

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

When 'Wheels' Meant Stage Coaching

by Adri Boudewyn - 2010

Last summer, Wells Fargo historian Dr. Robert J. Chandler, a gifted researcher, writer and humorist entertained us with early history of stage coach days, during the RBHS potluck picnic. He left behind for us to peruse the time schedules of various stage coach lines serving Western Sonoma. This is a takeoff and further examination of those early pioneer days.

More than any institution, Wells Fargo exemplified the early west. As historian Carl I. Wheat in 1930 wrote: "Wells, Fargo & Co's Express went everywhere, did almost anything for anybody, and was the nearest things to a universal service company ever invented." Wells, Fargo & Co's Express performed financial transactions that a bank does today.

From 1852 to 1918, Wells Fargo rushed customers' important business by any means – steamship, railroad, and, where the railroads ended, by stage coach. At first Wells Fargo contracted with independent stage line owners. Then in the great enterprise of building reliable transcontinental transportation, Wells Fargo came to own and operate the largest stagecoach empire in the world. Wells Fargo has never forgotten the importance of that image and runs a full service History Department and eight Wells Fargo History Museums around the country.

Wells Fargo served Western Sonoma County entirely between 1855-1918. Beginning in 1855, all express came into Petaluma by steamer and Wells Fargo arranged delivery from there. As transportation improved, especially on the railroads, Wells Fargo increased its offices. As the number of agencies grew, the geographic delivery area for each office decreased while service quickened.

When a town became viable, Wells Fargo picked leading entrepreneurs for its Express Agents and departed when it was no longer needed. Its agents were men and women of their communities. As Express, telegraph, railroad agents and postmasters, they acted as conduits to the outside world. Wells Fargo agents in railroad towns did not stay long. The railroad employed them, not Wells Fargo, and encouraged them to move to better their positions or just travel.

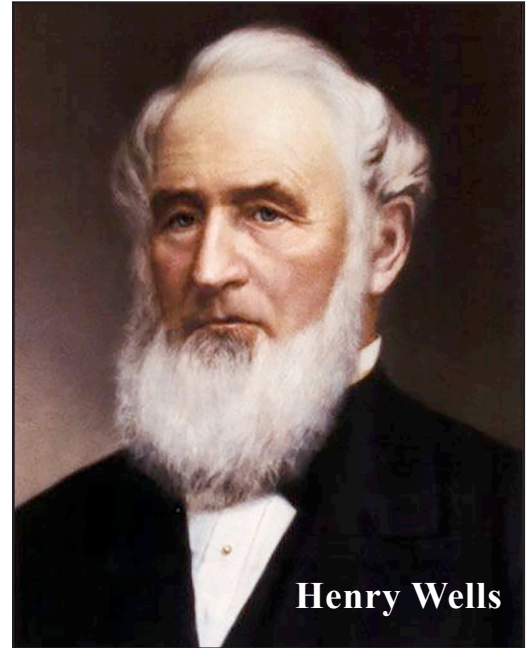
Though Wells Fargo only ran stage coaches for five years on the great overland line in the 1860s, stagecoaches everywhere carried Wells Fargo's green, iron-strapped treasure boxes. From 1852 to 1918,



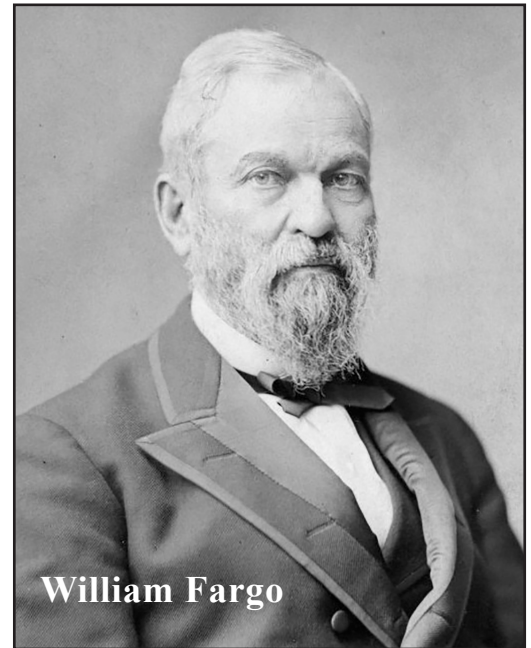
WELLS FARGO STAGECOACHES

Wells Fargo contracted with independent lines to move its express, an arrangement stage lines proudly advertised. In the public mind, gold meant Wells Fargo, and in the public eye every stagecoach became a Wells Fargo coach.

Overland stage coaching bonded intimately with expressing, the rapid and safe movement of valuables by the fastest means available. In 1839, William H. Hamden founded the expressing business, traveling between New York and Boston. The next year, Alvin Adams became an express man, and in 1841, Henry Wells joined the profession with William G. Fargo following him shortly. To gain profit, express men made exclusive contracts with stage, steamboat, and railroad companies to stake out territorial monopolies. For transporters, as the new endeavor matured, express shipments became the most valuable portion of the freight business. Night and day the stage rolled on at a pace of 5 to 12 miles an hour, across vast, treeless plains, jagged mountain passes, scorching deserts, and rivers cursed with quicksand. The coaches stopped only to change horses or let passengers slug down a cup of coffee with their beef jerky and biscuits. A trip from St. Louis to San Francisco would take from 21 to 25 days and nights. California though became an express free-for-all in 1849, as individual express men, local, regional and eastern express men all competed. By 1850 Wells Fargo & Co. dominated expressing to the end of that decade. By 1918, Wells Fargo Express had 29 express offices in Sonoma County including Bodega, Cazadero, Duncan Mills, Freestone, Guerneville, Monte Rio, Occidental, Sebastopol, Valley Ford, and Petaluma. Among its many mail contracts in 1858 were the following: from San Francisco to Petaluma 50 miles and back three times a week, a seven hour journey; from Petaluma to Tomales, 20 miles and back once a week; from Petaluma via Santa Rosa to Russian River 33 miles and back, twice a week; and from Petaluma to Smith's Ranch in Bodega, 27 miles and back once a week. The Petaluma to Smith's Ranch (the Bodega Post Office established in 1854) contract was made with James R. Wilson and William Tibbetts on March 22, 1858, for four-horse coaches at \$400 per year. The stages left Petaluma on Thursdays at 8 am, arriving in Bodega by 5 pm, then leaving Smith Ranch on Fridays at 8 am and arrive back in Petaluma by 5 pm.



Henry Wells



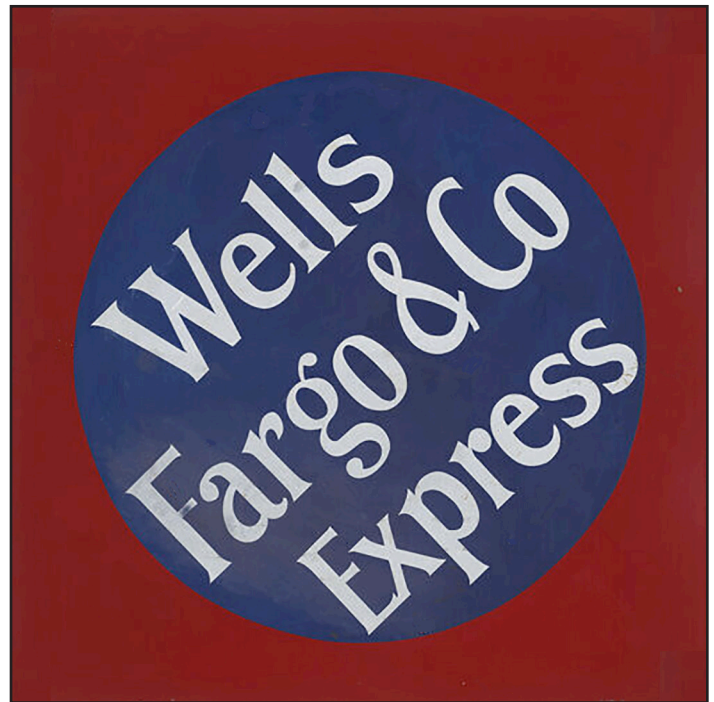
William Fargo

As changes were brought by the San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad, stage coaches were used to continue railroad passengers to their rural destinations.

Single Shipment Order: An express freight shipment of 30 Wells Fargo coaches April 15, 1868 by Abbot, Downing & Company, Concord, N. H. to Wells Fargo Company in Omaha, Nebraska. The railroad engine "Pembroke" pulled out of Concord with the 30 coaches on 15 flat cars and four boxcars crammed with 60 four-horse sets of harness and spare parts. This special cargo was valued at \$45,000. For the comfort of passengers in these 2,200 pound, \$1,100 vehicles, Wells Fargo called for "bodies made roomy inside & 3 inch more room between back & middle seats; russet leather lined (and) Damask head & fringe."

Candle lamps (were to be) extra large size and orders stated: "Paint Bodies Red, Carriages Straw. Letter 'Wells, Fargo & Company' (rail); 'U.S. Mail' (top door rail)." This famous scene has also been depicted in paintings. The original photo sold on E-Bay for \$3,608.84. Information from an article by Dr. Robert J. Chandler, senior researcher at Wells Fargo Historical Services in the California Territorial Quarterly of Spring 2007.

Odds and Ends: California's stage fares from the mid-1850s to the 1890s were 12.5 cents per mile. A team of four horses or mules drew a wagon an average of 120 miles a day, speed ranging from 12 miles per hour on the prairies to two miles on sand or mountain roads, with passengers walking. Travelers changed drivers and wagons every 300 miles. Two 40 minute breaks at windowless adobes or log cabins, with clay floors and heated by fires of dried dung and roots, sufficed for two meals, which ranged from horrendous to delicious. Crowding and discomfort were primary complaints. William Tallack moaned on June 18, 1860, at Fort Tejon after only four days' journey: "What with the mail bags and passengers, we were so tightly squeezed that there was scarcely room for any jerking about separately in our places, but we were kept steady and compact, only shaking 'in one piece' with the vehicle itself." 1860 customer Raphael Pumpelly noted the ludicrous situation arising with the front and middle seats of a nine-passenger wagon facing each other: "It was necessary for these six people to interlock their knees; and there being room inside for only ten of the twelve legs, each side of the coach was graced by a foot, now dangling near the wheel, now trying in vain to find a place of support."



After another traveler arrived at Fort Smith, Arkansas, he wrote to a San Francisco paper on November 28, 1858: "All of us who came in the stage have the twitches at night, or what is called by stage drivers the 'starts.' It is occasioned by being so long confined in a sitting position, and constantly tossed up and down by the jolting of the stage."

Sonoma County roads and highways of today follow the trails used by the Indians long ago. Animals that lived here before man arrived had made these narrow paths that the Indians found and used while they were searching for food and water. The first settlers made good use of these early trails and as more and more people and horseback traveled over them they became our first roads. Soon ox-carts and wagons deepened and widened them. They were of great importance to the settlers for over them came news from their old homes and goods that were needed. That included stage coaches carrying mail, express, and passengers that ran between the many settlements. Some stage coaches were double decked for passengers and freight. When new post offices were established they were either included in the old stage routes or an additional route was added to take care of them.