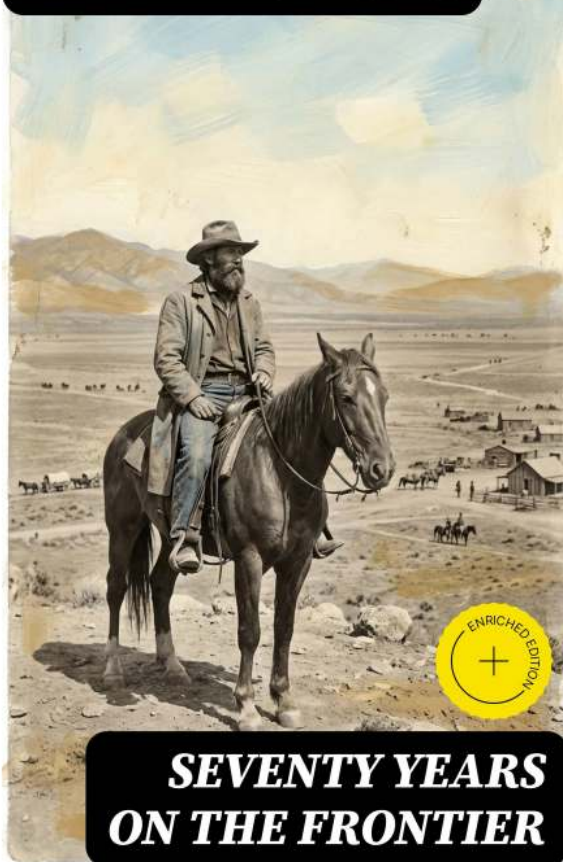


ALEXANDER MAJORS



**SEVENTY YEARS
ON THE FRONTIER**

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ON THE FRONTIER**

Alexander Majors

Seventy Years on the Frontier

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Peter Boyd

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Introduction

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Audacious ambition collides with a vast, indifferent landscape and the moral ambiguities of expansion. *Seventy Years on the Frontier*, by Alexander Majors, is an autobiographical narrative of the North American West, written from the vantage of a freighting entrepreneur and co-founder of the Pony Express. First appearing in the late nineteenth century, it situates readers in the mid-century trails, depots, and crossings that stitched the plains to the mountains. Within its pages, commerce replaces gunplay as the engine of movement, and logistics becomes the story's drama. Majors frames the frontier as a workplace as much as a wilderness, grounding western history in wagons, contracts, animals, weather, and risk.

Majors recounts a life spent organizing long wagon lines, provisioning remote forts and towns, and navigating routes that would later become national corridors. The premise is straightforward: a working proprietor describes how goods, people, and information traveled before rails knit the map. Readers meet landscapes and practical obstacles more often than duels or showdowns. The voice is practical, occasionally stern, shaped by a manager's eye for detail and consequence. Told in first person with episodic momentum, the book favors plain description, measured recollection, and the steady escalation of challenges rather than dramatic flourish.

The prose reflects its era: direct, occasionally formal, attentive to processes that modern histories often compress into a line on a map. Majors lingers over the composition of a train, the temper of animals, the price of supplies, and the fragile timings that determine whether a venture succeeds. Details of camps, rivers, and weather build a tactile sense of travel while keeping the perspective firmly anchored in work. The tone remains matter-of-fact even when dangers rise, and turns reflective when the author assesses decisions, partners, and the ethics of leadership. Anecdotes function as case studies, with emphasis on causes, consequences, and lessons.

Running through the narrative is a meditation on infrastructure in the making: roads traced by wheels, waystations improvised out of need, and communication networks assembled from courage and coordination. Majors treats speed as both necessity and peril, a force that compresses distance while magnifying risk. Enterprise requires discipline, knowledge of terrain, and careful stewardship of men and animals. The book also explores the costs of haste and expansion—the strain on bodies, the vulnerability of supply chains, and the thin margin between triumph and loss that defines frontier commerce. In presenting these pressures, it documents how mobility and logistics reshaped regional economies and everyday life.

As a participant in westward movement, Majors writes from a settler perspective, recording encounters with Indigenous nations, military authorities, and a diverse labor force. His accounts include negotiation, misunderstanding, and conflict, filtered through nineteenth-century

assumptions that modern readers will evaluate with care. The narrative's value lies not in neutrality but in its proximity to prevailing attitudes and practices. By hearing how a prominent operator justified choices and assessed others, readers gain insight into the structures that enabled expansion and the frictions it produced. The book therefore invites critical reading alongside other sources, supporting a fuller understanding of power, place, and responsibility.

For contemporary readers, the book resonates well beyond regional history. Its lessons about leadership under uncertainty, managing supply lines across hostile environments, and balancing daring with prudence echo in today's debates about infrastructure, logistics, and technological acceleration. The arc of communication—from riders and relays to broader networks—mirrors ongoing struggles to connect distant communities quickly and reliably. Majors's emphasis on professionalism, training, and accountability raises questions about work cultures and ethics that remain urgent. Above all, the memoir demythologizes the West, replacing spectacle with systems, and in doing so clarifies how large endeavors are built, maintained, and sometimes overextended.

Approached as a document of experience and a crafted narrative, *Seventy Years on the Frontier* rewards careful, patient reading. Its episodic structure allows entry at many points, while its cumulative portrait reveals the scale of organization required to keep people and goods moving. Without rehearsing outcomes, the book offers the texture of decisions made in real time, under constraint, with imperfect information. Read alongside complementary

histories, it becomes a casebook in risk, leadership, and the contested meanings of progress. That combination of immediacy and reflection is why this nineteenth-century autobiography continues to matter, challenging readers to measure ambition against terrain, time, and consequence.

Synopsis

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Seventy Years on the Frontier (1893) presents Alexander Majors' retrospective account of a life spent moving goods and people across the American West. Writing late in life, he frames the narrative as a practical history of overland freighting, from modest beginnings with teams and wagons to the command of large caravans that linked river towns with far-flung settlements and forts. Majors traces how opportunity, risk, and endurance shaped his career, establishing the book's steady focus on method over romance. Early chapters emphasize learning the business on the trails, the discipline required of animals and men, and the routines that kept long hauls possible.

As traffic over the plains intensifies, Majors explains the growth of organized freighting companies and his partnership with William H. Russell and William B. Waddell. He outlines contracting practices, provisioning depots, and schedules designed to keep ox trains moving through seasons and droughts. A recurring theme is managerial order: hiring reliable teamsters, enforcing sobriety, and standardizing equipment to limit breakdowns. He describes the scale of operations—hundreds of wagons, thousands of animals, and layered oversight—without ornament, underscoring how success depended on predictable routines. These sections make clear that the frontier economy rested on logistics: feed, water, distance, and time, carefully balanced.

Majors then turns to the hazards and negotiations that attended travel across vast Indigenous homelands and unsettled territories. He recounts planning for river crossings, storms, and scarcity, and describes encounters that ranged from trading and escort agreements to tense standoffs. His perspective is that of a contractor charged with protecting cargo and crews, and he details the precautions, scouts, and routes chosen to avoid loss. The narrative foregrounds practical judgment—when to press forward, when to fort up, and when to parley—while acknowledging that miscalculation could cost animals, freight, and lives on both routine runs and emergency marches.

The book's most famous chapter in enterprise is the creation of the Pony Express in 1860 under the Russell, Majors, and Waddell banner. Seeking a swift transcontinental mail, Majors describes the relay stations, remounts, and riders organized to cut delivery times dramatically. He emphasizes the logistical challenge, the expense of maintaining speed across deserts and mountains, and the tight coordination needed for reliability. While highlighting daring rides, his account centers on planning, supply caches, and station keepers who made endurance possible. He situates the service within larger ambitions for government mail contracts and notes how emerging technologies would soon overtake it.

National turmoil and market shocks reshape the enterprise in subsequent chapters. Majors recounts how war scares, shifting federal priorities, and credit contractions undermined large freighting operations, exposing them to

losses they could not absorb. He describes the abruptness with which contracts evaporated, routes were interrupted, and employers struggled to meet payrolls. Railroads and the telegraph, initially distant, move to the foreground as forces that redraw the map of movement and information. The memoir tracks his efforts to adapt or wind down lines, using these reversals to reflect on the fragility of success when dependent on distant financiers and policy.

Interspersed are vignettes of military expeditions, emigrant trains, and territorial communities that relied on steady supplies. Majors narrates provisioning campaigns that required precise timing to reach columns in remote country and relates the mechanics of escorting civilian caravans through contested stretches. He conveys the layered negotiations among army officers, settlers, and local leaders, as well as the mutual dependencies that bound them to freight schedules. Personal sketches and workplace incidents illustrate his views on leadership, thrift, and fairness in hard conditions, offering a portrait of frontier commerce as a network of obligations that ran from warehouse to way station.

Majors closes by measuring personal fortunes against the rapid transformation of the West. He emphasizes hard lessons learned about risk, integrity, and the limits of individual will when systems change. Without resolving every controversy, his memoir preserves the operational detail behind ventures often remembered only in legend, especially overland freighting and the Pony Express. The result is less a tale of singular exploits than a record of how infrastructure was built, strained, and replaced. For readers,

the enduring value lies in its firsthand view of logistics at scale and its sober recognition that new technologies finally remade the world he knew.

Historical Context

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Alexander Majors (1814–1900) wrote *Seventy Years on the Frontier* in 1893, recounting work rooted in the Missouri borderlands that outfitted the overland trails. Born in Kentucky and raised near Independence and Westport (present-day Kansas City), he entered freighting as the United States pushed west after the Louisiana Purchase. Those towns served as key departure points on the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trails. Institutions central to his world included the U.S. Army’s Quartermaster Department, frontier forts strung along the Platte and Arkansas rivers, and the Post Office Department, which managed mail routes that underpinned the expanding communications and commercial networks.

By the 1840s and 1850s, long-distance wagon freighting became essential to supplying military posts and trade across the Great Plains and Rockies. The Santa Fe trade dating from 1821, the Oregon migration of the 1840s, the 1848–49 California Gold Rush, and the Mormon settlement of Utah created sustained demand for transport. Majors partnered with William H. Russell and William B. Waddell in the mid-1850s, forming one of the largest plains freighting firms. Operating from Leavenworth and the Missouri River towns, they ran wagon trains with hundreds of wagons and thousands of oxen along established trails, synchronizing departures with seasonal weather and river stages.

Federal logistics shaped their business. The U.S. Army's Utah Expedition (1857-1858), sent to reassert federal authority in Utah Territory, required massive overland provisioning. Russell, Majors, and Waddell secured major Quartermaster contracts to haul supplies to frontier depots such as Fort Laramie, Fort Bridger, and Camp Floyd. Freightage demanded road improvements, ferries, and disciplined wagon management across the Platte River and South Pass corridor. To integrate transport and communications, the partners formed the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company in 1859, operating stagecoaches and express service over the central route through Julesburg, Salt Lake City, and the Carson Valley.

In April 1860 the company inaugurated the Pony Express, a fast mail relay between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California. Light riders changed horses at closely spaced stations, crossing the Plains, the Great Basin, and the Sierra Nevada. The service aimed to demonstrate the viability of the central overland corridor and secure lucrative federal mail contracts, complementing stage operations. Despite remarkable runs, the enterprise was costly. Completion of the transcontinental telegraph in October 1861 provided near-instant communication, rendering the Pony Express unnecessary; it ceased operations shortly thereafter, leaving the partners burdened with debts tied to the broader express and stage business.

Financial strains predated the telegraph. The Panic of 1857 tightened credit for freight and stage companies. In 1860 Russell became entangled in an Indian Trust Fund bond scandal involving improperly pledged government

securities, further undermining the partners' finances and reputation. The Civil War then disrupted routes and priorities: the Butterfield Overland Mail's southern line was suspended, and federal attention shifted to the central route. The Central Overland company went bankrupt; Ben Holladay acquired its assets in 1862 and consolidated overland staging under government contract, later selling to Wells Fargo in 1866. Majors's narrative tracks these upheavals as both participant and observer.

Travel across the central plains unfolded amid shifting relations with Native nations. The 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie sought to stabilize passage and define territories for tribes such as the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, but increasing trail traffic, resource competition, and incidents like the 1854 Grattan affair eroded peace. Military escorts and fortified stations became common along key corridors. Majors's business depended on negotiating access, avoiding conflict when possible, and recovering losses when trains were attacked or stock stolen. His perspective reflects a freighter's view of risk on contested homelands shaped by federal treaties, military policy, and emigrant demands.

Social and commercial norms on the trails reflected mid-nineteenth-century evangelical and managerial currents. A devout Baptist, Majors is documented as issuing Bibles and imposing a code of conduct on his crews that emphasized sobriety, restraint, and honesty. Wages, division of labor among teamsters and wagonmasters, and seasonal hiring rhythms formed a distinct occupational culture. Politics also pressed close: the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and "Bleeding Kansas" made the Missouri-Kansas border a

zone of violence and mobilization near his base. When Majors published his memoir, the 1890 census had declared the frontier “closed,” and popular fascination with the Old West was surging.

Seventy Years on the Frontier situates enterprise within national transformation: from wagons and stagecoaches to telegraph and, after 1869, the transcontinental railroad enabled by the Pacific Railway Act of 1862. Majors celebrates logistical ingenuity and personal resolve while criticizing unreliable financiers, shifting federal priorities, and the hazards of credit-dependent contracts. The memoir reflects prevailing settler perspectives on Indigenous peoples and Latter-day Saints, requiring careful contextual reading by modern audiences. Its detailed accounts of routes, contracts, and operations document how public and private institutions built overland systems, while its tone and emphases reveal the late-nineteenth-century impulse to memorialize the overland era.

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TWENTIES AND ENDING WITH NINETY.



W. F. Cody^[1]
"Buffalo Bill."

PREFACE.

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As there is no man living who is more thoroughly competent to write a book of the Wild West than my life-

long friend and benefactor in my boyhood, Alexander Majors, there is no one to whose truthful words I would rather accept the honor of writing a preface.

An introduction to a book of Mountain and Plain by Mr. Majors certainly need hardly be written, unless it be to refer to the author in a way that his extreme modesty will not permit him to speak of himself, for he is not given to sounding his own praise, being a man of action rather than words, and yet whose life has its recollections of seventy years upon the frontier, dating to a period that tried men's souls to the fullest extent, and when daring deeds and thrilling adventures were of every-day occurrence. Remembrance of seventy years of life in the Far West and amid the Rocky Mountains[1q]!

What a world of thought this gives rise to, when we recall that a quarter of a century ago there was not a railroad west of the Missouri River, and every pound of freight, every emigrant, every letter, and every message had to be carried by wagon or on horseback, and at the risk of life and hardships untold.

The man who could in the face of all dangers and obstacles originate and carry to success a line of freighter wagons, a mail route from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and a Pony Express[2], flying at the utmost speed of a hare through the land, was no ordinary individual, as can be well understood. And such a man Alexander Majors was. He won success; and to-day, on the verge of four score years, lives over again in his book the thrilling scenes in his own life and in the lives of others.

Family reverses after the killing of my father in the Kansas War, caused me to start out, though a mere boy, in 1855 to seek to aid in the support of my mother and sisters, and it was to Mr. Alexander Majors that I applied for a situation. He looked me over carefully in his kindly way, and after questioning me closely gave me the place of messenger boy, that was, one to ride with dispatches between the overland freighters—wagon trains going westward into the almost unknown wild dump of prairie and mountain.

That was my first meeting with Alexander Majors, and up to the present time our friendship has never had a break in it, and, I may add, never will through act of mine.

Having thus shown my claim to a thorough knowledge of my distinguished old friend, let me now state that his firm was known the country over as Majors, Russell & Woddell[3], but it was to Mr. Majors particularly that the heaviest duties of organizing and management fell, and he never shirked a duty or a danger, as I well remember.

Severe in discipline, he was yet never profane or harsh, and a Christian and temperance man through all; he governed his men kindly, and was wont to say that he would have no one under his control who would not promptly obey an order without it was emphasized with an oath. In fact, he had a contract with his men in which they pledged themselves not to use profanity, get drunk, gamble, or be cruel to animals under pain of dismissal, while good behavior was rewarded. Every man, from wagon-boss and teamster down to rustler and messenger-boy, seemed anxious to gain the good will of Alexander Majors and to

hold it, and to-day he has fewer foes than any one I know, in spite of his position as chief of what were certainly a wild and desperate lot of men, where the revolver settled all difficulties.

It was Mr. Majors' firm that originated and put in the Pony Express across the plains and made it the grand success it proved to be.

It was his firm that so long and successfully carried on the business of overland freighting in the face of every obstacle, and also the Overland Stage Drive between the Missouri River and Pacific Ocean, and in his long life on the border he has become known to all classes and conditions of men, so that in writing now his memoirs, no man knows better whereof he speaks than he does.

In each instance where he has written to his old-time comrades for data, he has taken only that which he knew could be verified, and has thrown out material sufficient to double his book in size, where he felt the slightest doubt that it could not be relied upon to the fullest extent.

His work, therefore, is a history of the Wild West, its pages authentic, and though many of its scenes are romantic and thrilling, it is what has hitherto been an unwritten story of facts, figures, and reality; and now, that in his old age he finds his occupation gone, I feel and hope that his memoirs will find a ready sale.

W. F. CODY,
"Buffalo Bill."

TO THE READER.

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In preparing the material of my book, I desire here to give justice where justice is due, and express myself as under obligations for valuable data and letters, which I fully appreciate; and publicly thank for their kindness in this direction those whose names follow:

COL. W. F. CODY ("Buffalo Bill") of Nebraska.
COL. JOHN B. COLTON, Kansas City, Mo.
MR. V. DeVINNY, Denver, Colo.
MR. E. L. GALLATIN, Denver, Colo.
JUDGE SIMONDS, Denver, Colo.
MR. JOHN T. RENNICK, Oak Grove, Mo.
MR. GEO. W. BRYANT, Kansas City, Mo.
MR. GEORGE E. SIMPSON, Kansas City, Mo.
MR. JOHN MARTIN, Denver, Colo.
MR. DAVID STREET, Denver, Colo.
MRS. NELLIE CARLISLE, Berkeley, Cal.
MR. A. CARLISLE, Berkeley, Cal.
MR. GREEN MAJORS, San Francisco, Cal.
MR. ERGO ALEX. MAJORS, Alameda, Cal.
MR. SETH E. WARD, Westport, Mo.
ROBERT FORD, Great Falls, Mont.
DOCTOR CASE, Kansas City, Mo.
BENJ. C. MAJORS, May Bell P. O., Colo.
PROF. ROBERT CASEY, Denver, Colo.
JOHN BURROUGHS, Colorado.
EUGENE MUNN, Swift, Neb.
REV. DR. JOHN R. SHANNON, Denver, Colo.

THOS. D. TRUETT, Leadville, Colo.
WILL C. FERRIL.

Yours with respect,
ALEXANDER MAJORS.

Seventy Years on the Frontier.

Montana and Alberta) who were historically bison hunters and opponents of some trapping and trading parties in the 19th century.

21 "Flatheads" is a historic name (an exonym) used for certain Pacific Northwest tribes; it refers to the practice of artificial cranial deformation (forehead flattening) described in 19th-century accounts and was not a universal practice among all bands.

22 Commodore Robert F. Stockton (1795–1866) was a U.S. Navy officer who led naval operations in California during the Mexican–American War and collaborated with Army officers in relief and occupation efforts in 1846–1847.

23 Camp Floyd was a temporary U.S. Army encampment in Utah Territory established in 1858 as the logistical headquarters for troops sent during the Utah Expedition (often dated 1857–1858) and located south of Salt Lake City.

24 A mid-19th-century U.S. Army fort on the Platte River mentioned in the text; it guarded emigrant routes and later gave its name to the town now called Kearney in Nebraska.

25 Refers to the U.S. Army force led by General Albert Sidney Johnston that moved through the West in 1857 during the Utah Expedition (sometimes called the Utah War), numbering several thousand regulars according to contemporary accounts.

26 A broad, low mountain pass through the Rocky Mountains on the Continental Divide that 19th-century emigrant trails used because it allowed relatively easy wagon travel across the range.

27 Dried bison dung commonly collected on the plains and used as a readily available fuel for campfires and

cooking in the 19th century.

28 In this chapter the name was adopted jokingly by an 1849 emigrant party; the term also appears in mid-19th-century American history as a nickname for various Kansas irregular fighters and settlers in that era.

29 A mid-19th-century conflict between Paiute (often spelled 'Piute' in contemporary sources) bands and white settlers in Nevada and adjacent areas, notably erupting in 1860 around Pyramid Lake and resulting in several engagements and volunteer expeditions.

30 A lever-action repeating rifle with a tubular magazine (commonly holding seven rounds) invented by Christopher Spencer and used widely in the 1860s; it provided faster fire than typical single-shot muskets of the period.

31 The Butterfield Overland Mail, a southern stagecoach mail route operating in the late 1850s–early 1860s that ran from San Francisco east via Los Angeles, the Gila valley, El Paso and Texas to St. Louis, chosen then as a longer but winter-passable southern corridor.

32 A natural hydrocarbon (a solid asphaltite) first commercially noted in the 19th century in Utah; it was later mined and used in varnishes, inks and industrial applications and is associated with the Uintah Basin region.

33 A mid-19th-century territorial judge (commonly identified as John Cradlebaugh in historical records) who presided over early legal matters in the Nevada/Utah region and whose name is associated with some of the first recorded territorial capital cases and punishments in that era.

34 A county in southwestern Missouri founded in 1837; here it denotes the rural region where Majors hunted in December 1839, part of the broader Mississippi Valley frontier in the early 19th century.

35 An idiom meaning a straight, direct path; historically used in 19th-century English and likely derived from the observation that bees fly directly to their hive or food source.

36 Refers to the seasonal dormancy bears enter in winter, during which metabolic rate and activity drop; the timing and depth of hibernation vary by species and climate.

37 Likely the Bitter Creek area of the Laramie Plains (Wyoming/territorial emigrant routes), historically noted by 19th-century travelers for poor water quality, scarce grass, and difficult conditions.

38 Alluvial deposits of gold or other valuable minerals where 'placer' mining (washing or panning gravel) is done; in gold rushes these deposits were often exhausted or 'washed out' after initial easy recoveries.

39 A public park near Colorado Springs famous for towering red sandstone rock formations described in the text as a natural gateway of colorful, temple-like rocks and scenic views.

40 A scenic glen at the entrance to Queen's Cañon noted in the chapter as the site of a wealthy gentleman's summer residence and distinctive pink sandstone pillars and rock formations.

41 A prominent Colorado mountain summit referenced several times; the chapter notes the summit elevation

reached by the cog railway as about 14,147 feet above sea level.

42 Initials used in the text for Helen Hunt Jackson, identified in parentheses as the author and poet who chose the Seven Falls site for her grave.

43 Named in the chapter as a trading post established in 1832 by Louis Vanquez at the mouth of Clear Creek, described as one of several early fur-trade posts along the Platte.

44 Short for Promontory Summit, Utah, the location mentioned where the Union and Central Pacific railroads met and the ceremonial driving of the golden (and silver) spikes took place at the completion of the transcontinental line.

45 A 19th-century American annual reference work (first compiled by H. V. Poor) that reported railroad companies' finances, equipment, and statistics and was widely used by investors and officials for railroad data.

46 A common name for U.S. paper currency issued during the Civil War era (from about 1862) that was not backed by specie; their market value fluctuated and they were central to postwar monetary disputes.

47 Short-term U.S. government interest-bearing securities issued during the Civil War era, commonly called '7-30s', that paid about 7.30% annual interest and were used to raise wartime funds.

48 Also called 5-20 bonds, Civil War-era United States bonds that typically paid 6% interest in coin and were redeemable after five years but due in twenty, used in postwar debt and currency operations.