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Wednesday, April 13, 2011

Traveling Cross-Country on the Butterfield Stage Line / San Diego, California

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Many people now travel across the western U.S. by jet plane. We can do this in a matter of hours. Some of us travel by automobile and this often takes a few days and some of us may consider this an arduous venture. Imagine making the same journey on a stagecoach. A stagecoach traveling on unpaved and rutted roads and often through hostile territory. This is exactly what many people had to endure during the 1800's especially before the building of the transcontinental railroad.



During the mid 1800's the countries main population was east of the Mississippi. The West Coast , notably the Sacramento, San Jose and San Francisco area had population. The 1849 Gold Rush added thousands more. There were really three ways to get to California from the east. Wagon train, stagecoach or by ship. There were risks in all of these. In the case of ship travel, the passenger had to sail to Panama then cross the Isthmus by land and then board another ship to sail up the West Coast.

The Butterfield Overland Mail Company began service in 1858 from Missouri to San Francisco, California in an effort to help stitch a fast growing country together. There was no railroad to California and the telegraph had not been wired. Aside from transporting passengers there was an enormous need to find an efficient way to send mail west. Up until 1858 there was really no scheduled means of transportation west of the Mississippi.



The route chosen (by the Postmaster General) was the southern route which most of the California gold seekers had chosen. It ran from Missouri through the northwest part of Texas and through New Mexico and Arizona Territory into California. It then went up the central valley and then west to San Francisco. The route was not totally safe since it traversed Comanche Indian land and the Comanche's were aggressive. It also ran through Apache Territory in New Mexico and Arizona. The \$600,000 annual six year contract awarded Butterfield

called for semi-weekly mail service.

The one way 2,800 mile trip between St. Louis and San Francisco typically took between 22 and 25 days with a one way fare of \$200. That was quite a lot of money in 1858. The stage line had 800 employees, 139 relay stations and 250 Concord Stagecoaches. A single driver might take his coach for a distance of sixty miles. The driver had a conductor/messenger traveling with him on top with a loaded shotgun, thus the term "riding shotgun". Stations were spaced about 15-20 miles apart but when the route traveled over the arid Southwest the stations were actually further apart. Stations needed to be near springs and rivers for the sake of passengers, employees and animals. Regarding weapons, the Butterfield Line recommended taking a pistol and ammunition along. Not only were Indian attacks possible but there were bandits on the road as well. The bandits at this time were often referred to as "highway men". The Concord coach was built with extra strong suspension to make the journey over the rough trail as comfortable as possible. Most passengers however didn't feel the journey was very comfortable. Certainly not as comfortable as the transcontinental railroad about 10 years later. The coaches had

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bench seats and were often crowded. Not the best conditions over bumpy trails. Food quality had a lot to be desired and getting proper rest was difficult. A passenger might even be asked to walk a bit if the coach needed to be lightened because of a too sandy road. Not even first class comfort for a \$200 fare in 1858 money.



Butterfield ran up large debts and the company was eventually taken over by Wells Fargo. The Confederate States oversaw the southern route from 1861-1862 and the Union ran a route to the west through the central plains which included the Pony Express for about 18 months. The Union obviously couldn't rely on the southern route during the Civil War and the Pony Express kept communication in tact with the relatively new State of California. Wells Fargo eventually ended up taking over the assets of the Pony Express when that service was discontinued.

The time line of transportation and communication seem to run together. Aside from strictly individual travel the settlement of the west started with the wagon train. Along with the wagon train the stagecoach service soon began. Then the transcontinental railroad was completed and shortly after that the telegraph lines were built to San Francisco mostly along the rail right of way. Mail sent by stagecoach took close to a month to reach California. With the railroad it took perhaps a week or less. With the telegraph, messages could reach the West Coast in a matter of minutes and hours.



The railroad did not signal the end for the stagecoach. Railroads were not built everywhere and people still needed a way to travel to unserved areas as well as to the nearest rail head. Stagecoach travel started to fade away between 1890 and the late 1920's. Roads were being paved, people were buying cars and the answer to the stagecoach at that point was the motorized bus.

By 1866 the Wells Fargo Company monopolized long distance overland stage travel. A good way to learn more about the Butterfield Overland Mail Company as well as Wells Fargo's story is to visit the very interesting Wells Fargo Stagecoach Museum in Old Town San Diego, about 4 miles north of downtown. The museum offers a 15 minute video presentation of the Butterfield Stagecoach story. Their web site is:

www.wellsfargo.com/about

Here is another excellent site to learn more about the Butterfield route:

www.thenaturalamerican.com/stagecoach

The site below will give you more information on the Concord Coach used by both Butterfield and Wells Fargo:

www.usgennet.org/usa/nh/town/concord/coach.html

Posted by Peter at 1:31 PM

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