

# Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

## **A Half Century of Tucson-Area Stagecoach Service 1870-1920s**

Last week I wrote about overland stagecoach operations through Tucson. This week I'll tell the story of how Tucson stagecoach pioneers provided service to southern Arizona mining areas and local settlements.

The first non-native miners in southern Arizona were Spaniards who began drifting north from long-established mining areas in Sonora, Mexico in the 1730s. Mexicans continued prospecting in the borderland country following their independence from Spain in 1821. Immediately after the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, Americans began exploring these same mining areas, rediscovering some of the old Spanish and Mexican diggings.

When the first Butterfield overland stagecoach reached Tucson in 1858, Americans had already established silver mines near Arivaca and in the Santa Rita and Patagonia Mountains.

### **Stagecoaches South**

While American mining was developing, in 1870 experienced freighter Pedro Aguirre started the Arizona & Sonora Stage Line in Tucson to carry mail and passengers between Tucson and Altar, Sonora Mexico, with connections southward to the Sonoran capital Hermosillo and the important Gulf of California port at Guaymas.

In 1873 gold was discovered south of Arivaca, near the border with Mexico, setting off an American mining boom and the development of the Oro Blanco mining camp. This strike, along with successful silver mining around Arivaca, led Pedro Aguirre in 1877 to start regular stagecoach service to Arivaca, south to Oro Blanco, with continuing service to Altar, Sonora.

Aguirre continued to provide stagecoach service to this intermittently successful borderland mining region until 1886 when he sold his company and retired to his Buenos Ayres ranch west of Arivaca.

From 1892-1908 stagecoach service to Arivaca and Oro Blanco was provided by Mariano Samaniego, a Sonoran-born freighter, cattle rancher, merchant, and the acknowledged most successful Hispanic Tucson public official in the territorial period.

Stagecoaches heading south from Tucson stopped at James Brown's Sahuarita Ranch and the "halfway" station in Amado to change horses or mules and obtain food for passengers.

## **Stagecoaches Southeast**

Two of Arizona's biggest mining strikes occurred in southeastern Arizona in 1877. Discovery of huge deposits of silver and copper led to the development of Tombstone in 1879 and Bisbee in 1880.

Within a month of arriving in Tucson from Kansas in October 1878, J. D. Kinnear started Kinnear's Express stagecoach service (every four days) to the new silver area. By 1879 Kinnear had formed the Tucson & Tombstone Stage Line to provide daily service to Tombstone and soon thereafter on to Bisbee. In the spirited competition to provide the best service, another new Tombstone arrival from Kansas, named Wyatt Earp, sold out his own stagecoach line interests to Kinnear.

Stages from Tucson to Tombstone and Bisbee started out using the old Butterfield overland stage relay stations at Cienega and San Pedro near Benson. When the southern transcontinental railroad tracks were laid right over the station at Cienega in 1880, a new station was built a mile and half to the east at Pantano. The San Pedro station was "re-opened," advertising "excellent meals for the traveler," in the *Tucson Daily Citizen*.

At about the same time as service to Tombstone and Bisbee was developing, stagecoaches from Tucson via Pantano began routes to mines around Patagonia.

## **Stagecoaches North**

Fifty miles northeast of Tucson, near Mammoth, gold was discovered in 1879. William "Curly" Neal, of African American and Cherokee descent, came to Tucson in 1878, opened a livery and by 1879 was running a stage line to the mining towns around Mammoth, with a stage stop in Oracle. In 1895 Neal financed the building of the luxurious Mountain View Hotel on his ranch in Oracle.

## **Stagecoaches West**

Also in 1879 silver was discovered in Quijotoa, 65 miles west of Tucson, but it wasn't until 1883 that rich croppings generated real excitement. Richard Starr (of Starr Pass fame) pioneered a stagecoach trail through the Tucson Mountains as a quick route to Quijotoa. The stage stop out of Tucson was the ranch house of the Robles Ranch in Three Points. Unfortunately the mining boom in Quijotoa only lasted until 1885, with a consequent drop-off in stage business.

## **Stagecoach Network**

While stagecoach service to southern Arizona mining regions was developing, Tucson remained a "hub" on an increasing stagecoach transportation network among other settlements in Territorial Arizona, including Nogales, Casa Grande, Florence, Phoenix, Prescott, and Globe.

The stagecoach business was dynamic. Stage companies went out of business or changed names frequently. As improved roads replaced rough wagon trails, the coaches themselves changed. The huge, heavy Concord coaches used on overland routes were supplemented with smaller, lighter stages, wagons, or buckboards. The vehicles were pulled by teams of two, four, or six horses or mules.

A survey by my brother Al of stage line records and advertisements in Tucson newspapers between 1880 and 1910 shows that stagecoach service to destinations within 75 miles of Tucson was provided several times a week, sometimes daily, and completed in one day. Fares for passengers remained relatively constant over the period at approximately ten cents per mile, decreasing slightly over the longer routes. During that entire period I could have traveled 65 miles from Tucson to Arivaca (as my grandparents did in 1905) for six dollars.

### **Transporting Valuables**

In 1877, in response to increased mining activity in southern Arizona, Wells-Fargo Express Company, transporter of valuables, reestablished its Tucson office that had been briefly operational in 1860 for the Butterfield Overland Mail. Wells Fargo began leasing space on stagecoaches to carry “treasure boxes,” a good source of income for stage lines but somewhat risky.

According to the fascinating book, *Encyclopedia of Stage Robbery in Arizona*, there were 129 stagecoach robberies in Arizona between 1875 and 1903. Eleven of them occurred in Pima County, including two robberies near present day Marana, single robberies near Patagonia and present day Green Valley, and a robbery of the Tucson-Quijotoa stage. The Marana robberies in 1878 were committed by highwayman Bill Brazelton, who supposedly turned his horse’s shoes around to confuse trackers, but was later shot dead by a pursuing posse.

### **End of an Era**

With increased links to population centers, and agriculture, livestock, and mining enterprises, Tucson’s population grew to about 14,000 people by 1910. Stagecoach lines were prosperous right up the time of Arizona statehood in 1912. But by that time local railroads, e.g. Tucson to Nogales, had proliferated and automobiles and trucks began to take the place of horse or mule driven stagecoaches.

A few local Tucson mail contract stagecoach services continued into the 1920s. One of these was mail delivery from 1914-1921 between Tucson and Wrightstown Ranch at the corner of Harrison and Wrightstown Roads.

Today, 100 years after statehood, if you “Google” “Tucson Stagecoach” you get a long list of van shuttle services that you can use to get to the airport or to Phoenix. Sadly, the romantic age the stagecoach is over, but it’s nice to know that “stagecoaches” so important to Tucson’s development, are still operating today!

Note: If you have any information about former stagecoach stations in Pima County that I have not included, please contact me.

*Sources: Arizona Daily Star; Arizona Place Names (Byrd H. Granger, 1985); Arizona Territory Post Offices & Postmasters (John and Lillian Theobald, 1961); Encyclopedia of Stagecoach Robbery in Arizona (R. Michael Wilson, 2003); Tucson Daily Citizen; Wells Fargo in Arizona Territory (John and Lillian Theobald, 1978)*

## Tucson-area stagecoach service: 1870-1920s

Stagecoach pioneers provided crucial service to Southern Arizona mining areas and local settlements, transporting mail, people, and "treasure boxes" that sometimes ended up being the target of robbers.



*Tucson stagecoach lines provided passenger, mail, and express service to southern Arizona mining towns. (Arizona Daily Star)*



*My grandmother Grace Ring is visible seated in this two-mule, two-seat stagecoach parked in front of the stagecoach station in Arivaca in 1905. (Courtesy of Ring family)*