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## STAGECOACH TRAVEL IN IOWA

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While every section of the United States had special handicaps to travel in the first half of the nineteenth century, three common obstacles, shared by all, had to be overcome before a stagecoach system could be extended generally: bad roads; vehicles ill equipped to convey passengers with either speed or comfort; and a lack of a population which could support better roads and better staging.

Of these three, the greatest single obstacle to a stagecoach system of travel, and one most bewailed by the American traveler and cursed by the foreign visitor, was the deplorable condition of the roads—if not their general absence—both before and after 1830. Criticism of such roads as were available was common among all travelers, native and continental alike. Not far behind as an obstacle, however, were the poorly equipped coaches used for “stage” travel before 1830<sup>1</sup> These pre-Concord coaches were without springs, or else were furnished with such springs in such numbers that passengers were jolted as much with them as with none at all. And since these coaches were also without any cushioned upholstery or other aids to comfortable traveling, one can well understand

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<sup>1</sup>The best description of these early coaches is given by the Englishman, Isaac Weld, in his *Travels Through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, (London, 1799), pp. 15-16:

“The coachee is a carriage peculiar, I believe, to America; the body of it is rather longer than that of a coach, but of the same shape. In the front it is left quite open down to the bottom, and the driver sits on a bench under the roof of the carriage. There are two seats in it for the passengers, who sit with their faces towards the horses. The roof is supported by small props, which are placed at the corners. On each side of the doors, above the pannels, it is quite open, and to guard against bad weather there are curtains, which are made to let down from the roof, and fasten to buttons placed for the purpose on the outside. There is also a leathern curtain to hand occasionally between the driver and passengers.

“The light waggons are on the same construction, and are calculated to accommodate from four to twelve people. The only difference between a small waggon and a coachee is, that the latter is better finished, has varnished pannels, and doors at the side. The former has no doors, but the passengers scramble in the best way they can, over the seat of the driver. *The waggons are used universally for stage carriages.*” (Italics by the Editor).

the reluctance of the public to patronize them; in reality, those coaches served more to discourage travel than to help. Yet even in the Concord stage, which represented the best that America had to offer, passengers were not secure against rain, snow, and mud, nor could they avoid the discomforts and stiffened limbs attendant upon this mode of travel. Furthermore, stages were not only uncommodious, but were slow as well. Visiting foreigners when not complaining of the wretched roads, decried the slow progress of their stages. Of course, this lack of speed was in part attributable to the abominable roads, but even at best, over macadamized highways, such as the National, or Cumberland, Road, only the very best lines averaged ten miles an hour,<sup>2</sup> and this they could rarely maintain over extended distances. These "Express Mail Stages," the through trains of their day, were not to be met with everywhere, those lines which did offer this premium service charged extra rates for the special speed; the added swiftmess, however, was too often balanced by a real increase in the danger of accidents.

With the arrival of 1830, two of these three handicaps to stagecoach expansion were yielding to frontal attacks. By that year the rapidly growing population of the country was fast spreading west of the Appalachian mountains, along the Cumberland Road, and pouring north into the rich lands of the Northwest Territory, and south into the regions below the Ohio River. By 1830 the introduction of the use of leather springs on the stagecoaches had begun to make stage travel more comfortable, immediately thereafter stately Concords began to appear in increasing numbers on the best lines in all sections of the country. These developments brought the coach even into the western regions of Illinois and Wisconsin, and a few years later, in 1837, into Iowa.

<sup>2</sup>Speed depended upon the condition of the horses, the roads traversed, and the vehicle used. In 1837 the Express Mail Stages between New York and Washington were only required to make the distance in 24 hours even; in 1840, J. S. Buckingham wrote in *The Eastern and Western States of America* (London, 1842, 3 vols.), that he traveled in Ohio at a rate of 3 miles an hour, in Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh, at five miles an hour, and other places in Ohio at five and seven miles an hour. Ohio, it should be noted, possessed better roads than were customarily found farther west. Charles Dickens mentions traveling over a macadamized road in Ohio at six miles an hour, and refers to it as unusual, see *American Notes for General Circulation*, (Scribner's & Sons, New York, N. Y., 1911), pp. 223, 229. In 1850, Colonel Arthur Cunnyhame is pleasantly surprised at an eight and nine miles an hour rate of stage travel in Georgia, see *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic* (London, 1852), p. 113.

During the first years in the middle west a stage system spread far more slowly than in the east, largely due to the fact that settlers in the west were more dependent upon steamboat and water transportation than upon a land system of travel. Since the first settlements were on or near the heads of navigable streams or their tributaries, the early settlers turned to the steamboats plying up and down their water highways to bring them their needed goods and supplies, and turned to the same service to carry them on their business and personal travels. In addition, for many years the steamboat was not only almost the sole means of public travel available, but for long it was infinitely cheaper as well. This combination undoubtedly delayed the expansion of the first pioneer stage lines in the western states for many years. The superior importance these western settlers attached to their navigation problems is amply attested to by the history of all the states bordering upon the great middle western rivers, a history which is replete with pleas for improvement of navigation years before Congress was importuned to increase the stage-mails in the same regions.

Aided each year, however, by the constant influx of new emigrants who settled up the interior, the uphill battle to acquire and then to extend staging services in the middle west was gradually won. By the time the first stage ran on regular schedules in Iowa in 1837, the coach was the accepted and expected mode of conveyance in the older communities to the east and south. This common acceptance of the two, four, or six horse stage is reflected in the popular monthly magazines of the period, which—whenever they did contain articles of native American life—referred to the stage as casually and as frequently as many of our national magazines today mention the automobile or airplane.<sup>3</sup> Some magazines even included the stage in their articles of fiction. One story recounted at some length the sensations of riding in the stagecoach to one in love—a description, one may be sure, that could not have been made by anyone else.<sup>4</sup> Another story, a true stagecoach romance, appeared in the *Knickerbocker* for September, 1849,

<sup>3</sup>*American Monthly Magazine*, (N. P. Willis, editor, Boston, Mass. 1829-31), II, 172; III, 96.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, II, 334-335.

disguised under the title of "The First Kiss," and was written by "An Amateur." It is also noteworthy that in the plethora of "Travels" and "Notes of Travels" which swamped America in the 1830's and 40's, while American stages, to be sure, came in for their share of criticism, there was seldom a complaint by these travelers of the absence of a coaching service to any reasonable point on their itineraries.

One can well picture what conditions may have been in Iowa during the first years of staging there, if a not too prejudiced traveler can offer the following description of one of the best traveled roads near the national capital in 1835. On being informed that the distance from the landing on the Potomac River to Fredricksburgh, Virginia, was but twelve miles, Charles Murray wrote:<sup>5</sup>

I was weak enough (in spite of my previous experience) to imagine that two hours would bring me thither, especially as the stage was driven by six good nags, and driven by a lively fellow; but the road bade defiance to all these advantages—it was indeed, such as to compel me to laugh outright, notwithstanding the constant and severe bumping to which it subjected both the intellectual and sedentary parts of my person.

I had before tasted the sweets of mud-holes, huge stones, and remnants of pine-trees, standing and cut down; but here was something new, namely, a bed of reddish-coloured clay, from one to two feet deep, so adhesive that the wheels were at times literally not visible in any one spot from the box to the tire, and the poor horses' feet sounded, when they drew them out (as a fellow-traveler observed), like the report of a pistol."

After analysing the clay as composed of glue, lead, lime, and putty, Murray continues,

Whether the foregoing, with a proper admixture of hills, holes, stumps, and rocks, made a satisfactory draught or not, I will refer to the unfortunate team—I, alas! can answer for the effectual application of the second part of the prescription, according to the Joes Miller version of "when taken, to be well shaken!

I must say I very much doubt whether any crack London whip could have driven those horses over that ground in the same time: there is not a sound that can emanate from human lungs, nor an argument of persuasion that can touch the feelings of a horse, that he did not employ, with a perseverance and success which commanded my admiration.

That this was not fanciful evidence is confirmed by none

<sup>5</sup>*Travels in North America, including a Summer Residence with the Pawnees Tribe of Indians . . .* (London, 1854, 3rd rev. ed., 2 vols.), I, 127-8.

other than Charles Dickens who traveled by stage over the same route seven years later; his dryly humorous comments indicate that the state of the road had not materially improved during that time. A similar condition of the roads is the report of travelers everywhere in the country between 1830 and the close of the era<sup>6</sup>

When other and like accounts of stage travel in this period are met with in Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the southern states, there is no reason to believe Iowa an exception. One is, therefore, little prepared for the statement of an Illinois enthusiast who wrote in 1830 that over a claimed 800 miles of staging that "the most effeminate dandy who lounges in Broadway or Chestnut street, may venture upon an occidental tour without the peril of greater damage than that inflicted by the jolting of a stage, or bite of a musquito"<sup>7</sup> Of this vain boasting one may charitably believe the writer was carried away by his enthusiasm over the splendid opportunities for new settlers in that state. At any rate, his statement hardly conforms with the facts, to say the least.

The general condition of Illinois roads in 1837 is well indicated by the warning of the *Iowa News*, of Dubuque, which in December of that year, cautioned its readers not to attempt the stage journey from Galena to St. Louis unless prepared to walk half the distance and carry a fence rail the rest of the way.<sup>8</sup> The truth of this warning, despite the possibility that it was prompted by Dubuque's jealousy of her sister city, is attested to by the somewhat jaundice-eyed Charles Dickens, who described the roads of southern Illinois in 1842 as made "through mud and mire, and damp, and festering heat, and brake and brush, attended by the music of the frogs and pigs."<sup>9</sup> At a place called Belleville, Dickens thought the road should better have been called a "forest path, nearly knee-deep in mud and slime."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup>See the numerous travels written recounting journeys made in America in this period, in addition to those mentioned in f.n. 2, see James Stuart, *Three Years in North America* (Edinburgh, 1838) 2 vols.

<sup>7</sup>*American Monthly Magazine*, II, 36, "Illinois College," written by "J. H." who was probably a member of the teaching staff. Besides lauding the college, the article puffs the state generally.

<sup>8</sup>December 2, 1837.

<sup>9</sup>*American Notes*, p. 212.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 213.

Dickens undoubtedly saw Illinois roads at their worst, during the wet season of the year, and it must also be admitted that Dickens was little disposed to look for the best in what he encountered in America. Other travelers journeyed across the state in stages or private carriages without hardly mentioning the problem presented by the roads. However, it did not take much of a "wet spell" to make the ordinary road a muddy quagmire, and this they too frequently were.

The roads in Iowa were certainly no better, and possibly worse. Even in that day Iowa roads held an unenviable reputation for their consistent muddy and sticky qualities. As one traveler remarked in 1857:

I had heard a good deal about Iowa mud, and now saw it to my heart's content. 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.<sup>11</sup>

In 1850, Colonel Arthur Cunnyhame, a touring British army officer on leave from Canada, described the stage road between Fort Madison and Keokuk as absolutely "dreadful." It was this Iowa road that prompted him to add, "no one can imagine what a bad road is until he has traveled in the Western States of America."<sup>12</sup>

What one of these western roads might be like in the dry season of the year is described by an eastern traveler who rumbled over that stretch of the stage road between Newton and Montezuma late one evening in 1857, with a storm threatening:

The horses could not go out of a walk, and every step made a sucking sound. The driver said he could get along while he could see, and thought best to light his lantern before dark; so they were taken inside, out of the wind, and properly prepared. About 9 the carriage stopped and on enquiry, found the driver in a fix. He had come to a "slough" (formed by the base of two or more hills coming together and forming a wet muddy space of several feet in width, and of some 100 to 300 in length), there were so many tracks leading across it, he knew not which to take, and wished us all to get out, and some one to take one of the lanterns, and seek for the best track, and after finding it, to stop and he would steer for the light, at the same time cautioning us to keep close together, or we might get lost,

<sup>11</sup>E. L. Peckham, "My Journey 'Out West'" in *The Journal of American History*, XVII, 344.

<sup>12</sup>*A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, p. 59.

as it was awfully dark and no lightning to guide us. In this manner we were obliged to act (all but red head and the fur hat man who would not get out) till we reached Montezuma at midnight where we alighted, the driver going to the bar, and swearing he would not go a mile further for all Iowa.<sup>13</sup>

Another description of what those "dreadful" Iowa roads could be like in a wet spring is well shown in the following recollection of the stage part of the journey made from Keokuk to central Iowa in the middle 1850's.

The mud was a yard deep in some places; many of the large creeks were not bridged, and the old fashioned sloughs were very much in evidence, and at their worst we thought that Skunk Bottom ought to have been named Skunk "Bottomless." Father walked most of the way. The stage coach was a few rods ahead of us, and kept us informed as to the depth of the mud. In the coach were two men, two women and a bird-cage. . . . Those four men both paid for and worked their passage, for they walked miles every day, carrying rails on their shoulders to pry the coach wheels out of the mud, while the driver unmercifully lashed his four horses. Sometimes a horse lunged, sunk in the mud to his body; that frightened the other horses, and then the men at the end of the rails dropped them and sprang for the horses, while another assured the women that there was really no cause for alarm. So it went every day. We didn't become stalled; we were "fore-armed."<sup>14</sup>

In addition, it must be remembered that muddy roads made slow traveling, and though time was not so madly sought after as it is today, even eighty and ninety years ago the fourteen days required to make the stage journey from Keokuk to Des Moines in 1849 must have seemed irritatingly slow. Eight years later the same distance was covered in six days, with the help of the embryo railroad line that was beginning to thrust its way up the Des Moines Valley.<sup>15</sup>

The following realistic account of being "stalled" in a stage on a stretch of the open Illinois prairie might just as well have been chronicled of Iowa, for doubtless similar experiences were met with there.

"At midnight, however, our troubles began. It has been already stated, that over the generally level plain of the prairies there are occasional undulations, like great waves upon

<sup>13</sup>*Journal of American History*, XVIII, 48.

<sup>14</sup>*History of Madison County, and Its People* (Chicago, 1915, Herman A. Mueller, editor, 2 vols.), I, 402-03.

<sup>15</sup>*Des Moines Register & Leader*, Jan. 3, 1904; *Annals of Iowa*, Third Series, XI, 329.

a broad scale in the Atlantic or Pacific oceans. In the depressions between these swells, there are often found small rills of water, which so soften the soil as to form sloughs of considerable depth. Of these we had crossed several in the course of the night, but after a heavy plunge we had surmounted them all, till at midnight, we sunk into one so deeply, as almost to bury the wheels entirely, and to defy the utmost power of the horses to move them an inch. Our first step was to empty the coach of all its passengers, and then repeat the effort, but it was still immovable. After this, all the baggage was taken off, and the heads of the horses held by the passengers, while driver urged, and whipped, and strained to the utmost but all would not do. We were literally "in a bad fix," as the Western people say, and there seemed little or no hope of extrication. Our trunks and carpet-bags were all lying in the slough, and absorbing water pretty freely; the labour of carrying them to drier land was such as could not easily be performed, as their weight occasioned the person bearing them to sink deep in the mire, as to make it difficult to lift the feet up again. So there was nothing to be done with our present force, and it therefore became necessary to send for aid. We asked the driver how he could think of bringing us into this slough, when right and left of it were places over which we could have passed in safety? and were not a little surprised to hear him say, that it was hard to expect him to know the right track, as he had never driven across the prairie before—this was his first journey—and he was only now "learning to find out the proper road!" which, after a few trips more, he hoped to understand. We were therefore in the condition of patients in public hospitals on whom young surgeons first try their hands by way of experiment; and upon the whole, we began to be thankful that things were no worse.

"We now dispatched the driver on one of the leaders, unharnessed for the purpose, to the nearest place for assistance, ordering him to bring a team of oxen if horses could not be had, or a force of men if these could not be procured; several of the passengers went on with him upon this errand, leaving four of us only behind, seated in the coach to await their return. It was past daylight before the driver came back,

bringing with him, however, no further help than a new cross-bar to repair one that had been broken by the strain, and a few poles to serve as levers for prizing the wheels out of the mud. . . . Search had now to be made over the prairie for something in the shape of logs, or rails, or stones, to build up a fulcrum, on which, our levers could be made to rest, and without which, of course, they could not be applied to the wheels. This cost us much time and labour; but at length, after more fatigue and discomfort, than any one had anticipated, we succeeded in extricating the wheels, and drawing the coach out of the slough, after which we had to assist in loading our own luggage, the driver's attention being necessarily confined to the horses; and by sunrise we were once more fairly under way, but so jaded and dirtied by this tedious and disagreeable labour, as to be fitter for the bath. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

The obstacle of bad roads was never completely overcome in Iowa during the whole of the stagecoach period, or for that matter for many years afterwards, as all who drove automobiles in the middle west twenty years ago well know. Towards the close of the staging era in Iowa, in the spring of 1865, due to the condition of the roads, the regular Concord stage on the well traveled route from Des Moines to Fort Dodge had to be replaced temporarily by a light spring mud wagon. And as late as the 1870's in northwestern Iowa the common reference to the stage fare on the Haskell & Cheney stages was "ten cents a mile and a fence rail!"

It would be quite erroneous, however, to conceive that either getting stuck in the mud, or the grave danger of such a "fix" was the constant year in year out threat hanging over the heads of would-be stage passengers. Many trips were made without even the remotest threat of such a danger. But in certain rainy portions of the year a fence rail all but became "standard equipment" for those stages setting out over the more notorious portions of Iowa's road system.

As the years went by, and as blazed trails, and tracks across open prairies, marked only at intervals by stakes, gave way to the improved roads brought about by a more adequate understanding of road construction and maintenance, the chief

<sup>10</sup>Buckingham, III, 238-40.

criticism heard from stage travelers shifted from the roads to the vehicles themselves. Nevertheless, stagecoach travel remained satisfactory to middle westerners as long as they could not reasonably expect anything better, or as long as they remained unacquainted with other improved systems of overland travel. By the late 1840's, however, Iowans were demanding better services generally, they had become familiar with the staging facilities in the east, particularly in New England, they were also aware that railroad transportation had proven feasible. Not unexpectedly, therefore, by that time, the late forties, criticism of stagecoaches in Iowa—of companies, men, and vehicles—became both impatient and vehement, particularly wherever visions of a railway line began to stir the ambitions of a village or town. Thus the sturdy Concord coach, which in the 1830's had been looked upon in the middle west as a mark of community progress, came by degrees to be an object of ridicule and scorn, even to those whom it had served both long and faithfully. Sic transit gloria. Not a little of this public criticism, of course, was encouraged by a feeling that in so condemning the stage, they were proving the need of a railway to their community.

Over the main traveled roads, good, bad, and indifferent, the Concord and Troy coach held undisputed sway from about 1830 on to the close of the era in the middle west. These coaches differed considerably from the "stages" which they superseded, so well described by Isaac Weld a generation before the opening of the stagecoach period in the west.<sup>17</sup> The body of the Concord coach, usually built of stout oak and braced with iron bands, "was oval, but flattened on top to permit the carriage of baggage. Within were three cross seats, each designed to hold three passengers. Those on the front faced the rear, the others towards the front of the coach. The driver sat on the elevated seat in front of the body, while at the rear was a triangular, leather-covered space known as the 'boot,' wherein such baggage was bestowed as did not ride on top" or was carried in the special forward "boot" under the driver's seat.<sup>18</sup> The body of the coach "was suspended upon

<sup>17</sup>See footnote at bottom of page 175.

<sup>18</sup>M. M. Quaife, *Chicago's Highways Old and New*, (D. F. Keller & Co., Chicago, Ill., 1923), pp. 155-56.

two leather thoroughbraces extending lengthwise of the coach and attached at each end to a standard protruding up from the axle. These thoroughbraces were made of straps of leather placed on top of each other to a thickness of about three inches. This leather swing was used in the absence of steel springs to absorb the jars, and it permitted the coach to rock slightly forward and back."<sup>19</sup> The rocking soon became a jolt over a rough road.

The coach body was usually painted in bright gay colors of red, green, and yellow, "and the panels were decorated with paintings of landscapes, or of noted historical characters. The interiors too, were attractively painted and upholstered, while the individual coach bore the name of some noted statesman or other character."<sup>20</sup>

These large nine-passenger coaches were used only on routes where the passenger and freight demands warranted their operation. On those routes which served as branches or feeders to the main lines, a smaller coach was used which in no wise compared with the Concord in size or comfort. These smaller vehicles, commonly called "hacks," or, more derisively, "jerkys," for good and sufficient reasons, although swung on leather thoroughbraces like the larger Concords, were much inferior. When a traveling Englishman first met such a vehicle, he noted:

It had a peculiarity which I had not witnessed before, of possessing no door to open on either side; but passengers got in and out through the open space, above the lower pannalling, by a wooden stool being placed on the pavement to step on—like getting in through the window of an English coach when the door should be shut. The reason assigned for this was two-fold—economy in the making of the coach—and saving of labour in opening and shutting the door after passengers!<sup>21</sup>

Until a relatively late date in the staging era of Iowa these two-horse "jerkys" were much more common in that state than the swifter and more comfortable nine-passenger-plus Concords or Troys. By that later date, however, the railroad was beginning to write the well known word on the wall of the future.

<sup>19</sup>Le Roy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-1869, Promoter of Settlement. Precursor of Railroads* (A. H. Clark & Co., Cleveland, 1926), p. 306.

<sup>20</sup>Quaife, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup>Buckingham, II, 282.

The first stages with which the early settlers in Iowa were acquainted, however, were probably neither the Concord nor the smaller two-horse hack, but more likely the "mud wagon." This vehicle was well named, and was used principally over those roads which more properly should have been described as tracks of muddy quagmire. In general, also, these wagons were used on routes where the more expensive hacks or coaches could not be operated with a profit. Though the later mud wagons had leather thoroughbraces, the earlier ones generally did not, both further differed from the ordinary stagecoach in the use of a wider tire, a larger wheel, and other features which would make it a better "mudder" than the light wheeled and smaller tired coach. Iowa pioneers more than once referred to their experiences with these conveyances, recalling that in their first days in the west "their ideas about traveling and commerce had not advanced beyond a light draught steamer, and John Frink's mud wagon."<sup>22</sup> Together with the growth of population and the improvements in the highway system, these mud wagons soon gave way in Iowa as elsewhere to the more luxurious Concord and Troy coaches.

Mud wagons, however, were not entirely abandoned even after the general adoption of the Concord stage, for when the condition of the roads became so bad after a rainy spell that even stagers referred to them as muddy, those operators who could afford to keep them for that purpose, withdrew the lighter coaches from the routes and substituted the heavy mud wagons.<sup>23</sup> Not all operators could maintain such a shock troop of mudders, however, and consequently the battles with sloughs and quagmires experienced by middle western stage travelers were usually fought in the two and four horse coaches.

During the winter season the stages battled snow and drifts as best they could, and for as long as they could, although it was generally a short and hopeless struggle. To meet the threatened disruption of staging service in the winter season the stages on some Iowa routes were retired to the barns and their places taken by open sleighs, or stage sleds, which offered to get the passenger over the snow from one point to an-

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<sup>22</sup>Franc B. Wilkie, *Davenport Past and Present*, (Davenport, 1858), p. 220.

<sup>23</sup>See Buckingham, III, 251.

other on the route.<sup>24</sup> Ice sleighs or sleds were quite commonly used on the Mississippi River after the closing of river in the winter season. Such use of the sleighs, however, were more as substitutes for the ice-bound steamboats than for the overland stage, though the sled tended to take the place of both during the winter season. The use of the sleigh as a public conveyance was not very common in Iowa, being more generally used in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

But even at best, the stagecoach was a fair weather vehicle. Though subjected to terrific strains by hardy drivers and indomitable operators, many lines were practically abandoned during the bad months of winter, and occasionally during the muddy depths of a wet spring. But even in dry weather stagecoach travel should be classed among the hardships of early American life, not as the romantic mode of travel which a later generation, twice removed from the era, so often picture it. The romance of stage travel, one writer has said, is the invention of a later age; it certainly does not square with the realities of such travel as have come down to us in the first hand accounts of stage passengers in this period. As described by them, stagecoach travel was far from pleasant, uncomfortable at best, it was terrible, no less, at its worst.

Being jolted around inside the coach "like peas on a drum," suffering from oppressive heat in the summer, intense cold in the winter, and being compelled to walk long distances while paying for a ride could never be pleasures one would look forward to. As coaches got older and as the roads remained a constant problem, teeth rattling journeys were the common experience of all travelers. Something of what a particularly trying experience must have been like is described by Charles Dickens of a trip made in Ohio, which, even allowing for the usual Dickensian exaggeration, might have been true of Iowa or other states in the middle west.

At one time we were all flung together in a heap at the bottom of the coach, and at another we were crushing our heads against the roof. Now, one side was down deep in the mire, and we were holding on to the other. Now, the coach was lying on the tails of the two wheelers; and now it was rearing up in the air, in a frantic state. . . .<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>See the abstract of the record of *Forrey v. Western Stage Co.*, 19 Iowa 535.

<sup>25</sup>*American Notes*, p. 230.

In the hot summer months the sun beat down on the slow moving stage and heated the inside like an oven, a condition made infinitely worse if the roads were dry and the rumbling wheels and beating hoofs kicked up a whirling dust. In cold weather quantities of heavy clothing, closed shutters and drawn curtains were about the only solutions possible for freezing temperatures. In Kentucky, hot bricks as foot warmers proved unsuccessful because coaches too easily caught fire.<sup>26</sup> Traveling in the winter time was also accompanied by an increased danger of the driver losing his way, something that not infrequently happened even when familiar land marks were not covered with snow. One Scott County resident found on one attempt to beat a blizzard that after ten hours the coach had so wandered from the road that they had advanced but 3 miles. Even in the pleasant cool weather of a dry fall, when neither heat nor cold troubled a passenger, normal stage travel involved an inordinate amount of walking, for if the coaches were particularly laden with luggage, the passengers were not infrequently asked to get out and walk to the brow of the next hill.<sup>27</sup>

Added to the normal inconveniences of stage travel, in the late years of the staging era in the middle west, when the coach was facing a losing battle with the railroads, the traveling public often had old dilapidated stages to contend with which in the palmier days the operator would have either quickly repaired or retired from the route. Inevitably, as coaches became older and underwent several repairs to patch up the damage of one or more upset, and were loosened up generally by the rutted roads and muddy sloughs, even the best of once-new Concords appeared far from stately to a critical public.

As the Concord monarchs of the highway made their acquaintance with the mud and dirt of western roads, or experienced an all too frequent "upset," they naturally took on a more prosaic and weatherbeaten appearance. Charles Dickens in his travels in this country noted that they were generally "covered with mud from roof to the wheel-tire," and thought

<sup>26</sup>John Coleman, *Stage Coaches in the Blue Grass Country*, p. 105.

<sup>27</sup>E. L. Peckham, in *The Journal of American History*, XVII, 225-235, 341-353; XVIII, 39-50, *passim*; Coleman, p. 42; J. M. D. Burrows, *Fifty Years in Iowa* . . . (Davenport, 1886), p. 91.

that they had "never been cleaned since they were first built."<sup>27a</sup>

The proprietor was naturally loath to maintain in the last lean years the same high standard of repair and replacement he had once adhered to, instead, he sought to eke out the last profit from the brief future remaining by keeping hacks and coaches on the road which should never have been left there. Possibly more than one Iowa coach even resembled the stage described by a traveler in Ohio in 1849:

"... the particular one [stage] in which we now took our seats, was neither wind nor water-tight. It was incrustated with mud until its original colour could no longer be discovered. The leather aprons which were intended to cover the open pannels in bad weather, where they secured on buttons, were so dried and shrivelled by alternate wet and heat, that they scarcely covered half the opening. Had they been of sufficient length they could not have been buttoned—the buttons were gone, and the button-holes split. The door was an inch too small on every side for the aperture it was designed to close. This, however, was not considered important, as the four panes of glass which formed the upper half were broken. During the previous night it had rained, and the vehicle having been exposed without cover to the storm, the seats were soaked with water and were now dripping like a wet sponge. The wind being high and squally, . . . the curtains flapped in our faces every moment, literally giving us gratis a shower bath. In all probability we should have had a plunge bath also, but for several holes in the floor which let the water escape."<sup>28</sup>

Such conditions, the jolting, the heat, the cold, the mud, the disreputable hacks and stages in bad states of repair, all these could be and were, put up with, especially if there were no easy ways of remedying them. But one feature of stagecoach traveling that was hard to put up with, and which was never reassuring, was the constant danger of a stage "upset" or "turnover." In western parlance, an upset referred to an accident in which the stage remained where it fell, whereas in a turnover the coach "rolls over and over again down a declivity." Accidents of both varieties could and did happen in the flat open country as well as on the hilly roads, for neither region held a monopoly on loose bolts, broken couplings, cracked axletrees, or even such things as tree stumps, wobbly bridges, and treacherous ferries. Accidents of all varieties

<sup>27a</sup>*American Notes*, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup>John Lewis Peyton, *Over the Alleghanies and Across the Prairies, personal recollections of the far west one and twenty years ago* (London, 1869), pp. 139-140.

were such common occurrences that a game for small youngsters grew out of their frequency.<sup>29</sup> Yet considering the number of accidents, it was amazing that there were not more serious injuries. That there were no more deaths, broken limbs, smashed heads, and "bruises and contusions" is attributable to the relatively slow speed of the stages, their sturdy construction, and above all to the fact that very few western stages were equipped with glass in their windows, being usually furnished with folding shutters, or blinds, instead.

An account of an accident which happened in 1865 on the night route from Indianola to Pella, may be taken as more or less typical of many kindred accidents in Iowa.<sup>30</sup> The journey described by J. E. Williamson, the injured party, began at Indianola.

On the 23rd of October, Monday, I think, 1865 last, I saw Elijah Hayden and spoke to him about taking passage [on the stage]. I told him that there would be two of us. I inquired the fare and he stated it would be 3.50 a passenger. When I stated that there would be two of us, he put the fare at six dollars, three dollars a piece. He then directed us to see Mr. Robert Boyd, the local agent of the Company here, to whom [we were] to pay the fare and put our names on the waybill. I then called upon Mr. Boyd, stated to him the conversation between Mr. Hayden and myself, at least as to the price. He took my name and I paid him three dollars. About some where along [?] after 1 o'clock the coach drove up to my house, I put in my valise and took a seat in the coach. We got to Knoxville, Marion County, a little after dark, possibly 7 o'clock, possibly 8, somewhere between 7 and 8 o'clock. We got supper there, remained there half an hour, the coach drove around to the Hotel door and I with other passengers got in again. I took the front seat, first set down in the middle seat, a gent on each side of me. I desired to smoke and took the outside seat. We had barely [?] got seated, got ourselves situated. The coach, I think, was travelling in a slow trot, or the horses were.

The next thing I knew, I saw fire fly, all the passengers were

<sup>29</sup>The writer well remembers the game "The Stagecoach Tipped Over!" The game, particularly suitable for restless boys on stormy afternoons, was played by furnishing one less chair than there were participants. One was selected to start the game by beginning a narration of stagecoach travel, at his good will and in due season came the climatic words, "The Stagecoach Tipped Over!" Then ensued a mad scramble of changing chairs, and in the effort of everyone to secure a new seat the narrator tried to get in one too. He who failed to secure a chair then took up the story of the stagecoach journey, building up suspense and incident preparatory to another climax, always the accident.

<sup>30</sup>Testimony of J. E. Williamson in the case of *Williamson v. Western Stage Co.*, tried in the Warren County District Court in 1866 as shown in the transcript of the record in the Iowa Supreme Court.

piled up together. I did not know whether we had been struck with lightning or what, the senses were all knocked out of me. The Coach turned over to the right hand side. The way I was sitting, I was riding backwards, and by some means got my head out of the window. The coach was lying upon the side I was trying to get out of, but could not do so, on account of not having the use of my left arm. I could not assist myself with my left arm and had to call for help, I thought at the time my left arm was broken, for I could not use it.

After being taken to a nearby house and having his arm and shoulder rubbed with camphor—there were no bones actually broken—Williamson resumed his journey to Pella an hour or so later. The coach itself was quickly righted and placed back on the road with no other damage than the glass broken in its lamps!

What might be the hazards of travel in other parts of Iowa may be left to the imagination when one learns that the accident occurred within some two hundred yards of the hotel where the passengers had boarded the stage, and that the collision came as the result of the stagecoach running into a tree stump less than two feet from the road, standing about sixteen to twenty inches high. Although the night was dark and windy, the coach had been out of the track for approximately the length of the coach only, the driver, who took over the reins at Knoxville, knew this "by the cracking of the brush and leaves." What weighed most heavily against the driver, and particularly the company, of course, was the admission by the driver that he had been over the route only four times before, and that this night trip was the first time he had undertaken to drive the distance!

It is worth remembering that despite the upset only one out of six or eight passengers were injured, and that he never missed a single day's work, nor spent more than three dollars on medicines, that the only damage suffered by the overturned coach was the breakage of glass in its front lamps. While the details of this accident can not be considered typical of all accidents in Iowa, this example may serve as an illustration from which there were always variations.

Accidents were not only feared by the traveler, but were one of the greatest anxieties which plagued the proprietor as

well, for they involved not only the cost of repairs, loss from a possible disruption of service, the probable damage suit of the injured passenger, but, if frequent enough, accidents resulted in prejudicing the public against the particular stage line, prejudice that was not merely fanciful, as the record of jury action in the number of damage suits tried in Iowa courts prove. Damage suits were the usual outgrowth of stage accidents, so much so that proprietors tended to encourage the use of arbitration tribunals. The use of the courts was not popular with stagecoach operators because of the strict judicial interpretation of their responsibilities to the traveling public. The ruling decision stated that an accident was "*prima facie* evidence of negligence, and to sustain his action it was only necessary for the plaintiff to show he was a passenger, having paid his fare, and that he was injured by the upsetting of the stage."<sup>31</sup> The burden of proof of innocence, therefore, was thus thrown upon the stage company, whereas normally the burden of proof rests upon the plaintiff.

The courts further held that all operators were "bound to provide good coaches and harness, gentle and well broke horses, and a skillful and careful driver. These are obligations which the law imposes on every stage proprietor, and if injury is received by a passenger from any defect in this preparation, the proprietor is responsible."<sup>32</sup>

If mud roads, jolting discomfort, and the constant threat of an upset were not enough to restrict wide spread stage travel, the fares charged for stagecoach passage was in itself a sufficient deterrent for many people, though private carriage, horseback, and foot remained common modes of travel throughout the period discussed. The following prices, taken at random from different years, is commentary enough on the cost of stage travel, especially when it is remembered that steamboat passage was always less, and that for almost the same price a railroad ticket gave one the assurance of a smoother ride and greater all around comfort wherever the Iron Horse ran.

<sup>31</sup>Most of the decisions of the state courts were decided in agreement with the opinion of Justice John McLean, quoted above in the case of *McKinney v. Neil*, 1 McLean 540, heard in the Ohio District Courts in 1839. The Iowa decisions which upheld these views were notably the case of *Frink & Co. v. Coe*, 4 Greene, 555, and *Sales v. Western Stage Co.*, 4 Iowa 547.

<sup>32</sup>1 McLean 540.

1842 Keokuk to Burlington .....	\$ 3.00
Davenport to Dubuque.....	1.50
Bloomington (Muscatine) to Iowa City....	1.50
1850 Rock Island to Chicago .....	9.00
Chicago to Peru, Illinois.....	5.00
1852 Chicago to Oregon, Illinois.....	4.25
1854 Keokuk to Des Moines.....	10.00
Montrose to Ft. Madison.....	1.00
St. Paul to Dubuque.....	20.00
1857 Iowa City to Des Moines.....	10.00
Des Moines to Council Bluffs .....	11.00
1865 Indianola to Pella .....	3.50 <sup>33</sup>

Prices obviously varied considerably from year to year, and also in different areas, at the same time of the year. The greater changes were usually induced by actual or threatened competition over the same lines, this sometimes drove prices down to ruinous levels, to the delight of the passengers—only. In Iowa, since stagecoach operation developed with less than the usual cut-throat competition, the variations in ticket prices, therefore, reflected largely the changing amounts of traffic over a given route at different seasons of the year, and, in part at least, the fluctuation in the fixed “overhead” costs of operation, such as the cost of good stage horses, of oats, corn, and hay. Yet even the lowest regular fares averaged close to five cents a mile, while the highest were over ten. When stage fares are compared with the charges made for steamboat and railroad fares, both then and now, the expensiveness of stage travel is clearly seen.

Yes, stage travel was expensive—if you could get it. But even this was by no means certain. Since stagecoach operation was a business enterprise and demanded a profit to maintain it, not every town and village in Iowa could support a stage service. Moreover, many a village that did enjoy this distinction did so solely because it was on the road between other and larger centers. Even those towns which we would normally expect to have a coaching service were without it for

<sup>33</sup>*D. W. Kilbourn Mss. Collection; John Frink Mss. collection; Bloomington Herald, October 28, 1842; C. Ray Aurner, Iowa Stories, I, 125-26; Minnesota Democrat, December 13, 1854. See also Medora-Black Hills Stage Line, (South Dakota Historical Society, 1925), p. 11.*

a surprisingly long time. For instance, between such points as Iowa City, the then capital, and Fort Des Moines, one would have expected a stagecoach service by 1852, but in January of that year the residents were still looking for the establishment of a *regular* two-horse hack, on a twice-a-week schedule. Only on the routes connecting the larger towns or serving the important lanes of travel could one confidently expect to find staging facilities. And only on the main lines would one find daily coaches operating, much more frequently in Iowa were found the tri- twice-, and once-a-week stage schedule. Not the least of the problems facing travelers, therefore, was How and When they could expect to reach the goal of their journeys. In 1852, Council Bluffs was connected with central and northern Iowa with but a once-a-week stage, and in 1858, even, the line from Dubuque to Davenport operated on only a tri-weekly schedule. That was not all, however, for on occasion the traveler was faced with the disconcerting discovery that the time the stage arrived and the hour of its advertised appearance often varied from a few hours to almost a whole day. Judge George Greene of the Iowa Supreme Court waited at Marion, Iowa, one April day in 1849, from noon until 9 o'clock the following morning for the expected stage from Iowa City to Dubuque.<sup>34</sup>

Those travelers who could afford to use the stage got used to all the various hardships to be met with in such travel, and even took a philosophical attitude towards possible accidents, choosing instead to look upon the more pleasant side: the company to be met, and the interesting and novel scenes to be viewed. Certainly the stagecoach had no equal for enabling the traveler to thoroughly see the country. The liesurely five to eight mile an hour gait of the stage team, rolling along winding roads which for the most part followed the highlands, offered rare opportunities for close and careful observation, which a reading of many of the travels written eighty and ninety years ago shows was well used. Such travel was slow enough, for example, for one to note the different kinds of flowers seen, the varied methods of farming adopted, and

<sup>34</sup>*Iowa Star* (Des Moines), Jan. 29, 1852; *Davenport City Directory*, 1859, p. 133; *Dubuque Miners Express*, March 3, 1852; *Diary of George Greene*, Mss., April 5, 6, 1849.

their relative efficiency, and permitted one to form a judgment of the quality of soils too.<sup>35</sup>

The average traveler, however, was not a recluse interested solely in what he saw outside his particular window. The Americans were notorious among foreign travelers for their insatiable curiosity, which was too often mistaken for a prying into other people's affairs. Certainly Americans had a large bump of inquisitiveness, and it paid western settlers to exercise it, for by so doing he might learn of exceptional opportunities farther on, of the best methods for protecting his claim, of recent additions of friends and acquaintances to his community, as well as keeping himself posted on the events of his neighborhood. Naturally enough, thrown into the intimate association that prevailed inside the ordinary nine-passenger coach, it was no time before all were identified as "Mr. Philadelphia," "Mr. Omaha," etc., depending upon their place of origin, destination, business, or other singularities. Mrs. Gage, who traveled through Iowa in the early 1850's and reported much of what she saw for the *New York Tribune*, remarked that "from stage-coach speeches we will draw our ideas of the impression made upon explorers in this interesting country." One's "explorer" companions might be the governor of Iowa, or of another state, a chaplain in the army, leading members of the bar journeying to court, an author seeking new material for a "travel," and quite frequently the group included either a speculator in lands, or a prospective emigrant seeking to discover the most favorable spot to bring his wife and family the following season. Conversation, aside from the customary attention paid to the country through which they were traveling, might take the form of a discussion of the spread of certain religious doctrines, the chances of "Tip and Tyler" against "Old Van," or whoever might be the current candidates for the White House, it always included some account by fellow passengers of their experiences in other sections of the country. Thus America went to school in the stage.<sup>36</sup>

Customarily travelers in choosing one seat in the coach continued in that seat until the end of the journey, unless with

<sup>35</sup>*Journal of American History*, *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*; see also the innumerable travels written in this period.

the departure of one passenger they might choose to occupy the vacant seat. There was a preference among some passengers for certain seats in the coach, and as passengers left the coach those who had traveled longest had preference in first changing seats. Some favored the middle seats because they were easily gained and because the swinging lurch of the stage was least felt there. Others preferred the rear seats because one faced the direction he was traveling, and because it had that invaluable help to a long journey, a rest to lean the back against. Those who preferred the front seats asserted that there was less danger from tumbling baggage in case of an accident than in the rear seats, and they too had a back rest to lean against. Splendid in good weather, and usually chosen by strangers in the country, outside seats either on the driver's box, or, as they were later, specially built seats on top of the coach behind the driver were the worst of all in bad weather.<sup>37</sup>

The stagecoach was, of course, the regular carrier of unpublished news for the route it served. In addition to the bundles of the weekly newspapers carried in the triangular boot in the rear, the latest intelligence or gossip which came too late for the weekly press was sure to be passed on by word of mouth either by the driver or passengers in the coach. Stagecoach offices, therefore, were congregating places for the curious and impatient. Besides carrying news, stages often were the bearers of miscellaneous notes and messages, ranging from notices of due bills to information that an intended visit was postponed, or that one might be expected on the next steamboat or stage, as the case might be. Sometimes a hat box, a chair, or a roll of bedding was sent by the stage as freight, in addition to the more usual items of merchants' supplies.<sup>38</sup> In time the freight business grew to such proportions that separate companies arose whose sole concern was the superintendance of, and the quick efficient transportation and delivery of these multifarious articles. From such humble beginnings arose the powerful firms of the United Express, the American Express, Wells Fargo and others.

<sup>37</sup>Coleman, 144-5; *Journal of American History*, *op. cit.*; cf. Hafen, *The Overland Mail*, p. 306.

<sup>38</sup>D. W. Kilbourn *Mss. Collection*, April 28, 1852, December 6, 1854.

Stagecoach drivers, apart from the occasional surly individual one was bound to meet with from time to time, were also very accommodating to the interest of individuals in the party. Not being too closely tied to a minute to minute schedule, they were usually willing to stop at particular points of interest to allow strangers to see special points, or to watch unusual processes.<sup>39</sup>

Considering the fact that stages made daily trips, sometimes in "sections" on the main routes, and customarily three times weekly over the lesser routes, the number of accidents, bogged coaches, and other "incidents" were not exceptionally large, remembering, of course, the conditions the stagecoaches were obliged to meet. True, the average speed of the coach did not exceed five miles an hour—if that; true that all too often the passenger on the outgoing stage had to be up and ready at such hours as four, five, and six in the morning, or else have the coach threaten to leave without him, granted that traveling all night in the cramped quarters of a nine passenger-plus stage, with small handbags of individual travelers taking up even more room, was far from comfortable, and that the meals at many of the eating stops that sprung up to feed the stage travelers was far from satisfactory and often obtained at exorbitant prices, yet by and large, the stagecoach performed a necessary service of transportation, and performed it tolerably well. This is not forgetting the vexations, the weariness, the impositions and real dangers that frequently attended stagecoach travel, this merely gives credit where credit is due.

It is impossible to more than guess at the amount of stage travel in that period in Iowa. The only way to judge the amount in any given period would be to check the number of stage miles operated, but the records are much too meager to make even an attempt at this possible. Consequently, one can but shrewdly guess, and one is liable therefore, to distort the amount of travel either way, depending upon his reference to the lush years of the middle fifties when special conditions prevailed, or to the pioneer days of the forties. In general one may say that the number of stagecoach travelers were less than

<sup>39</sup>*Journal of American History, op. cit.*

is popularly believed. It is well to remember that staging in Iowa did not get into full swing until the late forties, and that shortly afterwards came the railroads to seal the doom of the Concord, Troy, or modest hack. Even in the period when the stage was the uncontested means of overland travel, there were surprising gaps in the service offered, as have been noted. In addition, although on a few of the main traveled routes, principally east and west, "sections" of two or more coaches were sometimes required to carry the passengers on the same scheduled run, on the other hand, on many of the connecting lines which served these main arteries, a tri-weekly service still continued, and moreover, continued with two-horse hacks, not the larger and more commodious four-horse post coaches. For example the tri-weekly line from Dubuque to Iowa City, and the tri-weekly line from Iowa City to Fairfield, both enjoyed nothing better in 1852 than a two-horse stage. Even some of the six-times-a-week routes, such as the Muscatine to Burlington route, and the Fairfield to Keokuk lines offered nothing better than two-horse stages either. As a rough indication of the amount of traffic over these routes, it may be interesting to note that on all four routes mentioned above, applications for an increase for a two-horse stage to a four-horse post coach rating were denied by the Post Office Department, this in 1852, for lack of justified cause.<sup>40</sup>

Although hard to check their degree of influence, stagecoach travel in Iowa was principally helped by three factors, the gold rush and emigrant influx of the 1850's, the railroads, paradoxically, and the abnormal conditions of the Civil War. The stagecoach was eventually eliminated by the railroad, of course, which finally drove the last coach across the Missouri River in the middle 1870's.

While the gold rush fever of the early fifties unquestionably gave staging the greatest boost it had received in Iowa up to that time, the general effect on the state as a whole is easily exaggerated. Most of the horde of fortune seekers traveled across the state in one direction only: west, and on the main traveled routes. Although the stages everywhere felt the stimulus of the call of the California metal, most of the hunt-

<sup>40</sup>*Dubuque Miners Express*, June 16, 1852, July 7, 1852.

ers after the precious gold who traveled by stage were those anxious to reach Council Bluffs or another jumping off place by the shortest and quickest routes, where they could purchase their supplies and outfits from other less stout hearted adventurers. Though such men brought profits to the stage operators, much more bona fide travelers were the hosts of emigrants who, made restless by the tales of quick fortunes in the west, had set out for California, but were so tempted by the rich acres of Iowa that they remained to seek another kind of fortune in the black soils of that state.

The railroads, oddly enough, probably helped the stagecoaches as much as they hurt them, at first. The impetus given to traveling by the railway cars, with their greater speed, comfort, and novelty, frequently impelled an increase in the staging facilities at the points where the rails touched in their march to the west. But as the rails pushed farther and farther westward, the initial advantages were more than swallowed up in the loss in the number of stage-miles operated. In the end it was this loss that finally swept the last stages out of Iowa.

Among the abnormal conditions of the Civil War which combined to give the stagecoach a longer lease on life than it could rightfully expect, was the financial life blood given the stages by the extra demands made upon all services for the shipment and transfer of supplies and even troops. Another and more important effect of the Civil War was to arrest the westward march of the railroads across the state. All energies and all financial resources were too closely tied up by the titanic struggle to permit the extension of the Iron Horse. It is significant that in a few years after the end of the war the stages were closing their last days in the state.

By no stretch of the figures can one make the amount of stage travel equal that of the railroad, even in its early days. Aside from the obvious disadvantage in size of units used, the stage was never able to satisfactorily overcome the objections of elderly and infirm people to stage travel. With good wisdom these confined their traveling by stage to local areas which could be easily reached and without the fatigues of a longer journey. The fatigue of stagecoach travel was not

something to be made light of, either, for many a strong man was glad to interrupt his journey after a long hard "stage" to get a night's rest before continuing on his way the next morning. Here the stagecoach, as in so many other respects, had to yield to the railroad cars.

Important as stagecoach service was to communities, it is striking how little attention it received compared with that showered upon railroad dreams and hopes of improved steamboat services. This lack of attention may have been a tribute to the accomplishment of the stage operators, or again it may have been proof of the callous blindness of those who would not see. Be that as it may, the stagecoach deserves additional recognition for its services in helping to keep knit together the scattered clusters of farmsteads, villages and towns which were hopefully springing up. Glamorous to a later day, stagecoach operators were largely unaware of such a fate, but bent their energies to keeping coaches operating and drivers and horses available to the demands of a fickle public.

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