

distinctly hostile to their interests."¹² Wallace's editorials provoked a discussion in Congress and forced Hoover to send a letter to the Senate in his own defense. Less than a year later the two adversaries were to find themselves members of the same cabinet, and their fight during the war was in part responsible for the renewed bitterness which developed between them over federal policy and action in the Harding and Coolidge administrations.

"TEN CENTS A MILE AND A FENCE RAIL"

Stagecoaching In Iowa

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The earliest settlers in Iowa either provided their own transportation—horses, oxen, and wagons—or came up the Mississippi River, landing at Keokuk, Fort Madison, Burlington, Bloomington (now Muscatine), Davenport, Lyons or Dubuque. These pioneers found work, started a business, or went inland to stake out claims.

The heavy wagons of the settlers cut deep ruts into the tough prairie sod, along the tops of ridges and around the marshes. As others followed in the same paths, wheels gradually wore the trails deeper, to form long crooked scars across the land. These were to become the highways of the new country. Ditches were plowed beside the roads and bridges built to span the streams. Road building was one of the earliest and most important tasks of local government.

During the first years of the territorial and early state period, Iowa travelers depended largely on water transportation. The rivers were favored as the cheapest and easiest means of travel, but they did not go everywhere. Stagecoach service was extended slowly as a second type of public transportation, as settlement spread to the interior. The service

¹²Wallace to H. S. Irwin, May 18, 1920; and Wallace to A. V. Mather, April 21, 1920, *ibid.*, Box 2.

lasted for about 30 years, but flourished for a period of only a dozen years or so. The stagecoaches used the network of dirt roads. The main routes ran east and west; north and south traffic came later.

Most of the stage lines were operated by big companies. Largest of all was the Western Stage Co., which operated in eight states and had routes all over Iowa. Regular schedules were also maintained by Frink & Walker, the Ohio Stage Co., and local companies, such as the Hatch line.

Stagecoach stations were located every 10 or 15 miles along the stage routes, to permit changing horses. Upon arrival at the station, the tired horses were unhitched and fresh ones, already harnessed, took their places. This change was made in a minute or two. Taverns (hotels) were located at some of the stage stops, and at important crossroads, large stations, corresponding to railroad division points, were maintained. Such a station was located in Iowa City, where the Western Stage Co. kept coaches, horses and supplies and had blacksmiths and carpenters.

The stage driver was a man of importance and the envy of many a small boy who wanted to grow up to be just like him. Most of the drivers took advantage of every opportunity to display their talents. With the long-lashed whip, a driver could snap a fly off the flank of a horse. The horses were managed so well that driving looked easy. A good driver could chew tobacco and tell of his adventures all at the same time. But the work was often hard and sometimes dangerous. The driver needed to watch the roadway for rocks and ruts, to avoid upsets. He had to attend to his horses, look after the passengers, guard the mail, and battle with the elements—rain and mud in the spring, a scorching sun in the summer, and blinding snow and blizzards in the winter.

Looking back from today's comfortable travel by jet plane or in automobiles speeding over super highways and interstates, it is easy to romanticize about statecoach travel, but actually travel by stage was not a pleasant experience. Even under the best of conditions, the jolting and jarring of passengers, "like peas on a drum," wore down the hardest of travelers.

The Concord and Troy coaches drawn by six horses were used on the main traveled stagecoach lines in Iowa from about 1837, when stages began running on regular schedules. They were the most colorful and comfortable of all stagecoaches. Only passengers, baggage and mail were carried. The coaches were solidly built of oak, braced with iron bands. They were oval-shaped but the top was flat to use for carrying baggage.



courtesy New Hampshire Historical Society

Concord Coach

Inside were three seats, placed crosswise, each accomodating three passengers, with the front seat facing the rear. The driver sat outside on an elevated seat at the front of the body, while at the rear was a triangular leather covered space called the boot, also used to hold baggage. The body of the coach was suspended on heavy leather straps, which acted as springs, and permitted the coach to rock back and forth and absorb some of the shock caused by the rough terrain. The outside of the coaches were usually painted in bright colors—red, yellow and green—and the body panels adorned with paintings of landscapes or noted historical characters. Each coach was named for some famous personage or place. The interior was painted and upholstered.

The large, nine-passenger or lagger coaches were used only on routes where the passengers and freight carried was sufficient to warrant their operation. The branch or feeder lines to the main routes used smaller, less comfortable coaches. These more modest vehicles were referred to as

"hacks" or "jerkys," for obvious reasons. These had no doors, but only an opening above the lower paneling through which the passenger went in and out.

The earliest travelers in Iowa, usually men, were probably more familiar with the so-called "mud wagon" stages, than with the hacks or the more luxurious nine-passenger Troy and Concord coaches. The light spring mud wagons were drawn by only two horses and carried four passengers. They were a modification of the early farm wagon and had broad, high wheels designed to buck the mudholes and quagmires found in the trail-like roads following every rain. A cloth top protected passengers and baggage. Hard benches, without backs, ran across the wagon, inside. The wheels were held in place on the axles by wooden pins which often broke off or slipped out.

A fence rail was carried along to pry the stagecoach wheels out of mudholes and the sloughs on roads where the horses could not budge the coach. Passengers would then have to get out and wade. On one stage journey, passengers were advised not to make the trip unless they were willing to walk half the distance and carry a fence rail the rest of the way. Sometimes baggage was dumped into the mud and water and, if this didn't lighten the load sufficiently, the passengers had to push and tug to help the horses drag the coach from the mudhole. Or they might walk and lug their baggage for miles through the sticky black gumbo until the stage reached a portion of the road where it was safe to reload and start out again.

Some of the early accounts vividly described the Iowa mud. One 1857 traveler said, "It was as thick as dough and greasy at the same time. The horses would slip up and the wheels slide fearfully at every inclination of the road, and whenever we got out to walk it seemed as though we lifted a common sized farm at every step." Another recollection of the "dreadful" Iowa roads reads, "The mud was a yard deep in some places. . . Sometimes a horse lunged, sunk in the mud to his body; that frightened the other horses . . ." The hindrance of bad roads continued during all of the stagecoach period, and for many years afterward. In the 1870's

the fare on the Haskell & Cheney stages, operating in northwestern Iowa, was commonly referred to as "ten cents a mile and a fence rail!"

Even the most comfortable trip meant a severe jolting that "almost shook the bones apart" and there was always the chance that a bolt would jar loose, an axletree crack, or a coupling break and upset the coach or cause a "turnover;" or an inexperienced or careless driver might hit a tree stump or a rock, hit a weakened bridge in the wrong spot, or miss a ford and give the passengers a ducking or turn the coach over.

Of course, many stagecoach trips were made without incident, but accidents did occur, as evidenced by the following news item which appeared in the *Adair County Free Press* in October 1868:

BRIDGE BREAKS AND IMMERSSES STAGE COACH

The stage carried 4 passengers. Crossing a bridge 2 miles east of Greenfield, the stage broke through. Horses and stage and passengers were immersed in 8 feet of water.

Passengers and stage alike escaped undamaged except for scratches to both. One of the horses was less fortunate, however, becoming entangled in the wreck of the bridge, in such a manner that axes and shovels were required to free him.

Serious wrecks were infrequent because of the slow speed of the stagecoach and its sturdy construction. Windows were not closed with glass, but had shutters or blinds.

Stagecoach schedules could not be depended upon. Passengers often found the stages late—maybe by an hour or even a day or more in bad weather. Only those communities where business warranted it were given service. Daily schedules, with departure times set as early as 4:00 a.m., were found only on the main lines.

Customarily, travelers kept the same seat throughout the journey. Some passengers preferred certain seats—the middle seats afforded easy access, and the swinging lurch of the stage was least felt there; the rear seats permitted a passenger to face the same direction in which he was traveling; front

seats had the advantage of less danger from falling luggage in case of an accident, and provided a back rest to lean against; outside seats afforded a better view of the countryside in good weather.

In January 1852, Des Moines was still hoping for regular twice-a-week, two-horse hack service from Iowa City. Council Bluffs had only a once-a-week connection with central and northern Iowa. It took three days by stage to make the trip from Crawford County to Council Bluffs, a distance of less than 70 miles. The speed of the coaches was from five to eight miles an hour if they could be kept going, but bad roads often slowed them down. As a result, some of the early settlers preferred to provide their own means of transportation, even after stagecoach lines had been established.

Fares charged for stagecoach travel varied according to the season and for different areas. The lowest fares averaged five cents a mile and the highest averaged ten cents. Typical fares in 1842 were Keokuk to Burlington, \$3, and Bloomington (Muscatine) to Iowa City, \$1.50. In 1854, the fare from Keokuk to Des Moines was \$10 and in 1857, it cost \$10 to go by stagecoach from Iowa City to Des Moines and \$11 from Des Moines to Council Bluffs.

When more than one company ran stagecoaches over the same road, keen rivalry sprang up. Drivers raced to prove which was fastest and fares were lowered from five, six, or seven cents a mile to almost nothing. Free meals and lodging were sometimes offered as special attractions.

Later on, mail contracts furnished another source of income for the local stagecoach lines. In 1844-45 the Post Office Department opened extensive mail routes, and bitter competition developed for the contracts to carry the mail. The stages also began to handle express, which increased as immigration began in earnest.

The rapid settlement of Iowa during the 1850's gave the stage companies much business. In one year the stage line between Des Moines and Boone is said to have earned \$100,000. The financial success of Western Stage Co. may be judged by the fact that the value of its stock rose from \$100 to \$2,000 a share. But with the coming of the railroads, the stagecoach business began to dwindle as much of the travel

and trade deserted the wagons and steamboats.

The stagecoaches were given a new lease on life by the Civil War, as all types of transportation were needed to carry war supplies and soldiers. Railroad building was halted by the war, so stagecoaching was freed from competition with railroads for almost another decade. The end of the railroad in 1866 was at Denison, in Crawford County, so there was heavy travel by stage between that point and Council Bluffs to the southwest and Sioux City to the northwest.

The stage office was a place for news-hungry settlers, isolated from the outside world, to congregate. Not only did the stage bring bundles of newspapers from the east, but the driver himself was a source of unpublished news. The mail stages often gave better service than the first railroads during Civil War days, which caused the Anamosa, Iowa *Eureka* to deplore, "Oh, for the good old times when we had a daily stage instead of a bare railroad track."

Stagecoach schedules were altered to make connections with the advancing railroads, but the "iron horses" puffed steadily westward and the stagecoaches continued to retreat. Gradually the network of railroads covered the entire state and stagecoaches served only out-of-the-way places.

The first stagecoach arrived in Fort Des Moines (No. 2) on July 1, 1849 and the last one left the capital city on July 1, 1870. It was this year that the Western Stage Co. went out of business. Their coaches which had cost \$1,000 each were sold for scrap iron, bringing as little as \$10 per coach. This marked the end of stagecoaching in Iowa.

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