

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Can You Imagine Being a Passenger on a Overland Stage

by Adri Boudewyn - 2010

Many of the early American and European settlers in this area came by ox-cart, covered wagons in which they had crossed the plains, by horse, and by stage coaches. If you want to imagine what it is like being a passenger on an overland stage, visit the Wells Fargo historical museum in San Francisco (Montgomery and California) and sit inside the stage coach on the second floor. There you can hear the narration of a traveling passenger. The narration is reproduced here with added comment from Dr. Robert J. Chandler, senior historian at Wells Fargo who wrote about it in the Spring 2007 issue of the California Territorial Quarterly (Wells Fargo's Stage coaching – An 1860s Turf War).

Let's join 21-year-old Francis D. Brocklehurst, a hardy Englishman, on his journey from St. Louis to San Francisco in May-June 1859. Brocklehurst paid \$200 for his ticket and prepared for the 2700-mile journey. The Overland Mail Company was very solicitous that passengers should be well armed and provided with plenty of ammunition.

“So, having equipped myself with a double barreled fowling piece, one of Colts' revolving rifles, a five shooter, and a pocket seven shooter, a buffalo robe, two blankets, a patent air pillow, and a very small black bag containing a toothbrush and just a change, I consigned myself to their tender mercies.” Young Brocklehurst had to journey to Tipton, Missouri, to embark on the mail stage leaving the railhead there on May 9, 1859, and soon discovered the discomforts of staging.

“Arriving at 8 PM, we found our stage all ready waiting for us with a team of two pairs of stout horses and being unceremoniously bundled into it, away we went ... helter skelter. Interest on the journey varied by occasionally forging rapid streams, crushing through thick black looking woods. We changed horses six times and whenever we stopped I could hear in the woods about ... the wild and faint cry of the whippoorwill and occasionally saw one flickering about in the moonlight..”



WELLS FARGO STAGECOACHES

Stage coaching certainly was no picnic for him, and after two days Brocklehurst revealed why he stopped two times on his overland journey to recuperate. May 11, 1859: "Not having had five consecutive minutes of sleep since my departure from St. Louis, and my unfortunate body being bruised, jolted and jammed to a jelly, I felt considerably jaded and scarcely in a condition to enjoy or even notice anything that was going on.

"No sooner had we dined when we were called upon to resume our places and we were annoyed to find two extra passengers traveling with us from this point, thereby running our number to nine inside and depriving us of every inch of elbow room. To add to our distress, the heat of the afternoon was excessive. That night, trudging through the Boston Mountains of Arkansas to rest the horses, "I actually feel asleep on my feet," Brocklehurst recalled. "As I was stumbling uphill after the coach (I) had to be roused by a good shake from one of the other passengers, or I should certainly have been left behind. Along with the physical discomforts of the journey, the quality of food gradually worsened.

"We are now reduced to a diet of boiled black beans, washed down with a strong hot concoction called coffee, without sugar or milk and drunk out of dirty tin cans, both impregnated with a strong nauseous smack of alkali." As Brocklehurst soon discovered even alkali coffee was better than nothing.

"On arriving at Hannah station where we expected to change teams and get our daily pittance of boiled beans, for which we had to pay a dollar a head, we found the place shot up and deserted. So, with empty stomachs, we had to continue our weary way some 12 miles further to the next station." Two weeks after his departure from civilization Brocklehurst's growing discouragement over the journey was evident.

"Not having had an opportunity of even touching water since leaving El Paso, my face and body were by this time covered over with a thick coating of alkali dust, which caked on to one's skin and when rubbed, chipped off in thin flakes. My hands and arms up to the elbows are swollen nearly twice their natural size with prickly heat which goes near to drive me wild, especially during the night. One can guess how he slept:

"The only rest I can get is by rolling my rugs round my feet and sinking on to the floor of the wagon with my legs doubled under me. I then have to clasp the hard wooden seat firmly with my hands and arms, and rest my head upon them." Young Brocklehurst's spirits rose however as he crossed the Colorado River into California. June 4, 1859 ... through this country, which is slightly undulating and quite destitute of either trees or shrubs, flows the crystal Santa Anna River over a beautifully clear bed of white sand and pebbles. In this stream, the cattle -- red and black and white -- collected in picturesque groups and appeared to take a special delight. That evening he arrived at the county seat of Los Angeles with a population of 4,000

"A quaint looking town, half Mexican, half American, crowded with hard looking fellows who appeared to have nothing to do but to frequent the many saloons and drinking shops." Finally, his stage coach journey neared the end. June 6, 1859 ... "Leaving Visalia we crossed through 12 miles of very dirt rich country, flat but well wooded and the land intersected by artificial canals and water courses for irrigation. Every here and there was a snug looking wooden farm house and when the trees were sufficiently open there was a fine view of the Sierra Nevada."

On June 7, 1859, Brocklehurst's spirits rose. He and fellow passengers dined in a proper restaurant in San Jose, and then changed their canvas covered wagon for a regular old fashioned Concord Stage coach and continued through cultivated land and on either side with distant range of forest clad mountains. "We bowled along at furious pace, and towards midnight, to my ecstatic delight, I saw that we were actually rolling along through fine gas-lit streets! And I hugged myself. At last I was really safe and sound (though filthy dirty) at the end of my journey in the far famed Golden City of San Francisco."