

The Steamboat and Stagecoach Era in Montana and the Northern West

by Carlos A. Schwantes



Captain John Mullan had witnessed many transportation changes during the quarter century since summer 1859. That was when Lieutenant Mullan, military engineer, left Fort Walla Walla at the head of an expedition of 230 men, 100 of them soldiers and the rest mainly artisans and laborers. The force was considered strong enough to repel any Indian attackers who might interfere with their work of surveying and constructing the missing link in the transportation geography of the northern West. They intended to build a military wagon road to join steamboat navigation on the Missouri and Columbia rivers. It would be the longest road of its type in the United States and among the first in the West to be built according to modern engineering principles.

Now in September 1883, nearly a quarter century later, Mullan rode aboard a special train as it steamed west from Helena across the mountains to the Northern Pacific's final spike ceremony at Gold Creek, near Garrison, Montana. In some places the newly laid tracks paralleled the military road he had helped to construct. Almost as if to speak for Mullan, a Montana journalist aboard the same train reflected, "While I looked down the steep mountain into the old Mullan wagon road, my own thoughts went back to a sultry day in August 1866, when I acted as brakeman and engineer of the then fashionable [wagon] trains. Our trains, consisting of three cars, with twelve yoke of bovines to each train, pulled and reeled a full half day to reach the summit. The hip-ha-hoy and loud popping of the whips echoed from hill to hill and back again, lending an enchantment to the scene, which in those days the carrier of goods and wares loved dearly to hear."

"It was pleasant to look back over the seventeen years and note the change," he continued. In those days "the oxen pulled our trains and we were content. Now steam draws us." The oxen "go to

market on the steam-propelled trains, and the engineers have exchanged their rawhide whips for iron levers, lead pencils, etc."¹

For Montana pioneer Granville Stuart, the long-anticipated coming of rail transportation to the territory meant an end to the unpleasant experience of stagecoaching. "No more will the happy denizens of Bozeman and Yellowstone walk o'er the mountains behind Gilmer & Salisbury's 'palace jerkies,' while the unpleasant driver thereof regards them as did the Roman general of old when looking upon the long procession of prisoners that follow his victorious chariot. . . . At last, Oh people of Montana, the hour of your deliverance draws nigh. Job has been handed down through all the ages as the most patient man, but we all do feel and know that if it had only occurred to Satan to try him with a Montana stage line from the proprietors down to the off-wheeler, he would have sworn."²

It is easy to return, if only mentally, to the wedding of the rails at Gold Creek in 1883 and agree with Stuart that the new mode of transportation was liberating to the first generation of Euramerican Montanans. Likewise, it is easy to fall into the practice of labeling the years before 1883 as the pre-railroad era, as if every transportation innovation in the northern West before that date took place only in anticipation of the eventual arrival of the iron and steel rails. However, the years from 1850 to 1883—from the first common carrier steamboat on the Columbia River to the final spike of the Northern Pacific at Gold Creek—might accurately be described as the steamboat and stagecoach era, a distinct time when those two modes of transportation (together with freight wagons, pack trains, and other relatively low-cost and utilitarian methods of conveyance, as well as early telegraph lines) defined the pace of life and etched the earliest lines of commercial transportation and communication across the landscape of the northern West.³

As essential forms of transportation in the pre-railroad West, steamboats and stagecoaches marked a distinct period for the region, defined the pace of life, and left some of the earliest physical evidence of modern transportation and communication. At left, under the watchful eye of an observer, a steamboat plies the river through the Missouri Breaks of Montana (no date). On the right is a classic Concord coach on a muddy Wolf Creek Canyon stage run north of Helena, Montana (no date).



Though the word “stage” was commonly used to describe any coach, wagon, or sleigh used as a public conveyance, the Concord coach emerged as the quintessential icon of commercial transportation across the frontier West, surpassing even steamboats, which were more often seen as an icon of the antebellum South. Like mountain steamboats that churned along the upper Missouri River, Concord coaches represented the adaptation of existing technology to a harsh new environment. Until made obsolete by a spreading network of railroad tracks and motorized transportation in the early twentieth century, Concord coaches sped along the primitive roads of the West, drawn by four- or six-horse teams and driven by skillful reinsmen. No other vehicle became more closely identified with the West of the 1850s and 1860s.

Of all peoples living in the northern West, that sparsely settled portion of the United States stretching from western Minnesota to Puget Sound, Montanans had been best served by steamboats reaching up the Missouri River from St. Louis to Fort Benton, effectively the head of commercial navigation, starting in July 1860. Briefly during the same decade an ungainly mélange of steamboat and wagon routes traced the Columbia and Clark Fork rivers, connecting Montana (then part of Idaho Territory) with Portland and the

Pacific Coast. During the 1860s too, the first stagecoach lines extended north from Salt Lake City to Virginia City, Helena, and other pioneer settlements to offer passenger and express connections by land. Collectively these modes of transportation and communication reshaped Montana’s geographical relationship with its neighbors in the northern West, as well as with more distant parts of the United States and the world. They redefined the experience of long-distance travel. Indeed they altered people’s perceptions of time itself, which acquired a far more precise meaning after the dawn of the steamboat and stagecoach era.

Early roads of the northern West often amounted to little more than dirt paths, and a hard rain could turn long stretches into a knee-deep quagmire. Stage passengers might then be required to trudge through the mud to lighten the load or get behind to help push.

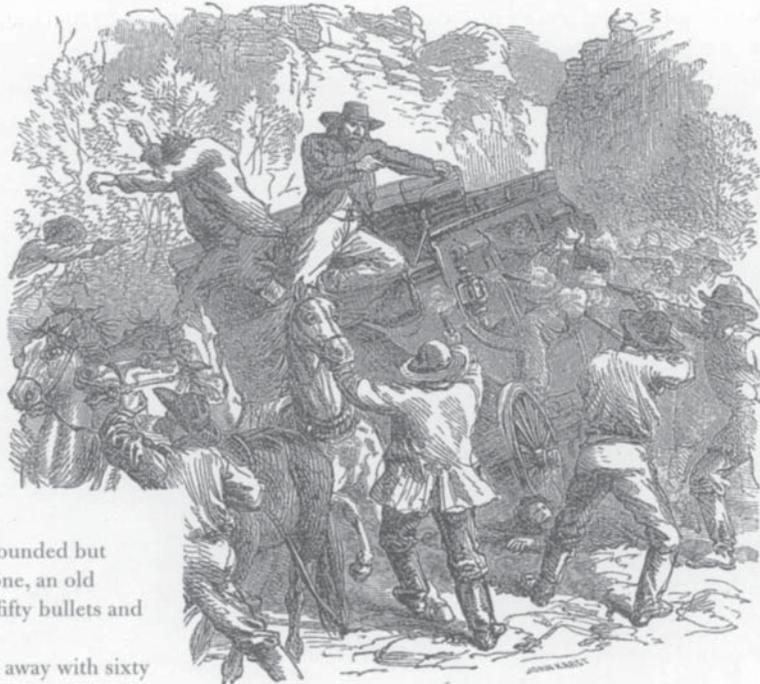
Granville Stuart had the misfortune to travel through Idaho’s Snake River country near Blackfoot Butte during an unexpected thaw late in 1866. The stage company, recalled Stuart, loaded its passengers into a large freight wagon “with four little rats of mules to draw it, and as a natural consequence they ‘stalled’ in every low place or hollow, and we were compelled to get out in snow and water up to our hips and dig the ‘outfit’ out.” Farther south at the Portneuf River they switched to a

The discomforts of stage travel were one thing, the dangers quite another. When Albert D. Richardson, the New York journalist, wrote of his travels through the West in his popular 1860s classic, *Beyond the Mississippi*, he included the illustration below with a description of a stage robbery gone violent in the Portneuf Canyon area near present Pocatello, Idaho. The canyon, he noted, was some thirty miles long, and the stage that passed through it bringing gold dust from Montana had twice been robbed. “The last time,” he wrote, “it was crowded with passengers all armed to the teeth, and keeping vigilant watch; for a

suspicious, staring horseman, his face concealed by a slouching hat, had twice ridden past. The canyon is narrow, with high walls and shrubbery along the little brook which threads it.

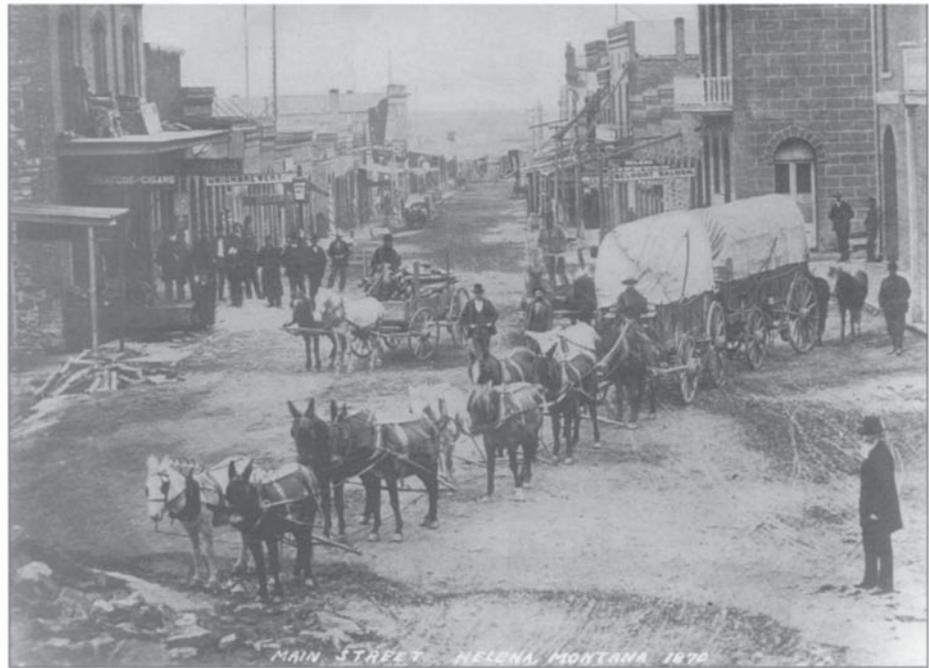
“In broad daylight, when all were riding with guns and revolvers cocked in their hands, seven men with blackened faces, abruptly rose up from the dense willows on each side, stopping the horses and firing into the coach. The passengers returned fire; but their courage was useless. In these stage robberies, persons are seldom able to defend themselves if they remain in the vehicle. By jumping out and scattering they often succeed in driving away the robbers. On this occasion one of the highwaymen was wounded but escaped; four passengers were killed—one, an old Kansas neighbor of mine, riddled with fifty bullets and buckshots.”

The robbers, Richardson said, got away with sixty thousand dollars in gold dust and were never caught.



ROBBERY OF THE MONTANA COACH.

Mules, freight wagons, and bullwhackers still dominated Helena's Main Street in 1870 (right). Four years earlier, the same Montana street bustled with 2,500 men, three thousand teams, and twenty thousand oxen and mules delivering and receiving freight from Fort Benton and various Montana mining camps.



sleigh, “but the snow having lately all melted off, we had to walk eight or ten miles up the canyon, while the horses could hardly drag the sleigh and baggage.” Stuart complained that “everything goes by contraries on the Overland; the climate changes so rapidly that where the sleds and sleighs are, there is no snow, and where the snow is, there you had to ride in coaches, steamboat wagons, carts, and anything else that’s convenient—generally without seats, compelling you to sit on the mail and baggage.” Such experiences caused Stuart to welcome Northern Pacific trains in 1883.⁴

Perhaps equally alarming were roads that wound down steep hillsides. West of Lemhi Pass, where members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition first crossed the Continental Divide in 1805, the stagecoach connecting Red Rock (near Dillon), Montana, with Salmon City, Idaho, descended with its wheels “double rough-locked.” The more seasoned passengers kept a calm silence as the coach tipped toward the edge of a cliff. “The narrow road would round sides of precipices, where trees grew hundreds of feet below us. Timid passengers looked not out of the windows towards the depths. The travelers on the roof of the coach were instructed to sit on the upper side, and those inside told gruesome stories of former accidents to stage coaches.”⁵

Few travelers had a kind word for stagecoach food and lodging. “Each meal was the same; breakfast, dinner and supper were indistinguishable save by the hour;

and the price was one dollar or one dollar and a half each.” All across the West, stage stations were typically positioned every ten to fifteen miles, depending on the availability of water and grass, and some were very isolated. Perhaps to amuse themselves during the long and often tedious stage journeys, passengers circulated stories about a station kept by a Mrs. Corbet, who was a terror to all travelers. It was said she commonly forced passengers at the point of a pistol to eat meals at her table, charging them one dollar per, without any comment. Another station along the road linking Utah and Montana was known as the “Dirty Woman’s Ranch.”⁶

Long-distance travel by steamboat was in some ways more comfortable than that aboard a jostling stagecoach, if only because for passengers eating in the salon, meals were filling and served on time. Moreover, while the price of a ticket between Montana and Missouri was roughly the same regardless of whether a traveler covered the distance by stage or steamboat, meals were included in the price of steamboat passage. An additional advantage was that a ticket holder could ship considerably more free baggage by boat than was allowed aboard a stagecoach (usually only twenty-five pounds per passenger). For such reasons, Montanans favored Missouri River steamers for sending wives and families home to “the States” for a visit, or for bringing them out West to settle. The actual price of a ticket varied

1. White Sulphur Springs, Montana, *Rocky Mountain Husbandman*, September 13, 1883.

2. *Weekly Missoulian*, April 27, 1883.

3. The historical literature dealing with early transportation and communication in the northern West could easily fill a large bookshelf. Among the best books that treat specific topics are Hiram M. Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River: Life and Adventures of Joseph La Barge*, 2 vols. (New York, 1903); Joseph M. Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri: Being the Story of the Life and Exploits of Captain Grant Marsh* (1909; reprint, New York, 1946);

William E. Lass, *A History of Steamboating on the Upper Missouri* (Lincoln, 1962); Betty M. and Brigham D. Madsen, *North to Montana: Jehus, Bullwhackers, and Mule Skinners on the Montana Trail* (Salt Lake City, 1980); and Paul F. Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865-1885* (Minneapolis, 1955).

4. Virginia City, *Montana Post*, January 5, 1867.

5. Lemhi, Idaho, *Herald*, June 9, 1910.

6. Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent: A Summer’s Journey to the Rocky Mountains, the Mormons, and the Pacific States* (1865; reprint, Temecula, Calif., 1966), 21.

wildly during the 1860s depending on demand, and it was not unthinkable for one-way stagecoach fare from Montana to Atchison, Kansas, a major gateway to points east, to rise to \$350. The journey required twenty days.

Despite its supposed advantages, a steamboat trip from St. Louis to Fort Benton was never an excursion jaunt, and it generally took longer than by stagecoach. E. W. Carpenter, who undertook the journey in 1865 aboard the *Deer Lodge*, recalled it this way: "Two months of life on a 'mountain steamer,' with cracked roofs and warped decks, especially adapted to the broiling of passengers in fair weather and drenching of them in foul; two months of life between a double wall of muddy bluffs bounding the river on either side and cutting off whatever scenery might lie beyond, was naught but tedious in the experience, and could not prove entertaining in the description." As often happened aboard an Overland stagecoach, steamboat passengers frequently dealt with boredom on a long journey by drinking whiskey all night and sleeping all day.⁷

Low water was ever a topic of conversation and concern on the Missouri River. When in 1865 the *Deer Lodge* was unable to push the final 250 miles upriver to Fort Benton, passengers joked that the "barkeeper had taken so much water for the dilution of his whiskey" that their boat, though drawing only two feet, could proceed no farther. So much for the claim that the special "mountain steamboats" might run on "a light dew."⁸

Beyond such travel experiences, perhaps of even greater significance was the way steamboat and stagecoach travel affected the lives of early-day settlers. Measurements of time, like those of distance, acquired a new meaning during the steamboat and stagecoach era. Before the early 1880s, for example, when railroads created four standard time zones in the United States, local time prevailed throughout the northern West. On June 17, 1866, on what must have been a very slow news day, the *Idaho World* patiently explained to its readers how frontier communities reckoned the passing hours. Idiosyncratic and imprecise timekeeping was perhaps a metaphor for a simpler age (at least when viewed from the perspective of our own time-mad era). "The difference in time between Idaho City and New York is about two hours and forty minutes; between San Francisco and this place about thirty-five minutes. When it is 12

o'clock at Idaho City it is about twenty minutes to 3 o'clock in New York and twenty-five minutes past 11 o'clock in San Francisco." "About time" was a standard good enough for that era, but railroads demanded more precise timekeeping.⁹

The advent of regularly scheduled commercial transportation by land and water gradually eased the heavy burdens imposed by time and space, though only the railroads promised to lift them entirely. Still, many of the first generation of non-native peoples to reach the northern West thought of their permanent homes and families as located outside the region. Homesickness was therefore common during the plodding pace of the steamboat and stagecoach era.

Consider, for example, the world of the Reverend Gustavus Hines, who arrived in Oregon from the East in 1840, well before the dawn of the steamboat and stagecoach era in the northern West. Hines had traveled by the fastest commercial means possible at the time, leaving New York City on October 9, 1839, sailing around Cape Horn, and reaching the Columbia River on May 21 the following year. His passage by ship required nearly eight months.

Three years later, on a lonely promontory overlooking the Columbia River near The Grand Dalles, Hines paused from his labors to reflect on the burdens of time and space that nearly overwhelmed him. The Methodist missionary lamented most of all that he was so far from home. "I thought of my beloved parents from whom I had not heard for years; of the tears they shed when last I saw them, of receiving the parting benediction, and of the anxiety they must still feel, if alive, for their wandering son." He thought too of his brothers and sisters, early schoolmates, and fellow worshippers "who, if they had not forgotten me, would ask, 'Where is he? and what is his employment.'"

Hines fondly recalled the landscape of his native East Coast—"of bustling cities, with wheels rattling and towns, with their splendid turnpikes and McAdamized roads; of railroad cars and steamboats; of temples erected to the God in heaven; the toll of chiming bells as they informed the waiting thousands that the time of worship had arrived"—until he actually imagined himself "amidst the scenes, the contemplation of which had produced this pleasing illusion, and starting up I found myself surrounded with the stillness of death, save the murmuring of the turbid waters of the Columbia that rolled beneath where I sat. Contrasting the land which had passed before my mental vision with that in which I felt myself a voluntary exile, I exclaimed, how

7. *Overland Monthly*, 2 (April 1869), 378-86.

8. *Ibid.*, 379.

9. Idaho City, *Idaho World*, June 17, 1866.

10. Gustavus Hines, *Oregon: Its History, Condition, and Prospects* (New York, 1859), 151-52.

11. Lee Silliman, "'Up the Great River': Daniel Weston's Missouri Steamboat Diary," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 30 (July 1980), 37.

changed the scene! This, thought I, is truly a land of darkness.”¹⁰

In the 1840s a journey from the East Coast to distant Oregon was in some ways analogous to one’s own death, not just for the Reverend Hines or anyone who traveled by sailing ship, but also for emigrants who bade parents and friends good-bye and undertook the five-month journey west by wagon along the Oregon Trail. Any adult who survived the hazards along the way still had to overcome an overwhelming sense of isolation on the Pacific Coast. During most of the 1840s the nearest post office was located in Weston, Missouri, some two thousand miles distant. If a letter was destined for the States, the sender had first to find someone returning east who would mail it upon reaching Missouri. When the letter finally did reach its destination several months later, the receiver often paid the delivery cost: many writers on the West Coast were so uncertain about transcontinental mail service that they sent their letters collect.

Some twenty years later in the 1860s, during the steamboat and stagecoach era, the *Montana Post* commonly used the headline “News From America” when providing information from eastern states. Like Reverend Hines in the 1840s, many newcomers to the remote West, both settlers and sojourners, still wondered, “When shall I see the old home faces and places again? This question,” Daniel Weston wrote, “is often on my mind. It saddens me to think it may be years—perhaps maybe never—. If I am spared to again return, whose places will be vacant? What faces have I looked my last upon?”¹¹

James Knox Polk Miller reflected on the burdens that time and distance imposed in mining camps of the northern West when he wrote in his diary for June 8, 1865, that he and some acquaintances had rented a cabin in Virginia City for \$10 a month: “Slept in the cabin with them last night. Remington played on his guitar during the evening. I lay on the floor in a blanket. The moon cast a clear, soft light over the cabin and in the open doorway, provoking thought & reflection. The music was sad & I grew very very blue and homesick. It came so natural to think of home, friends, and all I so much loved, all lost and far away. I have ‘no one to love & none to caress.’ As I write this today I can not help the tears starting. I feel so much alone.” So many miners experienced the same powerful emotions that columns in the *Montana Post* counseled against the “annual scourge” of homesickness when “hundreds will agitate the question, ‘Are you going home this summer?’”¹²

12. Andrew Rolle, ed., *The Road to Virginia City: The Diary of James Knox Polk Miller* (Norman, 1960), 75; Virginia City, *Montana Post*, June 29, 1867.

While some newcomers managed to live a self-contained existence at the fringe of society—“happy in their freedom from all wants they cannot supply and from all ambitions they cannot satisfy”—one notable thing about life in the northern West before the 1880s was the number of Euramericans who lacked attachment to the places they inhabited. “Every spring hundreds of thousands of our countrymen go westward, as inevitably as wild geese fly south on the approach of winter,” wrote journalist Albert D. Richardson. “We are indeed ‘A bivouac rather than a nation, a grand army moving from Atlantic to Pacific, and pitching tents by the way.’ It is not from accident, or American restlessness, but Law fixed, inexorable as that compelling water to its level, or the magnet to its pole.”¹³

A peripatetic population estimated to number as many as 250,000 trappers, hunters, traders, soldiers, government agents, packers, teamsters, stage and express company personnel, miners, timber workers, and travelers, all without any firm attachment to place, ranged across the West during the early 1870s. Moreover, during the previous decade, a time of numerous mineral discoveries in the Rocky Mountains, perhaps one hundred thousand sojourners crossed a portion of the Great Plains each year. With each bonanza a fresh wave of humanity surged into the northern West.

Especially during the Civil War years, any news from America was a prized commodity on the nation’s western fringes. A stagecoach passenger on the Central Overland route recalled a brief exchange one November night in 1860 when the Pony Express rider dashed by:

“What’s the news?” shouted our driver.

“Lincoln elected! New York gives him fifty thousand majority!” came back the cry through the darkness.

It woke up all our Republicans who sent forth cheer upon cheer, while the Democrats were sure it must be a hoax.

Richardson, who penned those words, recalled that all along the way west “emigrants and ranch-men besieged us for papers. One night, when we rolled up to a lonely station, miles from any other human habitation, the stock-tender, ragged, shaggy, sunburnt and unkempt, put his lantern up to our coach window and implored: ‘Gentlemen, can you spare me a newspaper? I have not seen one for a week and can’t endure it much

13. Wallis Nash, *Oregon: There and Back in 1877* (1878; reprint, Corvallis, Oreg., 1976), 104; Albert D. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi: From the Great River to the Great Ocean* (Hartford, Conn., 1867), 23.

longer. I will give a dollar for any newspaper in the United States not more than ten days old.” He was a “representative American,” thought Richardson. “No other nation so subsists upon the daily journals as our own.”¹⁴

The same insatiable desire for news from home was noticeable along Pacific sea routes. Frederick Billings, the Vermont-born, western railroad pioneer after whom Billings, Montana, was named, recalled that on a trip around Cape Horn, his ship reached Callao, Peru, in spring 1865 with all its passengers hungry for news. Billings asked the first Yankee he met on the shore:

“What is the news from the United States?”

Slowly removing his cigar, the stranger replied with genuine American nonchalance, reciting the stupendous events in a tone as monotonous as if reading a laundry-list.

“Richmond is taken; Lee has capitulated; Johnston has surrendered; President Lincoln has been assassinated; and Jeff Davis has been caught in his wife’s petticoats.”

The listener stood speechless at the startling catalogue.¹⁵

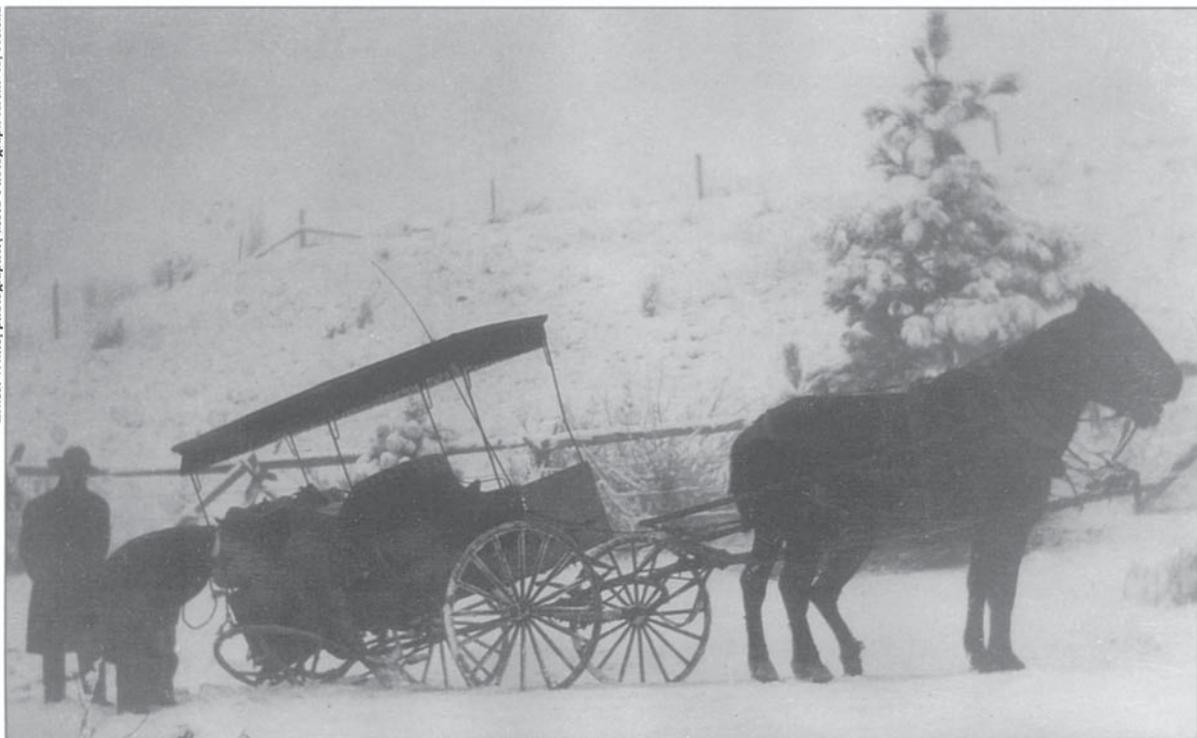
News traveled surprisingly fast in the the steamboat and stagecoach era, and despite burdens imposed by distance, the average resident of Virginia City or Helena seemed to know far more about everyday events in distant Portland or Panama than do many of their descendants in the 1990s. One Oregonian recalled that in 1852, “I was surprised to find that all the old settlers

seemed to be well acquainted with each other, even to the most remote parts of the territory.” This was due in part to the way Portland newspapers conceived of the city’s hinterland extending to the Rocky Mountains and beyond. Before the advent of an overland telegraph connection in the 1860s, news tended to reach Montana along the shipping lanes, the longest of which reached from coast to coast via Cape Horn. Any newspaper from home (loosely defined as anywhere east of the Mississippi River) was therefore a treasured possession.¹⁶

Before the Pony Express and the first transcontinental telegraph line reached California in the early 1860s, communication and transportation in all parts of the West were virtually one in the same—and equally slow. Though the “latest news” from the East Coast might be several weeks old, its arrival in the 1850s and 1860s was a community event. Oregon settlers in the 1840s had been “astonished at getting the news at all.” The way it crossed the continent was both highly visible and intensely personal (unlike today’s electronic transmissions bounced off satellites). To help residents of the far Northwest better visualize how news reached them from the East Coast, the *Daily Oregonian* described a Pony Express rider “splashing through mud-holes, climbing up steep hills, and sliding down the other side; fording creeks and ferrying rivers, until he reaches Fort Kearny.” In Sacramento the story continued: “Here he comes, panting, foaming, laden with news at \$2 the half ounce,

Winter weather could make for a wet, cold, exceedingly uncomfortable stage ride, especially when the wheels collapsed, as one did on this coach from Polson to Somers in about 1908. Traveling on the west shore of Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana, the stage line nonetheless enjoyed a brisk winter business after the lake froze and thus shut down seasonal steamboat traffic.

Ernest White, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena





Lonely outposts like the Red Rocks Stage Station in southwestern Montana (above, probably 1880s–1890s) offered weary sojourners food and lodging, although the quality of the former could be monotonous if not notorious.

the precursor of the railroad, another link between us and the old folks at home.”¹⁷

The slow pace of transportation and communication was one reason why during the 1860s the mere rumor of an impending telegraph connection could excite people every bit as much as the promise of railroad connections did in later decades. In spring 1866 John A. Creighton, who together with his brother Edward had helped to construct the first transcontinental telegraph in 1861, secured financial backing for a line to link Virginia City and Salt Lake City. In record time workmen strung wires for the new branch, soon to become part of the expanding Western Union system, and the whole town eagerly paused to hear the clicking dots and dashes that radically redefined distance for their hitherto isolated settlement. On November 2, 1866, Edward Creighton sent the first telegram into Montana that read: “Citizens of Montana, allow me to greet you. It gives me pleasure to connect your city by lightning. Men of so much enterprise should not be forgotten. Your brave governor will send the first message free to A. Johnson, President of the United States.” A week later the *Montana Post*, delighted that it could

now print the latest news, reported: “The telegraph works beautifully.”¹⁸

Despite occasional downed poles and frequent breaks in the slender wires, the ability to communicate at the speed of lightning represented a vast improvement over the links that existed only a decade earlier. “By means of the electric cord, we can triumph over the elements and present the citizens with reliable intelligence,” enthused the *Montana Post*.¹⁹

During the steamboat and stagecoach era, mining settlements of the northern Rocky Mountains experienced distinctive seasonal rhythms as well. In summer months of the 1860s, letters from New York reached Montana in about twenty-two days; during snowy winter months, when the Missouri River froze over and drifts closed mountain passes to stagecoaches, no one dared predict how long the mail might take. “The Mud, the beautiful Mud” was a popular refrain in the spring when Virginia City awaited the long-anticipated cry, “the coach is coming!” By late March or early April the first trains of freight were on their way north from Utah. Summer was the time of greatest bustle and prosperity for merchants, but in high mountain country, autumn followed all too soon. November concluded the hectic days of freighting for another year.²⁰

14. Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi*, 326, 331.

15. *Ibid.*, 387.

16. P. W. Gillette reminiscence, December 7, 1900, in George H. Himes Scrapbook no. 21, Oregon Historical Society Library, Portland.

17. *Portland Daily Oregonian*, May 10, 1861. By the time this story appeared it was already out of date: the Pony Express sped the news only between the eastern and western ends of the telegraph wires at Fort Kearny, Nebraska, and Fort Churchill, Nevada.

18. Merrill G. Burlingame and K. Ross Toole, *A History of Montana*, 2 vols. (New York, 1957), 2:66; Larry Barsness, *Gold Camp: Alder Gulch and Virginia City, Montana* (New York, 1962), 195–96.

19. Virginia City, *Montana Post*, September 29, 1866.

20. As quoted in Barsness, *Gold Camp*, 194.

A modest amount of investment was required to start a stagecoach outfit like the Overland Stage Line of Ben Holladay (below, circa 1870). At right is a receipt his company issued in 1864 for a shipment of gold dust from Denver to New York City.

THE OVERLAND STAGE LINE,
 FOR CARRYING THE **GREAT** **Through Mails** FROM THE **ATLANTIC** TO THE **Pacific States**
Ben Holladay Proprietor.



Received from *Wm Clark & Co*
Denver City Dec 6th 1864
 in apparent good order, *One Letter and two Packages* said to contain
Gold dust valued at \$5000.00 Gold or
sixty two thousand (\$62,000.00) Dollars in Treasury notes.
 MARKED " *Northrup & Chick, Nassau Street New York City*"
 Charge *9.50.00*

IT IS AGREED, and is a part of the consideration of this contract, that the OVERLAND STAGE LINE are not to be held responsible for any loss or damage (except as hereinafter only) due for any loss or damage by the dangers of railroad, ocean or river navigation, leakage, breakage, fire, or from any cause whatever, unless the same be proved to have occurred from the fraud or gross neglect of our own agents or servants, or unless insured by us. (In no case do we insure against package or breakage,) and in no event is this Company to be liable beyond their route as herein specified. VALUED OVER FIFTY DOLLARS, unless otherwise herein stated. All rates of Freight Wages at Shippers' rates.

For the Overland Stage Line, *C. B. Walker*

Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado



Oregon Historical Society, Portland

Some who chose to winter at diggings in the northern Rocky Mountains recalled organizing lyceums and debating clubs and spending their snowbound evenings pondering such weighty matters as whether a state had the right to secede from the Union. Pastimes, from "bean poker" to downhill sled-

ding, made life bearable. "I well remember that we were ten weeks without mail during the first winter of my residence in Virginia City," said one early resident. "There was no moping about it, but we all set to work to make the time as pleasant as possible."²¹ Winter often inflicted real hardship. "You went from camp to camp on snowshoes or not at all," Theodor Kirchoff recalled. "Visitors from outside were barred for months at a stretch. Mail became a long-cherished hope. . . . Food frequently grew scarce, prices soared, and flour at \$1.00 a pound was common. Many miners surrendered their last specks of yellow dust to the food seller to ward off starvation."²² During winter 1865 a number of freight wagons lumbered north to Virginia City from Salt Lake bringing loads of precious flour, but they became snowbound in Beaver Canyon and all the oxen perished. Provisions of every kind grew scarce in the Montana mining camp. In late February the price of flour almost quadrupled in just a few days. Most Virginia City residents, "especially those with families," were unable to purchase flour at so inflated a price "and as all provisions were scarce, many were reduced to a diet of meat straight," recalled Granville Stuart. "Beef was quite plentiful and sold for fifteen cents per pound. It was evident that a corner was held on flour. Groups of people collected on the streets and the all-absorbing topic of conversation was the price of flour." In mid-April an armed body of men almost five-hundred strong resolved the food crisis by confiscating all the available flour—searching for "sundry lots of flour concealed under coats, in boxes and barrels and under hay stacks"—and selling it to hungry citizens at the usual price, Stuart said. "After the flour was distributed the members of the committee returned to their homes."²³

A wintertime trip from Montana to Salt Lake City usually involved a sleigh ride, with coaches meeting sleighs on either side of the snowy mountain divide that is now Monida Pass. Frequent blizzards made it easy for either conveyance to miss the road and upset in a drift. When one "slow coach" finally did reach Virginia City, it brought nine bags of eagerly awaited "literary matter, which were delivered into the hands of the Postmaster." These formed so large a pile needing to be sorted that the *Montana Post* advised "all impatient people, who have not been weaned from their

21. Helena *Weekly Herald*, January 1, 1880; Virginia City, *Montana Post*, December 3, 1864; Walla Walla *Statesman*, February 10, 1865.

22. Frederic Trautmann, ed. and trans., *Oregon East, Oregon West: Travels and Memoirs by Theodor Kirchoff, 1863-1872* (Portland, 1987), 63.

23. Granville Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier As Seen in the Journals and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart, Gold-Miner, Trader, Merchant, Rancher, and Politician*, 2 vols. (Cleveland, Ohio, 1925), 2:28-30.

24. Virginia City, *Montana Post*, December 29, 1866.

25. Deer Lodge, *Montana, Weekly Independent*, March 29, 1868.

26. Among the few exceptions were short railroads cobbled together using local resources and capital, as was the case for Dr. Dorsey Baker's famed "rawhide" line, the Walla Walla and Columbia River Railroad, completed in the mid-1870s.

former homes in the States, to complacently 'grin and bear it.'"²⁴

To lonely dwellers in the northern Rocky Mountains the annual ice "break-up" on the Missouri and Columbia rivers was the most welcome event of the year, "for it was the knell of the long and tedious winter, and the certain harbinger of approaching spring." That prospect made one Deer Lodge poet positively giddy:

Fair spring! Fair spring! we welcome you here,
To warm our vallies, and our hearts to cheer,
Thy smiles and thy frowns we willingly bear,
And Pray to kind Heav'n to lighten our care.²⁵

Nothing weighed more heavily in favor of railroads in the northern West than the way the new technology promised to redefine time and space, and especially the freedom it offered settlers from seasonal interruptions due to inclement weather. Though this was not the only source of a railroad's competitive advantage, to settlers who had endured the isolation imposed by winter it was certainly an important one.

Unlike a steamboat or local stagecoach outfit, the typical western railroad was not a modest undertaking financed and built by two or three tradesmen. Except for the shortest and most primitive tramways, railroads were large-scale industrial enterprises that required vast amounts of capital. The price of a steamboat before 1860 might total several thousand dollars, yet that was only a fraction of the cost of constructing and equipping a railroad of any length. Even Ben Holladay's entire Overland Stage Line (which joined the Missouri and Columbia rivers and offered service from Salt Lake City to Montana) was cheap by comparison. Thus while individuals or partnerships might succeed in steamboat or stagecoach operations, building and operating a railroad usually demanded corporate enterprise. The difficulty of carrying out a railroad project of any size was so great that planning, promoting, constructing, and equipping it usually extended over a

period of years and required the investment of millions of dollars from outside the capital-starved West.²⁶

When people first thought seriously about railroad transportation across the West, some imagined only an extended portage across six hundred miles of land that separated the navigable waters of the Missouri and Columbia rivers. Only people of still greater vision imagined a railroad extending from the Great Lakes to the Pacific that was independent of the two historic waterways. Until that distant time, Montanans made do with what the steamboat and stagecoach era provided, and like Stuart, they eagerly awaited the "hour of deliverance" that railroads promised to bring.

Stagecoaches, steamboats, and railroads: each mode of transportation left its characteristic signature across the landscape of Montana and the northern West. Comprising that signature were machines, their support structures, and altered adjacent spaces. Railroads, of course, had the greatest impact, such as when tracks of the Milwaukee Road opened the plains of eastern Montana to an army of twentieth-century homesteaders. Even after rails were later pulled up, elements of a distinctive signature remained visible in the landscape. Along almost any abandoned right-of-way one can still perceive where a railroad ran its tracks and positioned its yards, roundhouses, stations, bridges, tunnels, and trestles.

But what about signatures left by modes of transportation during the steamboat and stagecoach era? Steamboats and stagecoaches and their respective support structures formed at best a small presence in an expansive western landscape. Apart from ubiquitous relay posts built at intervals along the long-distance stage lines or the portage railroads that linked steamboats on the Columbia River, the region's pioneer transportation technologies did not write large physical signatures across the northern West, as the railroads later did.

Steamboats and stagecoaches might be financially manageable for a partnership or individual, but operating a railroad of any size usually required corporate resources. At right, steamboat and train meet in 1885 at the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company transfer landing on Oregon's Willamette River.



F. Jay Haynes, photographer, Haynes Fnd. Coll., MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Of course, time itself has had much more opportunity to erase evidence of a landscape unique to transportation by steamboat or stagecoach. The machines often exist only in museums or as replicas in amusement parks. Western steamboats, regardless of design or embellishments, were essentially self-contained machines that required a minimal support structure compared to railroads and their highly engineered right-of-ways. Along the Missouri or Columbia rivers and their several tributaries, support structures for steamboats consisted mainly of isolated woodlots for refueling and unadorned landings where any would-be passenger hailed a passing steamboat by waving a white flag. In bigger ports, such as Sioux City or Portland, somewhat more elaborate systems evolved to provide for steamboat freight and passenger traffic. The Oregon Steam Navigation Company, which maintained a virtual monopoly over steamboat service to inland points between Portland and Lewiston, Idaho, from the early 1860s until the early 1880s (and even briefly into Montana in the mid-1860s), operated a large machine shop in The Dalles, Oregon, to maintain its steamboat fleet.

Finding fuel enough to feed the hungry boilers was among the most serious challenges facing any steamboter. Wood alone was used, and “wooding up” was once a vital part of steamboating in the northern West. On the Columbia River, the Oregon Steam Navigation Company developed an elaborate wood-supply system. On the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers another system developed. Smaller steamboats burned from twelve to twenty-four cords every twenty-four

hours, while larger ones consumed anywhere from fifty to seventy-five cords each day. Cottonwood gave a fierce, hot fire but one that required constant stoking; and if the wood was unseasoned, an engineer found it almost impossible to maintain steam without the aid of highly combustible rosin. When buffeted by a strong head wind, many a captain preferred to tie up rather than waste precious fuel.

In early years the crew cut wood for fuel as their boat proceeded on her voyage. But as steamboat traffic became more regular, boat owners or resident choppers called “wood hawks” established supply yards. The sight of dry cordwood stacked along a secluded stretch of water would gladden the heart of every steamboatman. Some Native Americans found the sale of wood a source of considerable revenue and attempted to bar outsiders from the business. During the 1860s and 1870s, the Euramericans who dared work as “wood hawks” on the plains of Dakota Territory or in eastern Montana ranked among the most hardy or reckless personalities attracted to the frontier.

Especially during Indian uprisings—such as occurred in 1862, 1867–1868, and 1876—steamboat wooding became a most perilous chore. Working by the light of a torch or lantern, crewmen often spent the first hours of the night hurrying to gather fuel for their next day’s run. To prevent an ambush, Captain Joseph La Barge equipped one of his Missouri River steamboats with a diminutive sawmill and a yoke of oxen. During each pause for “wooding,” deckhands swung out a large stage, drove the team ashore, and dragged several logs aboard as quickly as possible. Crewmen sawed up their

Commercial navigation on Flathead Lake, which began in the 1880s when the Northern Pacific Railroad brought increasing numbers of settlers to what was then a remote northwestern Montana location, peaked in 1915 when roads for automobiles were built. The Thiri Aerial View Service captured a view of the excursion boats at Somers Landing (below) in 1911.

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena





Unlike stagecoaches and steamboats, railroads like the Marysville line (above), photographed by F. Jay Haynes in April 1889, often had to create their own rights-of-way. The Marysville run was typical of local lines that ultimately replaced stagecoaches serving small towns in Montana and elsewhere in the northern West. The Haynes Palace Studio Car, a darkroom on wheels, sits on the trestle.

precious fuel aboard the lower deck as they steamed safely along the Missouri.²⁷

Sometimes a luckless vessel consumed all its fuel before reaching the next wooding place. It was then necessary for crewmen to gather drift logs or any combustibles they could find. A prized discovery in such emergencies was an accumulation of driftwood, called a “rack heap,” which the high-water current piled on sandbars. Whenever a trading post was abandoned, its palisades and buildings quickly found their way into steambot furnaces. Harriet Pack Sanders, a passenger traveling from St. Joseph to Fort Benton in April 1867, recalled that when the *Albeona* stopped in the Missouri Breaks of Montana Territory for fuel, it took thirteen hours to wood up. The boat got stuck on a sandbar the next day, prompting Sanders to write, “All got the blues. Have thrown off every stick of wood that the men cut yesterday from six A.M. to seven P.M.” Required to stop for wood again the next day, she observed, “All the men helped to draw in twenty loads, have all the boat will carry.” No wonder it took seventy-two days to reach Fort Benton.²⁸

Steamboats with their insatiable appetite for wood to fuel their boilers affected the forests of the northern West as no previous technology had done, though their impact was minor compared to that of later railroads and underground mining. Steamboats also influenced Native American life by injecting cash into what had heretofore been a barter economy, such as when the Nez Percé received money for cutting wood to fuel capacious fireboxes of the steamboats plying the Snake and Columbia rivers. Native Americans of the Great

Plains often did likewise for Missouri River steamers.

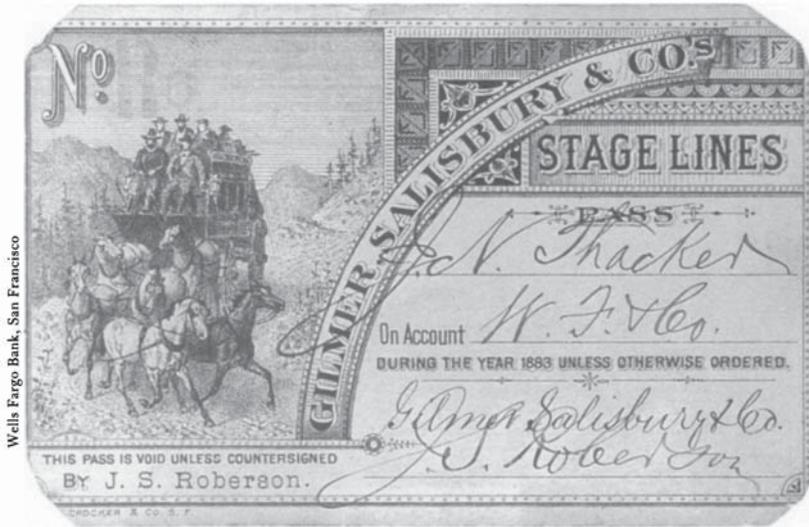
Another kind of support structure were locks such as the Corps of Engineers opened in 1896 to maintain steambot service around the Cascades of the Columbia River and in 1916 around The Dalles and Celilo Falls. Slackwater behind The Dalles Dam covers The Dalles–Celilo Canal today, but portions of the old canal at Cascade Locks remain above the slackwater created by Bonneville Dam. Woodlots have long since disappeared. In fact, all the way from Bonneville Dam to Lewiston, a distance of about three hundred miles, eight massive dams have today raised the waters of the Columbia and Snake rivers and covered most of the signature landscape of the steambot era. The same thing is true for long stretches of the upper Missouri River, especially the portion above Sioux City.

At first glance, stagecoaching across the northern West may seem simple when compared to steambot technology and operations. Yet the machine itself, often a Concord coach, was every bit as much a work of craftsmanship as the typical steambot. There were, however, homely conveyances built to meet local needs, such as “mud wagons” that served some of the less traveled stage routes or the unadorned, home-built steamboats on some of the smaller rivers.

Stagecoaching, like steambotting, generally involved using what nature provided for a right-of-way. Construction of elaborate tunnels, bridges, and fills was out

27. Chittenden, *History of the Early Steamboat Navigation*, 1:117-18.

28. Dorothy M. Johnson, “Slow Boat to Benton,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 11 (Winter 1961), 8.



Staging on the central overland route died in 1869 with completion of the first transcontinental railroad, but because of entrepreneurs like Jack Gilmer and Monroe Salisbury it continued in other parts of the American West for at least another four decades. At left is a pass issued by Gilmer, Salisbury and Company in 1883.

of the question. Besides, Concord coaches were built to travel comfortably along rutted roads and to ford safely the occasional stream. Some early attempts to overcome these impediments now seem almost ludicrous in their simplicity. Veteran stagemen recalled that in the 1850s “when a stage went to Salt Lake only once a week, some of the boys on the line used to despise a coach almost wholly loaded up with public documents from Washington, but such mail matter came quite handy at times. Occasionally the drivers, as they themselves said, in rough weather, would get stalled going through a bad slough, and be unable to move. In that case they were obliged to take out sack after sack of the ‘Pub. Docs.,’ open the bags, and pile the massive books from the Government printing office in the slough, and, by building a solid foundation with them, were thus enabled to pull the coach out of the mire.”²⁹

As for changes in the land adjacent to steamboat and stagecoach lines, these are worth contemplating even if they are difficult to see today. Trees were cut to fuel steamboat boilers or build stagecoach relay posts, and a few stage stations survive today in various states of decay. Farms and ranches sprang up in strategic places along stagecoach routes to supply horses and mules and grow the grain needed to feed them.

Few travelers missed the many discomforts of a long stagecoach journey, but as a romantic symbol of the frontier West, this mode of transportation was unrivaled even by the steamboat. Not long after Gilmer and Salisbury shut down most of its once-extensive Montana operation in 1883, nostalgia moved a Deer Lodge journalist to write:

The stage horse out to grass, harness hung in the stables and the coaches parked in the yards and sheds. It reminds us that the days of stage coach-

ing are over in this part of Montana, and nearly everywhere. We haven’t seen a coach and six on the street for a fortnight, and miss them not altogether without regret. If there is a prettier picture of animation than a red Concord coach, with six spirited horses in bright harness and a good reinsman on the box, we haven’t seen it. But it was not always clean Concorde and six prancing horses. There are jerkeys and mud wagons, with two and four horses, and passengers packed in like sardines, or footing it through the mud at the rate of two miles an hour, in the dark background of memory on which the brighter picture is painted.³⁰

Steamboating, like stagecoaching, died a thousand small deaths, and though the pace and nature of the industry’s demise varied according to location, in some places stagecoaches as well as steamboats continued to serve local needs well into the twentieth century. Even as steamboats disappeared from the upper Missouri River, their numbers actually increased along other waterways of the northern West, especially those west of the Continental Divide during the 1890s, but by that date they were no longer hailed as pioneers of transportation as they had been during an earlier era.

If it can be said that railroads functioned as engines of regional development and social change, then it was the lack of regional development—the scarcity of investment capital, the widely scattered population outposts, and difficult terrain—that shaped commercial transportation across the northern West during the third of a century between the early 1850s and the mid-1880s. Given their dissimilar times and financial resources, it would be hard to say which transportation pioneers, those of the steamboat and stagecoach era or the railroaders who followed them, shouldered the more difficult burden.

29. Frank Root and William Elsey Connelley, *The Overland Stage to California* (Topeka, Kans., 1901), 73.

30. Deer Lodge, Montana, *New North-West*, as quoted in Helena *Weekly Independent*, October 18, 1883, p. 5.

31. Governor Miles C. Moore, November 18, 1889, in *Messages of the Governors of the Territory of Washington to the Legislative Assembly, 1854–1889*, ed. Charles M. Gates (Seattle, 1940), 278–79.

Moreover, if the representative modes of transportation during the steamboat and stagecoach era physically altered the landscape through which they passed, it was wholly incidental to facilitating the movement of people and goods. Railroaders created a new regional landscape, while their predecessors struggled to adapt transportation technologies to the landscape as they found it. Yet, in retrospect, the steamboat and stagecoach era did permanently alter landscapes by making Euramerican settlement not only possible but also more comfortable than it would have been without regular mail and express service, wagon freighting of food and a few of life's luxuries, and scheduled public transportation.

They also had an economic impact that was perhaps most visible when they were gone. After the arrival of railroads, many stagecoach and freight lines closed down, idling an army of agents, drivers, stock tenders, and station keepers. Owners often could not sell their teams or rolling stock at any price; and farmers rued the loss of customers for their grain and hay. Most farmers eventually found other markets, and un-

employed stagemen and teamsters migrated to other jobs. But across the northern West there was no return to the landscape—physical, economic, or social—that existed before the steamboat and stagecoach era.

When the history of the northern West was recalled from the perspective of the railway era, everything that went before it was slow or sleepy. In a typical expression of that perception, Washington's governor Miles C. Moore claimed in 1889 that the "old settler watched through the long years the gradual unfolding of these resources, the slow increases in population. At last the railroads came, linking us with the populous centers of civilization. A change came over the sleepy old Territory." Though that is fundamentally true, the steamboat and stagecoach era of the northern West should be recognized as a distinctive age all its own, with its peculiar definitions of time and distance and the odd juxtaposition of the romance of frontier travel with the travail of the journey.³¹ 

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Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

As many would attest, an artist's grim depiction at left of an overland coach crossing the Rocky Mountains in 1868 departed little from reality if at all. Winter travel meant a jolting, drafty coach, often with windblown snow that seeped past the curtains to cover floor, seats, and shivering occupants. Though widely romanticized in later years, few travelers of the day regretted the railcar's eclipse of the stagecoach.