



Siuslaw Pioneer Museum

Stagecoach Service In Oregon History

PART 1

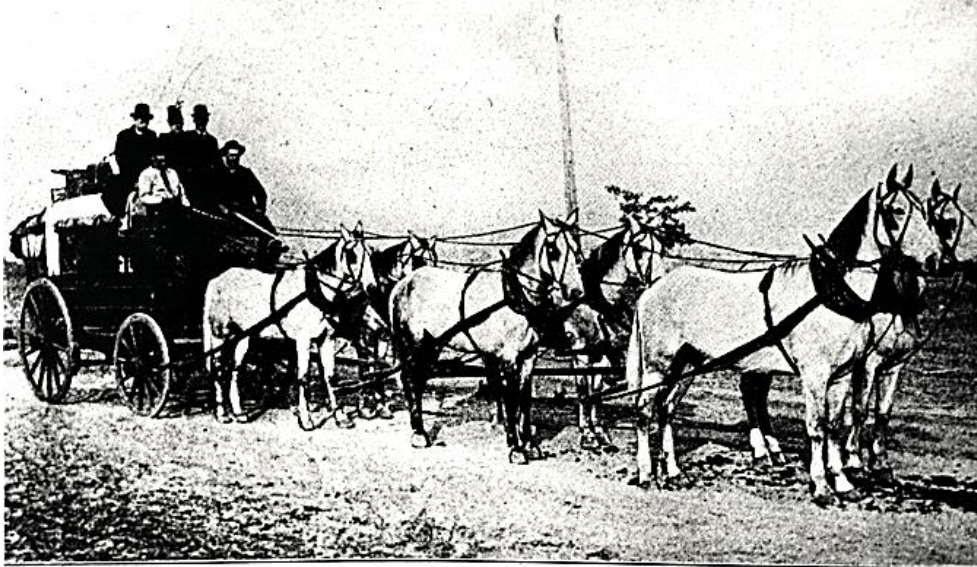


Photo courtesy of the Josephine County Historical Society in Grants Pass, Oregon

Siuslaw Oar Newspaper – 4 Sep 1953

History of Whisman Family Recounted at Early Day Siuslaw Settlers' Reunion

The following history of the pioneer Whisman family was given at the recent meeting of the Siuslaw Pioneer Association held at Ada, and as there are but three members of the original family still living, its history is being passed on thru the columns of the Oar.

“John and Joe Whisman were sort of wild-west stage drivers, as depicted in movies of today. They migrated from the San Joaquin valley in the year 1881, where they grew up as stockmen and buckaroos, arriving in Eugene in August. The youngest child at that time was Cora Whisman, later known as Toad by most everyone, who was just one year old.

The development of the Siuslaw country was just beginning at the time. **John and Joe bid in the government mail contract from Eugene to the head of the tide; thus began their participating in the development of our early Siuslaw country.**

They took up homesteads on Lake creek, John's place was at the mouth of Deadwood and Joe's

place at the mouth of Nelson creek. They built a road over the Chick-a-hominy and Nelson mountains, which made a short cut of eight miles between the Hale post office and Swisshome (which was not named at the time.) Their homesteads served as stage stations of this short cut to the Siuslaw river.

John's eldest daughter, Anna, carried the mail by horseback over the river road in conjunction with the stage line which took the short cut. This was a daily process of a trip each way from Eugene to the head of the tide for a period of 11 years, which required a lot of horses, lots of help, a lot of nerve and lots of hardships.

In the year 1893 they moved off their homesteads, which had all been logged off, and the logs rolled into Lake creek, three years earlier at the time of the disastrous 1890 flood, which took everything on the creek and river into the ocean. Losing their logs broke them up in business, both boys lost their homesteads.

The John Whisman's moved to Florence and ran the Safley hotel for a while. A little later they ran the boarding house for the Kolb and Benedict sawmill at Spruce Point. It was there in December, 1894, that John Whisman lost his all, with the passing of his beloved wife, Abbie. Since then, the Whisman's have scattered hither and yon, until today there are only three members of the original families living: Forest of Portland, Will of Blachly and Frank of Florence, the latter submitting this history.”



Route to the coast

This photo looks down the Eugene-Mapleton Stage Road, once one of the major routes from the Willamette Valley to the Pacific Ocean, in July 1913. Note the sign to the right of the dirt road that says **"Log Crossing – Be Careful."**

Source: The Register Guard newspaper, 1913.



Tales, Tails, and Trails by Dale H. Pretzer - Excerpts from his booklet 1996 Siuslaw Pioneer Museum Publication

... I quickly found that horses played a vital role in when and how a passenger arrived at a destination. There was artistry in handling horses, in making the stage move at a reasonable speed and even in getting through the Coast. I learned that the 60 miles to Florence from any direction presented a greater variety of obstacles than perhaps any other 60 miles in the United States.

The vast array of elements that influenced travel ranged from flat land that collected water or created prairie fires to rock formations that had to be climbed or dynamited, water and low lands that flooded easily, and the weather that made stretches impassable in the winter. The Pacific Ocean changed travel twice a day with its tides and created moving pockets of quicksand and sandbars that moved with the season. The thick underbrush was so dense that a horse or a man had difficulty moving without major clearing.

The routes changed frequently at the whim of the coach drive or the needs of the travelers. Many of the routes were not firmly established. They varied between more or less permanent points such as post offices, horse exchange stops and lodging points. It became clear during research that coaches could not go all the way to Florence and other modes of travel had to be undertaken to make a complete trip.

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Travel from the Valley to the coast took great endurance. Between 1850's and 1916, travelers had far less control of the conditions than that of today. In the 1880s cleanups on trails took days or months. Sometimes, moving the road completely was the only alternative. Immigrants had to adapt to the conditions of the landscape. Travel to Florence required several types of vehicles and a knowledge of each. East to west travel required some travel by wagon, by foot or horseback, and some by water.

The Oregon Territory began to be marked by wagon ruts from the eastern U.S., ending in the Willamette Valley in the 1850s. The last 60 miles to Florence was a maze of foot paths, winding streams and rivers over the Cascade Mountain Range, and through the forests. The sea otter fur trade drew many people. Traders and explorers came from Russia, England, and Spain to claim land. As early as 1792, Captain Gray of Boston came to the Columbia River on the ship *Columbia*. When the Oregon Territory finally became possession of the U.S., the number of travelers to the area began to increase.

By 1853, Eugene was established as the county seat for Lane County and recognized by the territorial legislature. Oregon was admitted into the Union in 1859. The Homestead Act of 1862 granted 160 acres of public domain to every adult American for the payment of a \$10 fee, and conveyance of a title to the land if the registrant cultivated it for five years. The Indian population was heavily impacted by this rush of immigrants to the area. The Homestead Act brought many people to California via the Oregon Trail during the California gold rush. Those who were not as successful in the gold fields migrated north along the coast of Northern California and Southern Oregon by wagon, horses, and boat to the mouths of coastal rivers like the Siuslaw. At this time, in the early 1850s there were no stage lines and no railroads in Oregon. A proposed line between Portland and San Francisco was organized. Some of the various land claims over which the line would travel eventually set up stage stops for drivers and hostlers to maintain horses and travelers.

Immigrants to the Oregon Territory did not realize how rough and unimproved travel would be compared to that of the eastern part of the country at that time. They had to adapt to uncertain travel modes and learn new techniques of going from place to place. Those adaptations provided incomes to many and impacted everyone's way of life. Road construction, shipbuilding, and stagecoach transport became income-generating services. The mail had to be delivered. Excess produce had to be moved to and from the farms via various rivers to the markets in Florence for exchange or for sale.



Prior to settlement in the Florence area, the Siuslaw river was the highway of the Siuslaw Indians for many centuries. The river played a major role in the continuing transportation for both the Indians and settlers. Because of the advantages of the river, it was a long time before roads and land travel by vehicle could make it all the way to Florence. At that time, most of the land travel was either on foot or horseback.

Eventually, two trails leaving Elk Prairie for the Siuslaw became popular modes of travel. One trail led over Badger Mountain, down the Wildcat, using the riverbed part of the way. In winter and at flood time it was dangerous or impossible for pack animals to traverse. The other trail led over Chickahominy Mountain, own to the headwaters of Chickahominy Creek, on over Nelson Mountain and down Nelson Creek to Lake Creek then down to the Siuslaw River. This latter trail was the first to be used by wagons. This was the first mail route to Mapleton by pack horse.

Image- Indigenous canoe at the museum.

Editor's Note: This issue is a 2-part series about the history of stage coach travel in the Siuslaw Valley. It is brought to you courtesy of printing support by Florence Branch Banner Bank. Part 2 will be published later this spring.



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