnest in urging me to give up the contract. This, however, as I now see it, only served to make me more decided in my efforts; as then I again resolved to sell my life in the attempt to succeed. I was now a thousand miles from home, none to counsel with, and no one willing to accompany me back. I quietly determined, in the face of all my recent losses and trials, to carry the mail to California alone, let come what would. When this decision was made known, it met only with ridicule; and in order to buy a single mule from Messrs. Holliday & Warner, I was required to give an order on my father in the East for its payment, in case I was killed by the Indians, which they all assured me I would be. Up to this time no man had ever made the trip between Salt Lake and California alone; nor had any party ever made it in less than twenty-two days. I not only announced my determination to carry the mail alone, but also to go through in fifteen, days; this the community considered simply absurd. However, on the day appointed, my outfit—consisting of 1 saddle and one 1 pack mule, 15 pounds of hard bread, 14 pounds of ham, 7 pounds of crushed sugar, my blankets, and the mail bags—being all ready, at 11 o'clock a.m. I left the post office in Salt Lake, and in fifteen days one and a half hours I delivered the mails, followed by quite a crowd of friends and curious observers, to the post office in Sacramento city.

Summation of Chorpenning's Redress

The death of Absalom Woodward, the senior member of the partnership, was a serious blow to Chorpenning and to the Jackass Mail. Indian depredations on the mail riders and the problems with the snow over Granite Pass and the Sierra made the enterprise very precarious. Chorpenning "negotiated a $2,000 contract with John A. 'Snowshoe' Thomson to carry

At the center of the photo is the Humboldt River, running left to right. Gravelly Ford is off to the right hand side of the photo.

Gravelly Ford on the Humboldt River, looking west. Somewhere in this area is the main crossing of the California Trail to the South Bank Route. Chopenning's east- and west-bound stages would meet here, exchange mail, then return.
Photograph courtesy of Herman Zittel.

the mail to Carson Valley between 1854 and 1858. In 1858-59, . . . When storms closed the passes to sleighs, ski couriers carried the mail across the mountains."

Chorpenning's contract was canceled in 1853 due to the lack of communication between Special Agent Goggin in California and the Post Master General, but after Chorpenning went east to Washington and the misunderstanding had been explained, the mail contract was returned to him. The second contract was awarded to Chorpenning for four more years. A third and more lucrative contract was signed to run from July 1, 1858, to June 30, 1862. Concord Coaches were to be used, with stations twenty-five miles apart, from Carson Valley east. Stages were to leave Placerville and Salt Lake and meet at Gravelly Ford, exchange mail, and return.

Harrowing winter experiences in the Goose Creek country made it necessary to abandon the Salt Lake Cutoff. Explorers searched the country south of the Humboldt River. The Beckwith Trail was followed to Ruby Valley and then down to the Humboldt. Chorpenning laid out the route, and on November 21, 1858, he dispatched a column of fifty wagons and over 300 animals southwest from Temple Square in Salt Lake City. On November 29, the first stage west took the Ruby Valley shortcut.

Chorpenning joined with Hockaday & Company in a one-time race with Butterfield to carry President Buchanan's annual message to Congress from St. Louis to the Pacific Coast. In so doing Chorpenning instituted the first pony express to cross the continent. Departing from St. Joseph, Missouri, on December 15, 1858, the express crossed South Pass and proceeded to Sacramento in less time than did the Butterfield Stage via the southern route. This precedent of using horses and riders for a fast express impressed freighting entrepreneur William Russell, who later exploited the concept which led, in part, to the ruin of both Hockaday and Chorpenning.

Simpson's Explorations Across the Great Basin in 1859

Captain James H. Simpson's book, *Report of the Explorations Across The Great Basin In 1859* (reprinted, University of Nevada Press, 1983) details the work of The Corps of Topographical Engineers, U.S. Army, under Simpson in expeditions across the Great Basin for a direct wagon route from Camp Floyd, forty miles south of Salt Lake City, to Genoa, Nevada, in the Carson Valley at the foot of the Sierra Nevada.

Simpson and a party of sixty-four men set out in 1859 across the rugged terrain of the arid Great Basin region. The journey, commissioned by the United States Army, resulted in shortening the previous route from Utah to San Francisco by more than 250 miles and nearly two weeks in travel time. The Pony Express, the Overland Mail, the telegraph system, and thousands of emigrants quickly adopted the new route. Present-day U.S. Highway 50 runs along much of the trail blazed in 1859.

During Captain Simpson's explorations he notes Chorpennings mail activities. He writes about the locations of some six stations, comments on the building and condition of at least six sections of roads built by Chorpenning's men up to Overland Pass. On May 3rd, he notes that: "The California mail-stage passed us on the way to Camp Floyd."

On May 3rd Captain Simpson also notes the following while at his camp on "Meadow Creek" [by Faust in Rush Valley]: "Near our camp, Russell, Major & Waddel have a herd-camp." This raises a question: why would "Russell, Major and Waddel" have a herd-camp in Rush Valley in early May of 1859 when Chorpenning's contract would not be annulled until May 11, 1860, a year later? They must have had some inside pertinent information to which Chorpenning wasn't privy concerning the status of his mail route. A political conspiracy was apparently already at work to phase out Chorpenning's mail company.

On May 4th, Simpson moved on to Simpson Springs: "The spring where we are encamped furnishes

Overland (Hastings) Pass. Looking east from the summit, the Pony Express marker is at the right of the photo.

Simpson Springs Pony Express station.

but a scant supply of water, which, however, the mail company, which has a station here, has collected in a reservoir formed by a dam across the ravine."

Simpson continues:

> May 8th, This evening, just at dark, two six-mule teams, belonging to the mail company, came in from Ruby Valley, and, after watering, continued on to Fish Springs. Took them five days to make the trip, they lying over one day. Report the road worked through to Ruby Valley, and the mail-stage is to run the next trip as far as the station in that valley from Camp Floyd. Heretofore it has run only as far as Simpson's Spring; from that point to the Humboldt River the mail has been carried on pack mules.
>
> [May 13th] The mail party also inform us that Mr. Egan, the principal agent of Chorpenning & Company, tried twice to get south from Ruby Valley, toward Genoa, in Carson Valley, but was once defeated by the snow, and once business in Salt Lake City diverted him. It is from this point, near the southern extremity of Ruby Valley, Hasting's Pass, where we reach it, that I contemplate striking off southwestwardly from the route we are following, and shall attempt to get through with our wagons to Genoa in that direction.
>
> The mail from Camp Floyd passed this afternoon, on mule-back, to California, and the carrier reported two stages at Pleasant Valley Station, just through from Salt Lake City.

On May 16th he gives the responsibilites of Chorpennings agents:

> The mail company has three traveling agents between Salt Lake City and the Humboldt River—Howard Egan, superintending agent; Ball Robert, district agent between Salt Lake City and Pleasant Valley; and Lott Huntingdon, [Huntington] the agent for the district between Pleasant Valley and the Humboldt.

On May 18th Simpson mentions crossing over Hastings Pass on the south end of the Ruby Mountains, now called the Overland Pass:

> For the first time we in this pass get into Beckwith's, here coincident with Hasting's, road, both of which at the present time are very indistinct. Descending from the summit, by the finest kind of grade, in about 4 miles we leave Beckwith's and Hasting's roads, which go, the former northwestwardly to join the old road along the Humboldt, 10 miles above Lassen's Meadows, the latter northwardly to join the same road at the mouth of the South Fork of the Humboldt; while we strike southwestwardly, over an unknown country, toward the most northern bend of Walker's River, my object being to cut off the great detour which the other roads make in going all around by the Humboldt River and sink, to reach Genoa in Carson Valley. We also now leave Chorpenning's or Mail Company's extension of my route from Hasting's Pass, it also turning northward, and joining the old road near Gravelly Ford, which they follow by way of the sink of the Humboldt and Ragtown, on Carson River, to Genoa.

Thus Captain Simpson leaves the mail route, having noted Chorpenning's companies activities, and travels southwest to explore a shorter road to California and then return to Camp Floyd.

On May 11, 1860, Postmaster General Holt annulled Chorpenning's contract, ignoring the fact that Chorpenning had faithfully delivered the mail even though he didn't meet the contract deadlines. Russell, Majors and Waddell's pony express company obtained the new contract and seized the stations, stock, and equipment of Chorpenning's mail line. The Union Telegraph and the Overland Stage Company also used the trail. A Mr. W. H. Shearman of Ruby Valley stated that the Pony Express simply helped itself to Chorpenning's assets.

Conclusion

We have solved the mystery of Absalom Woodward's disappearance, but what about the gun and bones found on Johnsons Pass and the four men killed by Indians at Dugway Pass? Ibapah Jack's story, related thirty-nine years after the event, told of how he and the other Indians killed the four outriders. Could Jack have been mistaken on where he killed the men, or

could he have lied to Mr. Sharp about the location of the ambush? The story is the same—five men, four killed, the other escaping to die later—but the location is wrong. If Mr. Sharp's story is true, could the four men killed at Dugway Pass and the remains of the other on Johnsons Pass be five of the sixteen men that Chorpenning said he lost during the nine years of his contracts?

Since Mr. Sharp hired Ibapah Jack and his family to herd sheep at Grouse Creek, in the northwestern corner of Utah, Jack would have been familiar with Granite Pass which is just a few miles further north. Mr. Sharp would have known about a mail route through Tooele County, but maybe he wasn't aware of the other two routes and therefore fit Jack's story to his own area of knowledge.

We probably will never know the true story about who the men were that Ibapah Jack claims to have killed at Dugway Pass and the bones found on Johnsons Pass.

Mr. John M. Townley summed up Chorpenning's problems in his article cited earlier:

> Whether the loss of his contract in 1860 was the result of the machinations of ruthless competitors, or simply a classic case of undercapitalization, Chorpenning made a genuine contribution to opening transcontinental communication. He instituted, and for nine years maintained, regular mail delivery between California and Salt Lake City; he introduced wheeled transportation to the western section of the overland mail; and he reoriented the Utah-California route to a shorter, safer, and more dependable trace. Like many other entrepreneurs, Chorpenning saw opportunity on the Far Western frontier and was willing to gamble. His ultimate failure appears as yet another example of an ambitious man's reach exceeding his grasp.

Chorpenning eventually sold his claim on the government to a James Montgomery, who attempted to sell shares. Chorpenning died on April 3, 1894, without even one major newspaper in the western states noting his passing or anyone caring about him or his contributions to opening up the mail route from Salt Lake City to California. He never received compensation from the United States Government for his loses, nor did he receive the credit due him for pushing the mail through to California under extreme hardships using mules, wagons, stage coaches and his running of the first pony express.

An Associated Press article by Martin Griffith in *The Reno Gazette Journal,* on Monday June 18, 2001, stated that after one hundred and fifty years, ". . . angry Chorpenning descendants are still pressing Congress to reopen the 'Jackass Mail' case."

SOURCES

[Chorpenning, George.] *A Brief History of the Mail Service, Settlement of the Country, and the Indian Depredations.* Introduction by Henry Clifford. Los Angeles, 1972.

Hafen, LeRoy R. *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869.* Cleveland, 1926.

Simpson, James H. *Report of the Explorations Across The Great Basin In 1859.* Reno, 1983.

Thrapp, Dan L. *Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography.* 4 vols. Glendale, 1988.

White, David. *News of the Plains and Rockies,1803-1865.* V. 7: Mailmen 1857-1865, Gold Seekers, Pike's Peak, 1858-1865. Spokane, 2000.

White, David A. *Plains & Rockies, 1800-1865.* Spokane, 2001