

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

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 A REVISIONIST INTERPRETATION\***

*Context for Revisionism: About two decades after Alphonse died, camels and human allies began to agitate for increased rights for camels and for improved treatment of camels in society. Historians, many of whom sympathized with camels (and some of whom were camels themselves), began to recognize that camels' perspectives had been left out of the historical narrative. They set about consulting new types of sources to create histories that more accurately reflected the experience of camels.*

Although previous accounts of how Alphonse the camel died have tended to place blame on Alphonse for his death, Alphonse was not, in fact, to blame. Alphonse was subjected to inhumane treatment throughout much of his short life, and his employer, Frank, was directly responsible for his death, as well as for the suffering and likely deaths of many other camels.

Alphonse was employed, like most camels at that time, in the business of carrying heavy delivery loads to his employer's customers. Although Alphonse had been born with a condition that made his back weaker than other camels' backs, he had been able to overcome this disability over the years, and by the time he reached adulthood, he was able to carry as much weight as camels who had not been born with the condition. He was very proud of his strength, and occasionally he would demonstrate his prowess to other camels by carrying very heavy loads, particularly if they were doubtful about his abilities. Alphonse's diary entries demonstrated that he considered his employment in deliveries a testament to his personal strength (both mental and physical), and he worked very hard at it.

At that time, camels were very marginalized in society. The best camel employers were indifferent to the comfort of their camels, while the worst were cruel and reckless with their camels' lives. This behavior was generally accepted because camels were seen only as a means to transport goods. Despite the high rate of camel deaths and injuries revealed by hospital and mortuary records, there was a very low rate of reportage on these deaths in the media, suggesting a tacit or perhaps explicit acceptance of the mistreatment of camels. Therefore, Alphonse's employer, Frank (known locally as the "Camel

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\*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](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/secondary_resource_80_8.html)†

Killer” because of his decades of camel abuse, which often led to their deaths), was able to get away with all kinds of abhorrent treatment. He harbored a particular grudge against camels because, as a child, he had been kicked in the face by a camel. His childhood friends reported that this incident had led to a deep mistrust of the animals that manifested itself in Frank constantly thinking of ways to make them suffer. Many other people also mistrusted camels due to their long history of social marginalization and commonly held stereotypes of camels as mean and selfish creatures, which can be seen in numerous satirical drawings and characterizations of camels in literature and the media. This meant that when Frank tortured the animals, others would stand idly by or even enjoy the spectacle.

Frank’s favorite torture involved loading camels up with goods almost to the point of the camels’ collapse and then walking them on lengthy, steep, roundabout routes to make deliveries to his customers. Frank’s delivery records showed that he frequently loaded the animals with a heavier weight than other deliverymen, and maps of his delivery routes revealed that he often walked camels, on average, longer than other deliverymen. This resulted in many camels collapsing and dying from exhaustion and dehydration. Eventually, Frank’s camels decided to try to unionize, but op-eds from local papers showed that the political environment was too unfavorable and the camels became worried for their safety. Ultimately, they abandoned this attempt.

On the day that Alphonse was murdered, Frank had decided to take him on an unnecessary delivery trip. Alphonse’s diary indicated that he had been in poor health for several days by that point, but Frank loaded him with even heavier weight than usual. Just to rub in his total power over the poor animal, Frank spat the straw he had been chewing onto the pile on Alphonse’s back as he was struggling to stay standing under the weight. Alphonse, under the enormous weight placed on him by Frank, collapsed and died.