Literary Stagecoaching: Famous Victims

Series: FHWA Highway History Website Articles **June 30, 2023**

U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

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Washington, DC 20590

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Literary Stagecoaching: Famous Victims

All forms of transportation are risky. Stagecoaching was no exception. The condition of the roads-and the drivers-ensured that. Two famous 19th century writers left accounts of their own perils on travels around the United States.

Charles Dickens, the most famous British novelist of his day, knew something about stagecoaching. His novel *The Pickwick Papers* is a good introduction to British stagecoach practices. So when he toured the United States in the early 1840's, he took some interest in American stagecoaching, a topic he discussed in his 1842 book *American Notes*.

To illustrate general conditions, he described a specific trip in Ohio from Cincinnati to Sandusky via Columbus. The road to Columbus, Dickens reported, was macadamized, which he referred to as a "rare blessing!" The coach often stopped at a roadside inn "which is always dull and silent." Periodically, the coachman changed teams, resulting in difficulty with young horses not trained for the wagon. He described the practice of breaking horses for the trade:

> . . . catch him, harness him against his will, and put him in a stage-coach without further notice: But we get on somehow or other, after a great many kicks and a violent struggle; and jog on as before again.

The coachmen frequently changed, but their character didn't. "He is always dirty, sullen, and taciturn." Dickens apparently rode at least part of the way in the box next to the coachman:

> If he be capable of smartness of any kind, moral or physical, he has a faculty of concealing it which is truly marvelous. He never speaks to you as you sit beside him on the box and if you speak to him, he answers (if at all) in monosyllables.

Reaching Columbus, he learned that a scheduled coach was not headed to Sandusky, so he hired an "extra" to take him to Tiffin, where he could catch a train to his destination:

> [We] started off again in high spirits, at half-past six o'clock next morning . . . disposed to enjoy even the roughest journey.
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> It was well for us, that we were in this humour, for the road we went over that day, was certainly enough to have shaken tempers that were not resolutely at Set Fair, down to some inches below Stormy. 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, with all four horses standing on the top of an insurmountable eminence, looking coolly back at it, as though they would say, "Unharness us. It can't be done." The drivers on these roads, who certainly get over the ground in a manner which is quite miraculous, so twist and turn the team about in forcing a passage, corkscrew fashion, through the bogs and swamps, that it was quite a common circumstance on looking out of the window, to see the coachman with the ends of a pair of reins in his hands, apparently driving nothing, or playing at horses, and the leaders staring at one unexpectedly from the back of the coach, as if they had some idea of getting up behind.

Dickens found the present road a sharp contrast to the macadam road to Columbus:

> A great portion of the way was over what is called a corduroy road, which is made by throwing trunks of trees into a marsh, and leaving them to settle there. The very slightest of the jolts with which the ponderous carriage fell from log to log, was enough, it seemed, to have dislocated all the bones in the human body. It would be impossible to experience a similar set of sensations, in any other circumstances, unless perhaps in attempting to go to the top of St. Paul's in an omnibus.

Following dinner at mid-day, they continued on:

> As night came on, the track grew narrower and narrower, until at last it so lost itself among the trees, that the driver seemed to find his way by instinct. We had the comfort of knowing, at least, that there was no danger of his falling asleep, for every now and then a wheel would strike against an unseen stump with such a jerk, that he was fain to hold on pretty tight and pretty quick, to keep himself upon the box.

At least Dickens could report one comfort for the passengers:

> Nor was there any reason to dread the least danger from furious driving, inasmuch as over that broken ground the horses had enough to do to walk; as to shying, there was no room for that; and a herd of wild elephants could not have run away in such a wood, with such a coach at their heels. So we stumbled along, quite satisfied.

This trip through Ohio is the type of experience Dickens had in mind when he remarked that no one should ever travel by road in America if he could get to the same place by boat.

In 1861, Samuel L. Clemens (who had not yet created his future literary name, Mark Twain) left St. Joseph, Missouri, by stagecoach for a job in Carson City, Nevada. His account of that trip occupies the first 20 or so chapters of Mark Twain's 1872 book, *Roughing It*. As a sample, here is a few excerpts from Twain's account of a stagecoaching experience similar to Dickens' description:

> Our coach was a great swinging and swaying stage, of the most sumptuous description-an imposing cradle on wheels. It was drawn by six handsome horses, and by the side of the driver sat the "conductor," the legitimate caption of the craft; for it was his business to take charge and care of the mails, baggage, express matter, and passengers. We three [Twain, his brother, and fellow traveler George Bemis] were the only passengers this trip. We sat on the back seat, inside. About allt eh rest of the coach was full of mailbags-for we had three days' delayed mails with us. Almost touching our knees, a perpendicular wall of mail matter rose up to the roof. There was a great pile of it strapped on top of the stage, and both the fore and hind boots were full. We had twenty seven hundred pounds of it aboard, the driver said . . . . We changed horses every ten miles, all day long, and fairly flew over the hard, level road. We jumped out and stretched our legs every time the coach stopped, and so the night found us still vivacious and unfatigued . . . .

When the thoroughbrace-the combination of belts and springs that suspended the coach-broke, the stage came to a halt. The driver explained that the weight of three days' worth of mail had caused the problem, so the passengers helped unload the coach of all its mailbags. "It made a great pyramid by the roadside when it was all out.

After repairing the thoroughbrace, the driver, conductor, and passengers began loading the mail, but taking on only a half the sacks:

> The conductor bent all the sat backs down, and then filled the coach just half full of mailbags from end to end. We objected loudly to this, for it left us no seats. But the conductor was wiser than we, and said a bed was better than seats, and moreover, this plan would protect the thoroughbraces.

Off they went, with a plan to send guards back to pick up the mail left by the roadside:

> The stage whirled along at a spanking gait, the breeze flapping curtains and suspended coats in a most exhilarating way; the cradle swayed and swung luxuriously; the pattering of the horses' hoofs, the cracking of the driver's whip, and his "Hi-yi! g'lang!" were music . . . .we felt that there was only one complete and satisfying happiness in the world, and we had found it.

Unfortunately, happiness never lasts forever:

> We began to get into country, now, threaded here and there with little streams. These had high, steep banks on each side, and every time we flew down one bank and scrambled up the other, our party inside got mixed somewhat. First we would all be down in a pile at the forward end of the stage, nearly in a sitting posture, and in a second we would shoot to the other end, and stand on our heads. And we would sprawl and kick, too, and ward off ends and corners of mailbags that came lumbering over us and about us; and as the dust rose from the tumult, we would all sneeze in chorus, and the majority of us would grumble, and probably say some hasty thing, like: "Take your elbow out of my ribs! Can't you quit crowding?"
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> Every time we avalanched from one end of the stage to the other, the unabridged dictionary would come too; and every time it came it damaged somebody. One trip it "barked" the secretary's elbow; the next trip it hurt me in the stomach, and the third it tilted Bemis's nose up till he could look down his nostrils-he said. The pistols and coin soon settled to the bottom, but the pipes, pipe stems, tobacco, and canteens clattered and floundered after the dictionary every time it made an assault on us, and aided and abetted the book by spilling tobacco in our eyes, and water down our backs . . . . It was fascinating-that old overland stagecoaching.

Another writer, the American author Washington Irving, used the well-known traits of stagecoaching in an analogy in his 1824 book *Tales of a Traveller*:

> There is a certain relief in change, even though it be from bad to worse; as I have found in traveling in a stage-coach, that it is often a comfort to shift one's position and be bruised in a new place.