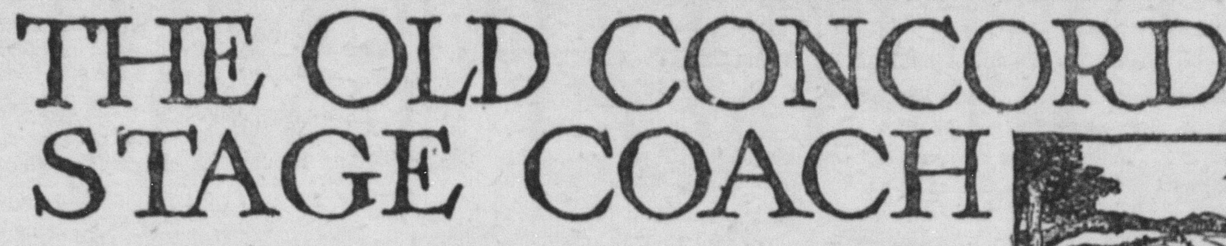
THE OLD CONCORD STAGE COACH




A STAGE STATION OF NEW ENGLAND'S PIONEER DAYS


CARRYING THE MAIL ACROSS THE PLAINS


AN OLD STAGE COACH AT A CALIFORNIA FIESTA


AN EASTERN STAGE COACH

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

THE old stage coach days in this country are long since gone, but in many places throughout the United States relics of that romantic era in our history are still preserved as object lessons to us Americans who live in the automobile and airplane age of the hardships endured by our pioneer ancestors in their journeys through the wilderness.

Perhaps the most familiar one of these is the weather-beaten and battle-scarred old stage coach which stands on the lawn near the museum at Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone National park. This old Rocky Mountain mail coach, the first in Montana, once ran between Helena and Bozeman and at one time or another carried such distinguished passengers as Gen. James A. Garfield (before he was President), President Chester A. Arthur, the first President to visit Yellowstone park (in 1883) and General Sherman, during his inspection trip into Montana in 1877.

Although the paint is scaling off and the curtainless windows stare sadly at the passerby, there is a certain pride about this old relic of the early days and well there might be. With General Sherman aboard and a "he-man" skinner in control of the six horses that provided the power, the distance between Fort Ellis and Helena, Mont., 108 miles, was once negotiated in the record time of eight hours by this coach. There were frequent changes of horses but P. B. Clark, proprietor of the stage company, drove the entire distance.

A year or so ago another of these old vehicles attracted nationwide attention through the following press dispatch from Washington:

Two of the country's most widely known comedians, Will Rogers and Fred Stone, have presented the dignified Smithsonian institution something for which it has long been searching—a rare old Concord stage coach built in 1825.

It has arrived at the museum after journeying from San Francisco to New York by way of the Panama canal on an army transport, thence by boat down the coast and up the Potomac.

Under orders of the quartermaster general, the creaking old relic, with paint peeling off the wheels and red leather upholstery badly worn, was handled as carefully as though it were a jewel. It came uncrated and was rolled proudly through the streets of the Capital to its final august abode.

For some time the arts and industries section of the Smithsonian institution has been hunting for a Concord coach. Very few of these early vehicles are left as most went to pieces from hard use.

About a year ago museum officials saw a picturesque coach which was the property of Fred Stone. They asked Stone later to give the coach to the museum. He replied that it had been given his friend Will Rogers and was in Beverly Hills, Calif.

The Smithsonian institution began writing and wiring Rogers. A month ago the comedian briefly stated through his secretary that the high old carriage which once sheltered hoop skirts and poke bonnets, was theirs. Lest the treasure slip from them the museum officials promptly dispatched a bill of lading with instructions to load the coach on an army transport with all speed.

Now they are trying to get from Stone or Rogers a history of the relic, but so far have had to be content with the small brass plate attached to the coach and inscribed: "G. Gerald, Blacksmith, Concord, 1825."

The coach is of the type used to carry passengers over the national highways in early days. Its railed top is reminiscent of the armed guardsmen who perched above the passengers on the lookout for robbers in the then Wild West.

It now takes its place beside Colonel Lindbergh's famous plane, "We" and a "hobby horse" presented by Buster Keaton. The latter is a quaint mode of early transportation somewhat resembling a modern kiddie car and propelled by the feet.

At about the same time another old stage coach was featured in a press dispatch from Las Animas, Colo., as follows:

One of the famous stage coaches of the Southwest has been sold to pay a storage bill.

The old coach which once operated between Leavenworth and Denver and whose passengers include Horace Greeley, President Grant and other national personages, was sold at sheriff's sale for $4,500 to E. L. Elder. This is just another chapter in its interesting history.

Years ago the coach was purchased by the Bent County Fair association. When the annual celebration was discontinued the old vehicle was stored in the barn on the L. G. Kurtz farm. A few years ago the coach was used in a celebration and then was parked backed of Elder's garage. Later he cleaned the coach and kept it in the store room.

According to prairie tradition it is the coach used by Mr. Greeley in 1859. It is known as the Greeley coach. The old coach was built in Concord, N. H. In spite of its abuse the old vehicle is sturdy and much of its equipment is serviceable. The trip from the Missouri river to Denver required six days and nights and horses were changed every 12 hours.

The old stage at one time was operated by Barlow & Sanderson. This was in the early '60s. Spottswood & McClelland were the next owners of the vehicle. In the early '70s, S. W. Nott purchased the old conveyance and used it on a stage line out of Denver. About the time of the excitement in Deadwood the Greeley coach went into service on a route to Elkhorn.

In 1873 bandits held up the stage, riddled it with bullets and killed three passengers. The driver, Jack Quinn, escaped with the mail and his exploit is mountain country history. The bullet holes are visible in the old rounded body.

Nobody knows when the old stage made its first overland trip from Leavenworth. At the time of the Civil war it was in service between the river and Denver. Previous to that, it went over the Santa Fe trail and was no stranger in Santa Fe. Many buffalo were shot from its hurricane deck, for it served as the original "rubber neck" wagon in the Southwest, when the tourists from the East went to sample the thrills in the wide open spaces.

Mention of Horace Greeley in connection with a stage coach recalls the classic story of Hank Monk, perhaps the most famous of all western stage coach drivers. Monk was the driver of the coach in which the famous editor once rode from Carson City, Nev., over the Sierras to Placerville, Calif. The story of that famous trip is told by Wesley Stout as follows:

Uncle Horace was the most generous of men with advice. Thousands of readers held their breath until he gave them the signal to exhale; and if governments blundered or the rainfall was excessive, it was not for lack of Uncle Horace's omniscient counsel. Accustomed to cosmic affairs, Greeley saw in Monk only one more Jehu smelling of horses.

Leaning out the window and peering over his steel spectacles, the editor informed the driver that he expected to be in Placerville on the dot, having promised to speak briefly there before going on to Sacramento, and wishing to catch the connecting coach.

"Yes, sir!" said Monk blandly, and started with a lurch which upset all. The early miles were upgrade and the pace moderate, but once Monk topped the Sierras, he opened the throttle. The mountain gait down this alpine corkscrew was as breath-taking as a shoot-the-chutes; what this must have been is better left to the imagination. Greeley made three attempts to get his head out the window again and was thrown for a loss each time. On the fourth down, he succeeded and, his wreath of white chin whiskers bristling with anger, he shrieked a command to slow down.

"Keep your seat, Horace," Monk called back. "I'll get you there on time."

He did. This is the story, at any rate, still told as gospel. An admiring populace presented Monk with a heavy gold watch upon which was inscribed "Keep your seat, Horace," and thereafter Hank was the commodore of the fleet. For fifty years after, any far western impatience was as likely as not to be squelched with this quotation.

Greeley had ample time to advise the public of Placerville from the veranda of the Cary house. The name of Monk did not appear in this speech or in Greeley's book, but the latter does refer to the ride: "Yet along this mere shelf, with hardly a place to each mile where two meeting wagons can pass"—Greeley is writing as of 1859—"the mail stage was driven at the rate of ten miles an hour—in one instance eleven—or just as fast as four wild horses could draw it. Our driver was, of course, skillful, but had he met a wagon suddenly on rounding one of the sharp points we were constantly passing, a fearful crash was unavoidable. Had his horses seen fit to run away—as they did once on the unhooking of a trace, but at a place where he had room to rein them in out of the road on the upper side—I know that he could not have held them, and we might have been pitched headlong down a precipice of 1,000 feet; where all the concern that could have been picked up afterward would not have been worth two bits per bushel."

Mark Twain, who was supposed to have authored the Monk anecdote, declared that he had heard it either 861 or 862 times in six years, but that it never had occurred, and was a poor thing anyhow. Joe Goodman, editor of the Virginia City Enterprise, was going East in 1869. Monk's parting words to him were: "You tell Horace Greeley I want to come East, and ask him to send me a pass."

One of the first acquaintances Goodman ran across in New York was the editor. "Mr. Greeley, I have a message for you from Hank Monk—" he began innocently.

Greeley glared. "That scoundrel!" he broke in. "He has done me more injury than any other man in America." And that was that.

Although we commonly think of the stage coach as a vehicle of the trans-Mississippi frontier, the old Concord coach, the use of which became so general on all the stage lines of the West that no other coach ever supplanted it, was a New England product. It was made by the Abbott-Downing company of Concord, N. H., a firm that had its beginnings in a wheelwright business, founded by Lewis Browning in 1813.

Back in Colonial days coaches at first were imported from England. Coach building had become an accepted English tradition in the Eighteenth century, and the few colonial coach builders had served their apprenticeships in the old country.

The close of the Revolution brought independence to this country not only in political, but in industrial domains. This was evident in the development of transportation. The fine English coach was not well adapted to the rough and often precipitous roads of the United States.

In such states as Vermont, with her Green mountains, and in New Hampshire, with her White mountains, once one colony, the demand grew for a vehicle which would be as safe and comfortable as possible on the steepest and rockiest grades. The coach developed early in the last century by the Abbotts of Concord met this want.

The body of the coach was built of stout white oak, braced with iron bands. It was suspended upon two leather thoroughbraces extending lengthwise of the coach and attached at each end to a standard protruding up from the axle. These thoroughbraces were made of straps of leather placed on top of each other to a thickness of about three inches. This leather swing was used in the absence of steel springs to absorb the jars, and it permitted the coach to rock slightly forward and back. Behind the body was the triangular "boot" for mail, express or baggage, and at the front, under the driver's seat, was another leather compartment (the front "boot") for the carriage of similar articles.

The coach had three inside seats, capable of holding nine passengers. The front seat faced backward, and the middle one was often a mere bench-shaped contrivance that could be removed when the floor of the coach was needed for mail or express. There was room for another passenger (sometimes still another was squeezed in) on the box with the driver and the messenger; and on some of the coaches a further seat was set up above and behind the driver, capable of holding three passengers. An occasional three-passenger seat at the rear of the top was not unknown; and on such a stage 17 passengers might be found.

There was frequent crowding, especially when one or more of the passengers happened to be of unusual girth. Raphael Pumpelly, who traveled over the Butterfield route from Tipton, Mo., to Tucson, Ariz., in what was presumably a Concord coach, gives us this picture:

"The coach was fitted with three seats, and these were occupied by nine passengers. As the occupants of the front and middle seats faced each other, it was necessary for these six people to interlock their knees; and there being room inside for only 10 of the 12 legs, outside of the coach was graced by a foot, now dangling near the wheel, now trying in vain to find a place of support. An unusually heavy mail in the boot, by weighing down the rear, kept those of us who were on the front seat constantly bent forward, thus, by taking away all support from our backs, rendering rest at all times out of the question."

Barter That Satisfied All Concerned in Deal

Forty-five years ago I owned a lumber business in a little country town in Manitoba. We were all desperately poor; a $10 bill looked as large as a bed sheet.

One day a farmer asked me to sell him, on credit, $10 worth of lumber, explaining that he had sold some hogs to the butcher, who could not pay him. The butcher would go good for the lumber bill, he said. I explained to the farmer that I would as soon trust him as the butcher and told him to get the butcher, who confirmed the farmer's story.

I asked the butcher if he sold meat to the Grand Central hotel, where I was boarding. He said he did and that they were owing him money. I told him to go to the hotel and get me two $5 meal tickets on account of his meat bill, which he did, and I furnished the farmer with the lumber.

So the hotel paid for its meat, the butcher for the hogs, the farmer for the lumber, and I for my board without any money passing.—W. J. Palmer, in Wall Street Journal.

Settled

Reggy—So Grace told you that you might hope?

Ferdy—She did.

Reggy—Well, you needn't bother—I'm going to propose to her myself tonight.—Brooklyn Eagle.

Perseverance

Lots of people have good ideas, but they fail because they won't stick.—American Magazine.