Spring **2026** ***Special Edition***

Siuslaw Pioneer Museum

Image of Cole's Stage Station situated in the foothills of the Siskiyou Mountains

Stagecoach Service In Oregon History

PART 2

Excerpts from the book *Knights of the Whip; Stagecoach Days In Oregon* by Gary & Gloria Meier:

Stage stations were important stops for travelers and stages alike. Many jobs occurred when a stage stopped at a station; emergency horse and riders were available and dispatched on various missions. Road and fording conditions were given, a storm shelter provided, repairs made, warnings given about holdups, and help organized for needs such as overdue or snowed-in stage coaches. Some stations served as post offices and all were centers of area activities and socializing.

Stations typically were about ten to thirteen miles apart. Depending on the terrain, it took a stage at least three hours to travel that distance. Well run stage stations known up and down the Pacific Coast and far to the East for their bountiful tables. Stage timetables were tight and there was not much time to serve the passengers. Some passengers could lay over at the stage station if they desired a good rest. Passengers in a hurry could sleep on the stage and occasionally get off at a stop for a quick meal and personal needs.

The stage stations were privately owned; most run by pioneer Oregon families on their Donation Land Claim properties. The operator contracted with the stage company for a set sum to be paid for specific services. The contacts did not included provisions for passenger services; those were left to the station operators. Passengers were charged a nominal fee for meals and lodging. Baths were free. Travelers were ready for a stop after being squeezed in the coach like sardines, no one bathing for several days, bumping along rough roads and over rickety bridges in the dark of night. Frequent accidents added to the excitement; wheels flying off, stages tipping over, horses running wild…

Types of Stage Stations

There were two types of stage station; "home" and "swing" stations.

Home stations were stage stops where regularly scheduled meals were provided and lodging accommodations offered to passengers. Home stations were the main stations and enjoyed the status of social centers along the line. Some were like small communities with a store, blacksmith, and outbuildings to house workers. Many stage drivers had the option of living at home stations; it was the only real home they knew…

Swing stations were the stage stops located between the home stations and were used only for quick change of horses. They also contracted with the stage company for limited services – feed for horses and board and lodging for one or two hostlers (men who looked after the horses). The chief function of a swing station was as horse changing points on the line.

All of the stations were frequent hosts to stage company representatives; Road Agents and Division Agents. They were in charge of ticket accounting, schedules, supervisors of the lines; most were former stage drivers and very popular among drivers, hostlers, and station operators.

Don't Forget the U.S. Mail…

Immigrants wanted to keep in touch with relatives and friends as well as ordering materials from catalog suppliers. The increase in mail pushed the one-man-one-horse mode to stagecoaches and then on to the railroad.

The U.S. Postal Department offered stipends to mail carriers and post offices. There was even the practice of having a mail stop about every 5 to 10 miles. These post offices were generally spots where the residents from the area would collect their mail at such spots as stage stops, stores, farms, or hotels. All mail came general delivery.

The mail service in the West started as "a once a week to every 10-day delivery" to drop-off points, but when the volume increased, a rider could no longer carry it all on horseback. Once decent roads were created, trips by other modes could be made more often.

By the time Oregon became a state in 1859, there were 14 territorial post offices.

Whisman Brothers Stage Trip

The ad below offered full round-trip accommodations… "*Take the trip to Florence on the Whisman Bos. Stage between Eugene and Head of Tide. Take the ocean beach route to Heceta Summer Resort --- Florence and Heceta Stage Line. W.E. Warren Prop. Steamer Lillian leaves Florence daily for the mouth of the Siuslaw where the connection is made with the stage to Heceta. Gardiner stage leaves Florence Mon., Wed., and Fridays, and arrives Florence Tu., Th., Sat. Connect with the steamer and Scottsburg stage line for Drain; also with the stage line to Coos Bay, H. H. Barrett, prop*."

WHISMAN BROS.

Stage : Line,

Over Lake Creek Road,

BETWEEN EUGENE & HEAD of TIDE.

Leave Eugene Monday and Thursday mornings.

Leave Head of Tide Tuesday and Friday at noon.

Whisman Bros., Proprs

The Stage Drivers

Excerpts from "Knights of the Whip" by Gary & Gloria Meier

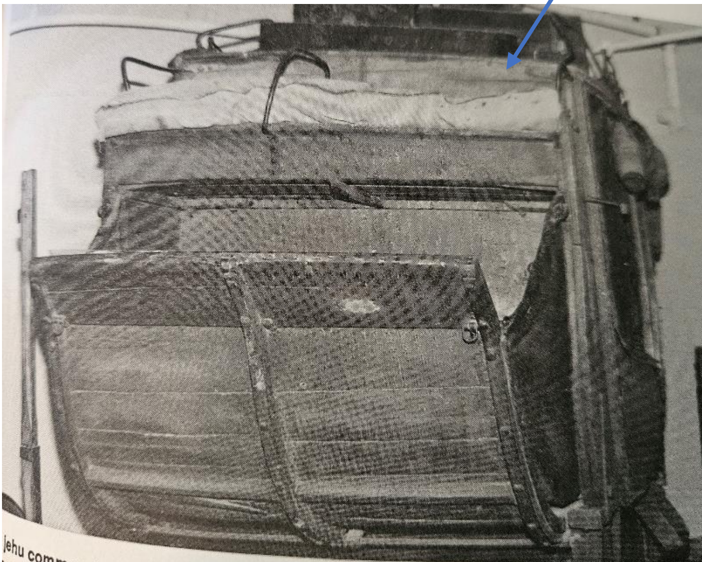
The job of the stage driver was to guide teams of spirited horses through all kinds of hazards, bringing through safely their passengers, Wells Fargo treasure boxes and the U.S. Mail – often not knowing if they would even make it to the next station.

They wheeled their teams around sharp curves on ink6-dark nights, down narrow and precipitous mountain grades and across swollen streams, pressing to meet schedules... and sometimes in the performance of their duties, they died.

It took a special sort of man to be a stage driver and they were greatly admired and respected. Their nicknames were "jehus" (2Kings:20), "Charlie" and "Knights of the Whip," or simply "Whip." They came from all walks of life. They were loyal, proud, tough, and dedicated to their craft. Usually, they were under forty years old, but older men drove, too. Though many were lacking in social graces they were always courteous gentlemen to their passengers, especially the ladies.

Drivers were good organizers when it came to getting People and luggage properly loaded into and on their coaches. The drive with his stage would come swinging into the area in front of the station. The passengers would hurry toward it. The driver would verify that the stage agent had listed on the waybill all passengers and collected the fares, including rates for any baggage in excess of thirty pounds. He folded the waybill in quarters and tucked it away in a special pocket sewn in his hatband.

The most prized seat, in good weather, was on the box with the driver. The whip always sat on the right side of the three place box seat. If there was a "shotgun messenger" (a Wells Fargo employee), he sat on the left side. Occupying the seat beside the driver was strictly by invitation. Getting up to the high seat, seven feet off the ground, was a challenge to many a lady hampered by her skirts and petticoats, but the driver was more than happy to assist her in her difficulty!



The Driver's Accessories

Drivers chose their own clothes. They wore good quality boots from Oregon & California bootmakers. Gloves were another way the drivers exercised their individualism; they were handmade of the finest buckskin; some with gauntlets and fancy stitching. Many were made by Southern Oregon ladies who knew the particular characteristics of the individual drive. The gloves commonly had a fringe of buckskin around the top and back seam. Colored beadwork was often used.

During the winter the drivers wore heavy protective coast. For further protection drives kept a canvas tarp in the box which they would tuck around themselves in wet weather. Some coaches had leather lap protectors which snapped to the footboard and sides of the box.

The driver's whip was his chief pride and joy. They were custom made for each driver, purchased with the driver's own money and maintained in the condition that suited his own artistic taste.

Horses were NEVER struck with the whip. The drivers loved and respected their horses. Instead of yelling at their horses, drivers kept up a constant chatter in tight spots, singing out to one horse or another by name, urging them on, encouraging or steadying them as the need arose. The whip was used as a signaling device to the horses. In the skilled hands of a veteran driver, the whip gave off scores of different tones and cracks, each with its own meaning and purpose. The whip itself was a work of art. The whipstock was from five to seven feet long, made from shaped and glued pieces of straight-grained hickory or oak. The butt was 1-1/2 to 2 inches and tapered rapidly for two feet. The taper was more gradual for the next two feet and maintained the same size from there to the end, where the lash was attached. The stock was usually ornamented with silver bands, engraved, and the wood was well oiled and polished. At the tip end of the stock was fastened the 8 to 10 foot long braided leather whiplash. It was not more than 5/8 inch thick.

The LADY Stagecoach Driver – Charley Parkhurst

Charlotte Darkey Parkhurst was born on 17 Jan 1812 in Lebanon, New Hampshire. Upon the death of her mother, Charley and her sister were taken to an orphanage and raised under the care of Mr. Millshark. Charley ran away at the age of 12 and assumed a masculine presentation. Charley met a man named Ebenezer Balch who owned a livery stable in Rhode Island. Balch took Charley under his care, teaching Charley to work as a stable hand and then with horses. Charley developed an aptitude for horses and Balch taught Charley to drive a coach, first with one, then four, and eventually six horses.

In the 1930s, Charley left for California, sailing on the *R.B. Forbes* from Boston to Panama. Shortley after reaching California, Charley lost the use of one eye after a kick from a horse, leading to the nickname of *One-Eyed Charley* or *Cockeyed Charley*. Charley went on to work for a friend named James E. Birch, who was a stagecoach drive who started his own stagecoach service. Charley developed a reputation as one of the finest stagecoach drivers (a "whip") on the West Coach. This inspired another nickname for Charley, *Six-Horse Charley*.

Seeing that railroads were overtaking stagecoach business, Charley retired from driving some years later, moving to Watsonville, California. For fifteen years he worked at farming and lumbering in the winter. He also raised chickens in Aptos Twp. He later moved into a small cabin about six miles from Watsonville, and suffered from rheumatism in his later years. Charley died there on 28 Dec 1849, due to tongue cancer. The obituary about Charley was reprinted in the New York Times on 9 Jan 1880. The headline was: "Thirty Years in Disguise: A Noted Old Californian Stage-Drive Discovered after Death to be a woman."

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 Branchm, Banner Bank.**

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