

THE OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY STAGECOACH

By John and Mildred Frizzell

DEFINITION OF AMERICAN STAGECOACH

The American stagecoach is a horse drawn vehicle which was designed to carry passengers and mail over stages of primitive roads, in a coach type body with windows and doors, swung on leather through-braces suspended between jacks attached to a running gear made up of three reaches which hold the front and hind axles.¹

The original twelve passenger American stagecoach shown in color on the opposite page here, photographed from the original exhibited in the Oklahoma Historical Society Museum (at the foot of the marble stairway), was a gift of the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch, Ponca City, Oklahoma. It was accepted for the Society by Mr. J. B. Thoburn, Secretary, on July 18, 1921.

This stagecoach was used by the Miller Brothers, Jo, George and Zack², in their Wild West Shows which were brought to an untimely end in England in 1914 at the outbreak of the first World War. For the next eight years the 101 Ranch discontinued their shows and devoted much of their time to the war effort in America.

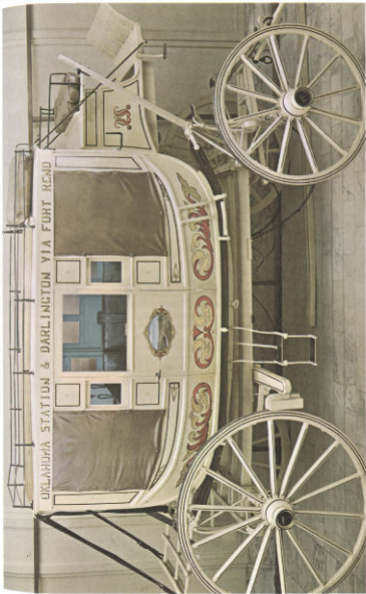
There are two other rebuilt original stagecoaches in Oklahoma today. One is a twelve passenger Western Type owned by Mrs. Charles E. Wahl, Marland, Oklahoma. The other is the last "Pawnee Bill" stagecoach which was rebuilt by John Frizzell, and used on the Butterfield Overland Mail Centennial rerun in 1958. There is also a very historic Celerity Wagon which is closely related to the stagecoach structurally, in the Woolaroc Museum, Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

The Society records state that this stagecoach served on two early western routes: the St. Joseph, Missouri to Denver, Colorado³, route prior to the coming of the railroad and on

¹ The spelling of the word "stagecoach" follows that of Webster's Third International Dictionary, 1961.

² Zack Miller, Jr. who resides with his mother Mrs. Marguerite Miller on the 101 Ranch, reports that the traditional Miller western showmanship is being carried on by his niece, Miss Jimmie Gibbs, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Gibbs, Valley Mills, Texas, since she was recently chosen the World's Typical Cowgirl in 1962.

³ Oklahoma Historical Society, Museum "Acquisition Records" No. 3828.



the "Cannon Ball" Green⁴ line which reached its peak of success and fame in the 1860's. If future research verifies these statements, the Oklahoma Historical Society stagecoach must have been made during the first half of the Nineteenth Century. However, the earliest date in the life of this vehicle that can be substantiated at this time is near the turn of the century.

Meager information about this stagecoach indicates it spent most of its obvious long and varied life in the west. But the design of its construction indicates that it was made originally for use in the eastern part of our country. Such features as the solid panel front foot board, the slat luggage rack and the reaches built on top of the hind axle, all indicate that it is what some authorities refer to as the "Eastern Type American stagecoach." As the steam locomotives extended their network of rails throughout the East, many of these early Eastern Type stagecoaches were later used in the West.

The Western Type American stagecoach was designed for more rugged use, with a bag front boot (hinged to the body allowing it to give with the jolts) with leather sides, leather hind boot and reaches built under the hind axle to give greater strength to the running gear.

In the early days, it was customary for the stagecoaches to carry the name of the Stage Line or the towns serviced on the head-board of the coach. During the recent restoration of this vehicle, the author was granted permission to examine one of the original head-boards. Removal of the modern paint, one flake at a time, revealed a thrilling sight. There in bold illuminated block letters, in gold leaf with black shadows (2½ inches tall by 2½ inches wide) the words; *Jefferson via Sanatorium and Rutland.*

There are several states in the Union that have both a Jefferson and a Rutland but only one state, Massachusetts, has these specific towns close enough together for a normal stage run. Also, it is the only state that has a Sanatorium between these two towns.

The Sanatorium between Jefferson and Rutland (now a part of Rutland) is the first state tubercular sanatorium in the

⁴ Brochure, semi-centennial issue on the Museum Collections with illustrations, published by the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The *Daily Oklahoman* for Tuesday, October 28, 1941 carries a story and a photograph of the old stagecoach in the Historical Society, with D. R. ("Cannon Ball") Green's daughter, Mrs. J. M. Sterrett standing beside the old vehicle. Her father was a colorful figure as a stage-line owner in the early 1860's, in western history. He lived during his last years near Bridgeport, Oklahoma, and died in California in 1922. Mrs. Sterrett gives a few notes in the story accompanying the picture in *The Oklahoman* (1941), about her father but knew nothing about the old stagecoach itself.



View of the Stagecoach,
showing the curtains rolled up.



Interior view showing the trim.

United States. Since it was up in the mountains "on top of Massachusetts" it could not be reached by rail. Jefferson was the terminus of the railroads to this mountain community. It was also the end of the trolley from Worcester, Massachusetts. So the Oklahoma Historical Society stagecoach picked up patients and guests of the Sanatorium and citizens of Rutland at the railway station and at the end of the trolley line and took them up the mountain to their respective destinations.

Dr. Paul Default, Superintendent of the Rutland State Sanatorium of The Commonwealth of Massachusetts was unable to find any pictures of our stagecoach in the early files of the Sanatorium which opened in the fall of 1898. He did however, introduce the author to Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Murphy, two delightful historians of Rutland who took the problem to heart and verified the supposition that our stagecoach did serve the first state tubercular sanatorium in America about 1900.

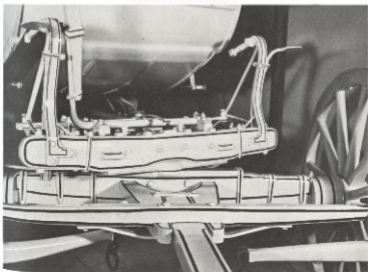
Many of the stagecoach builders of the Nineteenth Century numbered their vehicles. Abbot-Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire, is one of the few early stagecoach builders whose records have been preserved. These records which are in the Library of the New Hampshire Historical Society in Concord, carry the detailed description and number of many of the vehicles they built. According to Gretchen Toby, Librarian, these records are not complete and some of the numbers have been repeated without explanation. Because of this irregularity of numbers, an Abbot-Downing stagecoach cannot be identified by number alone.

According to Mr. Bill Ferris and F. D. Stevens who restored the Society's stagecoach in Oklahoma, the only number found was "453." Gretchen Toby searched the Abbot-Downing records and found a vehicle numbered 453 but it could not possibly be the Oklahoma stagecoach since it was a nine passenger, with bag foot board and leather boot, with reaches made to go under the hind axle. However, since the records are incomplete this does not definitely preclude the Society vehicle from being an Abbot-Downing stage.

There were countless other coach and carriage works throughout the United States building stagecoaches during the Nineteenth Century. One very fine coach builder that made early stagecoaches was located in Worcester, Massachusetts, only a few miles from Jefferson. It was the Osgood Bradley Coach Works which was started in 1822. Mr. Murphy states that the Osgood Bradley Company built the first passenger coach for a steam road in 1833. One hundred years later it became the Pullman Standard Division of Pullman, Incorporated of Chicago, Illinois. Only recently the Worcester plant of Pull-



View showing the luggage rack at the back of the Stagecoach body.



Front end of the running gear.

man Standard was closed and offered for sale. Naturally the historians of Rutland think the Oklahoma Historical Society stage was made in Worcester by Osgood Bradley, but this cannot be confirmed at this time.

Each of these original stagecoaches is an important page in the early history of America as well as Oklahoma. It is regrettable that so many of these significant pages of history have been allowed to disintegrate in some forgotten wagon salvage yard.

Oklahomans have a growing appreciation for the thoughtful preservation of this historic stagecoach by the Miller Brothers, and its subsequent care by the Oklahoma Historical Society.