

Stagecoaches in the Comstock and Carson Mint Era

By Tom DeFina

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“By and by, as the sun rose up and warmed the world, we pulled off our clothes and got ready for breakfast. We were just pleasantly in time for five minutes afterward the driver sent the weird music of his bugle winding over the grassy solitudes, and presently we detected a low hut or two in the distance. Then the rattling of the coach, the clatter of our six horses’ hoofs, and the driver’s crisp commands, awoke to a louder and stronger emphasis, and we went sweeping down on the station at our smartest speed. It was fascinating—that old overland stagecoaching.” Mark Twain wrote the above description of a stagecoach ride in his book, *Roughing It*. He described the Concord stage’s ride in his book as “a cradle on wheels.”

Stagecoaches and express lines in the United States were a means of transportation and communication to the outside civilization. They played a significant role in America’s history. As swarms of fortune seekers moved to the vast expanse of the American West during the height of the Comstock Lode, the stagecoach met the challenge and formed one of the most colorful epics in the history of transportation. It has been noted that the stagecoach played a part in the building of the West that could not have been assumed by anything else that ever ran on hoofs or wheels; it was called the most perfect traveling vehicle that horses ever drew.

The great stage lines prospered with magnificent vehicles such as the Concord coach, and the stage or mud wagons, of which only the finest equipment was used. The Concord coaches were built so solidly it became known they didn’t break down, but simply just wore out. The stage lines used American horses driven in from



Kentucky and elsewhere to replace the native mustangs. Interior comfort however may have been another story entirely.

Hollywood movies suggest cozy seats and a sense of romance and elegance. The truth is, the best seat was the one next to the driver. In coaches with three bench seats, the passengers rode three abreast, squeezed into a space of fifteen inches apiece. Usually, the two back rows faced forward and the front row faced rearward. Those in the forward and middle row had to ride with their knees dovetailed. The center seats only had a leather strap to support their backs, and passengers rode with baggage on their laps and many times with mail sacks beneath their feet.

Despite the fact that most stagecoaches rarely traveled over five miles per hour, it goes without saying that some travelers suffered from motion sickness due to the unpredictable movement of the coaches over the rough terrain. Overland stagecoaches would make only brief stops at way stations to change teams. Passengers often had poor food and little rest. If a passenger got off the stage to rest, he might easily be stuck in that location for a week or more if the next available stage didn't have any seats open.

Crowded coaches often caused conditions that prompted Wells Fargo to post these rules in each coach for passenger behavior:

- Abstinence from liquor is requested, but if you must drink, share the bottle. To do otherwise makes you appear selfish and un-neighborly.
- If ladies are present, gentlemen are urged to forego smoking cigars and pipes as the odor of same is repugnant to the gentler sex. Chewing tobacco is permitted, but spit with the wind, not against it.
- Gentlemen must refrain from the use of rough language in the presence of ladies and children.
- Buffalo robes are provided for your comfort in cold weather. Hogging robes will not be tolerated and the offender will be made to ride with the driver.
- Don't snore loudly while sleeping or use your fellow passenger's shoulder for a pillow; he or she may not understand and friction may result.
- Firearms may be kept on your person for use in emergencies. Do not fire them for pleasure or shoot at wild animals as the sound riles the horses.

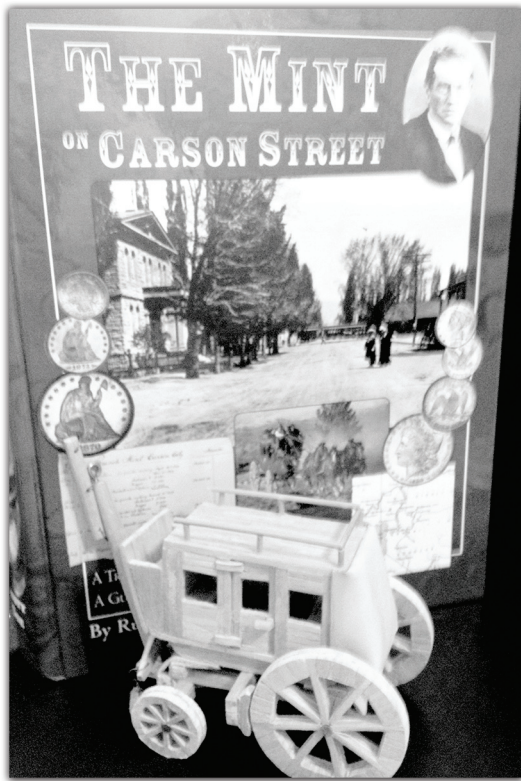
- In the event of runaway horses remain calm. Leaping from the coach in panic will leave you injured, at the mercy of the elements, hostile Indians and hungry coyotes.
- Forbidden topics of conversation are: stagecoach robberies and Indian uprisings.
- Gents guilty of un-chivalrous behavior toward lady passengers will be put off the stage. It's a long walk back. A word to the wise is sufficient.

Stagecoach travelers were always at risk of robbery by highwaymen, and also faced the dangers of Indian attacks. As gold and silver discoveries spread across the West, so did the stagecoach robbers. In the early days, to attack a stagecoach was not only to engage as many as a few dozen well-armed passengers, but it was also to arouse all the settlers and miners for miles around—men who would never rest until the crime was avenged. Society knew it had to depend on stagecoaches for its existence; and to attack a stagecoach was to attack society.

Out of Folsom, California, ran the Pioneer Stage Line, which Frank Stevens had started. It was extended over the Sierra Nevada to accommodate travelers to the silver mines near Carson City and Virginia City, which were at the peak of their activity in the high times of the Comstock Lode. Virginia City was on the Overland Mail line under the management of Wells, Fargo and Company. These lines, operating as though they were one, joined the railroads of the East with the cities of the Far West. It was a chain of railroad and stage that reached from sea to sea.

Just about everyone has heard of a seasoned stagecoach driver named Hank Monk. He was the man who drove Horace Greeley, the great editor of the *New York Tribune*, so rapidly over the Sierra

Nevada that poor Horace was said to be unable to sit down at a banquet given in his honor. Greeley and many others said Hank was reckless, but twenty years of fast driving over the Sierra left not a single injured passenger upon his record. He was considered by many as a “skillful and careful whip.”



There was another interesting stagecoach driver of fame named Charlie Darkey Parkhurst (Charlie was a woman). She was one of the best drivers in New England before the gold fever called her away. She started her career in a livery stable where she dressed in boys clothing; the owner did not know why she laughed when he told her that he would “make a man of her yet.” Charlie was a hero of sorts as she took out several highwaymen, and saved the coach’s

treasure, and escaped unscathed—passengers, coach and all. During all of her career she ranked with some of the most expert linesmen in the Sierra. Until her death, many of Charlie’s best friends never even realized she was not a man!

Wikipedia notes, “The last American chapter in the use of stagecoaches took place between 1890 and the late 1920s, when the road to Young, Arizona was paved and the stagecoach was replaced with a Ford motorcar. In the end, it was the motor bus, not the train, that caused the final disuse of these horse-drawn vehicles.”

This *Curry’s Chronicle* edition of the Word Treasure Hunt features twenty-five stagecoach-related terms, all of which represent just another edge of the tapestry that made up some of the great and amazing stories from the Comstock Lode and the Carson City Mint. Enjoy!

References:

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Roughing It, Mark Twain

Wikipedia – Internet

www.tombstonetimes.com

(Images courtesy of Tom DeFina)

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www.carsoncitycoinclub.com**

C40A WORD SEARCH PUZZLE

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E	C	T	C	W	H	E	E	L	H	O	R	S	E
E	H	R	E	L	T	S	O	H	C	C	S	X	C
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I	S	E	S	R	O	H	G	N	I	W	S	C	T
P	C	C	T	H	G	I	R	W	L	E	E	H	W

25 Stagecoach-related Terms

Hounds
Bellyband
Wheelhorse
Shotgun
Overland
Reaches
Charlie
Stagers
Wheelwright

Whip
Snubber
Reinsman
Concordcoach
Traces
Whippletree
Hostler
Swinghorses

Rig
Carryall
Singletree
Deport
Hame
Jehu
Thoroughbrace
Box