

**The Death of
Alphonse the
Camel:
A Post-Revisionist
Interpretation**

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Context for Post-Revisionism: Historians revisiting the topic of Alphonse's death about half a century after he died were generally educated in an atmosphere of revisionism, but they have taken into account the charged political context that gave rise to revisionist history. These historians have sought a more nuanced account of Alphonse's death, giving consideration both to the indirect and the direct causes of his death and taking into account both Alphonse's actions and Frank's.

Who bears the responsibility for the death of Alphonse the camel is a central debate in camel history of this century. While some historians place an emphasis on Alphonse's actions and have absolved Frank, Alphonse's employer, of most or all blame, others have suggested that it was Frank, and Frank alone, who was responsible for Alphonse's death. In fact, a variety of factors contributed to Alphonse's demise, but it was indeed Frank who contributed the straw that broke the camel's back.

At the time that Alphonse was in Frank's employ, social attitudes toward camels tended to be largely negative. This often resulted in bad treatment of camels. They were considered to be animals who did not need much, if any, rest, and they were generally assumed to be selfish, disorganized creatures who were prone to sudden, violent behavior. This view fell out of favor several decades ago due to efforts by camels to organize and to agitate for increased rights. Indeed, Alphonse himself was involved in an early attempt at camel unionization, but that union, like many other nascent camel unions at that time, failed due to a lack of external support and a lack of internal organization. Some historians have pointed to minutes from these early union meetings to argue that the camels had too much internal disagreement to create an effective organization. While some groups did have trouble overcoming internal disagreements, it can also be argued that a large-scale public campaign—including newspaper op-eds, ads, and threats from employers—exerted enough political pressure to prevent the unions from succeeding. Frank was very much a product of this society: He saw his camels as a means to an economic end, and it is also possible that he bought into the negative stereotypes about the animals due to a childhood incident in which he was kicked in the face by a camel.

*The story of Alphonse the camel is adapted from the May 2013 Cambridge International Examinations IGCSE American History Training in Phoenix, Arizona, as well as from Arthur Chapman, "Camels, Diamonds and Counterfactuals: A Model for Teaching Causal Reasoning," *Teaching History*, 112 (2003): 46–53. Interpretation of the original text prepared with permission from the author. http://www.history.org.uk/resources/secondary_resource_80_8.html†

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Whether it was due to general social attitudes or specific childhood trauma, Frank treated his camels poorly by current standards; he loaded them with heavy packs and expected them to make very long, uphill journeys on a regular basis. This type of behavior was not atypical for camel owners in this period, and though hospital and mortuary records indicated it did cause the death or disability of many camels, other camels were able to manage this workload and survive well into retirement. An examination of Frank's records of delivery, as well as those of other camel deliverymen in that region in that period, did reveal, however, that he often loaded his camels with heavier packs than most other camel owners and that he required them to walk longer distances. A statistical analysis of camel deaths during Alphonse's lifespan reveals that Frank's camels died at a slightly higher rate than camels belonging to other deliverymen in that area.

Alphonse was in a somewhat unique situation. He had been born with a defect that meant that throughout childhood, his back was extremely weak. He had worked for much of his life to strengthen his back, and at the time he was employed by Frank, he was considered to be as strong, if not stronger, than all of the other camels. Historians are not in agreement about why Alphonse would often, in his free time, carry heavy loads; some argue that it was because he was arrogant and liked to show off to other camels, while others contend that Alphonse was eager to prove himself. Either way, it is clear that this practice did contribute to Alphonse's exhaustion on the day of his death. It is generally recommended that camels with that type of disability limit their physical exertion when not strictly necessary.

Therefore, on the day of his death, Alphonse was in poor physical condition. Delivery records from that date showed that Frank did not load Alphonse with a heavier pack than was typical for his camels. However, eyewitness accounts of the incident suggest that it was clear that Alphonse was struggling under the weight of the pack and that he was in distress. Observers also reported that Frank was in a hurry that day and seemed annoyed by the camel's lack of enthusiasm for the trip. Charlie, Frank's assistant, wrote in his diary that evening that Frank "was chewing on a piece of straw like he sometimes does, and when he told Alphonse to 'hurry up,' the camel just stood there. Frank grabbed the straw out of his mouth and threw it on the camel's back and started to shout. At that exact second, Alphonse fell over. I ran over and immediately saw the camel was dead. The straw was only a tiny thing. I can't understand how that could have caused Alphonse's back to break."