



Parked in the Past

Stagecoaches: mass transit in the 19th century – Definitely not a joy ride

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Drivers on today's Park County roads take nearly the same routes stagecoaches took and see some of the same scenery; but that's where the similarities end.

It's an annoyance to modern travelers when the car breaks down, when traffic delays eat into busy schedules or dirt and gravel side roads turn to washboards. Travel in a stagecoach would put our modern discomfort into perspective. It was no joy ride.

With a top speed of 10 miles per hour on the flat and more common speed of five miles per hour, the ride from Denver to Fairplay on the stagecoach, was a 16-18 hour ride requiring an overnight stay. According to ads in the Rocky Mountain News of 1873, the fare was \$12, equivalent to about \$235 today.

Seating

Because of the seating arrangement, one couldn't help but become acquainted with fellow travelers. The Abbot, Downing & Company's Large Overland Wagon, the stagecoach model most often used in the mountainous West, had an inside space

of about 45 inches wide and 65 inches long and an inside height of seven to eight feet.

Nine passengers sat in three rows; each traveler occupied a 15-inch square leather seat and had about seven inches of leg room. In comparison, the width of coach-class airline seats today is up to five inches wider with leg room five times greater, according to CNN Travel at www.cnn.com.

The front row faced backward, the middle and back seats faced forward. Passengers in the front and middle seats, facing each other, had to dovetail their knees in order to fit; passengers sitting on the ends had to brace one leg against the window opening or hang their leg out the door. Another discomfort for passengers in the middle row – they had no back rest.

Foot space was determined by the number of packages, pieces of luggage and mail sacks that didn't fit in the front and back boot and were stored on the floor of the passenger section.

According to a story by Doug Hansen in the July 2009 *Cowboys and Indians*

magazine, the best passenger seat on a stagecoach, at least in good weather, was sitting next to the driver. The seat was eight feet off the ground and the passenger had a commanding view of the countryside while watching the driver control six running horses by the three reins he held in each hand.

An express agent rode shotgun, also next to the driver. His job was to guard gold shipments and currency. One or two bench seats, holding three passengers each, were on top behind the driver.

The Chinaman's seat, with room for four, was a loose board between leather straps, facing backwards on the back of the stage. The slang term originated because, according to Hansen, it was common for Chinese workers to sit back there. These seats had the lowest fare and passengers were breathing dust the entire ride.

Once passengers, packages and freight were arranged, a team of six horses or mules sped to the next stop, 10-12 miles away. It was a ride of at least an hour, more commonly two.

Some comforts were built into the design. Stages had leather strap braces between the coach and undercarriage, making it swing from side to side during travel instead of jolting up and down. Mark Twain described it as a "cradle on wheels" in his 1872 travel book, "Roughing It."

At each stop a new team was harnessed and passengers could stretch, use restrooms and get a bite to eat. Food was generally what could be cooked fast or was pre-made – coffee, beans, bacon and hard biscuits. A better meal was served at overnight stops for as little as 50 cents (about \$9.50 today).

In 1870, stages were scheduled "tri-weekly from Denver to Hamilton, Fairplay and the South Park Country," an ad in the Nov. 16, 1870, Rocky Mountain News advised. The stage left Denver on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays. (Hamilton was about two miles northwest of Como on Tarryall Creek, site of the first gold discovery in Park County.)

Traffic

Reports in The Flume indicate stages were common in Park County.

The April 3, 1879, paper reported a full load of passengers on every Alma stage and the July 2, 1885, edition reported four stages daily to the mining town of Montgomery (now buried under the waters of Montgomery Reservoir.) In the April 1, 1880, *Flume*, the Pioneer Stage Company advertised two stages running daily from Como to "Breckinridge," in three hours, making connections with all trains running east and west.

(The paragraph above shows the old spelling of Breckenridge. The original spelling, in 1859, was Breckinridge after then U.S. Vice President John Breckinridge. Its spelling was changed in 1861 by citizens outraged when Breckinridge joined the Confederacy, according to www.blog.breckenridge.com. The Flume was still using the original spelling in 1880.)

Even as late as 1904, the Spottswood & McClellan line ordered five new Concord stages for the Fairplay to Leadville route and "the stages were all crowded," according to station agent A. B. Crook in the April 1, 1904, edition of The Flume.

Accidents

Statistics weren't found on the number of stagecoach accidents and few were reported happening in Park County. One

that occurred four miles south of Wellington Lake in Jefferson County on July 27, 1902, resulted in the death of one Denver city alderman. Another was seriously injured. The two were with other Denver officials and three newspaper men on a trip to investigate the Denver water supply at Cheesman Lake.

The stage lurched suddenly causing the driver to lose control. He was thrown from his seat and the horses ran wildly down the mountain. Alderman Kelly, sitting in front with the driver, sustained fatal injuries. He tried to grab the reins and fell over the front of the stage.

“His forehead was crushed and he sustained a rupture,” said the Aug. 1, 1902, Flume.

City Committee Supervisor Lindquist, weighing about 300 pounds, jumped from the stage and landed on his left foot. That leg was broken on impact.

“The front bone [tibia], which was dislocated, was forced through the skin,” The Flume reported.

Robberies

Seemingly more common than accidents were robberies by masked bandits.

One reported in the April 11, 1895, Boulder Daily Camera, told of two men who robbed the Cripple Creek stage, making away with \$16,000 in currency and \$1,000 in gold.

They flagged the four-horse stage down two miles from town and asked for a ride. One sat with driver Robert Smith, the other sat behind Smith. The man behind Smith hit him on the head with a revolver. The other hit Smith with a fist; Smith was dazed.

After rifling the mail sacks the two cut out the lead horses and escaped. Smith

managed to drive with the remaining horses to Cripple Creek before he fainted.

Six weeks later, on May 28, 1895, the Leadville Herald Democrat reported the capture of two men in that city who were responsible for the Cripple Creek stage robbery and other crimes.

Arrested were Stewart “Kid” Gray and Samuel Starr, “of the notorious Starr gang,” the Herald Democrat reported.

“They are bad men,” said Captain F. J. Dodge of Kansas City, special officer with Wells, Fargo & Co.’s express, “and your sheriff has made a big catch.”

Whips

Stage drivers were called Jehus, after the Biblical Jehu – a fast and furious driver – and whips, possibly because they all carried one. They were greatly respected and were known to treat others with respect.

Whips typically dressed in a long linen duster coat (to keep off dust, rain and wind), long leather gloves, a wide-brimmed, low-crowned felt hat and tall leather boots.

One whip in Park County was Perley Wason (or Wasson). Born in about 1845 in Vermont, he was 18 when he started driving stages, first probably in Wisconsin where he was raised and later in the Dakotas. In 1873, he began driving stages in South Park for Spottswood & McClellan.

When that firm received a shipment of new Concord stages in May 1879, one had the name “Perley” painted on it to honor Wason.

The Flume on May 20, 1879, reported that Wason “is without a doubt the most careful and fortunate driver in the West,

having never met with a serious accident in all of his 17 years of staging.”

The story continued, “To know that Perley holds the reins is security enough for any of the thousands who, having ridden with him once, have occasion to go over the road again. Steady, industrious and honest as the day is long, he is held in the highest esteem by his employers and all of his acquaintances and is a man to be selected from a thousand of his fellows.”

In 1880, Wason ran a livery and stage service in Leadville. Two years later, he was the postmaster of Meserole, Colo., 35 miles northwest of Durango in La Plata County.

In 1883, he ran the half-way house between Dolores and Rico, Colo., and in 1889, he was appointed by Governor Cooper as the first sheriff of Colorado’s Montezuma County.

After 1891, he was running a stage and livery service in Cortez, Colo., and was having financial troubles. As train tracks were laid to more towns, railroads took over mail delivery contracts from stagecoaches and stage businesses suffered. In 1892, Wason lost his home, stage outfit and horses when the Montezuma Valley Bank of Cortez repossessed his property, according to the Cortez Journal on Nov. 3, 2012, in the story, “Perley Wason, business pioneer.”

He later moved to Rifle where his trail disappeared.

South Park stages

By 1874, passengers rode the train as far as Morrison before completing the trip to Fairplay by stage. In July 1878, the train was complete to Bailey’s Ranch [now called Bailey] and in the summer of 1879, the Denver, South Park and Pacific

Railroad topped Kenosha Pass and established stations at Jefferson, Como and Garo.

Stages were still used into the early 1920s for travel to and from the depots. Their use died out when automobiles became popular.

Mosquito Pass stage

The Mosquito Pass road was completed in July 1879, and on July 23 the first tolls were taken.

“Over 150 outfits passed over the road that day,” said the July 24, 1879, The Flume.

That edition also reported the stage station on Mosquito Pass was becoming a town. Stables were being built for four stage companies – Spottswood & McClellan, Wall & Watter, M. McLaughlin and the Despatch Company. In addition to a store and saloon, lumber was ordered for a large hotel.

The Flume said, “The general idea prevails that the road [Mosquito Pass] will be kept open the year around.”

That still hasn’t happened, but the hotel was built.

A notice in the July 8, 1880, Flume, announced the Half-Way House hotel’s opening on June 12, 1880, by owner James Minihan.

In the late 1950s, that same hotel was moved to Fairplay’s South Park City museum and is on display as the Stage Stop Inn.

Also at the museum is a cosmetically restored Large Overland Wagon stagecoach originally built by Abbot, Downing & Company of Concord, N.H. It is the type of stage that ran the circle route from Fairplay to Alma, over

Mosquito Pass to Leadville, on to Salida and back to Fairplay.

When looking at rough roads still existing in Park County, one can easily imagine the overland stage rushing alongside a creek, pulled by a team of well-trained and matched horses bringing miners, government officials and school teachers to new homes in the Colorado Rockies.

Think of those who settled the land the next time traffic is stopped on the highway. Think of them zipping across the prairie at 10 miles per hour, crowded inside or hanging on for dear life on the top of a stagecoach.

See images on next page.



Rifle-Meeker Stage

The side view of a mud wagon on the Rifle-Meeker route shows, by design, an absence of windows and doors. That made the vehicle lighter and also let in wind, rain, snow and sunshine. (Photo courtesy Park County Local History Archives, Harry C. Epperson Estate)



Restored Large Overland Wagon

Also called a mud wagon for its ability to travel through mud and mountainous terrain, the Concord Large Overland Wagon, shown

here at Fairplay's South Park City museum, is the type of wagon used on the Fairplay-Alma-Leadville-Salida circle route. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



Stage Stop Inn

The former Mosquito Pass Half-Way House was moved to Fairplay's South Park City Museum in the late 1950s. It gives museum visitors a view of pioneer hotel accommodations. (Courtesy photo)



Ready to roll

The Concord mud wagon is ready to roll in this photo from 1860s Nevada, a stage model also used in the Colorado mountains. The wagon was lighter weight than a full stagecoach and had no windows and no doors except for canvas coverings. The roof was canvas reinforced with wood slats. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia Public Domain)

DENVER & SOUTH PARK STAGE COMPANY.



DAILY LINE of Four and Six Horse Obedient Coaches, carrying the United States Mail and Wells, Fargo & Co.'s Express; connecting with the DENVER, SOUTH

PARK & PACIFIC RAILROAD at MORRISON for FAIRPLAY, ALMA, and all points in Park, Summit and Lake Counties.

This is the only direct route from Denver to Fairplay, and the Southwestern Mine.

8:30 a. m. Train from Denver Connects with the Coaches at Morrison.

Through in One Day.

1875

W. C. MOUTRIE & N. J. SPOTSWOOD, Proprietors.

To Denver, South

This historical reproduction of an ad used in 1875 urges stage riders to take the Denver & South Park Stage to Fairplay, Alma and all points in Park, Summit and Lake counties. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives)