Quarterly Publication of the
Western Cover Society

TABLE OF CONTENTS

President’s Message, etc.................1

The Kootenai Express
By Ed Mannings..........................7

Bours’ Express
By James Blaine..........................16

My Favorite Letter—1853 Santa Cruz, California
By Dr. Ed Laveroni.........................26

The Elliott Family - Illinois to California in the Summer and Fall of 1859
By Jim Petersen...........................28

Chasing the Trail of John Butterfield (A Profane Easterner Went West to Move the Mail)
By Charles Eson..........................42
Recent Awards

APS StampShow 2009 (Pittsburgh, PA) - GOLD
Chicagopex 2009 (Arlington Heights, IL) - GOLD

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The History

As the rush for gold spread north from California in the 1850’s and 1860’s, the demand for express services followed. The mails were the only source of contact with the outside world from the remote wilderness which was the Oregon, Washington and Idaho Territories and the Colony of British Columbia. In 1859, Edward W. Tracy, E. Norton, and E.L. James, formed Tracy & Co.’s Oregon Express to service the mining camps of the Inland Northwest, and had established offices in 21 towns by 1862. They were the official agents of Wells Fargo & Co., and connected with that company’s office at Portland on the Columbia River. Fort Walla Walla had been established in 1856 by the US Military, and connected the navigable waters of the Columbia River at Wallula with the newly constructed Mullan Road to Fort Benton in 1859, which was the head of navigation of the Missouri River; thus, theoretically connecting the East and West coasts of the United States. The city of Walla Walla was incorporated in 1862, and became the transportation and supply hub servicing the new mines in the region. E.L James was listed as the agent in Walla Walla for both Wells Fargo and Tracy & Co., but his partnership with Tracy was dissolved in 1862, and Tracy sold out to Wells Fargo in 1863.

Late in the fall of 1863, rumors of a new gold discovery above the 49th parallel in southeastern British Columbia began to circulate around Lewiston, Idaho Territory. Lewiston had been established as a supply center for the Idaho mines in May of 1861, and the location was the chosen terminus of the Wells Fargo stagecoach line from Walla Walla. Lewiston was also headquarters for the many pack trains that supplied the mines in places like Orofino, Elk City, and Florence. It also became the first capitol of Idaho Territory in 1863 (see Figure 2, following page). When E. L. James (& Co.) established the Kootenai Express to the Kootenai Mines, the service connected with the Wells Fargo stage in Lewiston for service on to Walla Walla. Contemporary and historical
Every once in awhile, something “new” turns up in the realm of Western Express Covers. This article concerns such a cover (Figure 1) ostensibly carried from Stockton, California to San Francisco by T. Robinson Bours & Co. (previously known solely as a mercantile and banking firm situated in the base town of Stockton, the gateway to the Southern Mines \(^{(1)}\) in Gold Rush California). The apparent fact that T. Robinson Bours & Co. also handled mail was not evident until this cover came to light. The cover is from the Adolph Sutro Correspondence, a part of which came into the possession of ephemera dealer and Western Cover Society member Ken Harrison, who has discovered other unique items over the years, including the first-known example of the Hervey’s Express handstamp (struck upon the front cover of a May, 1859 issue of *Hutching’s California Magazine*). Also pictured (Figures 2 and 3, following page) are two additional covers from the Sutro Correspondence, one bearing an unique type of Adams & Co.’s Express “Mariposa” handstamp, the other a conjunctive cover of Adams & Co.’s and Cram, Rogers & Co.’s Expresses.

The cover of primary interest, hereafter referred to as the “Bours Cover,” is a folded letter of date “14 Septb [September] 1853,” sent by Stockton merchants Lodtman & Marpe (“Wholesale and Retail Dealers in Groceries and Provisions”), to “Mr. A. Sutro, care of Messrs A. Sutro & Co., San Francisco, 110 Sacramento Street next to Duncans Chinese Salesroom.” A. Sutro & Co., importers of “variety goods, segars & tobacco,” consisted of partners Adolph Sutro, and cousin Gustave Sutro. Adolph Heinrich Joseph Sutro is best known to Western historians as the engineer / builder of the Sutro Tunnel, which drained the rising waters from the Comstock Silver Mines of Virginia City, Nevada, rendering him an extremely wealthy man in the process.

While the content of the Bours Cover is purely commercial in nature, Sutro nevertheless appreciated the potential significance of a written missive, he having penned in a February 27, 1851 letter sent from Stockton to his collective family members on the East Coast: “At last, my dears, I
My favorite letter...an 1853 letter from Santa Cruz, CA mailed April 22nd to the writer’s mother in North Monmouth, Maine explaining what happened to someone named “Lat” during one of the early voyages of the Vanderbilt Line to San Francisco from their Nicaragua Port of San Juan del Sur.

I originally thought the year-date was 1852, due to Wednesday April 7 being the date that the letter was supposedly started, but the events taking place in the letter took place in 1853. So, somehow the author put down the wrong year-date. The shipwreck mentioned in the letter occurred on the early morning of April 9, 1853, which the letter writer verifies when he said his “Lat” was in San Francisco on April 9. The ship grounded itself on the Duxbury Reef off the Coast of Marin County. According to the writer, it was because the crew got drunk and missed the gate. I bet you won’t read that in any history book! The vessel’s name was the **Samuel S. Lewis**, a steam screw vessel of the Vanderbilt Line sailing from San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua 18-19 days before.

In my research, I found it very hard to pinpoint maritime vessels that sank, wrecked, grounded or burned around this time. Every list I was able to find had different ships listed that were not on the other lists. Thanks are due to Richard Frajola and his material from the APS course at Westpex on Early Western Mail Routes regarding the crossing at Nicaragua, and the timely information emailed me from Dr. Bob Chandler, who suggested I check out the **Samuel S. Lewis**. I would have had an even harder time figuring out everything, since I started with the year 1852. There was no lack of ships going down between 1851 and 1853. Only a few had loss of life, and the enclosed letter stated no lives were lost. To me, it is inconceivable that the records of maritime problems with ships are incomplete. Even the official records of the state are incomplete.

The text of the letter is provided on the following page. The spelling wasn’t bad, but it was not perfect either.
The cover shown above (Figure 1) is from the town of Toronto, Iowa. Toronto is a town in the far western portion of Clinton County near the Wapsipinicon River. It was named by George Thorne, who was originally from Toronto, Canada and was the man who platted the town in 1853. The date may be hard to read, but it is March 12. The stamp looks to be a Scott #35 so the year is probably 1860 or 61. The cover may have begun its journey traveling down the Wapsipinicon River to where it enters the Mississippi River, some ten miles south of Clinton. From there it traveled to Saint Louis and then by the Butterfield Overland Mail Route to San Francisco (see Figure 2, top of following page). I haven’t been able to find out who the writer may have been, as I could not find any connection Wilson Elliott may have had to anyone in Iowa.

This article is not so much about the cover, but about Wilson’s trip back to Illinois in the fall of 1858, to bring his relatives to California. The vast majority of the information presented here comes from the spring 2015 issue of *The San Joaquin Historian*, which I would like to gratefully acknowledge. It contains diary entries of two of Wilson’s sisters, S. Eveline (Eva) Elliott Morris (1834-1915) and Maria J. Elliott (Norton) (1836-1912) and their journey beginning at Blackberry Station, Illinois on May 5, 1859 and ending in California, October 19, 1859.

The Elliott family came to Illinois from New Hampshire in 1838. Wilson first came to California in 1853, possibly to mine gold but eventually to start farming in the San Joaquin Valley. In 1858 he urged his father, Edmund, to come west, hoping the healthy environment would help him to recover from “Lung Fever”. His health improved so dramatically that he wrote home to his wife, Sarah, and told her to sell the farm and bring the family to San Joaquin Valley. Wilson then went back east to lead the wagon train. Eva and Sarah’s diaries list 27 people by name. The Elliott family members were as follows:
As Americans settled in the west before the Civil War there were increasing demands for mail service between major cities, including St. Louis and San Francisco. This led to lucrative mail contracts, one of which attracted a Schenectady area native.

John Warren Butterfield was born on November 18, 1801, the son of Daniel and Catherine Ebert Butterfield, in what was then known as Knox, NY, three miles up the road from the village of Altamont where I live. He was one of nine children. As I was unable to locate the deed granted to the Butterfield family, I could not determine the exact location of the farm to know if it was in Berne or in the northern area of Berne incorporated into Knox in 1822. For some reason the records are missing from 1790 to 1850, most likely due to the transition of record keeping methods used by the Dutch Van Rensselaer versus the English.

At the age of 19 John went to work as a stagecoach driver, driving from Albany to Utica. In 1821 he got a job at Thorp and Sprague Express Company in Albany.

In 1822, at the age of 21, he moved to Utica where he was employed by Jason Parker, and married Malinda Harriet Baker. They had ten children, including Daniel Adams Butterfield, who was a major general in the Union Army during the Civil War.

Butterfield’s remarkable career began when, at the Canal Coffee House in Utica, he purchased a horse and one-horse conveyance from a traveler. Butterfield utilized the rig to inaugurate his own livery service. He began to increase the facilities of travel and intercommunication in central New York. His livery grew until it became the leading one in Utica, establishing a stage line from Utica south, connecting at Mount Pleasant to New York City via Newburgh, and Philadelphia via Easton, Pennsylvania.

Among his other undertakings, Butterfield was one of the organizers of the Utica & Black River Railroad in 1853, invested shares in packet boats, and then steamboats on Lake Ontario. He was also the originator of Utica’s street railroads. The U&BR later was leased to its competitor — the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg, which was formed in 1842 as the Watertown & Rome Railroad.

After the Civil War he was the founder of the Albany and Buffalo Telegraph Company. He also built and operated the Butterfield House, Utica’s largest hotel.
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