

## Sloane's Column:

# Bicycle Mail, San Francisco, 1894

by George B. Sloane (From STAMPS Magazine, Feb. 18-Apr. 29, 1950)

February 18, 1950

In the Summer of 1894, the American Railway Union called a strike in California which crippled transportation in the San Joaquin Valley, and as a result no mail moved in or out of San Francisco. In this emergency, a bicycle service was privately organized to relay mail between San Francisco and Fresno, and the stamps used in this service are listed in Scott's U. S. Catalog, under the Locals section. The history of the issue has been widely published and the two best articles are those by H. B. Phillips, in *Filatelical Facts and Fallacies*, July, 1894, and Arthur C. Banta, in *Weekly Philatelic Gossip*, December 8, 1934. Banta, who operated the bicycle mail, draws heavily on the Phillips' article, and subsequent articles I have seen may be dismissed since all draw on one or the other of these two articles.

These notes of mine are concerned with the stamps issued and used in the service. I have been trying to reconcile what I have seen in the stamps with what I have read of them in these stories. As yet I have not been able to make it all add up, and I am now at the stage where I think some questions are in order.

The first stamp used, we are told (and believe it), was hand engraved on copper, mounted on a wooden block. For all the Californians concerned in its production, it is remarkable that it read, "San Fransisco," where it should have read, "Francisco." After eight hundred stamps had been printed, one at a time, from the die (according to the articles mentioned, which I do not dispute, since I have never seen a pair or other multiple piece with the "s" error), the engraver made a crude correction, altering the "s" to a "c." At the same time the die was considerably retouched and there were added many additional marks, like "whitecaps," on the roadway. The chain of the bicycle was touched up and there is a distinct white curved mark, like a boomerang, just below the "s" of "Francisco." At this time, the initials "E.D." (for Eugene Donze) were cut into the left bottom frame line. Donze was an engraver for Hall Brothers, a Fresno firm of undertakers (probably engraved nameplates for caskets) and he has always been credited as having engraved the die for the bicycle stamps, but Banta, in his 1934 article, says he learned in later years that while Donze "agreed to provide a die," the actual engraving had been done



The San Fransisco error of spelling (Sc. 12L1) in a sheet of six. At <http://www.rfrajola.com/fresno/fresno.pdf>, the finest study I have seen on this issue, it is explained that the first stamps (12L1) were individually printed on the sheet, confirmed by the varying alignments from one sheet to another.

by J. c. Duelle, "a retired U.S. Government engraver, whose home was...near Fresno." From an examination of the work. I'd guess that Duelle was never an engraver at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

February 25, 1950

After the die error, "Fransisco," had been crudely corrected to "Francisco," a new printing of the stamps was made. Banta in his 1934 article says this comprised about 1,000 stamps. Two U.S. stamped envelopes of the 1887-94 issue were also imprinted from the altered die. These are the 2¢ green on white, and the 2¢ green on amber, Scott's Nos. U311 and U312.



Crudely corrected "Francisco" 25¢ green (Sc. 12L2) sheet of six. This sheet measures 64mm in height, which identifies it as the July 9, 1894 first printing that was used to carry mail rather than the July 16 printing after the post closed.

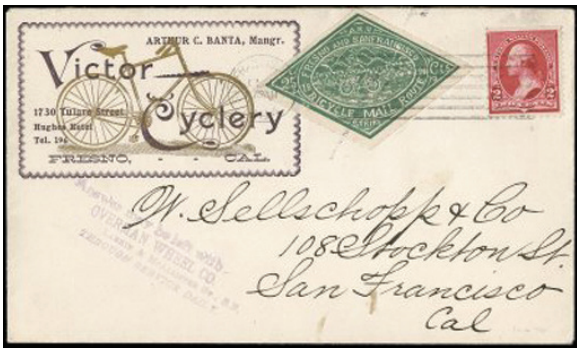
The first mail left Fresno for San Francisco on July 6, 1894, and legitimate service ended on July 18th. Banta, who had conceived the idea of the bicycle service during the strike emergency, owned the Victory Cyclery, in Fresno, and the San Francisco end of the route was



Fresno to Santa Barbara cover carried on July 8, 1894 Northern trip with Bicycle Mail 25¢ with "San Fransisco" error (Sc. 12L1) tied by Menlo Park July 11 circular date stamp, violet answer handstamp along left side, also with manuscript "Via Boat to S.F.", also with violet bicycle handstamp and Santa Barbara July 14 4 p.m. receiving backstamp on reverse.



25¢ green, Retouched Die (Sc. 12L2) tied by purple bars cancel, 2¢ (Sc. 220) tied by oval grid with duplex "Fresno Cal. Jul. 12 8:30PM 1894" circular datestamp on blue cover to Fresno Cal., backstamped with Jul. 12, 1894 "Victor Bicycle Messenger Service" Fresno office datestamp with bicycle illustration.



Sc. 12L2, 25¢ green, retouched die with "San Francisco" spelling corrected, tied to Victor Cyclery illustrated corner card cover of Arthur C. Banta. The Bicycle stamp along with a 2¢ carmine are tied on arrival by a "San Francisco, Cal. Jul. 19, 1894" machine cancel, the Bicycle stamp also tied by bars cancel, cover with violet return answer cachet on the front and bicycle handstamp on the reverse dated July 17, 1894 on departure. This was probably the last trip from Fresno to San Francisco.

operated by the Overman Wheel Co., makers of the Victor bicycles. Banta states that about 380 letters were legitimately carried during the period of the emergency. Each letter carried with the 25¢ bicycle stamp also had to bear the government postage of 2¢ in accordance with the postal laws. It is apparent that there were many bicycle stamps left over.

According to the Phillips and Banta articles, the printing was done by O.J. Treat, of the Commercial Printing Co., of Fresno, and both writers maintain that all of the bicycle stamps were printed one at a time, direct from the die, and that no plates were made. Since the stamps are seen in sheets of six subjects, that would have meant six separate impressions to complete a sheet. If this is so, then the alignment of the subjects on these sheets is extraordinarily well done for spacing and it is all the more remarkable that they could reproduce the identical alignment and spacing on more than one sheet. In my opinion, there is no question that the printings after the die was corrected were made from a plate. I think the evidence of alignment proves it. The "Sisco" error, however, was likely printed one at a time from the die. I have never seen a multiple piece of this error.

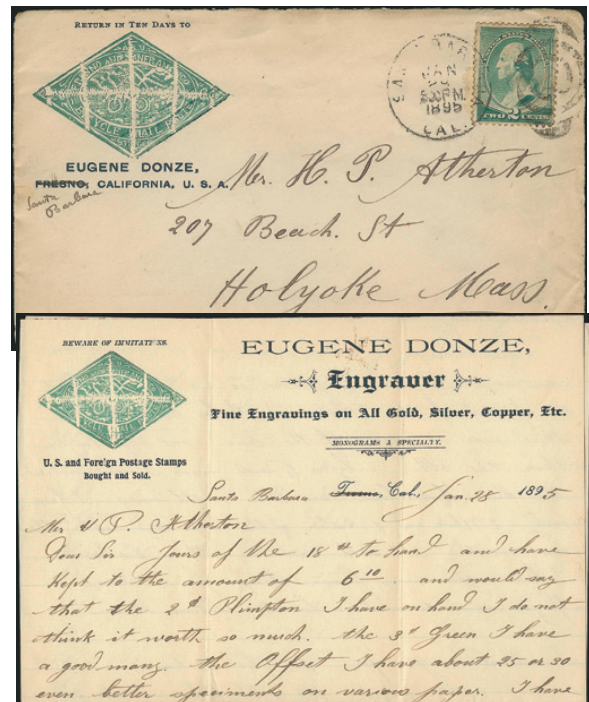
It would be my guess that a plate was made at this time because collectors were becoming interested and philatelic

possibilities, previously overlooked, were being considered. The legitimate service was nearing its end and collectors were buying the stamps and asking for covers. Also, about this time, it was decided that something be done to assure the interests of collectors, therefore the die must be defaced to prevent future reprintings which, according to Banta's 1934 article, would have rendered "unused specimens of the stamps...worthless." Thereupon, Banta requested Donze, the supposed engraver of the die, and who had possession of it, to cut such marks into the face of it that the die would be permanently disfigured.

March 4, 1950

With the conclusion of the Bicycle Mail service, Arthur C. Banta, who operated the route, had instructed Donze, who held the die, to deface it and turn the die over to him. Donze did so, and at the same time handed Banta a number of impressions printed from the die, after defacement, which, according to Banta's 1934 article, were "to show and prove that the die had been defaced. But the canny Banta submitted one of these impressions to H. B. Phillips, who immediately pronounced it a counterfeit, and suggested that steps be taken to secure the original die and disfigure the same at once."

Donze, let us say, had a sentimental attachment for the original die and evidently had cut a second die, for the thing was a copy of the first die, or as collectors would term it, a counterfeit. (In my opinion Donze was the actual engraver of the original die. Banta, in later years, was led to believe the work had been done by J. C. Duelle, but the style is definitely that of one who cut name plates for caskets, and that was



San Francisco Bicycle Mail corner card of the defaced die in green used by Eugene Donze, on cover with 2¢ green (Sc. 213) tied by "San Francisco Cal. Jan. 29 5:00PM 1895" duplex and sent to prominent stamp collector H. P. Atherton in Holyoke Mass., with original enclosure with same design. The contents discuss the Bicycle Mail local and why there are so many varieties including, "I engraved the die in a hurry and made a mistake in spelling 'San Francisco'. There were more than 810 struck before we found it out".

Donze's profession). Impressions from the counterfeit die show a six-line defacement, one horizontal and five vertical lines, also many discrepancies and variations, on the whole, a very good copy—but a counterfeit.

Banta enlisted the aid of the late Charles E. Jenny, a Fresno collector, and both personally called upon Donze, exhibiting the Phillips letter, whereupon Donze went to a safe, in the undertaking establishment where he was employed, and produced the genuine die. Banta and Jenny witnessed its defacement on the spot. All three then called upon a local Notary Public where Donze signed an affidavit, August 23, 1894, stating that the die had been defaced and not used again after the mail service ended July 18th.

Up to this point the record is quite clear and the material seen apparently bears out the story, but there are some points not explained. How explain a green impression from the counterfeited die on an envelope with the corner card imprint of the "Victor Cyclery, Fresno, Cal., Arthur C. Banta, Mangr.?" How to account for a cover, same corner card, and an impression of the counterfeit die, sent over the Bicycle route, franked with a U. S. 2¢ 1890, postmarked at Fresno, August 15, 1894 (remember that service ended July 18th), addressed to the Overman Wheel Co., San Francisco? I agree with Banta that the die was a fake, but why were impressions used on his envelopes? Who dunnit?

Mar. 18, 1950

The usage of the counterfeit die with the six-line defacement on envelopes bearing the Banta, "Victory Cyclery," Fresno, corner card could be excused on the grounds that Banta had accepted delivery of the die from Donze in good faith and had not then learned that it was a fake. Donze's affidavit was executed August 23, 1894 and the cover previously described was used over the bicycle route, August 15th.

When the strike emergency had ended and the government's postal facilities were again in normal operation, the public was no longer interested in the service. But Banta, at the Fresno end, and the Overman Wheel Co., at San Francisco, continued to shuttle covers over the route and these could only have been intended for stamp collectors.

I am looking at a cover which supposedly went over the bicycle route, bearing a U.S. 2¢ Columbian, and a bicycle stamp with the "Fransisco" error. Postmarked at Fresno, the date seems to be "July 2, 8 PM, 1894." It is backstamped, "San Fransisco," apparently on the same day, at 2:30 P.M. If these dates could be accepted for what they seem to be, it would be an extraordinary item, used several days before the service actually started. It's laughable, too, that they could run time backwards! Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that someone had used a knife to erase numerals in the two government postmarks, and the cover more likely left Fresno July 20th, and arrived at San Francisco, July 21st. But the cover also has the big, customary backstamp of the "Victor Bicycle Messenger Service" and this is plainly dated, "July 1, 1894," without tampering of any kind. Now who could have altered the government's postmarking dates, and dated back the Victor Bicycle handstamp?

Stamp collectors must have been showing considerable interest in the bicycle stamps. Banta says, in his 1934 article, that only 1000 of the stamps were printed after the die error was corrected. In disagreement I find an old advertisement, which I believe is from *Filatellic Facts & Fallacies*, about 1894, wherein Banta offered the stamps for sale to collectors. In this advertisement he states that the printing was 2,000 on white paper, and another 500 on an "amber" paper, and these figures



A genuine cover with a 2¢ Columbian (Sc. 231), tied by "Fresno Cal. Jul. 16, 1894" duplex on Victor Bicycle illustrated advertising cover used locally, also bearing Bicycle Mail Route, Cal., 25¢ green (Sc. 12L1) with spelling error "San Fransisco", tied by purple handstamp, with large purple "Victor Bicycle Messenger Service, Fresno and San Francisco, Fresno Cal. Jul. 16, 1894" backstamp with illustration of bicycle.

add up to 2,500 stamps.

The indications are that even these were not enough to go around, and about this time, I would guess, a new plate of six subjects was made up from the defaced die, the original die that Donze had turned over so reluctantly. Whatever eventually happened to the counterfeit die I do not know.

April 18, 1950

The original die, recovered from Donze and defaced with two irregular lines cut across its surface, one horizontal, one vertical, and each drawn from corner to corner was used to make up a new plate of six subjects, three stamps above and three more below. Defacing marks are identical in each subject. In the earlier undefaced plate the six stamps were grouped in one compact block, but in the defaced plate the two rows are grouped in a staggered arrangement, one stamp in the top row juts out at the left, beyond the lower row, while the third stamp in the lower row juts out at the right end and the designs are lined up to rest on their lower left sides where previously they rested on their lower right sides. For collecting interest, the right end stamp in the lower row was deliberately placed upside down, a "tete-beche" variety. A sheet at hand is without gum, but rouletted in the same form as the previous issues. I have seen no copy from the defaced die used.

The originals, all in the 25¢ denomination, with and without the "s" error, are found in various shades of blue green, some lighter or darker, but holding to a good standard. Paper varies from a white to an ivory. Sheets were imperforate on the outer sides, but rouletted between the stamps. Some were not fully rouletted resulting in varieties imperforate between. The cancellation used was of two parallel bars, made from printer's rules, usually applied in black, although violet has also been seen.



Bicycle Mail Route, Cal., 25¢ green corrected die Imperforate vertically in strip of three (Sc. 12L2a)

The U.S. stamped envelopes imprinted are the 2¢ green on white and 2¢ green on amber issue of 1887-94, Scott's U311 and U312. The 25¢ bicycle stamp is imprinted at the

upper left corner in a dark violet brown, and according to Banta's 1894 advertisement 150 each were printed, and of these, according to his later statement, only 40 were sent over the mail route. These were all made after the "s" error in the die had been corrected. Scott notes that reprints of the envelope items were later made from the defaced die. I have seen none but they could well exist.

I find it hard to believe the service rated the supposed "emergency" importance so many philatelic writers have since bestowed upon the issue. The Post Office Department probably regarded it with little or no enthusiasm, and the general public of San Francisco and Fresno, suddenly deprived of mail communication with each other, seem to have been curiously apathetic. The 25¢ extra fee no doubt dampened interest. Banta admitted that only 380 letters were shuttled over the route during the strike, July 6 to 18, 1894, and many of these covers I have noted were addressed to stamp collectors or dealers, and often to agents of Banta and the Overman Wheel Co.

April 29, 1950

In 1935, a reprint of the Bicycle Mail stamp was made, the stamps showing the two-line die defacement previously described. These reprints were from a new die or plate and probably because the old die was not in condition for printing. This Banta reprinting was to mark the 40th anniversary of his Fresno-San Francisco Bicycle Mail, and a relay race was staged over the old route of 1894. Cacheted covers and reprints were offered to the stamp collecting public and permission was granted by the Post Office Department to conduct the one-day revival on May 1, 1935.



The 1935 Re-Run on cover addressed to Banta, individually signed by Banta, as usual. Note the crossed out "Mail".

The reprint is in a yellow green, unlike any earlier printings. However, the copies which were used on the cacheted covers carried back and forth on this special trip differ from the unused copies. In the inscription, "Bicycle Mail Route," on these used copies, the word "Mail" is obliterated with a bar, printed in the color of the stamp. While the Department allowed them, on this anniversary trip, to pass a number of U.S. Post Offices with mail, the government nevertheless insisted that the word "Mail" be stricken from the stamp, and all covers had to be franked with government postage.

Banta's brochure announced that the Bicycle stamps would be cancelled in the same manner as those of the original issue. The originals were cancelled with a two-line bar cancellation, but the cancellations on the souvenir trip turned out to be double-lined ovals, "San Francisco. Cal.," and "Fresno, Cal.," and dated "May 1, 1935."

I have an interesting letter from James S. Hardy, who visited Santa Barbara in 1938, and was told to call on Banta as a likely source for stamps. He found him, then about 70

years old, running a grocery and meat market there. Banta brought out an album and Hardy purchased a number of dollar value Columbians and Omahas, then Banta went into a back room and reappeared with a package of about 800 sheets of the Bicycle stamps, many of them stuck together. Hardy didn't buy, but to his chagrin later learned that a short time afterward the late Victor Weiskopf visited the store, and being a better "stamp hunter," got into the back room where he fished out of a barrel about 18 covers postmarked with the Goleta "kicking mule," at 25¢ each.



Bicycle Mail Route 25¢ brown entire (Sc. 12LU2) on 2¢ green on amber entire (Sc. U312), cancelled by parallel bars, 2¢ embossed stamp cancelled by grid, "Fresno Cal. Jul. 20 8:30 AM 1894" circular datestamp to local address, purple "Victor Bicycle Messenger Service" illustrated backstamp.



Sc. 12LU1, Bicycle Mail Route, 25¢ brown imprint on 2¢ green on white postal entire (Sc. U311), sent to Sellschopp in San Francisco by Banta on the last trip of the service, "San Francisco, Cal./Sta. B./Jul. 18, 1894" duplex applied on arrival late in the day, similar receiving c.d.s. of the 19th the next morning on the reverse, Bicycle imprint with bars cancel, violet answer cachet for San Francisco on the front and bicycle handstamp on the reverse dated July 17, 1894 on departure from Fresno, one of a number of covers sent to this stamp dealer on the last trip of the service.