

## BY COACH AND SIX

**A** FREQUENT winding of horns, snapping of whips, rattling, jouncing, swaying, splattering mud in the springtime, bucking drifts in the winter, stuffy inside, wet or freezing outside — such was stagecoach-ing in its hey-day. “Creaky, mud-covered old caravans,” “diving bells,” “distiller’s vats,” or “violoncello cases hung equally balanced between front and back springs” riding like a “ship rocking or beating against a heavy sea; straining all her timbers with a low moaning sound as she drives over the contending waves” — these were terms used to describe the familiar coaches.

A traveler in Tristram’s *Coaching Days and Coaching Ways* gives more detail relating to stagecoach adventures:

“Inside — Crammed full of passengers — three fat, fusty old men — a young mother and sick child — a cross old maid — a poll parrot — a bag of red herrings — a double bar-  
relled gun (which you are afraid is

loaded) — a snarling lap dog in addition to yourself — Awake out of a sound nap with the cramp in one leg and the other in a lady’s band box — pay the damage (four or five shillings) for gallantry’s sake — getting out in the dark at the halfway house, in the hurry stepping into the return coach and finding yourself next morning at the very spot you had started from the evening before — not a breath of air — asthmatic old woman and child with measles — window closed in consequence — unpleasant smell — shoes filled with warm water — look up and find it’s the child — obliged to bear it — no appeal — shut your eyes and scold the dog — pretend sleep and pinch the child — mistake — pinch dog and get bit — Execrate child in return — black looks — no gentleman — pay the coachman and drop a piece of gold in the straw — not to be found — fell through a crevice — coachman savs

'He'll find it!' — can't — get out yourself — gone — picked up by the ostler — no time for blowing up — coach off for next stage — lose your money — get in — lose your seat — stuck in the middle — get laughed at — lose your temper — turn sulky — and turn over in a horse pond.

"Outside — your eye cut by the lash of a clumsy Coachman's whip — hat blown off into a pond by a sudden gust of wind — seated between two apprehended murderers and a noted sheep stealer in irons who are being conveyed to gaol — a drunken fellow half asleep falls off the Coach — and in attempting to save himself drags you along with him into the mud — musical guard, and driver horn mad — turned over — one leg under bale of cotton — the other under coach — hands in breeches pockets — head in hamper of wines — lots of broken bottles versus broken heads — cut and run — send for surgeon — wounds dressed — lotion and lint four dollars — take post chaise — get home — lay down — and laid up."

Perhaps this gentleman was crotchety and pessimistic, but he was not far wrong. Traveling by stagecoach was a distinct adventure. It was hard to prophesy what might happen — seldom that something or everything did not happen.

Stagecoaching began in 1736 in Rhode Island when Alexander Thorp and Isaac Cushno were permitted to run a stage to Massachusetts for a period of seven years. This was only sporadic, however, and the regular travel by this means did not get under way until Thomas Sabin began to run stagecoaches in 1767 between Providence and Boston. They left Providence on Tuesdays and came back from Boston on Thursdays. Before this time the owner of a coach only made a trip when he was fully assured in advance of a full load of passengers. He would give plenty of notice and passengers would make as much fuss in preparation as a transatlantic passenger of today.

After the Revolution two stagecoaches a week were in service between Boston

and Providence, and with the development of the turnpike system (by which roads were built and owned by private corporations) they became common. Lines were extended from Providence to Taunton, New Bedford, Worcester, and Springfield as well as to New York and Boston, and the service offered became fairly efficient.

The almanacs of the day carried the time-tables for stagecoach travel to various points, not only giving the starting and terminal points but all the way-stations and mileages between. Taverns, the depots of the stagecoach lines, were listed with the names of the tavern-keepers. Thus in the *New England Town and County Almanack* for 1769 we find such notes as the following:

"The Norwich coach comes once a week from Mr. Azariah Lathrop's, in Norwich, to Dr. Samuel Carew's, on the west side of the Great Bridge, in Providence, where travellers will meet with the best entertainment. The stage performed in a day."

"The Providence coaches kept by Mr. Thomas Sabin and Knight Dexter, Esq., go twice a week from Providence to Boston, performing their respective stages in a day."

Around 1793 Israel Hatch issued the following notice:

#### "ISRAEL HATCH

"Most respectfully informs the publick that his line of Stages will run every day in the week, excepting Sundays. His Coach leaves *Boston* at 5 o'clock, and arrives at *Providence* by 2 P.M. The Stages from *Providence* start at the same early hour and arrive in *Boston* by 2 o'clock. Twenty-four excellent horses, six good coaches, and as many experienced drivers are always provided. The horses will be regularly changed at the half-way house, in Walpole. Passengers may be accommodated with places at the sign of the Grand Turk, No. 25 Newbury Street, Boston; at Mrs. Catherine Gray's, *State Street*; and in Providence at Mrs. Rice's, the sign of the Golden Ball; or at Mr. Coggeshall's, the sign of the Coach and Horses  
\* \* \*"

The increase in the number of packets docking and sailing from Providence had a marked influence on the stagecoaches, increasing their business tenfold. Passengers from Boston, Worcester, and Springfield would generally come to Providence, hence to proceed by packet to New York. Many a race between rival coach lines gave a zest of excitement to this form of travel. Frequently a number of them would arrive in Providence at once all bound for the same boat and the sight of them thundering down the streets, lurching precariously from side to side, crammed with passengers and loaded with baggage, the horses plunging and sweating, the whips snapping and the rival coachmen yelling and blowing blasts on their horns was enough to send townfolk scurrying for safety in doorways. A large number of horses and coaches were always kept on hand at Copeland's old livery stable to meet the boats from New York and carry the passengers on to Boston. A signal system established at Field's Point relayed the information from boat to stable concerning the number of passengers aboard and the necessary coaches needed. Then there was a deal of hurrying and cursing, getting the horses harnessed and the coaches rattling away to the wharf in time to be ready when the boat docked. In regard to the time made by such coaches between Providence and Boston, we find the editor of the *Gazette* in 1832 proclaiming in pride "we were rattled from Providence to Boston last Monday in *four hours and fifty minutes* including all stops on the road. If any one wants to go faster, he may send to Kentucky and charter a streak of lightning, or wait for a railroad, if he pleases."

At this period the great center for the starting and arrival of coaches in Providence was the area in front of the Manufacturer's Hotel, where the What Cheer Block came to stand. Here sometimes as many as a dozen coaches, each with its six horses, would be drawn up waiting for the incoming stages. When these latter arrived and the business of transferring baggage and passengers, holding horses, and transacting business began, one can easily picture the grand confusion.

The number of passengers carried by

stage in those days was very large, considering that only about a dozen could be crowded into a coach. Two lines alone transported 24,000 passengers between Boston and Providence in the course of a year. But by 1830 there had begun the talk of a railroad. The coaches were beginning to be too slow. By 1840, the railroad had come to stay and although the



Courtesy, Milton M. Cranston

TURNPIKE MILESTONE, SOUTH SIDE OF SMITH STREET, TWO MILES FROM CENTER OF PROVIDENCE.

stagecoach lines cut rates and did everything else to secure passengers, they were beaten at every turn. Flesh and blood could not compete with the "iron horses," and dirt turnpikes, no matter how smooth, could not be kept as smooth as steel rails. And so, within a very short period of time the stagecoach became obsolete. A few minor lines continued to run to sparsely settled districts in the country, places where the railroad did not touch. These were called "omnibuses" and had their

vogue. But this type of travel was sent hustling into decline with the advent of the horse-car lines in 1863. Now, only in the very poorly inhabited country districts do we find the "omnibus," generally picking up children and carrying them to

school. The stagecoach is now no more than a colorful item in the history of transportation. Its rattle and clatter and the echoing of the coachman's horn among the hills are locked in silence behind scores of years.