CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST GOLD RUSH
THE STAGE COACH AND THE PONY EXPRESS

Once more addressing the mythical character who arrived with Columbus in 1492 and pitched his tent where the Weld county court house now stands:

In 1836 your first white neighbor arrived. Others had passed through and on, but this one came to stay. His name was Lancaster Lupton and he settled on the banks of the Platte river about twenty-five miles south of you. He did not pitch a tent, but put up a strong building made of grass roots and adobe mud and big enough to shelter a lot of trinkets he had brought with him to trade with the natives hereabouts. Why he came, what he did and when and why he left is told in Chapter 5.

In the decade between 1849 and 1859 what is now Weld county was but a grain of sand in the big sand pile that was called "The Great American Desert," and in the parcel labelled "The Pike's Peak Country." Major Long had said it was a desert more than twenty-five years before and no one had yet seriously questioned that statement. You, of course, knew better all the time, and in 1849 things began to happen that made you wonder if other folks were not beginning to find it out too.

Early in that year the prairie breezes began to bring to you strange noises, different from the song of the wild birds, the "yip" of the coyotes or the croak of the frogs. As it was wafted to you from the east sweeping on toward the west it sounded like the rush of many feet. and that was what it was. It was the tramp, tramp, tramp of hundreds, even thousands, of human feet, and of the feet of oxen and horses, and of the creaking of many wheels; and as it drew nearer the sound grew louder; louder than the tread of the buffalo herd, as the owners of the feet and the wheels beat a pathway across the continent to the outermost edge of the world, where the earth ends and the waters begin.

That was the famous *Gold Rush to California*, in 1849.

The great noise kept up for weeks and months, even years.

and after while another sound crept in; it was the rumble of still more wheels, big ones and little ones, and the creaking of axles and gears; and when it came close enough for you to see the queer object that was causing it all as it pulled into the station at Latham, three miles east of you, you looked at it in amazement and wondered what this country was coming to.

THE STAGE COACH.

After while you found out that the queer object that swung along so awkwardly behind a bunch of horses fastened to it was a Stage Coach, that it had come into being because the owners of the human feet that had so long been rushing past, had found gold at the far western rim of the world and had established a big settlement out there, and their kin folks back east wanted to go there too but could not walk so far; and because this was so, a man by the name of William H. Russell had decided to give them a lift by means of a stage coach. And later you learned the whole story that follows:

That this Mr. Russell was a very ambitious and aggressive sort of a man; had been in partnership with two others, Mr. Majors and Mr. Waddell, and they had been crossing the desert for a long time with great wagon trains loaded heavily with military and other supplies, and this was what had made so much noise.

And now Mr. Russell had a new idea; why not carry people as well as freight? So he suggested to his partners that they start a Stage Coach line and do that very thing. He told them it would be a sure money maker; but his partners did not see it that way, and they said to him—in effect if not in exact words—"Nixie; there's nothing to it; we would lose all we have ever made with the wagons."

So Mr. Russell broke with his long-time partners and found a new one, a Mr. Jones,—John S.—who was as much of a plunger as he, and together they launched the new enterprise. They went heavily into debt, sparing no expense in equipment; their coaches, built by the famous Concord Carriage Makers, were the last word in elegance and style.

They first named their enterprise "The Jones and Russell Pike's Peak Express Company," but when it was incorporated gave it a still more imposing name: "The Central Overland California & Pike's Peak Express Company." But for brevity they ran away ahead of the alphabetical designations of the Roosevelt regime and called it the "C.O.C. & the P.P.E." Co. You could sing it; it jingled along so smoothly. But it didn't work; it was a hundred years too early; the public had not had the alphabetical training for it; so they had to let it go at the un-musical name of the Overland. Sometimes they called it the "Concord Stage Line" to distinguish it from ordinary Concord carriages.

An innovation that was entirely original with Jones & Russell, the swinging of the coaches on strong leather straps instead of metal springs, gave the coaches such a peculiar swinging motion that the nickname of "Pitching Betsy" soon attached to them.

Each coach had a seating capacity of nine passengers and there were places for mail bags under the seats and on top of the coaches. Four to six especially selected horses or sturdy Kentucky mules were attached to each coach and changed every twelve or twenty miles according to road conditions. Fifty-two coaches were put on the line. The cost of each was $800 and the horses were worth from $150 to $200 each. The distance from Leavenworth to Denver was 640 miles and the time allotted for the journey was six days; but it took action to make it in that time, with no allowance for interruptions by the way; being an average of more than 100 miles a day. The passenger fare was at first $150, then $100 and finally came down to $75.

So altogether when all those fifty-two coaches and nine passengers each with plenty of mail bags came rolling into Latham, one after another, with a rumble that shook the earth it made you, the First Citizen, wonder what was going to happen next.

Mr. Russell's first partners were right about the business end of the enterprise; it was a failure. The plunger, Mr. Russell, and his partner Mr. Jones, lost heavily, but they had the satisfaction of knowing that they had planted a milepost of Progress on the pathway of the Great West and marked an epoch in its

development. Mr. Russell was later one of the incorporators of the town of Denver and some of his descendants are in business there now.

So much for the business end of this great enterprise; now for something of its human side.

In the 1850s and '60s the First Americans, the Indians, were not yet fully accustomed—nor reconciled—to the ways of the fast-encroaching white man. Thomas Walker in his interesting book, "How They Carried The Mail," tells many graphic stories of the meeting of the two races on the plains while it still was in doubt as to which was to gain final ascendency. The following story is typical of many others.

It was the custom at that time for a special mail carrier appointed by the government to accompany each coach carrying mail and to be responsible for its safe passage across the plains. In this story Bob Alder was the responsible one. The driver of the coach was Bill Jennings. On this particular coach was a passenger, a young chap by the name of Sam Clemens. He had an unbreakable habit of writing down almost everything that happened and signing the name of "Mark Twain." That was not really his name, and that was why he signed it.

Thomas Walker does not state what time in the year this particular trip was taken nor where the Indian attack took place, but from the clue that the nights were chilly a good guess is that it was either spring or fall; and from his mention of the Sioux and Cheyennes the place must have been this side of Julesburg which was later Weld county.

Anyhow, it was in the middle of an afternoon when Bill Jennings, ever on the alert, discerned in the far distance what looked like a bunch of prairie dogs and excitedly exclaimed to Bob Alder: "Lookee yonder;" "Injuns," announced Bob, who, far away as they were, did not believe them to be prairie dogs; and by the time he had reached for his gun the bunch was near enough to leave no doubt as to their identity.

At the distance of about 200 yards the arrows began to fly and the mail sacks, just behind Bill and Bob were riddled; then Bob said to Bill, "you 'tend to the horses and I'll 'tend to the In-

juns; lean down so's I kin shoot over you." And the battle was on. Bob's hat was carried away by an arrow that burnt a track along the top of his head; the harness of the lead horse was hit and the horses began to plunge; and it was about this time that the young chap inside the coach and some other passengers joined in the chorus and arrows and bullets whizzed past each other like hail-stones coming from two directions at once. The only gun among the Indians was in the hands of the leader and when he leveled it at Bill, Bob beat him to it and in a split second shattered his hand causing the gun to drop to the ground, discharging as it fell.

That took marksmanship and, either the fact that such marksmanship was on board or because the Indians had had all the entertainment they wanted, they turned and sped away as fast as their ponies could carry them, but not until after a parting arrow had brought down the finest horse in the team, the high-spirited, dependable leader.

The young passenger, Sam Clemens, wrote the story in a book he called "Roughing It," and as usual signed that name, "Mark Twain."

At another time there was another passenger who should have special mention because he figures so essentially in the next period of this History, 1870 to 1885. He was a mild mannered, kindly, distinguished looking gentleman who signed the passenger roll as "Horace Greeley." At least that was what the signature looked like. He was not a good penman; in fact was entitled to the prize as the poorest one in America at that time. He may not have lost the laurel even yet. If you have any doubt as to his rightful claim to it just take a look at the title of the Greeley Tribune. He wrote it. That is, it was made up from the way he signed his name and wrote the name of his paper in New York. When Nathan Meeker first started the paper in Greeley he did not have it that way because he did not think anybody could read it, but later, because everybody thought so much of that Stage Coach passenger, he concluded to take a chance on it. The reason everybody thought so much of that passenger was not because of his penmanship but be-

cause of the many fine qualities he possessed. Among other things he had the rare ability of seeing far into the future; the day he passed through this territory he had the vision to see Weld county coming. He got off the Stage and walked around a bit, and, though there was not much in sight except the Latham station yet he saw a fine and prosperous country coming out of the future.

HOW THEY DID NOT CARRY THE MAIL.

Before leaving the subject of the Stage Coach the following incident should be given, illustrative of the difficulties of carrying the mail as new conditions developed.

In 1859 war clouds were gathering and by 1860 there was no doubt of the coming storm. Written by lightning streaks across dark skies was the one ominous word, "Slavery." Congressmen were making speeches that Westerners ought to hear. But there was no radio and the only way to get the speeches to the Westerners was for the Congressmen to make them in Congress, have them printed and sent by mail, which, from Leavenworth westward meant by Stage Coach.

For such voluminous mail postage was an item—a big one —and so the Congressmen passed a law called the "Franking Privilege," by which their speeches could be sent through the mail without postage. About that time, too, newspapers took on a new importance; they, too, could be used for speeches and political news, and the political pot was boiling. So newspapers were admitted to the mails in exchange with each other free of postage. Altogether it added a tremendous volumn to the mail carried by the already well loaded coaches. New places had to be found for the mail bags, and the only way possible to make more space was to suspend the bags from the ceilings of the coaches. The result was inevitable; the coaches were loaded beyond their capacity and the horses taxed beyond their strength.

But coaches could not be enlarged nor more horses added; passengers, at $100 apiece, were not willing to get out and walk; so there was but one thing to do and that was to unload mail-bags wherever convenient hiding places could be found along

the way. And this fact makes understandable an item that appeared in a Salt Lake paper, The Deseret News, under date of May 2, 1860. It said:

"The Way Mail, that is to say an oxwagon load of mail sacks that had been left by the wayside, some of them nearly or quite six months old, arrived Wednesday night, covering dates from November 1, 1859 to April 4, 1860."

And again on June 13, 1860, the same paper said: "The mail from St. Joe arrived at Hank's station Friday but could not be brought in until Monday, most of it being as wet as water could make it; we had to hang it up to dry before we could open it. The coach had upset this side of Weber's."

But the best story of all is that of two army officers who were on board the Pitching Betsy on a day when the mail was unusually heavy and when bags were suspended from the ceiling of the coach between the seats.

At first the two officers sat behind the sacks, but going up hill the sacks lost their moorings and buried the officers beneath their bulk and weight. The lusty cries of the officers soon reached the ear of the driver on his high perch outside and he stopped the coach and rescued the officers; then with many apologies he changed the position of the mail sacks, placing them back of the officers. All went well under this arrangement until the top of the next hill was reached and the coach started downward, when the sacks again lost their moorings and buried the officers in front of them. Again the officers were rescued by the obliging and apologetic driver, but their dignity could stand no more.

"Dump the whole blankety-blank lot," exploded the one who happened to be rather a high officer, a General in fact. His brother officer, not quite so high, forgetting for the moment his own subordinate position, was duly horrified and on the spur of the moment exclaimed: "Why this is government mail and there is a heavy penalty for losing even one of them there Patent Office Reports."

To be spoken to like this by a subordinate was even worse than being buried by a mail sack, and the General exploded

even worse than before, and in language more forceful than refined. "ROT," he shouted, "driver, get rid of them there sacks somehow." Then, remembering the dignity of the United States Government and his own responsibility in upholding it, he said, in a voice less explosive, yet stern, "But don't you dare let me see you do such a thing." This in a voice of command; then, modifying his tone to that of a citizen who had been buffeted by mail sacks beyond the point of endurance, he added: "My partner and I will walk up the trail a bit and when you catch up with us will get in. *But I don't want them there mail sacks where I will ever see them again.*"

That settled it, and for the balance of the journey the passengers rode in comparative comfort. But whether or not these particular mail sacks were among the six months old oxload, the story does not go on to tell.

THE PONY EXPRESS.

(Still Addressing the Typical First Citizen.)

Then when you had become so accustomed to the Stage Coach that you could tolerate its noise and dust, something else happened.

One day from your tent on the site of the Weld County Court House you saw in the distance an unusual cloud of dust, and, as you looked, something shot past you like an arrow; you could not focus your eye upon it quick enough to make out that it was a horse and rider outstripping the wind, but that was what it was.

A rider had started from St. Joe, Missouri, very early in the morning of April 3, 1860, to carry a letter from James Bucannon, President of the United States to George Downey, Governor of California, as quickly as possible. There was nothing in the letter to make all this dust necessary, but the big thing was to see how quickly it could get there. Mail carried by Stage Coach generally took weeks to cross the continent; and so the same plunger that had started the Stage Coach, Mr. Russell, had concluded it could get there faster if carried by a small rider on a fast horse; and you know how that man was; if he

thought a thing could be done he plunged into it without stopping to count the cost. And that was what was happening when you saw that cloud of dust.

Many folks have supposed that the desire for speed was just another hectic symptom of the too rapid development of this Twentieth Century civilization, but it isn't. Or, well, maybe the later *development* is, but the *desire* is as old as the human race; in our day it has been the urge that has brought us from the horse and buggy to the ninety-mile-an-hour streamliner. Of course it can be overdone, sometimes is; but that is because of the lack of reason; properly balanced, the desire for speed makes for progress.

Proofs of the antiquity of this desire are in the pictographs found by the earliest traders and trappers carved on trees and stones by the Indians themselves. Arthur Chapman in his book, "The Pony Express," says that the desire for speed can be traced back to the days when the Indian and his pony split the wind across the plains now covered by the white man's alfalfa. He says the pictographs were of a horse, crudely drawn, its four legs outstretched to the limit, the artists's best idea of speed—he was going somewhere, and going FAST. That was the white man's reading of the symbol and was probably correct. The white man may have misunderstood the Indian in all else, but this common human trait makes all the world akin.

But long before the day when Johnny Frey started with the letter from the President to the Governor, another fearless rider had accomplished a feat that proved to Mr. Russell that it could be done. This rider was a French-Canadian by the name of X. F. Aubrey.

A GREAT RECORD OF SPEED AND ENDURANCE

This was even back of the decade of the 1850s. Aubrey had been freighting over the Santa Fe Trail for a long time between Independence, Missouri and Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was a distance of 780 miles and it took his ox-drawn caravans from two to three months to make the journey. Horsemen allowed themselves from two to three weeks. Aubrey was a horse-

man; he never accompanied his own caravans but was at each end of the road to see their start and finish. He knew every inch of the trail and could check off the miles by starlight. He could make the trip in two weeks. That was the best any rider had ever achieved. Could it be done in *eight days*? To the unbounded surprise of all speed worshippers he did it. Then while the world still gasped with astonishment Aubrey audaciously wagered for a purse of $1,000 to reduce the time to *six* days. This would establish a new speed record for the world, and, with bated breath, the world awaited the outcome.

Did Aubrey win? He did. He covered 780 miles of Nature's own Highway within *six* days. And that record for speed and endurance, for both man and beast, stands unchallenged to the present day.

The relay of horses along the way proved to be insufficient and more than one emigrant train outbound from Independence swapped horses with him, glad to have that much of a part of the Great Adventure. Did his iron nerve sustain him, and did he make it in six days? He made it in *five and a half*, reaching his goal *twelve hours* before the wagered time. But at Independence he was dragged from his horse more dead than alive, unable to respond to the clamor of an enthusiastic and worshipful crowd.

Aubrey passed out of life soon after this, but he left something for men to talk about; left something upon which William H. Russell, a dozen years later, based a theory that mail could be carried across the country *quicker* by a small man on a fast horse than it could by any other way.

JOHNNY FREY AND THE PONY EXPRESS

It was a tremendous occasion when Johnny Frey left St. Joe, Missouri, for San Francisco, California. The letter from the President to the Governor had traveled from Washington to St. Joe by rail, and the theory of Plunger Russell was to be tested out on the balance of the journey.

The distance had been carefully calculated; it measured 1,966, almost 2,000 miles. Relays of horses and riders had been

provided. Each horse should cover an average of fifteen miles at a good speed, and each rider from 75 to 125 according to the condition of the country over which he must ride.

On the morning of that epoch marking day the horse for the first lap of the journey, stood saddled and bridled and pawing the ground, impatient for the start. Johnny Frey sat proudly in the saddle with keen eyes watching the approaching train. The whistle blew, the train slowed down, but long before it came to a stop, quick hands had grasped a mail pouch, thrust it into the waiting saddle bag and clamped down the fastenings. The rider touched his steed and off they darted down the street to the river's edge where a waiting ferry stood ready; and while still the whistles blew and the crowd cheered the ferry pushed rapidly out into midstream and soon touched the other shore. There another crowd shouted and cheered as steed and rider dashed away toward the setting sun. And soon past the whistling engines and cheering crowds they settled down to a test of endurance.

On and on sped the second great adventure, marking a milepost in history; changing horses and changing men but never slacking speed. It was speed in the changing as well as in the riding that must make the winning. Into the foothills, over the summit of the Rockies, into the great arid basin, over the Wasatch Range, into the valley of the Great Salt Lake, through the alkili desert, past the parched "sink" of the Carson River, over the Sierras and down into the valley of the Sacremento where a steamer stood ready to receive horse and rider for the last lap of the journey into San Francisco—where the Governor received the President's letter just *eight* days after it was written.

It was a tremendous achievement in 1860, but as measured by the standards of 1938 how slow. But it must not be measured by the standards of 1938. It belongs to another day. It would even be unjust to measure the achievement of Maughan who, seventy-five years later covered the same distance from the rising to the setting of the sun, with what may be seventy-five years hence when the speed of a cannon ball may carry a message across the continent as a lightning's flash.