Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Whip Was Often Profane

The unique thing about stagecoach travel in the far west is simply that it persisted here in "full vigor" for a generation after that vehicle had disappeared from the eastern states," according to Seymour Dunbar in his "History of Travel in America." But in 1850 the stagecoach could still be seen in any part of the world, and to travel by this means in California was so commonplace that only a very few of the hundreds who wrote on their experiences in the gold rush days were prompted to remark about what it was like to make the journey on four and six-horse stages.

The first standard coaches arrived from the East in the summer of 1850. Before that time the wagons and omnibuses used by the pioneer stage companies had been the subject of much criticism. These standard stages were of two distinct types the "Concord," and the "mud-wagon". The "Concord" was a coach which had been built by the Abbott – Downing Company in Concord, New Hampshire, since 1813, according to Charles Lummis in his "Pioneer Transportation in America". The construction principle of this coach was the resting of the body upon "thoroughbraces" – stout leather straps attached to C-shaped braces firmly attached to the front and rear axles.

This method of construction was superior, according to claim, to any other (especially for rough roads) in that it caused the body of the coach to rock or roll back and forth, making it what Mark Twain in "Roughing It" called a "cradle on wheels" This swinging and swaying, though far from comfortable, had certain advantages over the jerk and jar of the more rigid spring wagons.

The oval-shaped ash body of the "Concord" used in California was a modified enlarged form of an early nineteenth century design. Nearly all the coaches of this make had enough upholstered seats to accommodate nine passengers on the inside, and had places for at least a dozen more on top. At the rear, and often in front, were what was known as a "boots," leather covered triangular-shaped racks made to hold mail, express and baggage, according to the writing of Oscar O. Winther in "Express and Stagecoach Days in California."

Directly under the driver's seat or box was another compartment in which was placed the treasure box (often chained and locked) containing gold dust, bullion and other things of great value. A "Concord" coach weighed about twenty-five hundred pounds and sold for from twelve hundred to fifteen hundred dollars in California.

The "mud-wagon," the other type of vehicle extensively used in California, was much more simply constructed. It weighed less than the "Concord," and was built much lower to the ground to reduce the danger of overturning. The "mud-wagon" was also slung on "thorough-braces" rather than on main springs. Largely because of its lightness and its low center of gravity, this vehicle was employed in mountain travel and over "heavy roads."

Almost all the stages were drawn by four or six horses, which required expert drivers, or "whips" as they were then called, to drive the coaches over the rough, winding roads of California. The "whips" of the far west, although remembered principally for their picturesque qualities, were essentially sober, dependable men, according to Winther.

In California, J.D. Borthwick, an English traveler, observed, one found neither the "jolly old coachman with the red face," nor the "guard with his tin horn." Instead on the high driver's seat sat a swaggering rough-mannered but generally keen young man, and elsewhere on the coach was an equally dexterous "shot-gun messenger" whose duty it was to protect the coach from the depredations of outlaws." (Bancroft).

The average stage driver, in a class by himself, was to quote Bancroft, not the least original and fantastic of the conglomeration of humanity in California.

He was the "lord in his way," the captain in his craft, the [?] of timid passengers, the admiration of the stable-boy, and the trusty agent of his employer." Though the "whip" was often profane, he was usually gentlemanly and accommodating to his passengers according to "Old Time Stage Drivers of the West Coast." A stage driver usually had the rudiments of an education, and was celebrated for his pronounced, though probably not profound, views on all the problems of state, religion and life. As a class these men were "levelers of distinction," says Bancroft, "and the judge or governor on the box beside the driver is his equal, if not indeed his inferior …"