

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

April 22, 1957

Charley Was A Woman

Mrs. Mabel Rowe Curtis, president of the Pajaro Valley Historical Society and an enthusiastic student of Californiana, told us the story of Charley Parkhurst, pioneer stage driver, who only after death was discovered to be a woman. She had been a mysterious figure in a fabulous era, and now, after 76 years, her grave has been found in the Pioneer Cemetery in Watsonville.

In 1956 the Historical Society placed a monument over the grave of Charley Parkhurst and dedicated it to the great stage driver of the Gold Rush days, who led a hard-bitten existence as a man in the rugged old West.

The secret of why Charley Parkhurst chose to live as a man is still shrouded in mystery. It was long after Charley's death before any of the real facts began, bit by bit, to leak out. Even then the question of "Why?" has never been answered.

This is the story as we have pieced it together. As a youngster, Charley had run away from a New England orphanage. Dressed in boy's clothing, hair cut short, Charley had wandered into the stables of Ebenezer Balch, in Worcester, Mass. looking for a job. Balch needed a stable boy and hired Charley on the spot.

There was plenty of work and Charley was handy and did the work of two boys washing carriages and cleaning out the stables. So hard did Charley work that when Balch set himself up as an innkeeper in Providence, he took Charley along. He taught Charley how to drive. Charley became so expert that many wealthy customers demanded him over any other driver.

It was there that Charley became acquainted with Jim Birch. And it was a natural that when Birch went West, where he and Frank Stevens established the California Stage Co., the first great stage empire of the West, Charley was one of the first drivers he asked to come West.

In California, Charley's fame spread as a driver over many of the early routes. The runs from Stockton to Mariposa, from Sacramento to Placerville, from San Francisco or Oakland to San Jose, from Watsonville to Salinas to Monterey - Charley knew them all.

Capable of performing heroic feats, the stage drivers of that era were veritable monarchs of the road Charley was ranked with the best of them but remained aloof from the other drivers and never made any close friends. Charley wore a patch over one eye in later years as the result of

being kicked by a horse in an accident near Redwood City. Charley spoke with a high falsetto voice and walked with a limp due to a rheumatic knee.

Charley had two peculiarities of dress, a wide leather belt around the waist and embroidered gauntlets worn over extra small hands. Charley had the faults of other individuals - chewing tobacco, drinking moderately, and shaking dice for two-bit cigars. The day after payday Charley was broke, so it is said.

After nearly 30 years of driving, Charley was heard to remark "I'm no better off now than when I commenced. Pay's small and work's heavy. I'm getting old. Rheumatism in my bones, nobody to look out for old, used-up stage drivers. I'll kick the bucket one of these days, and that'll be the last of old Charley."

When the railroads came, Charley quit. About halfway between Santa Cruz and Watsonville, near the community of Soquel. Charley bought a 25-acre ranch. For a time, it was a station for changing horses on the stage run, but later Charley raised apples, wheat and hay. George F. Harmon, a neighboring rancher, came to know Charley very well, and to like and respect the "man." Charley represented to be a "kind, good-natured old fellow who never turned anyone away in need of help."

In 1876 Charley sold the ranch to Harmon and moved into a small cabin on the Harmon ranch. Friends calling at the cabin on Dec 26, 1879 found Charley dead. Preparing to lay out the body for a decent burial, as was the custom of the time, they made the amazing discovery that Charley was a woman. A doctor's certificate later confirmed the fact that this woman had also been a mother.

Mrs. Curtis, the president of the Historical Society, became interested in this character of the early days and began a search through the old record book of the Pioneer Cemetery and found a marginal notation giving the grave's exact location Charley lies in the Otto Stoesser Sr. plot, in the central part of the cemetery. Stoesser, a merchant and city official, was a devout Catholic and maintained a plot for his friends and workers whose bodies were unclaimed for burial. Stoesser was a friend of Charley. His descendants have now deeded this plot to the Pajaro Historical Society.