

Territorial Enterprise

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A RIP-ROARIN' RIDE BY STAGE

By Richard Benyo

In (hopefully) the style of
Mark Twain

One feature of my visit to the Great American West that never failed to amuse and astound me was my numerous voyages upon the smart ship of the Western inland seas, the stagecoach. In my book *Roughing It* a great deal of detail is expended upon the overland trip of my brother Orion and myself on our way to take up positions of importance in the Territory of Nevada. I have also detailed the adventures of Hank Monk, the greatest stage driver ever, in Chapter 20 of *Roughing It*. And during the 1995 gathering of the Royal Society of Vitesticle Koyote Howlers, I detailed the adventures to be had when a crazy Injun' attacked the coach driven my several other stagecoach stalwarts, Tall Andrew Hardage and Backdoor Bob Horton.

The adventure I am about to impart constitutes one of the bloodiest and most abhorrent of misadventures ever to befall me during my Western years. So bloody, so abhorrent, so outrageous was it, in fact, that I was prevailed upon to salt it away in my desk drawer lest it fall between the covers of *Roughing It* and by being related therein outrage those inclined to find indignities around every corner or revolt and disgust those of the fairer persuasion with its authentic savagery 'til they be once again roused to attempt to sanitize and emasculate the Wild West from that which it really was. Enough bad fortune has befallen the West without unleashing another vigilance committee of blue-haired old biddies intent upon erasing more of that which made the West worth experiencing before their gentle arrival to put things "right."

This tale begins in the town of Sonora on a day when there were no unwary drummers arriving on which the local Clamper chapter could bestow their unique welcome of fleecing the unwary. The mines and the coyote holes were goin' full blast, as a matter of fact, dirt and dust flyin' everywhere, smearin' a mustard color across the noonday sky. So industrious was the day that those of us attempting to engage in a bit of well-placed loitering were left without the benefit of witnesses to our indolence. What good is loitering if it goes unappreciated?

Even the local mongrels were in a state of despair. There was so much industry afoot in and around Sonora that there was no-one left to throw rocks at our otherwise annoy lazing canines. It made them feel doubly worthless and morose. I admit to feeling a bit of the canine morosity myself, having spent a completely dispirited and dissipated night falling from one public house to another with little focus.

It was near that hot high noon that I heard the sounds of the approaching Sonora-Mariposa stage. As it worked its way up the main thoroughfare, provoking complaints from a half-dozen lounging yellow dogs, and berthed itself in front of the commodious Owens House Hotel, I realized it was being captained by none other than old friend Tall Andrew and shot-gunned by Backdoor Bob. I arranged to get myself across the dirt street to reacquaint myself with the pair.

Tall Andrew had leapt down from his pilothouse and was disembarking a man of the cloth who had the look of a scarecrow to him. He was followed by a man the width of the backside of a side of beef, who uncorked himself from the coach's door like a champagne cork. He two, an "I" and an "O" shape in the modern alphabet, shook themselves loose and went through the hotel doors. Backdoor Bob lowered their baggage from the top of the stage to Tall Andrew, then lowered two mail sacks.

"A meager day all around," I ventured.

"A meager week," said Tall Andrew as he disengaged himself from the baggage and mail he'd set upon the boardwalk. Tall was a stalk of corn and whiskered like corn silk. He extended his hand. "How ya been?" he asked. Tall Andrew sported a well-worn Navy Colt on his right hip 'en a Bowie knife on his left.

"Bored as a weasel with a hernia," I replied.

Backdoor Bob deposited himself on the street next to us. "Lotta that goin' around," he said, also extending his hand after moving his ever-present 12-gauge from right hand to left.

"Where's Tumbleweed?" I asked.

Tall Andrew slung a thumb toward the covered rear of the stage. "Nother bad night for the 'Weed," he said. "Four nights in a row he fell offa the wagon." Tumbleweed earned his sobriquet from his penchant to drink enthusiastically, fall where he stood, 'en provide himself for being pushed or kicked out of the way. On those rare days when he was sober, he was one of the best stage drivers in the business; otherwise he served as ballast for the stage and a worthy companion for bank agent Wingate Wilson's notoriously spotless strongboxes.

"Git yer duties discharged 'en join me at the bat fer a bit 'a dust-chasin'," I offered, perceiving that setting up my old friends to a drink or two might lead me to some good.

ON TO SHEEPRANCH

So it was that I was offered a seat inside the stage leaving at sundown for Mariposa by way of Sheepranch, above Angels Camp. After a hardy supper at the Ten Penny Saloon, Andrew 'en Bob 'en I went by the Wells Fargo office to deal with fussybudget Wingate Wilson, the local agent. Andrew signed for the polished strongbox and Wilson, nattily attired fella sportin' a modified but meticulously cared-for VanDyke, followed us to the stage, fidgeting and wiping imaginary dust from the heavy box. Wilson was the fussiest male man any male man had ever encountered. He wouldn't ever let his strongbox be throwed on top of the stage; it had to be gently stowed away in the back, with the canvas cover placed over it so's it didn't get dirty.

Tall Andrew whipped up the canvas cover out back 'en Wilson gasped when he saw Tumbleweed sprawled out. I must admit I gasped a bit myself. The tarp had been restrainin' a multitude of sins, which upon release, exploded upon our senses. The stench of stale cheap whiskey mixed with the aroma of stale cheap tacos mixed with a patently unwashed 208-pounds of snoring Tumbleweed knocked us back like the hurricane that knocked over the outhouse.