

Home and Swing Stations

By Mary A. Helmich
Interpretation and Education Division
California State Parks, 2008



A stage station at Milton, California.
From California State Parks
Photographic Archives.

The instructions read:

This Schedule may not be exact—
Superintendents, Agents, Station-men,
Conductors, Drivers and all employees
are particularly directed to use every
possible exertion to get the Stages
through in quick time, even though they
may be ahead of this time.

If they are behind this time, it will be
necessary to urge the animals on to the
highest speed that they can be driven
without injury.

Remember that no allowance is made in
the time for ferries, changing teams, &
c. It is therefore necessary that each
driver increase his speed over the average per hour enough to
gain the necessary time for meals, changing teams, crossing
ferries, & c.

Every person in the Company's employ will always bear in mind
that each minute of time is of importance. If each driver on the
route loses fifteen (15) minutes, it would make a total loss of
time, on the entire route, of twenty-five (25) hours, or, more than

There was no time to be lost
on the Overland Mail
Company line. John
Butterfield gave specific
instructions to his employees
in 1858 about keeping to the
schedule.

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS.

In order to carry out this undertaking, it is necessary that the following
Instructions be strictly observed by all Employees of the Company.

TO CONDUCTORS, AGENTS, DRIVERS & EMPLOYEES.

1.—It is expected that all employees of the Company will be at their posts at all times, in order to guard and protect the property of the Company. There teams furnished in ample time, and ready to proceed without delay or hindrance. When the conductors and drivers have the teams harnessed to them in time. Teams should be hitched together and not be taken too much to the south, so that no delay can occur by their running away. All employees will assist the Drivers in unloading and loading the teams in all cases, in case time.

2.—When a stage is seriously delayed by accident or otherwise, the Conductor or Driver will have the amount on way bill and team book, and report fully to the Superintendent at first station the amount and cause of such delay.

3.—Conductors should never lose sight of the mails for a moment, or leave them, except in charge of the driver or some other employe of the Company, who will guard them till his return. This rule must not be departed from under any circumstances. They will also report to the Superintendent in all cases if Drivers absent or mismanage their teams, or in any way neglect or refuse to do their duty.

4.—The time of all employees is expected to be at the disposal of the Company's Agents, in all cases, on stations where they may be staying over. Their time belongs exclusively to the Company; they will therefore be always ready for duty.

5.—None but the Company's Superintendents or Agents who have written permission, are authorized to make or receive bills. No notes, bills, or any obligations on account of the Company.

6.—Conductors and Drivers will be very particular, and not allow the Company's property to be abused, or neglected in respect to the proper packing the teams required.

7.—You will be particular to see that the mails are protected from wet, and kept safe from injury, of every kind while in your possession, in your drivers, and will be held personally responsible for the safe delivery at the end of your route, or point of destination, of all mails and other property in your charge.

8.—The Company will not at present transport any stage horses, mules, oxen, or pack animals, or any other animals. All employees are cautioned against receiving such animals in any stage, or station, except such kind of animals as the Company may from time to time allow to be transported in the manner and prices to be given by the different Superintendents. You will not fail to see that all persons, horses or pack animals on the stage, shall be entered on the way bill, with amount of freight to be charged, and you will be held responsible for the safe delivery, at point of destination, of all such pack animals, excepted as at time of delivery. No money, jewelry, bank notes, or valuables of any kind, will be allowed to be carried under any circumstances whatsoever.

9.—All Superintendents, Agents, Conductors and Drivers will see particularly that every passenger shall have their names entered on the way bill at point of destination, that their fare shall be paid in advance, and the amount entered on way bill as paid in print of destination. No Conductor or Agent must allow any stage

10.—The rates of fare will, for the present, be as follows: between San Francisco, California and San Francisco, California, between San Francisco, California and Fort Yuma, California, and between Fort Yuma, California and San Francisco, California, and between Fort Yuma, California and the Railroad terminus, the rate of fare will be published by the Superintendents of those divisions.

11.—The meals and provisions for passengers are at their own expense, and shall be the regular fare. The Company intend, as soon as possible, to have suitable meals at proper places prepared for passengers at a moderate cost.

12.—Each passenger will be allowed baggage not exceeding 40 lbs. in any case.

13.—Passengers stopping from one stage to another, are only to do so at their own risk to the Company being able to carry them on following stage. In case of this nature, the Conductor or Agent at the place where they leave the stage, will endorse on the way bill against their name, "Stopped over at _____" And on the way bill of the stage to which the passenger resumes his journey, the entry of his name will be made with the remark, "Stopped over from stage of the _____ (giving the date). Fare paid to _____ on way bill of _____ (date) from _____ (date of stage)".

14.—All employees are expected to show proper respect and treat passengers and the public with ability, as well as to use every exertion for the comfort and satisfaction of passengers.

15.—Agents, Conductors, Drivers and all employees will receive strictly all instructions that may be issued from time to time from the Superintendents of their respective divisions.

16.—Any transgression of a disciplinary nature will be sufficient cause for the discharge of any person from the employ of the Company.

17.—Drivers. A good look-out should be kept for Indians, and the Indians should be kept well away from the stage, by no means noisy or wrong them. At all times an efficient guard should be kept, and each guard should always be ready for any emergency.

18.—It is expected of every employe that he will further the interests of the Company by every means in his power, more especially by being on good terms with all his fellow-employees, by avoiding quarrels and disagreements of every kind and nature with all parties, and by the strictest attention of each and every one to his duty.

JOHN BUTTERFIELD,
President.

Special Instructions for
Butterfield Overland Mail
employees in 1858,
courtesy of the
Huntington Library.

M. L. KENNEDY, San Francisco, Cal.
HOWE CHAMBERLAIN, Fort Smith, Ark.
JAMES GIBSON, El Paso, Texas
W. H. BERRY, Fort Yuma, Cal.
GEO. HAWLEY, Denver, Colorado
HENRY BROWN, Fort Shiloh, Texas.

one day. If each one loses ten (10) minutes it would make a total loss of sixteen and one half (16½) hours, or, the best part of a day.

On the contrary, if each driver gains that amount of time, it leaves a margin of time against accidents and extra delays.

All hands will see the great necessity of promptness and dispatch: every minute of time is valuable as the Company are under heavy forfeit if the mail is behind time.

Conductors must note the hour and date of departure from Stations, the causes of delay, if any, and all particulars. They must also report the same fully to their respective Superintendents.

When a mile or two from a scheduled stop, stage conductors blew a small brass bugle or trumpet to alert the station staff of the impending arrival. When close to the station, another long blast of the horn was sounded. The first call told a station keeper it was time to prepare meals for incoming the passengers and to ready a fresh team for the stage. The second marked the stage's arrival.

There were two kinds of stations—home and swing stations. Usually only ten minutes were allowed at a swing station to exchange teams and to give passengers a moment to stretch before the stage was on its way.



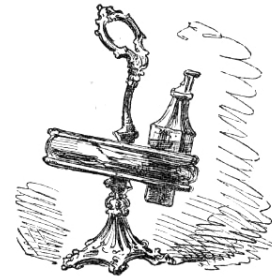
Old Vallecito Stage Station. From California State Parks Photographic Archives.

four, and nestling against its base were a couple of black and venerable tin coffee-pots, a tin teapot, a little bag of salt, and a side of bacon.

By the door of the station-keeper's den, outside, was a tin wash-basin, on the ground. Near it was a pail of water and a piece of yellow bar soap, and from the eaves hung a hoary blue woolen shirt, significantly—but this latter was the station-keeper's private towel, and only two persons in all the party might venture to use it—the stage-driver and the conductor. The latter would not, from a sense of decency; the former would not, because he did not choose to encourage the advances of a station-keeper...

The furniture of the hut was neither gorgeous nor much in the way. The rocking-chairs and sofas were not present, and never had been, but they were represented by two three-legged stools, a pine-board bench four feet long, and two empty candle-boxes. The table was a greasy board on stilts, and the table-cloth and napkins had not come—and they were not looking for them, either. A battered tin platter, a knife and fork, and a ware saucer that had seen better days... There was one isolated piece of table furniture that bore about it a touching air of grandeur in misfortune. This was the caster.

It was German silver, and crippled and rusty, but it was so preposterously out of place there that it was suggestive of a tattered exiled king among barbarians, and the majesty of its native position compelled respect even in its degradation.¹



At home stations, travelers had time for a hasty meal. Food varied greatly from station to station. Chicory coffee sweetened with molasses or brown sugar, hot biscuits, fried pork floating in grease, and corn bread were described in one account.² At a way station in West Texas in 1858, Waterman L. Ormsby breakfasted on jerked beef cooked on buffalo chips, along with raw onions, slightly wormy crackers, and a bit of bacon.³ He stated

...the fare, though rough, is better than could be expected so far from civilized districts. It consists of bread, tea, and fried steaks of bacon, venison, antelope, or mule flesh—the latter though tough enough. Milk, butter, vegetables were only met with towards the two ends of the trip.⁴

One traveler, English writer William Tallack, described his experience in 1860 at a way station in Southern California:

The Tejon station was a store kept by a dry sort of Yankee, who, after moving about very leisurely, and scarcely deigning to answer any questions put him, set before us a supper of goat's flesh and coffee.⁵

Mark Twain and his brother Orion Clemens dined even less satisfactorily at one station in the early 1860s. He wrote about it in his book, *Roughing It*:



DRINKING SLUMGULLION.

From Mark Twain's *Roughing It*.

The station-keeper up-ended a disk of last week's bread, of the shape and size of an old-time cheese, and carved some slabs from it which were as good as Nicolson pavement, and tenderer.

He sliced off a piece of bacon for each man, but only the experienced old hands made out to eat it, for it was condemned army bacon which the United States would not feed to its soldiers in the forts, and the stage company had bought it cheap for the sustenance of their passengers and employés. We may have found this condemned army bacon further out on the

plains than the section I am locating it in, but we *found* it—there is no gainsaying that.

Then he poured for us a beverage which he called "*Slumgullion*," and it is hard to think he was not inspired when he named it. It really pretended to be tea, but there was too much dish-rag, and sand, and old bacon-rind in it to deceive the intelligent traveler. He had no sugar and no milk—not even a spoon to stir the ingredients with. We could not eat the bread or the meat, nor drink the "*slumgullion*."⁶

¹ Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995 reprint. Pp. 21-22.

² 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..

³ 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. 72.

⁴ Ormsby, *Ibid*.

⁵ Vernet Snyder Ripley, "The San Fernando (Newhall) Pass: 11.1860: The Longest Stage Ride in the World," *The Quarterly, Historical Society of Southern California*, March 1948.

⁶ Twain, *Ibid*. Pp. 24-25.