

# A Rough Ride And Green Bread

These are what stagecoach passengers encountered on the way to Denver in 1860. Today's travelers have it easy compared to those hardy souls.

By **Liston E. Leyendecker**

**A**irline travelers sometimes can be heard grumbling as they board planes. They may feel like they are being stowed away like so many cattle. They complain about the expense, the sometimes impersonal treatment, and the food. I write here of ordinary mortals, not the pampered sybarites in the first-class section.

Yet, even the less fortunate souls who are lumped together in the plane's common area travel far more comfortably and reach their destinations much sooner than their ancestors who braved the rigors of the Great Plains aboard stagecoaches as they headed for Denver in 1860. Those who went by stagecoach were favored beings indeed, for they had only themselves to worry about and did not have to care for a wagon or its accompanying livestock. Furthermore, they reached their destination in a week as opposed to the six weeks or longer if they had joined a wagon train.

In the summer of 1860, the most popular route to Denver began at St. Joseph, Mo., the terminus of the North Missouri Railroad, which had tracks that reached farther west than those of any other line. The road, serviced by the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Co., crossed the Missouri River and a section of Kansas before heading into Nebraska and Fort Kearny. Once it left Fort Kearny, the stage followed the Platte River to a point near Julesburg, Colo., where it turned southwest toward Denver.

Although tourists availed them-

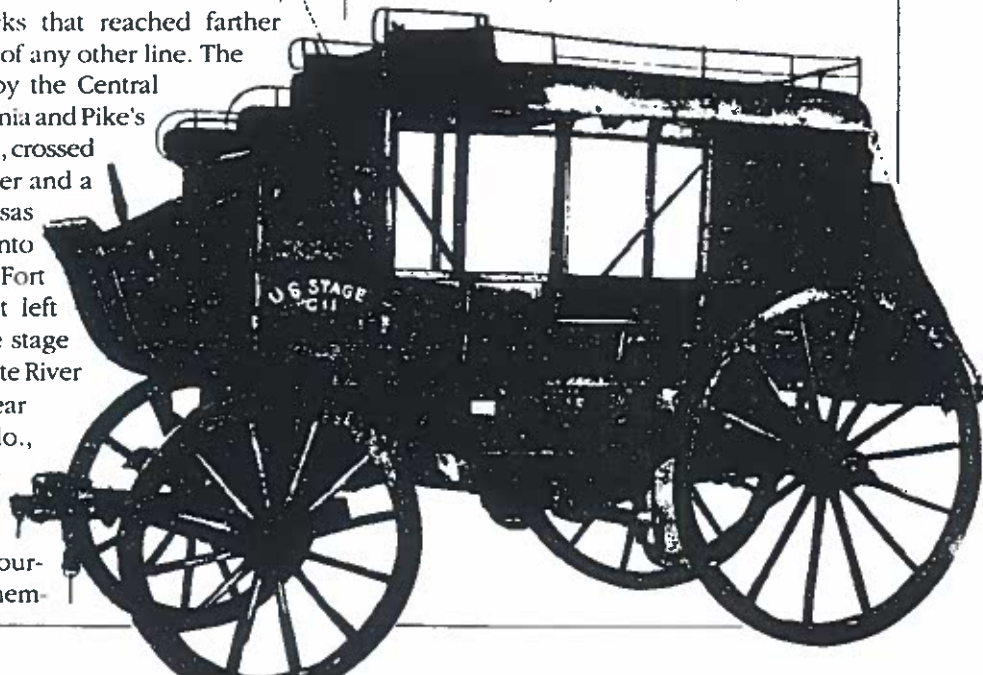
selves of stagecoaches, generally the passengers were merchants, speculators, or stamp-mill promoters interested in providing goods or services to miners who worked at the foot of the Rockies. These people belonged to the second wave of immigrants who brought amenities of civilization to the mining camps. The few women who made the journey usually were wives and daughters on their way to join husbands and fathers already in the area.

Prior to leaving "the States," well-organized travelers settled their affairs by visiting dentists, making sure aged parents and families would be cared for, and paying several installments on life insurance policies. A trip to the mining camps was no slight undertaking for the United States citizen in 1860.

Prospective wayfarers also prepared carefully for the trip by purchasing certain necessities. The wise traveler took a buffalo robe and a blanket for sleeping purposes; his coat would serve as a pillow. Other equipment included at least one revolver, ammunition, a bowie knife (also known

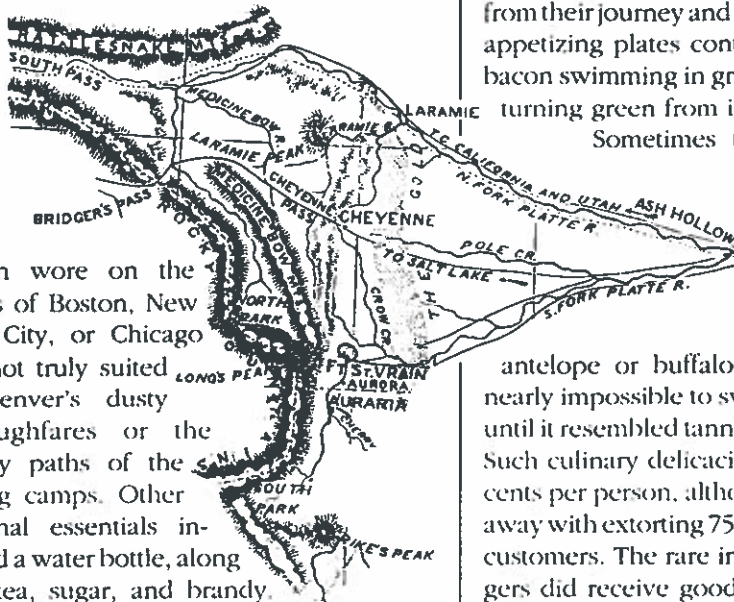


*Liston E. Leyendecker is a Colorado State University history professor.*



as an "Arkansas Toothpick"), perhaps a hunting rifle, and, for warding off Indian attacks, a double-barreled shotgun.

A traveler took rough clothing. What a



person wore on the streets of Boston, New York City, or Chicago was not truly suited to Denver's dusty thoroughfares or the muddy paths of the mining camps. Other personal essentials included a water bottle, along with tea, sugar, and brandy. Usually people who rode the coaches became ill the second night on the road, so medicinal purchases included opium to ease the pain of travel and Warburg's drops for fever. Travelers also took plenty of cigars for themselves and for the drivers, along with a pipe or two and a goodly supply of tobacco.

Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Co. coaches could accommodate nine passengers. The fare to Denver was \$100 per person; on occasion, prospective occupants banded together to purchase the ninth seat to give them more space.

The vehicles were built in Concord, N.H., and boasted red or green bodies that were sturdy enough to be safe, yet light enough to prevent overturning. Each coach's frame rested on leather springs that eased bumps and made repairs easier. Upon boarding, wayfarers found two or three movable benches, each of which could accommodate three people.

Along with passenger luggage (each person was permitted 25 pounds), the coaches also carried mail, all carefully packed because space was at a premium and an improperly loaded conveyance gave a bumpy ride that often caused occupants to suffer nosebleeds. Pulled by 12 horses or mules, these carriages traversed the region at speeds ranging from five to eight miles per hour between stations located about 25 miles apart.

Like today's travelers who complain about airline food, those who jounced along in stagecoaches expressed their distaste for the

victuals placed before them at the way stations. Most eating establishments were filthy and buzzing with flies that competed with the customers for their meals. Wayfarers, half sick from their journey and lack of sleep, faced unappetizing plates containing fried eggs and bacon swimming in grease, along with bread turning green from its leavening.

Sometimes they were treated to

antelope or buffalo so dry it was nearly impossible to swallow. Coffee, boiled until it resembled tannin, was the chief drink. Such culinary delicacies customarily cost 50 cents per person, although some stations got away with extorting 75 cents from disgruntled customers. The rare instances when passengers did receive good food served in clean surroundings were causes for outbursts of joy. Of course, the chance existed that no food might be prepared for the hungry argonauts if the person at the way station did not feel like cooking and serving it. Liquor, however, always was available at the stops.

Conditions inside the conveyance during the week's ordeal were less than wonderful. Temperatures varied from extreme heat during the day to intense cold at night. Passengers endured either dust or rain if they chose to leave the curtains rolled up, suffocation if they let them down. Tradition dictated that when the vehicle could not negotiate a hill, male occupants would have to bail out and help push it to the top. The same custom existed if it became stuck in mud or sand. Sleep was nearly impossible the first couple of nights on the road. After that, people became inured to the bumping and jolting along with the close proximity of their fellow riders, who became increasingly less acceptable socially for a variety of reasons.

Denver was a welcome sight as the stage pulled up at the company's large frame building on the southeast corner of today's 18th and Blake streets. There, weary occupants reclaimed their baggage and climbed the hill toward the town's leading hostelry, the Broadwell House, located at 16th and Larimer streets. Although most of them were tired and stiff, these hardy souls had survived the trip made in record time from St. Joseph. Happy to be in Denver, few would have been ready to begin the return journey the next day. ■



*The flapjacks that greeted travelers at breakfast at way stations were manufactured of grease and flour, and served with equal portions of molasses and dirt.*