The Wade Insulator

By David Merck

Growing up, I found that I had a natural tendency to collect things. This started to take a more focused direction when we moved back to be close to my mother's family in Colorado.

My uncle and his friends were old time collectors. They had all been going out, finding and collecting all sorts of artifacts, since the 1920s. Whatever they collected would end up in their own collection or would be donated to a local area museum. Their trips all over the West produced a wide variety of items.

My first encounter was on a rock hunting expedition when I was seven years old. On that trip at a historical marker, these men tried to explain to me about the Pony Express and the original telegraph lines. On these lines were glass insulators with wood covers. Upon asking, "Why the covers?" I was told they used them because if the Indians saw the glass, they would work to break them and make different tools (arrowheads) from them.

I got to see two of those Wade insulators, as they were called. A friend of my uncle had two of those wood-covered Wade's down in his "junk room" in this basement. Also in that room was a wonderful assortment of all kinds of artifacts and collectibles. It was more than enough to fire up a young imagination.

Whether a person is hunting and collecting Wades or any other collectible, just realize the first step is always learning the history and doing some good research.

The Wades have a colorful history and have been found in quite a vast area.

Specimens have turned up from California to Pennsylvania, and as far south as Alabama and many places in between.

The common characteristic is that they were originally wood covered. The glass was usually cemented with pitch to hold the insulator to its pin and to its outside cover as well. The outside wood was also treated with a preservative. The text from an early book showing its use at the time explains: "A glass insulator, somewhat similar in shape to that described, is covered with a wooden shield, to prevent fracture from stones and other causes, the wood being thoroughly saturated with hot coal tar, to prevent it from decay. The line wire is tied to the outside of the shield, in the same manner as when the glass insulator is used. The insulator is mounted on an oak bracket, as shown, secured by spikes to the sides of the pole or other support. The pin, or bracket, is saturated with hot coal tar in the same manner as the insulator shield."

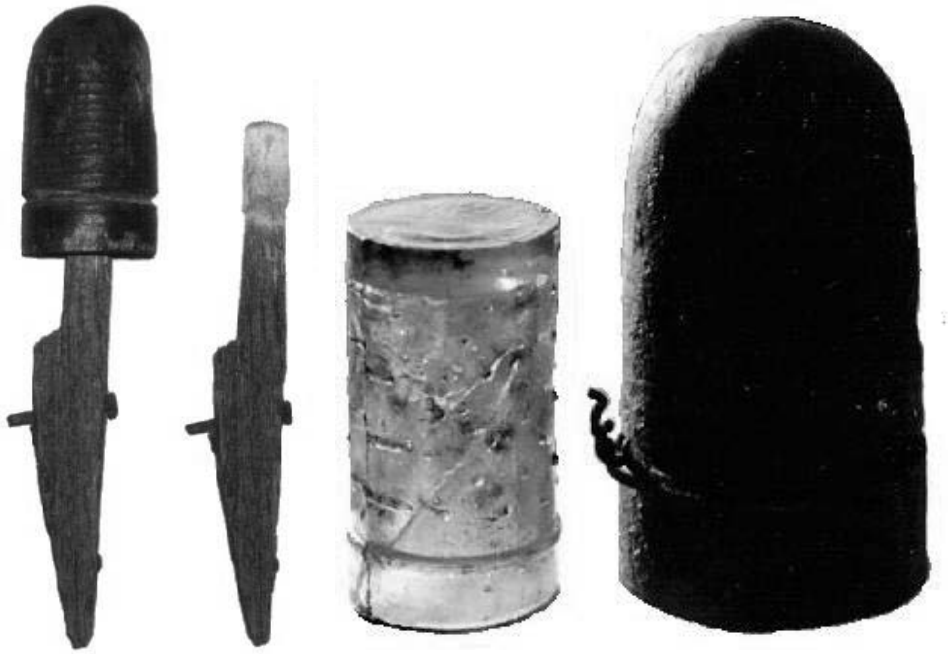
The "Wade" name is linked to Jeptha Wade, who was then the president of the Pacific Telegraph Company. The blusih hue to the glass has given rise to the theory that they were made by S.McKee & Co., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

There are three basic types: smooth-side, dot-dash and the concave style. In theory, the smooth-side would have been the earliest. However, the "grip" of the insulator to its cover caused problems and one wold have seen some floaters in the wire within a short time.

The appearance of the dots and dashes was not just to enhance the romance of the Morse code. The purpose was to use the raised elements on the glass to give the insulator a better grip to its wood cover.

The concave style appears to have come about to solve the problem of breakage. If the telegraph line came to a spot where a long span between poles was necessary, or a more difficult terrain was suddenly encountered, breakage might become a problem. The added strength in the thickness of the glass of the concave style was instrumental in solving this problem.

Again, although the Wade's have been found in such a widespread area, they are usually associated with the first telegraph line to cross state lines. This line figures prominently in the role of linking a young nation with its expanding territories at a critical time in our history.



The three pieces of the Wade insulator, the pin, insulator and wood cover, shown together and apart. (The insulator and its wooden cover have been enlarged for this illustration.)

The idea of a telegraph line across the continent was first proposed by Hiram Sibley, director of the newly-formed Western Union Telegraph Company in 1857. It wasn't until 1860 that Sibley and others inspired Congress to take action. The accepted contract between Sibley and the government called for complete construction within ten years. The government would also have preferential use of the telegraph line because of their $40,000 subsidy payment per year over that time.

Edward Creighton, a very prominent line contractor, surveyed a route before the spring of 1861. The route was adopted as: Omaha, Fort Kearney, Julesburg, Scotsburg, Fort Laramie, South Pass, Fort Bridger, Salt Lake City, Fort Churchill, Carson City, Sacramento and on to San Francisco.

The territory of Nebraska incorporated the Pacific Telegraph Company with a capital of $1,000,000. This company represented Western Union and had the Sibley contract. Jeptha Wade was elected president, along with Sibley as vice-president.

To the west, the California Telegraph Company organized the Overland Telegraph Company with a capital of $1,250,000 under the direction of James Gamble. Construction proceeded from both the East and the West to join together in Salt Lake City.

Construction began on July 4th, 1861. Mutiple crews were used, usually advancing ten to twelve miles a day. The Eastern section of the line was completed to Salt Lake City on October 24th, 1961. The Western section was completed just a few days later. The lines were connected and the first messages sent on November 15th.

The line was successful as well as profitable from the very beginning. The construction had taken less than four and a half months. The most hostile and desolate areas of our country had been successfully crossed.

Although this step was very significant, it was completely overshadowed by the completion of the first trancontinental railroad in May of 1869. Large portions of the line were moved to the railroad's right of way, sections that provided communication between the forts and survived into the 1880s.

Now over 125 years later, you may hike in a few places and imagine what how it was and how things might have been.

References:

Crown Jewels of the Wire.

Photos and illustrations courtesy of Ray Klingensmith.

Jeptha H. Wade information courtesy of Wikipedia.org and *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*.

Jeptha Homer Wade (August 11, 1811-August 9, 1890) was an American industrialist, philanthropist and founder of Western Union Telegraph.

Born in Romulus, Seneca County, New York, the son of Jeptha and Sarah (Allen) Wade. He operated a factory and worked as a portrait painter before becoming interested in the telegraph, and in 1847, as a subcontractor for J.J. Speedy, he began contruction of a telegraph line from Detroit to Jackson, Mich. Wade soon added lines from Detroit to Milwaukee and to Buffalo by way of Cleveland. In 1849-50, he built lines from Cleveland to Cincinnati and St. Louis. In 1854, he consolidated his lines with those of Royal E. House to create a network of lines across the Old Northwest, and in April, 1856, their network was part of the 13-company consolidation of lines that created the Western Union Telegraph Co. through a series of acquisitions and mergers.

In 1861, Jeptha Wade joined forces with Benjamin Franklin Ficklin and Hiram Sibley to form the Pacific Telegraph Company. With it, the final link between the east and west coast of the United States of America was made by telegraph.

Wade became president of Western Union in 1866, but poor health forced him to resign the following year.

Wade used his vast wealth to benefit his community of Cleveland. In 1882, Wade donated 72 acres of land east of the city for purpose of creating a park, which was named Wade Park in his honor. The park housed a small zoo. Today this is the Cleveland Zoo, one of the most renowned zoos in the world. Wade Park is still the center of the zoo.

Wade also was heavily involved with the formations and establishment of Hathaway Brown School, a private academy for young girls and women; he also co-founded the Case School of Applied Technology, now part of Case Western Reserve University. In addition, Wade served as the first president of the board of trustees for Lakeview Cemetery on Cleveland's east side.

Wade married twice, first to Rebecca Louenza Facer in 1832, who died in 1836; then to Susan M. Fleming in 1837. He was the father of one son, Randall P. Wade, and four adopted children, Delia (Moore), Eusebra (Bates), Myra (Huggins) and Bessie (Reynolds). Many direct descendants of Jeptha Homer Wade still live in Cleveland today, including his great-great-great grandsons, Morris Everett Jr. and Chandler Homer Everett.