20

Wagon Making in Southern Arizona

**by James E. Sherman and Edward F. Ronstadt,
with quotations from the memoirs of
Fred Ronstadt, pioneer wagon maker**

Reprinted from the Tucson Corral of the Westerners
The Smoke Signal **Number 31, Spring 1975**

Part I: Wagonmaking in the Late 1800s

On March 17, 1880, a wild, three-day celebration highlighted by the driving of a silver spike signified the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad at Tucson, Arizona Territory. On this momentous occasion, amid the din of excitement, telegrams were relayed to mayors and prominent citizens throughout the nation proclaiming the linking of Tucson to the outside world. This date would serve as an economic turning point in the lives of many. Among those who took particular notice were the freighters for they feared the railroad as a threat to their livelihood. They were right in their feeling of a threat, but it was not to come from the railroad; it would come from an unexpected source. With the increased volume of freight brought in by the railroad, fierce competition would be drawn to Tucson from teamsters and freighting companies from as far away as California, Nevada and New Mexico. The Southern Pacific moved east from Tucson, reaching Benson, Ariz., in June, and Deming, N.M., by December. With the silver spike ceremony at Deming on March 8, 1881 marking the connecting of the Santa Fe and the Southern Pacific Railroads, Tucson was to become an important stop of the second transcontinental railroad.

Prior to this time, freighting was a vital business in southern Arizona and was its only commercial link to other United States and Mexico trade points. During the time after the Civil War until the mid-1870s only two major routes supplied the growing Territory. Supplies from the port of San Francisco connected with New York City by the clipper ship and later in 1869 by the Union Pacific Railroad, reached Arizona by one of two ways. Shipped by steamer from San Francisco around Lower California, the merchandise arrived at Fort Yuma. It was then transferred to river steamship and continued its journey up the Colorado River to ports such as Castle Dome Landing, Ehrenberg, Liverpool Landing, and as far north as Hardyville, the head of steamboat navigation from where it traveled by wagon to points east. An alternate route was by Southern Pacific Railroad south from San Francisco, to Banning, Indio, Dos Palmas, or whatever the southern most terminus was at the time. From there freighters hauled cargo east into Arizona or they stopped at Fort Yuma for transfer to Colorado River steamers and the journey north.

Another supply route to Arizona in the 1870s began its westward trek to Denver via the Kansas Pacific Railroad, then south by the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad to Fort Garland or El Morro, Colorado, and then by freighter south into New Mexico and Arizona. Wagon freight to Tucson from these Colorado departure points passed south along the Rio Grande

to Mesilla, N.M., then west a total of about 650 miles from the railroad terminus to the Old Pueblo. A writer of the time, Richard Hinton, noted that by using ox teams and without feeding them grain, since water and grass were abundant along the route, the expense of freighting by wagon was reduced by one-half to a rate of 75 cents a 100 pounds per 100 miles if there were freight to be hauled in both directions. This resulted in a freight charge of about $5 per 100 pounds from El Morro to Tucson which, when added to railroad freight from New York, amounted to a freight expense of about $8.25 per 100 pounds from New York to Tucson.

The freighters, consisting of two or three wagons in tandem carrying up to 18,000 pounds and pulled by 12 to 20 mules, were eagerly welcomed by local business men and merchants in southern Arizona. After the stock was unhitched and the freight was unloaded a wagon might need minor repairs, a wheel refitted with a tire or the reaches replaced. Whatever the problem, there was usually a blacksmith and, occasionally, a wagon maker available to do the job. At times the teamster might realize more profit by selling his large freighters to local citizens for lumber and his trail-worn mules or oxen for lighter wagon duty. This could well be the case if he had no return load, or had no desire to wait for one to be assembled and wanted to be on his way. On the other hand, if his wagons had given him breakdown problems with little promise of withstanding the return trip without major repairs, he was also out of luck, for it is unlikely that blacksmith facilities were available to handle large freighter repairs in out-of-the-way parts of the west. [photo]

There is no apparent evidence that the big freight wagons were ever made by wagon makers or blacksmiths in southern Arizona, although minor repairs of such vehicles were common. The local blacksmith in Tucson or Florence probably had little or no experience in the construction of the large freighters. The largest of these, the Murphy wagon, had a box measuring 16 feet long, four feet wide and six feet high. Unless a blacksmith had gained training in the big wagon shops in cities such as St. Louis, Kansas City or San Francisco, he no doubt would lack the special skills needed to manufacture one. If the blacksmith had the skills, the chances were he didn't have the special equipment to shape a four-inch diameter axle or set a seven-foot diameter tire shaped like a section of a truncated cone. This type of work required special forges, heavy tire benders and shrinkers, oil troughs, lathes and special wood-working tools.

The 1876 census reports Pima County with a population of 8,117, Maricopa County with 3,702 and Yuma County with 2,212. Of the major communities, Tucson had an estimated population of 3,500, Florence, 1,000, Yuma, 1,500 and Phoenix, 500. These figures suggest that southern Arizona was not yet capable of supporting an elaborate wagon-making industry; however, apparently there was some demand. An 1877 Arizona business directory listed the following blacksmiths and wagon-makers in southern Arizona. Although the survey of the day may not have been complete, it at least suggests a picture of the wagon making industry. In Allen Camp, about 50 miles southeast of Ajo, Joseph H. Richards, wagonmaker and builder; Phoenix, John Burger, wagonmaker, and Wash Evans, John Lentgerding and John West, blacksmiths; Tucson, Thomas Belknap and C. T. Etchells, blacksmiths; Yuma, John G. Capron, agent for Mitchell wagons, and C. Horner, blacksmith.

With the coming of the railroad to Tucson in 1880, the Old Pueblo began to expand as a leading trade center, attracting merchants, miners and cattlemen from the outside world. Major changes in freighting practices came about since the long-haul distributing freighters were no longer necessary. The shorter haul and lighter wagons were now in demand to

deliver raw materials and supplies throughout the city as well as to other fledgling villages and mining camps that began to take root. With the increasing need for transportation of materials, local freighting and express competition became keen. Out of this came the demand for new wagons and wagon repairs, and by 1883 two businesses in Tucson were handling the bulk of the work. The older of the two was a wagon and blacksmith shop owned by Charles T. Etchells on the northeast corner of Congress and Pearl Streets. (see note 1) The other wagon and blacksmith shop [advertisement] was owned in partnership by Winnall Dalton and Adolfo Vasquez [photo] and was located at 317 and 319 Meyer Street. (see note 2)

The wagon making and blacksmithing business that was later to be owned by Charles Etchells was first established in 1856, the year the lst Dragoons arrived in Tucson. A 20-year-old Irishman from St. Louis named John W. Sweeney [photo] arrived that year with an idea. He met John Burt from Vermont and the two of them formed a partnership, built a small adobe enclosure and started what was probably Tucson's first Anglo blacksmith shop. Business must have been more than promising, for John Sweeney married a local girl, Manuela Ramirez, in 1863, and set about to begin a family that would later number five children. Somewhere along the line John Burt faded from the picture. In 1869, Sweeney formed a new partnership with Charles Etchells who had moved south from Prescott as an employee of the Cerro Colorado Mining Company. With renewed enthusiasm for prosperity, they set about expanding the blacksmith quarters to enclose an area 100 feet square. John Sweeney had strong political ambitions. He dissolved his business agreement with Etchells on September 20, 1877, ran for the Territorial legislature that fall and won. He moved to Florence, living there until his death in 1878.

Charles Tanner Etchells [photo] was born in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1837. After moving to Tucson, he became best known for his part in the famous 1871 Camp Grant Massacre, when about 100 peaceful Apaches were slaughtered by Papago Indians led by several of Tucson's leading citizens. Etchells, like all other defendants, however, survived the trial that followed. He subsequently prospered as one of Tucson's leading blacksmiths and wagon makers. By 1877, the Etchells shop had expanded into an area of 125 feet by 80 feet with separate departments divided off for carriage work, woodworking and blacksmithing. His shop reportedly had the capabilities of constructing wagons from the heaviest freighters to the lightest carriages from the wheels up. The repairing of old rolling stock was an additional specialty. He also manufactured heavy iron shafts and other machinery for the local flour mills and nearby mines. In December of 1877, workmen began to make improvements. They expanded the shop area to 160 feet by 200 feet, increasing the wall height by three feet and constructed a 60 foot by 80 foot warehouse. A crane and large forge were set in the center of the corral area so that wagon tires up to seven feet in diameter could be handled. A steam boiler and engine were installed to run necessary machinery, including a lathe, so that more work could be handled with greater efficiency. By 1891, Etchells was engaged in blacksmithing and wagon making in all of its branches and he was the sole agent for Studebaker freight and spring wagons. He employed blacksmiths Fernando Diaz, Gabriel Diaz and Pete Etchells. His establishment carried a full line of hardware, Concord axles, oak and ash wagon lumber and was the wholesale and retail dealer of Cumberland coal. The *Tombstone Daily Prospector* reported in November of 1889 that, "Another Tombstone is about to be discovered." The *Arizona Citizen* says Charles T. Etchells has received orders from Mr. Ed Schieffelin for a complete prospectors' outfit, wagon, harness, picks, shovels and Mr. Schieffelin will make an extensive tour through southern Arizona. When Tombstone was discovered Mr. Schieffelin had a similar outfit furnished by Mr. Etchells from the same

shop he now occupies. It was also noted in an 1896 newspaper that the walls of the Etchells' blacksmith shop, damaged by the explosion of Zeckendorf's powder magazine in the spring of 1881 and the earthquake shock of 1887, were now going to be repaired. [advertisement] Charles Etchells lived until 1900. At the time of his death, he was president of a bank and member of the city council.

Adolfo Vasquez was born in 1851, in Altar, Sonora where he grew to be a young man with a natural curiosity for mechanical principles and their practical application. With ambition for developing his talents, young Adolfo and his family journeyed to Los Angeles in 1874 and found employment. While in residence on the coast, Adolfo became acquainted with Winnall A. Dalton, a gentleman of culture and education, whose forebears included the Arguello and Zamorano families of early California. Of more interest to Vasquez, Dalton was a skilled woodworker. During the next few years their friendship and respect for each other matured, their families were socially compatible, and in 1878 Winnall Dalton married Jesusita Vasquez, Adolfo's sister. [photo]

Realizing the opportunities of the southward advancing Southern Pacific Railroad and with the gentle persuasion of his mother, Concepción Suastegui, Adolfo enrolled in a school for blacksmiths. After completing his apprenticeship in early 1879, Dalton and Vasquez formed a partnership and headed south with the Southern Pacific Railroad, working briefly at Yuma and Casa Grande, testing the climate for a new wagon making business. They arrived in Tucson late in 1879, set up shop at 317 and 319 Meyer Street and operated the business later to be owned by Fred Ronstadt [photo], and today known as the Ronstadt Hardware Company.

In an attempt to preserve the detail and color of the early history of Dalton and Vasquez, wagonmakers, the F. Ronstadt wagonmaking company, and early Tucson, much of the following history is told in the words of Fred Ronstadt [photo], pioneer wagonmaker, taken from his memoirs.

 PHOTO ALBUM

Go to Part II: **Fred Ronstadt**

Return to the  Wagonmaking main page

---

Return to the Ronstadt Family home page

Return to the Through Our Parents' Eyes home page

Return to The University of Arizona Library home page

This section created by Jan Neill

Last updated 11 September 1997