

REMINISCENCES OF OREGON PIONEERS

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EARLY STAGE DRIVERS, By Mrs. John Hailey, Jr.

In 1863 John Hailey, Sr., and "Uncle Billy Ish" started saddle trains from Umatilla Landing and Walla Walla to Boise basin mines. This forms one of the earliest chapters in the history of the staging business, which lasted until the 80's, when by degrees the stages were pulled off the various routes in Utah, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and California.

During the years of flourishing business many men were employed as drivers whose real names were never known to their employers. A certain name, or nickname, would be registered with a description of the route and the stock to be handled. Perhaps some peculiar personal description would circulate by word of mouth from one division to another, but a fellow's past was in his own keeping.

Several years ago, Judge Stephen A. Lowell and Mr. Himes, custodian of the Oregon Historical rooms, called upon me to write an article for the Historical Quarterly on stage drivers. I applied to Father Hailey for data. He said, "Bless your heart, child. I never inquired into the men's history and besides most of the early day drivers had assumed names, or nicknames. My business was to secure sober, competent drivers." However, he later sent me a list of names on the payroll of Hailey, Gilmer and Salisbury lines.

I then turned to the late George Quimby, who was living in Portland and looking just as young as when he had driven stage between La Grande and Baker some thirty years before. Mr. Quimby possessed a marvelous memory, but when he learned why I wanted him to talk about staging days, he said in his Vermont drawl, "Wall, Parrie, if you hadn't mentioned anything about a blamed sassiety I calklate I could have spun yahns from now till the furder end of next week, but if you say paper or sassiety to me, I'll be danged if I can think of a danged thing."

Unfortunately I had committed the error; but incidentally he told me of the "nervousest" man who ever rode with him. Said he, "I wonder if Reuben Alexander is still living in Pendledton?" I informed him that Mr. Alexander was still a respected citizen; whereupon he added, "Wall, sir, I was driving from La Grande to Baker. Alex rode on the front boot with me and he told me he was going up to Baker to get married. Wall he was the nervousest thing I ever saw, so I just threw leather into the hosses' hides again my conscience to hurry him along to his gal. At the last swing station this side of Baker I got a skittish kind of a brute in place of a jaded wheeler, and I had to keep my mind on my driving. To jolly Reuben up a little I said, 'Now lookee here, son, no one is going to steal your gal before you get there and if you don't kam down, I'm going to strap you in the hind boot'. Wall, sir, he kept getting nervouser and nervouser until, by gunnies, he was beginning to give me the Jimmies. I slowed down some and said, 'Say, son, have you got the colic?' and by bonnies! what do you think ailed him--it wa'nt his gal he was worried over but my pets, my hosses that were hurrying him along to his wedding--By Gummies!!"

The regular drivers were almost without exception kind, fun-loving open-handed fellows. They knew practical psychology and they could always pick out any "dead beat" among the passengers, and they seldom failed in their estimate of those whom they considered the "real stuff." They were lovers of horses and there was no uncertainty for any length of time about the horses' names. Sometimes they were namesakes of sweethearts, but more frequently, characteristic appellations--i.e., "Black Nick and Lofty," "Swayback and Baldy," "Ginger and

Blue Dick," "Weasel and Hawk," "Nig and Coley," etc.

I recall the name of one team, or rather of one horse with a peculiar sensation of shock. Riding along the tiresome Snake River desert land in Eastern Idaho, with a driver who never spoke except to admonish Greeley to "look out there" or "get over there" I timidly inquired the name of Greeley's running mate. Laconically he answered, "Damfool." All attempt to be sociable was squelched on my part, but later, I learned that "Damfool" was a real hoss, and, paradoxically had become quite a favorite. The Jehu had simply been admonishing Greeley not to impose upon him.

Perhaps Pendleton people may remember genial John Lemon, at one time a division agent in Pendleton; also Jerry Crowder, a Virginian by birth. Mr. Crowder drove in the 60's when but 16 years old. He came west with a man named Parker. He also was a division agent in Pendleton, but mostly a driver on the Walla Walla or La Grande routes. He died in La Grande but is buried in Olney cemetery. Other drivers of the late 60's, 70's, and 80's are George Richmond, Jack Gilmer, Joe weather, Charley Haines, Bill Lockwood, and Bill Wellman. In staging circles Mr. Wellman was familiarly called "Colusa Bill."

There were rival companies in California and opposition stages had to cross the Colusa river on the same ferry; the stage getting there first would secure the boat, so considerable rivalry was created. On one occasion both arrived at the same time and Bill's opponent secured the ferry. Bill, however, swam his horses across and so arrived first.

George Shannon, with a span of horses, was drowned in the John Day river at the time of the flood about which so many pioneers have written. Shannon and John Hailey, Jr., were trying to save the horses. John put the mail sack on one horse, planning to ride the other. After many trials, John carried the mail on his own back the last three miles into The Dalles. He arrived an hour late and the mail contract money of several thousand dollars was forfeited.

I could write a long chapter of tragedies that occurred when the Wells-Fargo Company's strong boxes filled with gold dust or coin were carried by stage with often only the driver to guard their safe transportation. We shall pass over these stories of gloom. However, on one occasion some bold men were defeated of plunder. John Hailey, Jr., was sent in charge of a box holding about \$30,000 to be delivered to Wells-Fargo agents at Winnemucca, Nevada. At Silver City a party was to be given in honor of a cousin of the Hailey's. John was prevailed upon to "lay over" until next stage. The box was placed at the bank and the party enjoyed. "Road agents" had heard of the expected transfer of money and were on hand to overhaul the stage at a lonely spot. John's conscience for having delayed the box several hours was quite relieved.

A story which has appeared in print about the late C. S. Jackson was not given quite in full. John Hailey, Jr., assistant manager of the routes, received a complaint that thorough braces ordered for a division below Pendleton had not been recieved. A stage without these braces rivaled a torture of the Inquisition--the braces were used to support the body of the Concords and acted as supports. Mr. Hailey not only sent out tracers, but traveled hastily to Pendleton from Boise. Upon entering the stage office where the braces had been lying for some time, he exclaimed, "Why, Jack, didn't you forward the braces as ordered?" Placidly Mr. Jackson answered, "Because they haven't come." Pointing to them Mr. Hailey said, "What do you call that?" To which the reply came, "Just a pile of leather. I thought braces were all same as galluses to hold the drivers' trousers up."

Some other names found on the old payroll are Barney Keenan, Jimmy Rogers, Sam Howery, Johnny Carpenter, Sam Logan, Rube Warren, Lee Gattard, Charles Barns, C. C. McCoy, George Shannon, George Luce, Marris, Joe James, and a man who drove the first stage out of Umatilla

was Mr. Carr, from Portland, his first name is not given. Also on the payroll, along various branches of the roads were Jake Chase, Billy Heiss, Phil Pencil, Ben Pierce, Henry Dunn, Tom Rankin, Dave Taylor, Sol Warmley and old Tom Petit. I believe Tom must have been called "old" a few hours after birth. He was, however, one of the Ben Holiday drivers, faithful to his calling as long as the old Concords ambled through the canyons and over the sage-brush flats. He drove mostly in Oregon and Idaho. Old Tom wore a hickory shirt and it was said he never put on extra clothing; he never wore an overcoat during the coldest storms. One man who nagged him, out of friendly solicitude, was reminded there had been a hanging up the creek, and if he didn't close his "trap" about overcoats, there might be another. Later poor old Tom paid the penalty for this lack of bodily care with weary years of rheumatism. Old timers who knew "Tom" usually agree that the tough old pirate had a heart of the true metal and he was sincerely mourned when he died a few years ago in Boise.

Many early day drivers like the late J. M. Lesley of La Grande, (who by the way was called Jimmy Cutter in Ben Holiday times), and many others have received recognition among the builders of greater Oregon.

Jack Dillon, or "Rattling Jack," must not be forgotten. Many a person still living could give a favorable testimonial to Jack's expert driving. He had a happy faculty of making all parts of the stage equipment rattle, just to make a noisy and spectacular entry into the home station. The boys said he even could make his own brain rattle, but he was a rattling good driver just the same.

There are many persons, especially of the younger generation, who do not appreciate why memory hovers over the old stage coach days. It was a treat to see the stages come in and start out. The spirited horses knew they had to gratify their drivers by showing off. Trunks, baggage and people loaded into or on top of the coach. Good, bad and indifferent folk chummed for the length of the journey, bumped heads and noses, but many lasting friendships were cemented in stage trip days. I have ridden many weary, dusty miles over the old routes. I am glad to have had the experience, but rejoice over good roads, automobiles and airplanes.