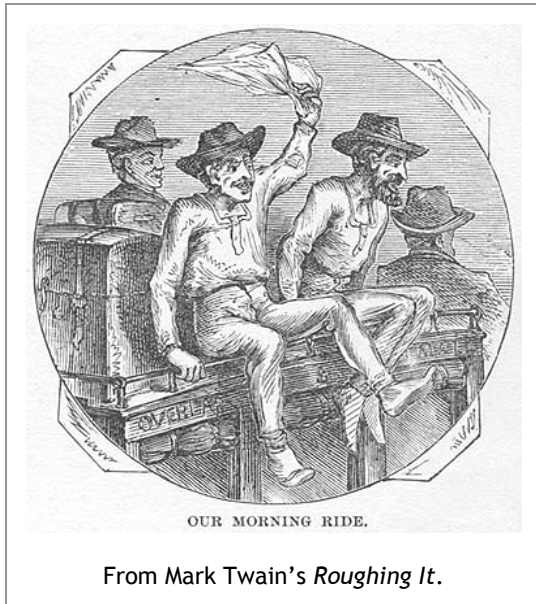


## A Moving Experience by Stage

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Filmmaker John Ford projected a nostalgic, romantic notion of 19<sup>th</sup> century stage travel through his movies, using only a few passengers and the very photogenic, heavy Concord coach as his star. In the West of more than 100 years ago, lightweight celerity wagons, mud wagons, Dougherty spring wagons, and ambulances ruled the roads.<sup>1</sup> These were pulled not by sleek horses, but more often than not by mules through the deserts and mountains. While Utah's picturesque Monument Valley offered wonderful backdrops for Ford's films, early overland stages traveled through the deserts of western Texas, southern

Arizona, and southern California. The actual experience on board a stage was nothing like the way it was depicted in the movies.

A "through" passenger was one going all the way, from the beginning of the line to the end; a "way" passenger traveled only part of the distance. The U.S. mail contract with John Butterfield called for the journey to be made in 25 days, but it usually took about 22 days. Unfortunately for passengers, the U.S. mail was given first priority by cross-continent stage companies.

Passengers were allowed to carry up to 40 pounds on the Butterfield line. It was recommended that they carry a pair of blankets, a revolver or knife, an overcoat, some wine to mix with water, which was not always the best, and three or four dollars worth of provisions purchased in Los Angeles to last over the desert.<sup>2</sup>

The driver and conductor or guard sat on the open bench in front. On some vehicles, luggage and extra passengers traveled on the roof. Mail was stowed in the boot at the back or at times beneath the driver's seat.

The mail pouches were never left unguarded or out of sight of company men. During [James] Birch's time, ... letter mail was to

be carried in a safe and secure manner, "free from wet or other injury in a boot, under the driver's seat, or other secure place, and in preference to passengers, and to their entire exclusion if its weight and bulk requires it."<sup>3</sup>

Day and night, through choking dust, constant heat, or intense cold, passengers sat inside the stage, shoulder-to-shoulder, and three to a bench. Each had about 15 inches to call his own. In coaches or wagons with three seats,

The passengers rode three abreast, squeezed into back and middle rows, both facing forward, and into a forward row, facing rearward. The facing passengers in the forward and middle rows had to ride with their knees dovetailed. All the passengers rode with baggage on their laps and [sometimes] mail pouches beneath their feet. They traveled relentlessly, day and night, with no more than brief moments at way stations for often poor food and no rest.<sup>4</sup>

Those stuck on the center seat of a larger coach had only a leather strap to support their backs on a long journey. Raphael Pumpelly, who rode on the Butterfield Overland Mail stage west to Tucson, noted:

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 ten of the twelve legs, each side 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. The fatigue of uninterrupted traveling by day and night in a crowded coach, and in the most uncomfortable positions, was beginning to tell seriously upon all the passengers, and was producing in me a condition bordering on insanity...<sup>5</sup>

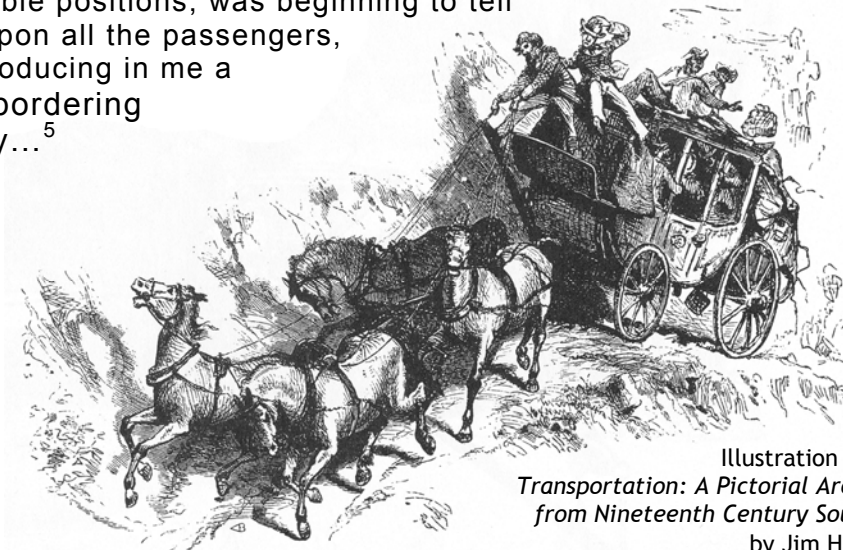


Illustration from  
*Transportation: A Pictorial Archive  
from Nineteenth Century Sources*  
by Jim Harter

There was also the heat, dust, cold and the darkness to be experienced on board a stage. Waterman L. Ormsby, the first “through” passenger on the westbound Butterfield Overland Mail and a reporter for the *New York Herald*, wrote feelingly of “the heavy mail wagon whizzing and whirling over the jagged rock... in comparative darkness... to feel oneself bouncing—now on the hard seat, now against the roof, and now against the side... was no joke.”<sup>6</sup>

Coaches had a lurching, rolling motion that was increased by rough roads. Some travelers suffered from motion sickness—similar to “seasickness” but without any refreshing sea breezes. William Reed described the experience.

The heat could be unbearable; the bodies of the passengers covered with sand, which permeated every inch of clothing. The rough roads gave to the coaches a motion not only from side to side, but a roll from front to back. Seasickness in the hot desert air, some said was far worse than the same ailment out on the cool Pacific waters. A seat in the front, in back, and a bench in the middle called for precise seating... Dust, sweat, insects, and a variety of irritating conditions made for an interesting, if not particularly pleasant trip across the arid desert.<sup>7</sup>

Stage passenger Demas Barnes remarked in 1866:

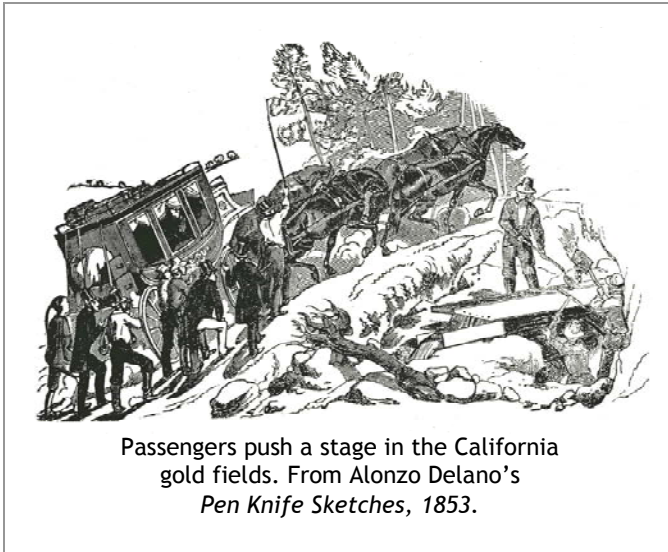
A through-ticket and fifteen inches of seat, with a fat man on one side, a poor widow on the other, a baby in your lap, a bandbox over your head, and three or more persons immediately in front, leaning against your knees, making the picture, as well as your sleeping place for the trip.

Overland stages traveled continuously, day and night, with no more than brief stops at way stations. A stage passenger at the Maricopa Wells station was quoted as saying:

Eight of us inside, not able to stretch much. Mere lying a full length is a considerable part of the relief as sleeping in a good bed. In coach the knees get weary, the back bone gets crooked, and it can only be straightened by a severe effort, and every nerve, muscle tendon and bone has a little protest of its own to make upon the natural strain upon it.<sup>8</sup>

On occasion passengers were required to get off the stage to relieve the fatigued teams or to push a vehicle. A *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin* Special Correspondent wrote about the approach to the Guadalupe Pass in Texas from the west on a cold November:

...we were informed by the driver that we were near a lay of sand four miles in length, and that we must walk through if we expected ever to arrive at our next station...the Pinery... Scarcely had we commenced our tramp on foot, before the young moon was veiled in a fleecy mist, which came down upon us poor devils and continued to play away upon our dusty hats and blankets until we had plodded our weary way four miles through the deep and heavy sand...<sup>9</sup>



Passengers push a stage in the California gold fields. From Alonzo Delano's *Pen Knife Sketches*, 1853.

Waterman L. Ormsby recalled, "We were obliged actually to beat our mules with rocks to make them go the remaining five miles to the station, which is called Pinery..."<sup>10</sup>

If passengers chose to stay in a town or at a home station to seek relief from their journey, they could become stranded for a week or more before resuming their travels. A ticket did not guarantee passengers the

right to travel on the next stage, when the seat was occupied by another.

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<sup>1</sup> Ambulances, used during and after the Civil War, and the Dougherty spring wagons were lightly constructed vehicles, open to the sides and to the front, with the driver seated beneath a canvas awning, with a footboard on the front of the wagon bed. Nick Eggenhofer, *Wagons, Mules and Men: How the Frontier Moved West*, Hastings House Publishers, New York, 1961. P. 122.

<sup>2</sup> William, Tallack, *The California Overland Express: The Longest Stage-Ride in the World*. Leisure Hour, London, 1860. Historical Society of Southern California reprint, Los Angeles, Ca., 1935.

<sup>3</sup> William Reed, "From San Diego to Tucson: A Glimpse of State Stations, People, Trails & Transportation," *Brand Book*, The San Diego Corral of the Westerners, Ray Brandes, ed., 1968. P. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Jay W. Sharp, "Butterfield's Grand Adventure," *Desert USA*. <http://www.desertusa.com/mag00/may/stories/butter.html>, 1/8/08.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> W. Eugene Hollow, "Great Days of the Overland Stage," *American Heritage Magazine*, Vol. 8, Issue 4. June 1957.

<sup>7</sup> Reed, *Ibid.* P. 130.

<sup>8</sup> Reed, *Ibid.* Pp. 134-135.

<sup>9</sup> Sharp, *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Waterman L. Ormsby, *The Butterfield Overland Mail*, Lyle H. Wright and Josephine M. Bynum, eds., The Huntington Library, San Marino, Ca., 1942, Reprint 1998. P. 73.