

STAGECOACH ROUTES IN IDAHO

Stage lines began to replace saddle trains in 1864 as soon as wagon roads were built. Stagecoaches were pulled by teams of four or six horses. They carried passengers, mail, and "fast" freight. Much of the gold and silver from the mines was shipped out by stagecoach. In fact, the stagecoach was to be far more important west of the Mississippi River than east of it, because in the West there were fewer navigable rivers and canals to compete with land transport. Stagecoaches were the most important means of travel in the west until the railroads were built.

Riding a stage was not always fun. The stage was noisy and bumpy, and the passengers were jammed together inside. It was an uncomfortable ride, and the rest stops were few and very poor. Stage stations were almost always dirty and smelly, and often the food was bad. Passengers suffered from dust and heat in the summer, mud in the spring and fall, and snow and cold in the winter. There were always mosquitoes and rattlesnakes in warm weather. Sometimes stagecoaches were held up by bandits who robbed the passengers and stole the mail and gold if any was aboard.

Stagecoach beginnings usually followed established trails in an effort to connect frontier settlements, or often forts, with established communities. A mail contract was indispensable to such an operation, but there were also government express and passengers, either military personnel or their dependents, to be hauled. In many cases stage lines acted as feeders to navigation on rivers like the Missouri, the Columbia, or the Sacramento. Whenever settlement began, small operators tried to make a living by transporting goods and passengers. The key to the success of these "one man-one horse" operations was a contract to carry the U.S. mail.

Idaho was served by two important stage lines. One line ran 675 miles from Salt Lake City to The Dalles, Oregon. It made three trips a week. The route passed through the Malad and Raft river valleys, through the Snake River Valley and Boise City, then west to the Columbia River. The other stage line ran from Salt Lake City to Virginia City, Montana. It passed through eastern Idaho and crossed the river at Eagle Rock (Idaho Falls).