

Forty-Niners Needed A Rifle And A Bag Of Needles

Old California Trail Was Only Route Leading West Out of Lone Star State



By Jan Isabelle Fortune

Sketch by courtesy of Wells Fargo.

ONE SHARP'S rifle, a hundred cartridges, and two pairs of thick drawers." These pertinent articles head the list of what the traveler should wear and bear on the California trail heading west in 1849.

A San Diego newspaper thoughtfully made out the complete wardrobe necessary for those who undertook the month-long journey from Texas to California. It was: "One Sharp's rifle, a hundred cartridges; a Colt's navy revolver and two pounds of balls, a knife, a sheath, a pair of thick boots and woolen pants; half dozen pairs of thick woolen socks; six undershirts; a wide-awake hat; a cheap sack coat; a soldier's overcoat; one pair of blankets in summer; two pairs in winter; a piece of Indian rubber for the blankets; a pair of gauntlets; a small bag of needles, pins, a sponge, hair brush, comb, soap, etc., in an oiled silk bag; three or four towels and two pairs of thick drawers."

The California Trail, established by Captain R. B. Marcy in 1849, was also known as Marcy's Return Route. It was for almost a decade the only route to California out of Texas, and had its own extensive immigrant travel. Along its way many will travel to Texas this year as the Lone Star State celebrates its 100th Anniversary with the Texas Centennial Exposition at Dallas.

This old immigrant route crossed the Red River at Old Preston in Grayson County, swung south into Cooke County and passed through Gainesville, where in the year of 1936 the principal street of this thriving town is still called California Street from the days of the early overland trail.

The road then ran through Montague County, through Clay and Young Counties and passed old Fort Belknap. It also swung by Camp Cooper and the Comanche Indian Reservation located in what is now Throckmorton County; from Throckmorton it ran through Haskell and Jones Counties and took a southwesterly course toward El Paso, passing Fort Phantom Hill and Fort Chadbourne.

TRACES of the old trail still can be found, although almost a century has passed since the great coaches drawn by four horses thundered through the Guadalupe Mountains and headed toward the Pacific Coast. Grave stones marked its way in '49. Today graves still guard the route which linked together the two states, both settled first by Spaniards; both fought for and won by pioneers who early set their faces to the west.

A few miles from old Camp Cooper, (on the ranch of J. A. Matthews) a lonely grave of a little girl marks the route of this famous overland trail. The crumbling gravestone which guards the head bears the almost undecipherable date of 1852. Daughter of forward looking parents, she perished on the trail and the galloping horses were reined in long enough for spade and shovel to dig deep; for ax and saw to form a crude coffin. Then stones were piled on the earth above the still figure, the driver shouted to his team and the coach leaped forward westward, always westward. Sometime, somewhere, they must have arranged — these westward people — to have a stone set up above the little grave. But they did not turn back. The people who made the West never turned back.

Near the foot of the Guadalupe Mountains in the extreme western portion of Texas lies yet another lonely grave, marker for the California trail, bearing the same date upon its tomb stone, 1852. But time and the elements have obliterated all else from the moss-grown marble save the date.

Nor are graves the only marks which the first trail laid upon the land of the Tejas, linking it with the land of California. Both Young and Haskell Counties have streams called California Creek, because they were crossed by this early trail almost a century ago.

Another route eventually superseded the California Trail. This was the highroad followed by the coaches bearing the San Antonio-San Diego Mail, established in 1857.

As soon as circumstances would permit after the annexation of Texas to the Union, a chain of military posts was established between San Antonio, El Paso, and points further west. This made safety havens across the land for those who went westward. It also provided way stations for rest and change of horses.

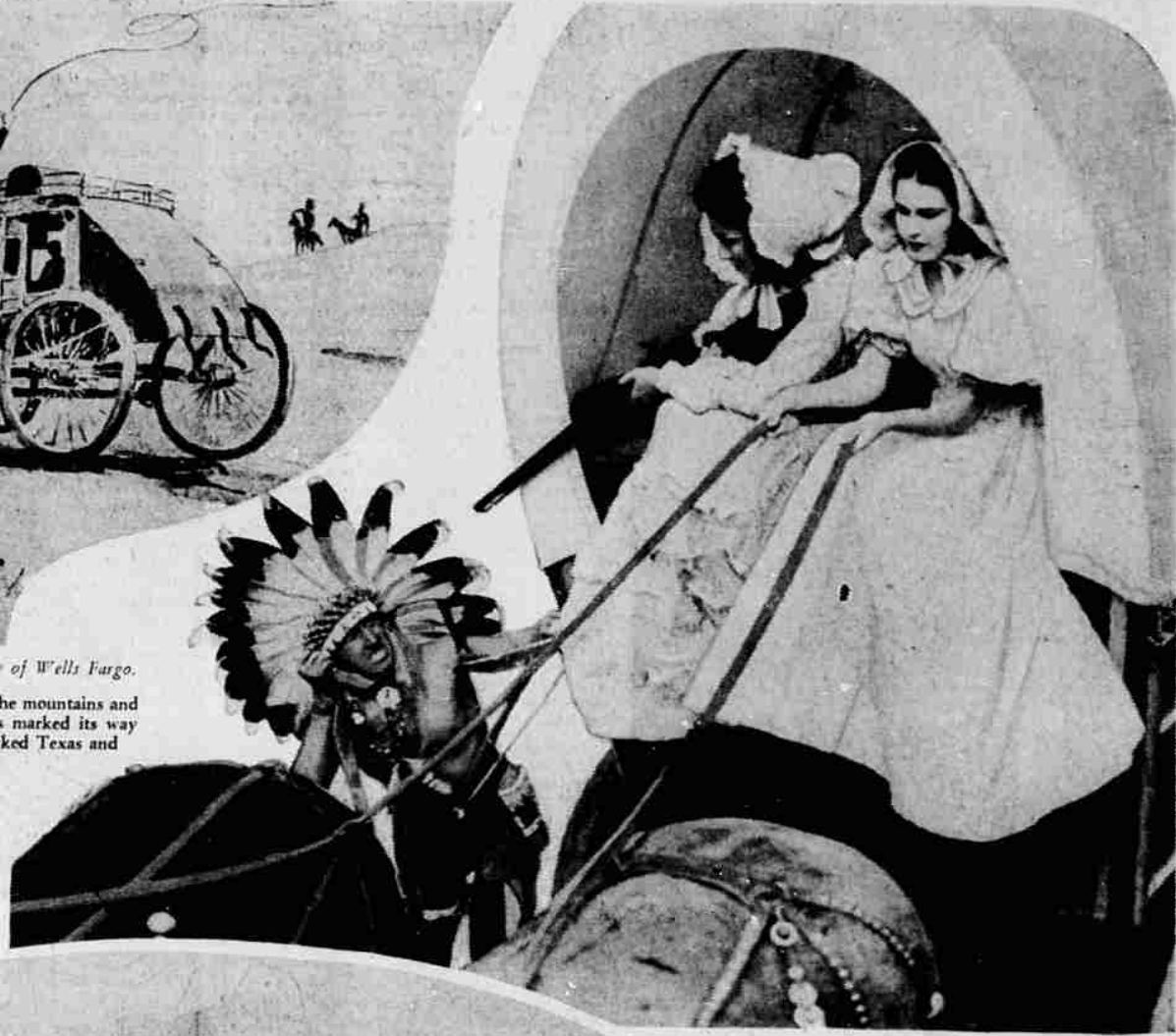
In 1857 the post office department, feeling that the opportune time had arrived, for such a step, called for contractors to carry the mail

Great mule-drawn coaches thundered through the mountains and headed toward the Pacific Coast. Grave stones marked its way in '49. Graves still guard the route which linked Texas and California.

from San Antonio to San Diego and back once a week.

A certain N. P. Cook made the lowest bid, and was accepted. Cook transferred his interest to a daring soul named James E. Burch.

AFTER careful consideration, the weekly mail was considered unnecessary, and a contract was made with Mr. Burch for bi-monthly mail



Every wagon was fair game to the Indians, who hailed news of the Overland Routes with joy. People using this route did well to pay up their life insurance, for safe arrival was problematical. They prayed — and "toted guns".



The postmaster-general was a Mr. Brown from Tennessee, and when the route was arranged to swing down from St. Louis to Memphis, across to Little Rock, Arkansas, thence through Texas to the Rio Grande, El Yuma and eventually San Francisco, some uncharitable souls insinuated that perhaps Mr. Brown had deliberately favored a southern route. Whether or not this was true, the Overland Mail went a southern route for many reasons. It was safe, comfortable and certain during every season of the year.

Again, there was Mexico to consider. Troops still had a tendency to boil over the Rio Grande and invade Texas at odd and unexpected moments. The southern route would provide a splendid highway over which United States soldiers could be rushed to the border in case of need. Without a doubt, Mr. Brown had many shafts to his bow and was well heeled for all sorts of criticism. And there was plenty of it. The Butterfield Overland Mail was described variously and derisively as "the horseshoe" trail and "the oxbow route", and it was widely predicted that no good would come of it. But time proved that the carping critics didn't know their stuff. President Buchanan staunchly declared that "it would bind the East and West together by a chain of living Americans which never can be broken." And for once, a President was right all the way, much to the discomfort of many politicians who were out after the Postmaster General's scalp, and weren't adverse to taking a little hide off the President in the process.

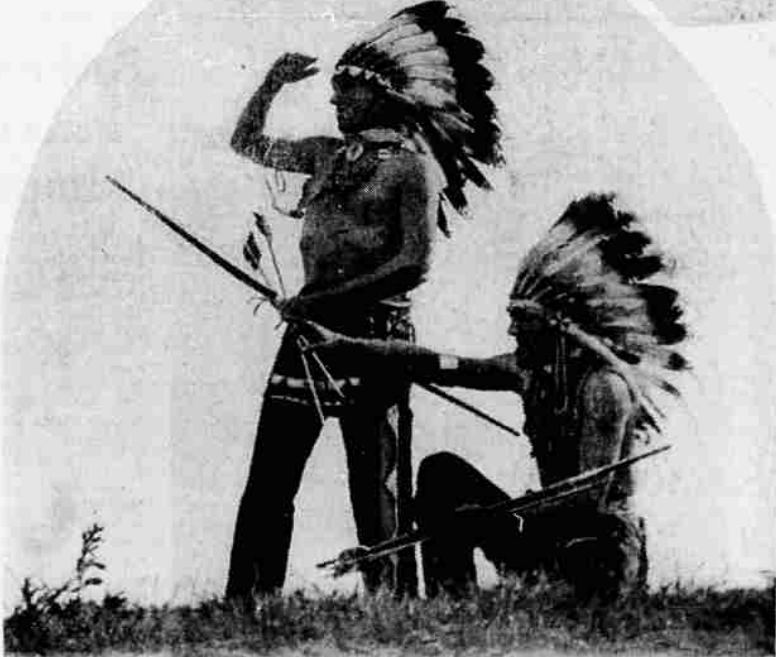
The Butterfield route brought into being the wide use of Concord coaches, the most perfect vehicle ever built for travel, till the coming of paved highways and the modern automobile.

THEY carried from six to nine passengers on the inside and from one to ten outside, plus their baggage and the mail. Four horses drew the coaches, and for the bad stretches, more were added. It became a tradition in the west that if a horse owner couldn't manage his horses, he promptly sold them to the Overland Mail, which whipped their ears down in no time at all.

Even in those early days Californians were rather vainglorious about their state and went on the general theory that any person who finally managed to get there wouldn't ever want to go back. Therefore, the fare from Texas to California was twice the amount of the fare from California to Texas. To "go west" cost \$200 plus forty pounds of allowed baggage. To return was only \$100. And to stay wherever you were required, like the Red Queen, that you ran as fast as you could all the time.

BUT in this year of 1936, the tables will at last be turned. Californians will head Texasward. And though the rates won't be doubled, as retaliation for the past, the Californians who set their faces toward the Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas from June 6 to November 29, will travel over the same trails which their ancestors rode going west in 1849—to the land of wealth and sunshine. Several times California has celebrated her glorious past with expositions. But the Centennial Exposition marks Texas' first birthday party, one which commemorates four centuries of history and a hundred years of freedom.

And just as thousands of Texans have responded many times to California's cordial invitation to "come over for a visit," so will thousands of California citizens accept Texas' request to "light, stranger, come in and set. Come see—The Cavalcade!"



There was always the chance that a man might lose his scalp on the Texas-California trail. Travelers might pray but they never stopped to kneel.

service. He was to bring and return the mail between the designated points for four years for the sum of \$149,800. The contract became effective July 1, 1857.

It was agreed that the mails would leave both San Antonio and San Diego on the same days, namely, the 9th and 21st of each month at 6 a.m. This distance between the two cities was to be covered in not less than thirty days.

Mr. Burch went himself to California to arrange for the establishing of the mails on the Pacific Coast. But, on September 11, returning to New York on the Steamer Central America, he was shipwrecked and perished. Wherever Cook was when this news came, one may be

sure that he felt he had been justified in leaving the mails alone.

Major J. C. Woods, general superintendent of the route, left New York for San Antonio on June 24, 1857. He arrived at his destination on July 11, two days after the first mail had left. But he immediately began to make preparations for the second mail and the first coach, scheduled to leave San Antonio July 24. Major Woods accompanied the second mail all the way to California, and arrived in San Diego before learning of Burch's death.

The Major found himself with the mail route in his lap. There was any amount of adverse criticism from old timers and new comers as to whether or not there was a well defined road;

Redskins were a constant menace to the Butterfield Overland Mail, called the "horseshoe" trail and the "oxbow route" — but this road was widely used by the famous Concord coaches, finest of its time.

was it all wilderness? Were the dangers great? In short, was the mail route worth a tinker's damn? Or was it merely another idea to grab money? What was wrong with the old California Trail? Why desert an established road for this? The Major arose nobly and took the stand in the defense of N. P. Cook's idea.

"Have we a well defined route?" roared the Major. "Even an ignorant immigrant would find it as impossible to miss his way when once on our road, either going or returning to California, as he would if traveling in a country with guide posts every half mile!"

So much for that, you doubters!

"Furthermore," continued the Major belligerently, "we assume nay, we know that the establishment of this line will lead to the speedy and rapid settlement of the country all along the road, giving us with a very few years' time a continuous succession of farms, ranches, hotels, military posts, stage offices, etc., from one ocean to another."

Major Woods was right in his surmises and his contentions. The establishments of the San Antonio-San Diego Mail was an important step in pioneering of the great West. For many years sixty-five men, fifty coaches and four hundred mules were constantly employed to carry the bi-monthly mail.

THE greatest swindle ever perpetrated upon the country by the slave holders," screamed the Chicago Tribune in the thick of the fight. But this route, too, had its part in the making of the west. The Butterfield Overland Mail blazed the trail for the route of the first great railroad to the Pacific.

According to the provisions of the Post Office Appropriation bill of 1857, the postmaster general was authorized to contract for the conveyance of the entire letter mail from such a point on the Mississippi River as the contractor might select, to San Francisco. Each trip must be completed in record time, only twenty-five days being allowed for it. Speed was even then taking a hold on the people.