

Wes Cowan: Our next story takes a fresh look at an almost-forgotten story in the building of the American West. It's January of 1856. Snow in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains cuts off thousands of settlers from the outside world. The 7,500-foot range turns back all attempts to get through with mail and supplies . . . until one man steps forward. John "Snowshoe" Thompson makes the crossing on homemade skis and becomes the sole link to people living in isolation. Thompson was a key figure in the building of the American West. He's been called the "father of California skiing" and perhaps, the greatest postal carrier of all time. Now, over a 130 years later, a man in California thinks he may own an object that gives life to the legend. Five years ago, on his way home from Montana, Michael Trujillo of Northern California made what may be a remarkable find.

Michael Trujillo: I pulled in to a -- a small antique store, and I was looking through it at some saddlebags and so forth, and I came across a very interesting-looking bag. So I purchased it. I threw it in the back of my truck. On the way home I looked and I noticed a tag that identified it as "Shoe Thompson."

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan, and I've come to Modesto, California, to see for myself. As an auctioneer of Western Americana, I'm totally intrigued by this story. Could this be an artifact from Snowshoe Thompson? Ah, so here's the bag, huh?

Michael: This is the bag.

Wes: Wow. It's really seen its better days, huh?

Michael: It sure has.

Wes: What's so special about this bag?

Michael: I have a pretty good feeling this bag may have belonged to Snowshoe Thompson because I came across a label on the bottom of the bag here. Want to take a look?

Wes: Boy, it's in terrible shape. Oh, let's see, I see the top line I can make out "o-e Thompson ... presented." I guess that must be "Museum by the . . . President." "American Railway Express." Well, I've got to tell you; the label is more than I normally have to go on. If you'll let me take it with me, it'll be very helpful.

Michael: Oh, I sure will.

Wes: Oh, thanks. The legend of Snowshoe Thompson grew during the Gold Rush, a defining era in the history of America. In 1848, 150,000 men streamed into northern California, and two years later, the first prospectors crossed the Sierras into the border country between California and what was then the Utah Territory. While the lust for gold brought some, religious persecution drove others, as thousands of Mormon settlers arrived, fleeing violent attacks in the Midwest. Their most important link to the outside world was the letters they could send and receive. But when the winter storms arrived each December, it was like an iron door slammed shut. High winds and 30-foot snowdrifts made the Sierras virtually impassable. For three to four months, people received no communication. Separated from their wives and children, many men didn't even know whether their loved ones were living or dead. To find out more about Snowshoe Thompson and his mailbag, I'm headed to the archives of the Sacramento Public Library. Okay, here it says John A. Thompson was born in Norway and came to America when he was 10 years old. In 1851, he traveled to California in search of gold, but made little money. It was the winter of 1856 when Thompson first delivered the mails. Those who attempted to cross the Sierras with pack mules and regular snowshoes had failed, but Thompson made the crossing -- on skis. His arrival created a sensation among the gold miners anxious for news from

the outside world, and his exploits soon caught the public eye. Ah, look, here's a story from the Sacramento Daily Union. January 10, 1857. It's about a rescue of a trapped and frozen gold miner. Oh, listen to this: "On entering, Mr. Thompson found a man lying alone upon the floor in that dreary spot, without other covering than the clothes he wore and the boots frozen to his feet." This guy had been here for 12 days. Thompson got the man to safety, but his legs were going to have to be amputated. So Thompson crossed back over the Sierras, got chloroform, came back just in time to save the man's life. Boy, he was a bona fide hero. The man who conquered the mountains has become a folk legend in the areas he served. Snowshoe Thompson is honored with festivals and displays in small towns on both sides of the Sierras. This statue of Thompson flying down the mountain, his bag strapped tightly to his back, stands outside the Courthouse Museum in Genoa, Nevada. If Michael's bag is genuine, it's clearly an important find. But there's nothing in the contemporary accounts about Thompson's mailbag. And Michael's bag is a saddlebag of some sort. I can't imagine how Thompson would have carried it on his back. To determine the age and purpose of Michael's bag, I'm headed to Sacramento, California. I'm meeting my friend, Brian Witherell, who specializes in early California and Nevada artifacts. Here's the saddlebag I told you about, and what I want to really find out is how old it is and what you think it is.

Brian Witherell: Well, first of all, just by looking at them, they appear just to be a commercial-grade leather. The stitching, it would seem more commercial-like, from the second half, probably 1870s, 1880s, of the 19th century.

Wes: Okay, that's a little late, but still early enough to have been used by Thompson. But what about their purpose? Could these have been used for mail?

Brian: I suppose they could have been used for anything. I think they're just simply saddlebags. Slanted here, this would probably sit on the back of the horse behind the saddle, behind the cantle there.

Wes: Oh, the cantle of the saddle, which is that high part at the back of the saddle.

Brian: This would just drop off and then this would be your saddlebags. Then you see, this would be where you would access it here. And then the bottom parts of the bags obviously were to hold most of the material. And then you have this strapping area that you'd secure it with. And then closed off, perhaps, with this -- with this little clasp.

Wes: But you do think that these could have been from the latter part of Snowshoe Thompson's career, from the 1870s?

Brian: I do, yeah, it seems to date about 1870s, 1880s.

Wes: But not used as a backpack.

Brian: I don't see how it could be used as a backpack.

Wes: Well, that's a little weird. If he was skiing, you'd think that he would have carried it on his back. I'm not sure how he would have used this bag. But it is from the right period. To discover what kind of equipment Snowshoe would have used, I'm driving through the Donner Pass to the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. As my vehicle makes the climb, it's difficult to imagine the hardships Thompson must have faced traveling this very same route. Here at the summit, I'm meeting with ski instructor Nina McLeod and ski maker Peter Bartell, experts on 19th century Nordic ski equipment and techniques.



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Nina McLeod: Wow!

Peter Bartell: That's good.

Wes: Boy, Nina, I've never seen anybody use a pole to ski like that.

Nina: Well, Snowshoe Thompson used a pole for pushing off and for balance, like on a tightrope, and he would also use it to slow down.

Wes: Wow! Now, before we get into the skis, I always thought these were snowshoes, and yet, you guys call these snowshoers. How come?

Nina: Well, the Norwegian immigrants came over and had these skis, but the miners in this area called them snowshoes, and they were also called snowshoers.

Wes: And, Pete, those are the kind that he would have used?

Peter: That's right. Contemporary accounts say that Thompson's skis were made of pieces of green oak 10 feet long and about 25 pounds.

Wes: I ask Nina if she can confirm that Snowshoe Thompson wore a backpack while skiing.

Nina: I have this engraving from 1857, and there you can see, it looks like he has a pack and you see the straps going over his shoulder?

Wes: Uh-huh; oh, yeah, yeah. The engraving that Nina showed me is the only known contemporary image of the bag Thompson used to transport the mail on skis. Nina told me that in every artist's depiction she's seen, Thompson is wearing a backpack, none of which look like our bag. Maybe we don't have a Thompson mail-bag. Just to demonstrate Snowshoe Thompson's typical burden, Peter had me try on his reconstruction of Thompson's gear.

Peter: Okay, Wes, you forgot your pack.

Wes: Oh, my gosh! How much does this thing weigh?

Peter: It weighs about 60 pounds.

Wes: Oh, come on! He wasn't going over the mountains with a 60-pound pack!

Peter: Yeah, you're getting off easy. He was carrying up to a hundred pounds.

Wes: Oh, my g... All right, here I go. Oh, I'm getting no traction. This was hard enough with the right equipment. Woo-hoo! It didn't take long to convince me that Thompson must have used a backpack. But where does that leave our bag? The only thing that ties the bag to Thompson is that tattered label. The discoloration of the paper indicates age, but it could be a fake. I examine the label under ultraviolet light. The light might reveal differences in age of materials on the surface of the object, but I don't see any here. The label seems authentic. Now I've got to investigate the information on the label. The label seems to read "American Railway Express." Back in the archives, I'm looking for information on the American Railway

Express Company. This is June 26, 1918, New York Times. "Organize Express Merger." It says here that in 1918, at the height of the First World War, the federal government nationalized the express companies to expedite the movement of goods and military personnel. The new government-run company was called the American Railway Express. Thompson used to work the mail routes owned by the old express companies. I wonder if the American Railway Express inherited Snowshoe's mailbag. But the label also seems to indicate that the American Railway Express gave Michael's bag to a museum. Wonder which one? After an online search, I find an article that might tell me the answer. This article talks about the American Railway Express Company donating a famous western artifact to a museum. The artifact is the shotgun that belonged to Black Bart, the famous outlaw. The museum that they're giving it to: the Pony Express Museum. So, the American Railway Express donated items to the Pony Express Museum, which was dedicated to the history of the mail service in the American West. Huh. Could they have also given them Snowshoe Thompson artifacts? Unfortunately, the museum closed its doors in 1955, but some of their artifacts went to the Wells Fargo museum in San Francisco, and that's where I'm heading next. Is it possible that the Wells Fargo museum ever owned Michael's bag? I ask museum curator Anne Hall to search her records for any mention of Snowshoe Thompson, the American Railway Express, or the Pony Express Museum. Oh, thanks very much.

Anne Hall: Good luck.

Wes: Appreciate it. Here's the catalog from the sale of the Pony Express Museum collection in 1986, but there's no reference to Michael's bag. It's disappointing, to say the least. I've come a long way in this investigation, but the truth is that Michael's bag looks nothing like the depictions of Snowshoe Thompson's bag. And the clues on the label have led us to a dead end. Hey.

Anne: Hi, I found something else I thought might be of use.

Wes: Then as I was leaving, Ann told me that she knows that Snowshoe Thompson delivered the mail in the summer . . . on horseback. Maybe a saddlebag does make sense. Then I found something that sewed everything together. I know what to tell Michael.

Michael: Okay.

Wes: The bad news from your standpoint is that those saddlebags were not used by Snowshoe Thompson as a backpack while he was skiing.

Michael: Okay.

Wes: Then I told Michael what I found inside the folder at Wells Fargo: a photograph of Snowshoe Thompson I'd never seen before. And on his lap was an 1870s mailbag. Thompson clearly used different bags to carry the mail in different seasons.

Michael: Oh, fantastic.

Wes: So, in the end, the circumstantial evidence is very strong, and all the facts on that label. Check out.

Michael: So this could be Snowshoe Thompson's bag?

Wes: Could be.

Michael: Well, thank you very much, Wes. I appreciate it.



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Wes: In 1868, the railroad finally caught up to Snowshoe Thompson, as the Central Pacific Railroad completed the line across the High Sierras. Within a few years, men like Thompson were no longer needed. In 1876, at age 49, Snowshoe Thompson died suddenly of pneumonia. He was buried in a small plot in Genoa, Nevada, beneath the mountains that he loved.