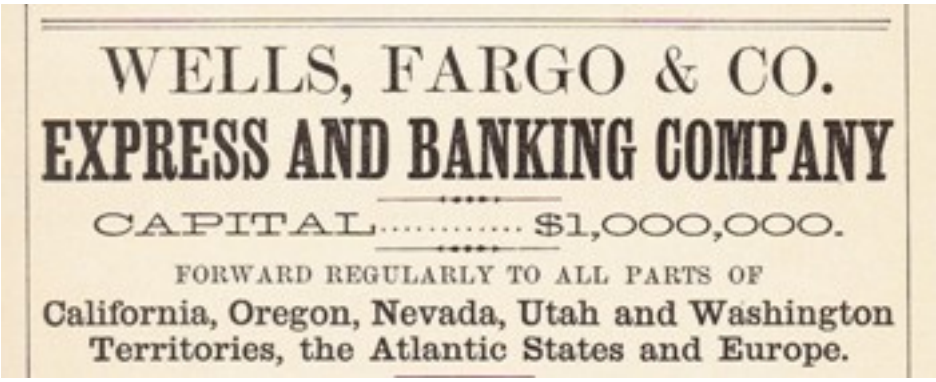
by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



Can a story be just too good to be true? A much-told tale of a Carson City area stagecoach robbery in the late 19th century fails to hold up under scrutiny. People still search for the loot somewhere in the vicinity of the old State Prison. The story, however, is pure invention, first appearing in a book called *Pots O' Gold* in 1935.

Former prison warden Matt Penrose is credited as the author of the pot-boiler, although the work was written by confidence man and convict John K. "Jack" Meredith according to Nevada historian Phil Earl. Whatever the nature of the authorship, people were misled by the stage robbery story and treasure hunters have been on a wild goose chase ever since.

We are not told when the "Wells Fargo stage" robbery occurred. The "gold bullion" worth $60,000 was being shipped to the U.S. Mint in Carson City from the Comstock. The Mint first produced gold and silver coins in February 1870, although bullion deposits were accepted in 1869 as the mint had expected to issue its first coins in that year.

By January 1870, the Virginia & Truckee Railroad operated between Virginia City and Carson City. Shipping heavy bars of bullion using Wells Fargo Express was much easier and faster by train than a stagecoach and much safer when it came to the prospects of a hold-up. A stagecoach line would have been hard-pressed to compete with the V&T Railroad. Arguably then, 1869 was the only year in which a stagecoach could have transported bullion from the Comstock to the Mint. The story claimed the bullion was gold and weighed 300 pounds. Comstock bricks at that time were mostly silver with some gold and would have weighed 3000

pounds.

According to Penrose, the stage had passed through the milling town of Empire in eastern Ormsby County and was on the final leg of the trip, a few short miles to Carson City. The driver and the guard, believing they were no longer in danger with the state capital in sight, relaxed their vigil, only to find four armed robbers jumping out of the sagebrush and waylaying the stagecoach. At the point of a gun, the “treasure boxes” were dumped to the side and the stage proceeded to Carson City on a dead-run.

A posse was soon formed and rushed to the site of the robbery where it picked up the trail of the robbers. The highwaymen had not traveled far when three of the four men were killed in a pitched gun battle. The person who was captured was described as a Mexican, and later versions of the Penrose story by other authors claim that the man’s name was Manuel Gonzales. “In due time,” wrote Penrose, “the Mexican was tried and sentenced to twenty years in prison.”

Gonzales, we are told, would not divulge where the bandits had hidden the gold bullion and later claimed he could see the location from his prison cell window. After some eight years a governor pardoned Gonzales because the prisoner had contracted consumption and the authorities and Wells Fargo hoped that upon his release he would make an effort to retrieve the stolen bullion. While that did not happen, an “old Dutchman” who ran a butcher shop in Carson City befriended Gonzales and finally convinced the career stagecoach robber to take him to the hiding place. As fate would have it, just as the two men were about to travel to where the bullion was stashed, “the Mexican,” wrote Penrose, “was seized with a hemorrhage, and died in a few minutes.”

Why then have no newspaper accounts documenting a robbery of this magnitude ever been found? Dr. Robert J. Chandler, Wells Fargo historian in San Francisco, told me the story is preposterous. According to Dr. Chandler, “papers nationwide would have carried the story; historians would know the exact time the robbery occurred and all specifics.”

In addition, there is no record of a Manuel Gonzales, or any Hispanic male, being tried for a stagecoach robbery in Ormsby County and serving time in the State Prison. Editor Myron Angel’s groundbreaking History of Nevada (1881) contains nothing on the crime. The biography of the famed Wells Fargo detective, James B. Hume and Howard Hickson’s history of the Carson City mint are also mute on the subject.

The bogus tale will live on, of course; it is already gaining new life on internet web pages like www.LostTreasureUSA.com. Treasure hunters will continue to haunt archives, historical societies, museums, and special collections for leads to something that never happened. After all, a confidence man, convicted of forgery, wrote the story. Such is the gullibility of mankind and the power of the myth.

For further information on John K. "Jack" Meredith, read "Confidence Man" by Phillip I. Earl, *Nevada Magazine* (Sept./Oct. 2005). See also, Nevada Lost Mines & Buried Treasures (1981), by Douglas McDonald, pp. 118-120.

Illustration from *The First Directory of Nevada Territory, 1862*, republished by the Talisman Press in 1962.

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