

## BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND MAIL COMPANY

BY F. P. ROSE  
*Rogers, Arkansas*

The stupendous task of opening up routes for postal communications, to keep pace with the rapidly expanding territorial growth of our young nation—through purchase and treaty, from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, and from Canada on the north to Mexico on the south, and now sub-divided into twenty-two great states—over the comparatively short period of fifty years, 1803 to 1853, marks one of the most inspiring chapters in our history.

The culmination of these efforts was reached when, on the morning of September 16, 1858, the first overland mail from St. Louis and Memphis to San Francisco, under contract with the Overland Mail Company, of which John Butterfield was the president, began its first westward trip.

In March, 1857, by Act of Congress, such a contract had been authorized. It was fathered in the Senate by William K. Gwinn, of California, and in the House by John S. Phelps, of Missouri. Under its terms "the Postmaster General was authorized to contract for the conveyance of the entire letter mail from such point on the Mississippi River as the contractors might select, to San Francisco, in the state of California, for six years, at a cost not exceeding three hundred thousand dollars per annum for a semi-monthly, four hundred and fifty thousand for weekly, or six hundred thousand dollars for semi-weekly service, to be performed semi-monthly, weekly, or semi-weekly, at the option of the Postmaster General."

The act further provided that "the service be performed with good four horse coaches or spring wagons, suitable for the conveyance of passengers as well as the safety and security of the mails; that the contractor should have the right to pre-emption to three hundred and twenty acres of any land not then disposed of or reserved, at each point necessary for a station, and not to be nearer than ten miles from each other—provided that no mineral land should be thus pre-empted; that the service should be performed within twenty-five days for each trip. . . ."

Congress had left the location of the route up to the approval of the Postmaster General, and it is a long drawn out story of the clashing interests of those advocating a route starting from St. Louis or further north; those advocating a route starting from New Orleans or Memphis, and another group favoring a route to start from San Antonio to El Paso, Texas. When the bids were opened in June, 1857, the bid of John Butterfield and his associates was found to be the most acceptable.

Mr. Butterfield had submitted three bids. First, a semi-weekly route from St. Louis; second, a semi-weekly route from Memphis; and third, a semi-weekly route starting from both St. Louis and Memphis, to converge at the best point, and proceeding thence on a common line to San Francisco.

This third proposal was the one preferred by the Postmaster General, and on September 16, 1857, a contract was signed for the converging of the two routes at Little Rock, Arkansas, then via Preston, Texas, to El Paso, "and thence along the new road being opened and constructed, under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, to Fort Yuma, California; thence through the best passes and along the best valleys for safe and expeditious staging to San Francisco, California, and back, twice a week . . . at six hundred thousand dollars a year, during the term of six years, commencing the 16th day of September, 1858."

After thoroughly testing out the proposed St. Louis to Little Rock route, Mr. Butterfield found it impossible for the operation of a stage line, and so notified the Postmaster General. After much discussion, Mr. Butterfield finally persuaded the Postmaster General that the most practical route from St. Louis would be west, and southward through Springfield, Missouri, thence through Fayetteville, Van Buren to Fort Smith, in Arkansas, at which latter point it would converge with the route coming from Memphis, through Des Arc, Little Rock and Dardanelle; and then proceeding over one common line, via El Paso and Fort Yuma to San Francisco.

Credit for much of the historical material used in this article must be given to Waterman L. Ormsby, special

correspondent for the New York Herald, and the only through passenger on the first westbound stage, for his accurate and interesting report of the trip. It is packed with thrills for every one of the 2,651½ miles, the total distance from St. Louis, via El Paso, to San Francisco.

Mr. Ormsby states: "So far from neglecting to make preparations for carrying out this contract, the contractors have worked with almost superhuman energy to get the details in readiness. I understand they have bought horses and mules enough to have one for every two miles, and wagons or coaches for every thirty miles, of the route, while arrangements have been made at all the stations for changing horses, feeding, &c., so that they can run straight through.

"During all their explorations and expeditions to complete the arrangements, they have received the cordial cooperation of the Postmaster General and the War Department, and received the most gentlemanly attentions from the officers of the army at the various stations which they passed. The route has been found practicable by the parties sent out by the Company to give them a private report. . . . It only remains to be seen whether they will go through at all and if so, in the time specified.

"Your humble servant feels so confident that the men engaged in this work will not belie their reputations, and that the mail to California from St. Louis, overland, will reach its destination, and that he risks the success of the enterprise, and leaving all that he holds dear behind him go through with the first mail bag, and give the readers of the Herald an impartial account of the trip, the difficulties—whether overcome or not, or likely to be—and all the information that can be gathered by rough experience as to the probable success or failure of the overland mail to San Francisco."

John Butterfield's instructions to his drivers were, "Remember boys, nothing on God's green earth must stop the United States mail!"

St. Louis, by the year 1858, had gained an unrivaled place among the important cities in the country as a center of distribution. The Pacific railroad, the first to lay rails

west of the Mississippi River, at that time had completed and in operation one hundred and sixty miles west from St. Louis to Tipton. (Ten miles west from Tipton a stage road met the old Boonville mail road running south to Springfield).

This was advantageous to Mr. Butterfield, in that the mail could be transported by train from St. Louis, via way of Jefferson City, to Tipton and return. Thence by stage through Springfield, and on through Fayetteville, Van Buren to Fort Smith, in Arkansas.

So little confidence was expressed in the success of the enterprise, that when the mail was made up in St. Louis on the eventful morning of the departure of the first Overland Mail for San Francisco, only about a dozen letters and a few papers were entrusted to its care. Even the newspapers ignored this event, and had it not been for the presence of Waterman Ormsby, special correspondent for the New York Herald, the details connected with this important event would never have been preserved.

The morning of the inaugural trip, Thursday, September 16, 1858, found Mr. Butterfield on hand attending to last minute details. He personally escorted the two little leather mail pouches from the postoffice to the train and then accompanied them all the way to Tipton. The train pulled out at 8 o'clock and was due to arrive in Tipton at 6 o'clock that evening.

At Tipton, the Butterfield station men were on the alert with last minute details, preparatory to the start of the great race against time across the vast expanse of the West. Even the horses, it is said, seemed to sense something of the prevailing excitement. When the news arrived over the telegraph wire that the train was actually on the way with the mail, the excitement mounted. A pony express rider sprang into the saddle and dashed off to relay the information to the stations along the route all the way to Fort Smith.

A few minutes after six o'clock, with young John Butterfield on the driver's seat, a brand new coach drawn by six beautiful horses, wheeled up to the railroad station in grand style. A whistle was heard, and in a few minutes

a little wood-burning locomotive appeared "belching smoke and vomiting flame" from its huge funnelshaped smoke stack, and came "snorting and clanking," with its short train, into the station from its thirteen-mile-an-hour dash from St. Louis.

Mr. Butterfield stepped from the baggage car with the two little mail pouches slung over one arm, and rapidly walked to the waiting coach and saw them carefully placed in the forward boot. It was a thrilling moment. The horses strained and pawed in the hands of the men at their heads. Mr. Butterfield gave a final inspection, tightened a few harness buckles, reached up and gave his son a silent hand clasp, gave a signal to the conductor, and quickly sprang into the coach. Exactly nine minutes had been consumed.

The conductor sounded a call on his bugle, then mounted to the seat beside young John. The horses were released and the next moment the first westbound Butterfield Mail, amid a clatter of hoofs and a cloud of dust, whirled away, heading west into the golden sunset. The only interest shown by the village spectators was a voice which called "good-bye" to young John. Little did they realize that history was being made at that moment.

At three-fifteen o'clock in the afternoon of Friday, September 17, 1858, the first westbound Butterfield Mail, twenty-one hours en route, dashed into Springfield over the old Boonville road, approximately four hours ahead of schedule. Amid several loud notes from the bugle of the conductor, young John Butterfield skillfully brought the galloping horses to a halt in front of the Butterfield station on the northeast corner of the square. A large crowd had assembled and Mr. Butterfield and his son were given a great ovation. A salute of several guns was fired in honor of the event.

Mr. Ormsby tells that, everything being in readiness, we got started again at four o'clock, having been detained at Springfield three-quarters of an hour. . . . One thing struck me as creditable, and that was that the mail bag from Springfield was quite as large as that from St. Louis."

Stage lines had been in existence throughout the Ozark region for many years preceeding the advent of the Butter-

field Overland Mail. They had come into being as new settlements required them, and roads became serviceable. They should not be confused with the Butterfield Overland Mail, as many legends indicate.

The Butterfield Overland Mail contract was authorized by a special Act of Congress for the sole purpose of creating a more rapid mail service between our Atlantic and Pacific seaboard, than the slow method of steamships down the Atlantic coast to the Isthmus of Panama, thence by pack mules across that narrow neck of land to steamships waiting to proceed up the Pacific coast to San Francisco. Future railroad companies were beginning the survey of the little known western plains and deserts, seeking practical routes over which to lay their rails. The saving of days, and even hours, had become of vital importance in the intercoastal business of our rapidly expanding Nation.

The Butterfield Overland Mail maintained their own stations, where teams were harnessed and waiting in advance of the stage arrival to save minutes, and even seconds in forwarding the mail. SPEED! was ever the word. Mail was only taken on and discharged at authorized division points along the route. The stations mentioned are those appearing on the official map and timetable printed at the time.

Entering Arkansas, in Benton County, over the old Springfield to Fayetteville road, the route passed Elkhorn Tavern a few miles south of the state line, and continued southward to Callahan's Tavern, the first Butterfield station in Arkansas, located in the northeast corner of what is now the city of Rogers. Although Elkhorn Tavern had been established, and always a popular stopping place for travelers, nearly 20 years before the advent of the Butterfield Overland, it never was listed as a Butterfield station.

The first westbound Butterfield stage arrived at Callahan's on Saturday morning, September 18, 1858. Breakfast was had, horses changed, and the wagon axles greased, and continued southward, through Cross Hollows to Fitzgeralds', adjacent to the present city of Springdale. From Fitzgerald's it traveled the old road to Fayetteville, next station and the second division point from St. Louis. Later

this road became known as the Wire Road when the telegraph line, erected in 1860, followed it from Springfield to Fort Smith.

At about 11 o'clock on this Saturday morning, September 18, the first westbound Butterfield Mail entered Fayetteville and arrived at its station on College Avenue just across the street north of the present court house. Here the mail sack was opened and a small addition made. After a change of horses, dinner, and everything being ready, the coach departed for Fort Smith at 12, noon, twenty-two hours and 13 minutes ahead of schedule time.

Fayetteville, Arkansas, dates its history from the organization of Washington County in 1828 when it was designated the county seat and post office established in 1829. It was one of the more important division and timetable stations on the Butterfield Overland Mail Route.

Ormsby states, in describing Fayetteville in 1858: "This town is located up among the hills in a most inaccessible spot . . . said by the inhabitants to be the star county of the state. It has two churches, the county court house, a number of fine stores and dwellings, and, I believe, about eighteen hundred inhabitants. It is a flourishing little town, and its deficiency of a good hotel will, I understand be supplied by Mr. Butterfield, who has bought some property for that purpose."

Hiram S. Rumfield, on his way to Fort Smith to take charge of that Butterfield division, in a letter to his wife, dated June 22, 1860, says: "Traveling along day and night through this solitary region we at length came to Fayetteville—a lovely town in Arkansas. . . . The town reposes upon the mountain tops, and is handsomely shaded by deep files of trees that line the streets on either hand. It contains a court house, several churches, and many fine stores and private residences. . . . From the steps of the courthouse I there witnessed the sale of a young slave boy, a spectacle that was indeed grating to my feelings."

When about 1835 the government surveyed and improved the north and south road passing through Fayetteville, making it a military road from St. Louis to Fort Smith, great impetus was given to the trade and transporta-

tion throughout the region. Van Buren and Fort Smith, although favored by the river trade, both profited by it, Van Buren becoming a center of distribution for the northern trade.

Two well-traveled roads left Fayetteville for Van Buren and Fort Smith, converging at Cedarville, a small hamlet about forty miles southwest of Fayetteville. One of these was known as the Boston Mountain road, and the other the Cane Hill road. While the Boston Mountain road was by far the roughest, it was the more direct, and for that reason selected as the Butterfield route. The Cane Hill road was the one most in use by local stage lines between Fayetteville and Fort Smith prior to and contemporary with the Butterfield Overland Mail Route. When in 1860 the first telegraph line connecting St. Louis and Fort Smith was constructed, it followed the Boston Mountain road.

The Butterfield holdings consisted of the station plot in Fayetteville, and a 360 acre farm a short distance west of town. The station plot was a five acre tract bought from William McGarrah in July, 1858. Besides the station and stables which were located here, the company built and operated a hotel on the property, situated just across the street north of the present court house, and the west side of which is now occupied, in part by the Opera House. Mr. Butterfield placed his oldest son, Charles in charge of the station and farm shortly after the inaugural trips.

It is said that the Butterfield home-station and farm at Fayetteville became a favorite retreat for Mr. Butterfield who regarded the region as the most healthful and beautiful along the route, and that he often brought prominent eastern friends with him on these occasions.

With the death at his home in Lincoln, Arkansas, of Alfred Hossman, on July 9, 1932, the last of the old-time stage drivers passed into history. Mr. Hossman had come to Fayetteville with his parents from Tennessee when he was six years of age. In 1858, when he was about twenty years old, he secured a position as a driver on a Cane Hill route. His greatest ambition was to become a Butterfield driver, but the war ruined his hopes. He was nearly 95 years old at the time of his death.

Mr. Hossman often related his reminiscences, and that on numerous occasions he had seen John Butterfield and his sons, Charles and John, both in Fayetteville and Fort Smith. Charles, who was in charge of the station and hotel in Fayetteville, he once saw break up a Negro campmeeting, just to see them run, by driving a mail wagon and four horses right through the middle of it. He says this was the first intimation that there was a Charles Butterfield, as his existence and connection with the company had not been known up to that time.

There were two old Eastern Butterfield drivers Mr. Hossman said he would never forget, "Bill" Hawes and "Dave" Milligan by name, who were greatly admired for their dexterity by the aspiring drivers of Fayetteville. "You could hear the conductor's horn way down the mountain," he recalled, "and it was a grand sight to see that 'Yankee' Hawes handle them six horses and swing his stagewagon into the square, taking the corners on a dead run."

It was at Springfield, the first division point on the Overland Mail Route, that the regular type of coach was changed to the "celerity" wagons, which was an innovation of Mr. Butterfield to provide a lighter and faster type of conveyance over the rougher sections of the route, as well as something like an overland mail coach sleeper.

Mr. Ormsby relates: "They are made much like the express wagons in our city which are used for trans-shipment, only are heavier built, have tops of canvas, and are set on leather straps. . . . Each one has three seats, the backs of which can let down to form one bed, capable of accommodating from four to ten people, according to their size and how they lie. . . . When the stage is full, passengers must take turns sleeping. Perhaps the jolting will be found disagreeable at first, but a few nights without sleeping will soon obviate that difficulty, and soon the jolting will be as little of a disturbance as the rocking cradle to a suckling baby. For my part I found no difficulty in sleeping over the roughest roads, and I have no doubt that anyone else will learn quite as quickly. A bounce of the wagon which makes one's head strike the top, bottom or sides will be equally disregarded, and 'Nature's sweet restorer' will be

found as welcome on the hard bottom of the wagons as in the downy beds of St. Nicholas."

Mr. Ormsby adds: "White pants and kid gloves had better be discarded by most passengers," and "that the wagons and coaches can hardly be expected to equal the Fourth Avenue horse cars for comfortable riding."

After leaving Fayetteville, Mr. Ormsby observes: "After a rather rough ride of 14 miles, which we accomplished with our excellent team in one hour and three-quarters, we took a team of four mules (at Park's station), to cross the much-dreaded Ozark range, including the Boston Mountains. I had thought before we reached this point that the rough roads of Missouri and Arkansas could not be equalled; but here Arkansas fairly beats itself.

"Had not a most extraordinary team been provided, I doubt whether we would have been able to cross in less than two days. The wiry, light little animals tugged and pulled as if they would tear themselves to pieces and our heavy wagon bounded along the crags as if it would be shaken in pieces every minute, and ourselves disemboweled on the spot. For 15 miles the road winds among these mountains at a height of nearly 2,000 feet above the Gulf of Mexico."

Hiram S. Rumfield, on his way to Fort Smith to take charge of that Butterfield station, describes his ride from Fayetteville to Van Buren. He says: "No one who has never passed over this road can form any idea of its bold and rugged aspect. It winds along the mountain sides over a surface covered with masses of broken rock, and frequently runs in fearful proximity to precipitous ravines of unknown depth. Over such a route as this the coaches of the mail company are driven with fearful rapidity. The horses are seldom permitted to walk, even when traversing the steepest and most tortuous hills, and when driven at their topmost speed, which is generally the case, the stage reels from side to side like a storm-tossed bark, and the din of the heavily ironed wheels in constant contact with the flinty rocks, is truly appalling. The man who can pass over this route a passenger in one of the Overland Mail coaches, without experiencing the feelings of mingled terror and aston-

ishment, must certainly be oblivious to every consideration of personal safety.

“Yet with all these indications of danger and recklessness, accidents rarely occur, and since the Mail company has been established, not a single life has been lost on this part of the route. The coaches are built expressly with reference to rough service—and none but the most reliable and experienced drivers are placed upon these mountain districts. The horses are of the most powerful description to be found, and when they are thoroughly trained to the service, perform the laborious run with apparent pleasure and delight.”

The mules, which had made the approximately 19 miles over the mountains, were replaced with horses at Woosley's station for the 16-mile stretch to Fort Smith. As the stage horses galloped down the long hill into the old riverport of Van Buren, the conductor sounded several “merry notes” on his bugle to announce their approach to the ferry men.

While Van Buren was never, never listed as a relay station on the Butterfield Overland Mail Route, yet it occupied a position of vital importance because here was the ferry across the Arkansas River.

Ormsby says: “We crossed the Arkansas, in a flatboat much resembling a raft at Van Buren, a flourishing little town on its banks. Our course through the soft bed of the flats (which were not covered, owing to the low state of the river) was somewhat hazardous, as our heavy load was liable to be sunk on the quicksands which abound here. But by the aid of a guide on horseback, with a lantern (for it was night), we crossed the flats, and up the steep sandy bank in safety. Picking our way cautiously for five or six miles, we reached Fort Smith on the Arkansas River, just on the border of Arkansas and the Indian Territory, at five minutes after two o'clock A. M., having made the sixty-five miles from Fayetteville in fourteen hours and seven minutes, or three hours and eleven minutes less than schedule time.”

Fort Smith was one of the earliest of the great chain of the old frontier posts. Its founding dates back to 1817,

when a permanent military post was required for the protection of the increasing white population in Western Arkansas and also for the civilized Indian tribes in the Osage territory. The site was on the summit of a sandstone bluff on the east bank of the Arkansas to which the early French fur traders had given the name of "Belle Point." The site was recommended by Major Stephen H. Long, who made a survey for that purpose.

It is described in 1858, as a town containing about twenty-five hundred inhabitants. Banks were unknown, gold and silver being the only currency. The principal trade was with the Cherokees and Choctaws in the Indian Territory. It was the southwestern outpost of civilization. There was not another town of equal size or importance on the entire Butterfield route after leaving Fort Smith until Los Angeles, California, was reached, nineteen hundred miles distant.

Mr. Ormsby describes the arrival of the stage in Fort Smith. He says: "We had anticipated beating the mail which left Memphis, Tenn., on the 16th to meet us at Fort Smith several hours; but as soon as we entered the town at so unseasonable an hour, we found it in a great state of excitement on account of the arrival of the Memphis mail just fifteen minutes before us. They had 700 miles to travel, five hundred of them by steamboat, from Memphis to Little Rock, but it was said that they got their mails before we did.

"Fort Smith is a thriving town of about 2,500 inhabitants, and they boast that every house is full. . . . As several other routes over the plains pass through this place and have contributed much to its growth, the people evinced much interest; and the news that both the St. Louis and Memphis stages had arrived spread like wildfire. Horns were blown, houses lit up, and many flocked to the hotel to have a look at the wagons and talk over the exciting topic, and to have a peep at the first mail bags. . . .

"An hour and twenty-five minutes were consumed in examining the way mails, arranging the way bill, joining the two mails from Memphis and St. Louis, and changing stages; and precisely half-past three A. M. on Sunday the

19th inst., the stage left Fort Smith, being exactly twenty-four hours ahead of the time required in the time table, which had been gained in the first four hundred and sixty-eight miles of our journey. I was the only person in the wagon which left Fort Smith—besides Mr. Fox, the mail agent and the driver. . . .”

Fort Smith, being the junction and distribution point on the main line of the Overland Mail system with the Memphis branch, consequently became one of the most important divisions on the entire route. The office was originally located in the City Hotel on Second street, but in September 1860, occupied the lower part of a building opposite the hotel. The company stables were located on Third street, almost in the rear of the hotel. From fifty to one hundred head of horses and mules were stabled here at times as well as several stage wagons held here in reserve.

The first east-bound mail through Fort Smith on October 7th, provided the occasion for a celebration on a most elaborate scale. Business was suspended for the day. Homes and business buildings were decorated, and a parade comprising wagons and floats, representing all the trades and organizations in the town, with a flag bearer in advance, followed by the Fort Smith brass band.

All the local societies were represented in full regalia. The firemen were especially resplendent in their red shirts and leather helmets. A detachment of soldiers from the garrison were also in line. The ceremonies were held in a grove on the government reservation where a speakers stand had been erected and many eloquent addresses were delivered by distinguished men of the town.

The grand ball and banquet which followed in the evening brought the day's festivities to a fitting climax. The ball was held in a large hall on the lower floor of a building in the Rogers block on the west side of what is now Second street. The banquet was given in an upper room of another building on the east side of the street, called Washington Hall. Mr. Butterfield was carried into the banquet room on the shoulders of four young men. With the good food, champagne, speeches and toasts which followed, the affair was one of the largest and most suc-

cessful ever attempted in the state.

It is said that about two weeks before the first mail coach swung out of Frisco headed for the East, the successful laying of the Atlantic Cable had been celebrated. But John Butterfield's coach reached its destination in St. Louis, October 9, 1858, before the cable flashed its first message under a similar length of sea.

The Butterfield Overland had been operating one year and nine months when Hiram S. Rumfield of Tiffin, Ohio, was appointed superintendent at Fort Smith. He wrote in a letter to his wife, dated September 25, 1860: ". . . A disastrous fire was raging Thursday morning the 20th on the opposite side of the street, and the devouring element threatened all that was valuable in the city. Fortunately—I might say providentially—the morning was calm, otherwise and the scene of destruction would have been fearful to contemplate. As it was, the principal buildings destroyed were the Garrison block and City Hotel, the latter being the house in which we board.

"The Garrison block was the pride and glory of the city. It was erected some years since at a cost of seventy-four thousand dollars, and was exclusively devoted to business. Originating in a room immediately above Cline's drug store the fire soon found its way through the intervening floor, and in an instant the entire concern was enveloped in a sheet of flame. . . . The post office was in Cline's store and not a single letter out of some four thousand, exclusive of the Overland mail from Memphis, was saved. . . ."