

KEELER TO MOJAVE STAGE LINE

By Beveridge R. Spear

The old six-horse stage line from Keeler to Mojave began late in the 19th century. W. K. Miller established the system so far as I can ascertain.

Miller's ranch lay south of Lone Pine and the present Indian reservation on the east side of the road. The late W. K. Miller Junior, his son, known to some of us as "Willie" was a slim-jim blond.

The stage coach was a typical Concord carriage of the times. The body was square and rather high. Its box-appearance had a door on each side, and rocked back and forth on multiple leather straps as springs.

Inside, two seats faced each other with storage beneath. Eight people could be seated with comfort. Little children could sit on the parent's lap. A ninth passenger could sit high up front with the driver. The fare was \$10 per head.

A boot under the driver's seat cared for valuables and other articles. Another larger boot in back cared for general baggage.

The road was neither graded, or straight. They picked their way through cactus and sand, and around hummocks. This became the road: Much of the road was sandy and rutted. If a bad spot developed in the road they drove around it. There were miles of upgrade and down hill. Travel was slow and dusty.



Keeler to Mojave stage at Keeler, CA
(Photocard courtesy of Rich McCutchan)

On a good section of the road they trotted the horses. On an exceptional stretch they might gallop the horses. This was done to make up time for the slow miles in deep sand. They had to average five miles per hour to make it in twenty four. The stage left Keeler and Mojave every other day at noon.

This story is told: The horses were on a downhill trot. The wheels struck a rut, the coach lurched, pitching a passenger headfirst into the sand.

The passengers yelled "Stop! Stop!" They ran back to the man staggering on his feet.

"Had a runaway?" he jabbered.

"No."

"Had an accident?"

"No."

"What happened?" he gulped.

"Nothing."

"Nothin!" he shouted. "If I'd known that I wouldn't got out." The poor fellow had rum on the brain.

They changed the six horses eight times during the trip. Summer and winter made a big difference in the performance of the animals. They had to have at least 60 horses in reserve to keep the stages rolling and on time.

I can still hear the slow-turning wheels grinding in the sand. I recall seeing the driver moving along beside the carriage on the sand silhouetted by a brilliant moon. The sky dazzled with beautiful unnumbered stars. Smog was unknown. The air always clean, and fresh except in spots where the dust boiled up into the slow moving carriage.

Passengers carried food and water with them. If a passenger needed comfort they stopped. He went to the rear, relieved himself, and the journey was resumed. This was custom. No one gave it a second thought.

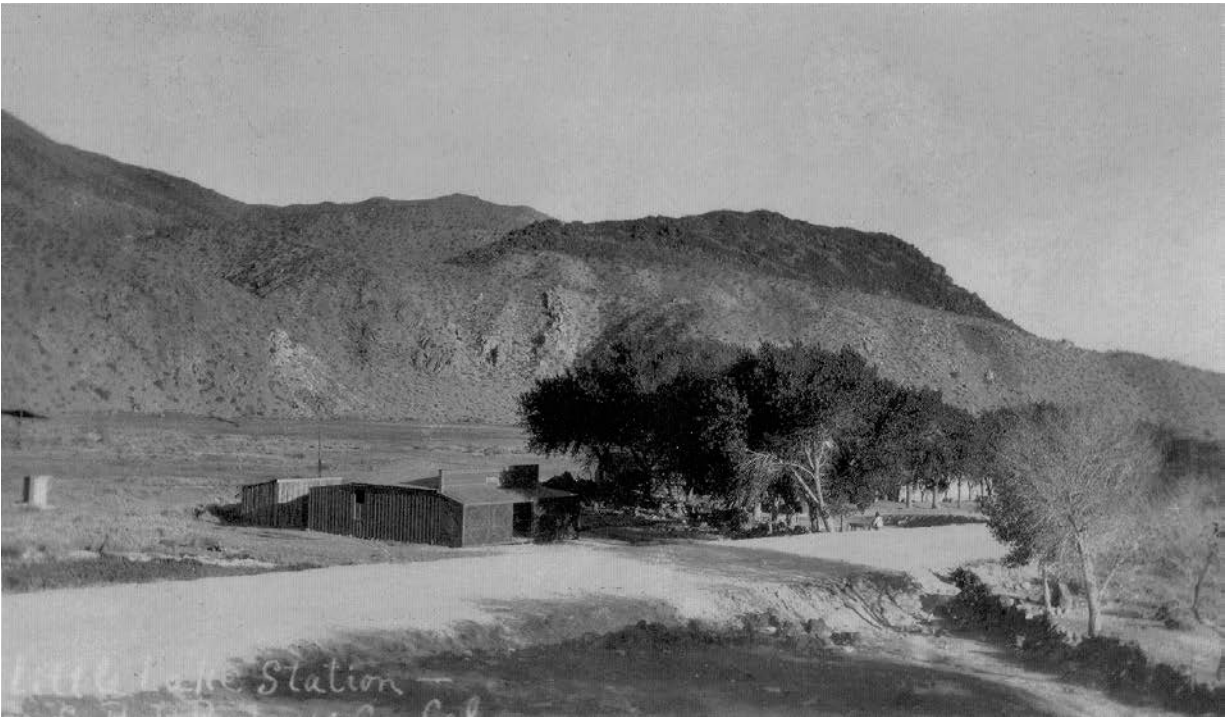
After a family-style dinner at the old Charlie Mate's hotel in Keeler, we boarded the stage, and the horses trotted away. Natural water supply regulated the stage-stops, and changing of horses.

Olancha was 19 miles away, around the south end of Owens Lake. About 14 miles of this road had some of the worst conditions of the trip. It took five to six hours to make this first leg of the journey. We arrived in Olancha about sundown. The exchange horses were harnessed and waiting. It took about five minutes to make the change, and we were off.

If the stage arrived at Haiwee or Haiwee Meadows on time, 17 miles away, (it was all down hill) we'd arrive about 9 to 9:15 pm. The Indian word means, Dove. That stage-stop is now under the waters of the Haiwee reservoir.

From Haiwee to Little Lake, 25 miles distant, was the best of the en tire road, and good time was made across Rose Springs valley. But from Little Lake to Indian Wells, some 15 miles away, was a

heavy uphill drag. There the pioneers drove a short tunnel into the earthquake fault of 1872 and developed a tiny stream of water.



Little Lake Stage Station on the on the Mojave - Keller stage route - circa 1908
(Photo courtesy of Paul Lamos)

The next station was Coyote Holes. This was long before anyone thought of calling it Freeman's junction. Then, out some miles from here they established Dixie, the only dry camp, for the sixth change of horses. In and out of Red Rock canyon, a heavy pull, made this extra change necessary.

We arrived at Red Rock canyon about daybreak. Here the water supply seeped out of the bed rock. From here it was about 15 miles to what was then called the Eighteen-Mile-House where the last change was made. We arrived in Mojave at noon.

It was 1898. My excited emotions were great the first time I remember the stage arriving in Mojave. Those huge steam locomotives held me spellbound. As a kid I'd crawled out of the slow dusty past into the fast moving stream of civilization in 24 hours.

I wore several pair of shoes out scuffing and puffing up and down the streets of Lone Pine, screeching, "Chu-chu - Chu-chu, and vigorously moving my bent arms back and forth. I was a little heathen being born into the 20th century.

Later, automobiles replaced the Concord stage. A. T. Hay used the old Mitchell car. But they had plenty of trouble. We've sat for hours while they worked and tinkered trying to get the machine to pick up the load.

Our last trip was by rail to Little Lake, then by car to Lone Pine. The railroad was completed to Owenyo in 1910.