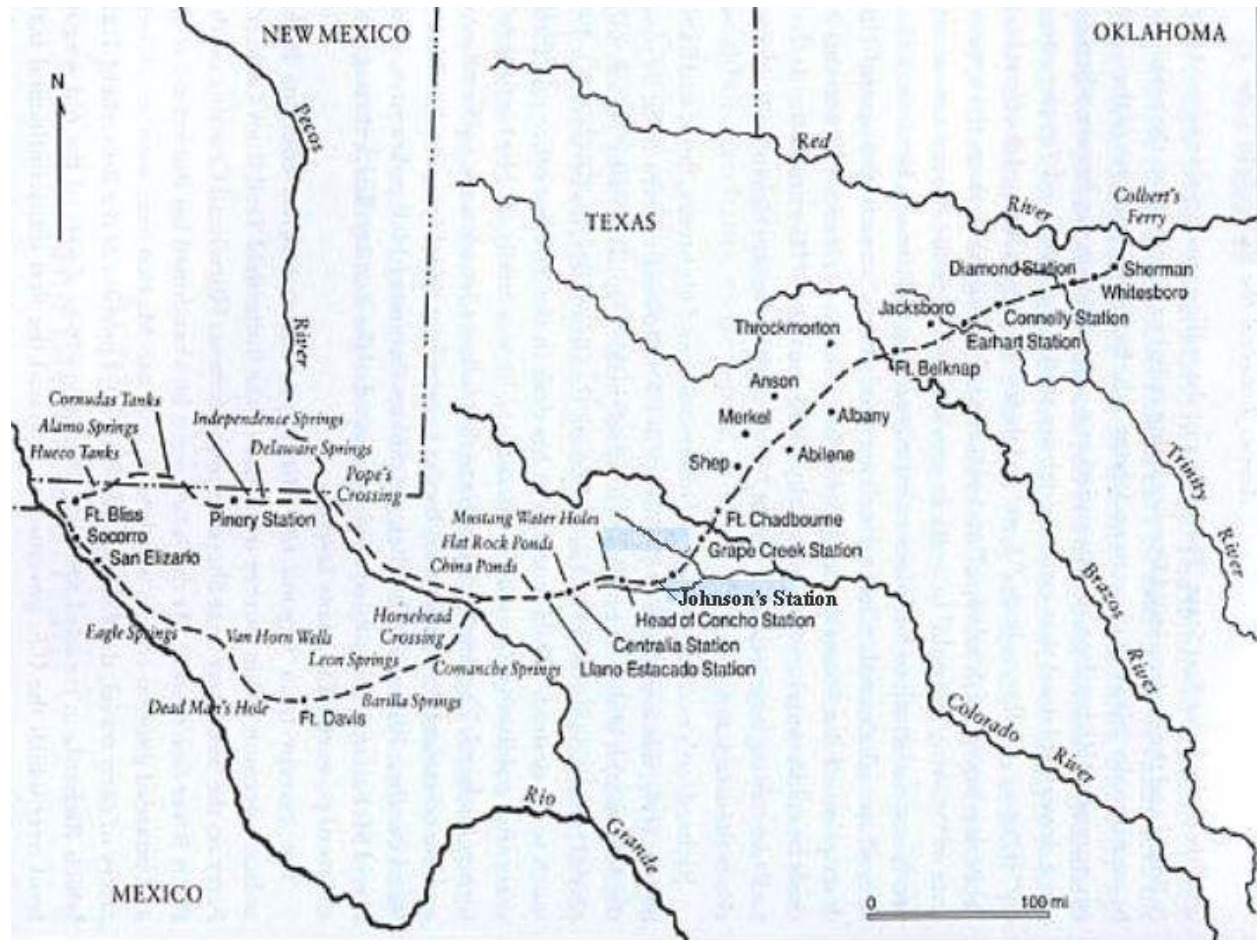


The BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND MAIL

By WATERMAN L. ORMSBY *Only Through Passenger on the First Westbound Stage*

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Special Correspondence of the *Herald Tucson*, Arizona, Oct. 2, 1858

A few hours' ride brought us to Chadbourne, a military station on a bend of the little Colorado River, exactly on the thirty-second parallel of latitude, where we arrived on Thursday afternoon, the 23d of September, nearly twenty-four hours ahead of table time, having traversed 955 miles of our journey without accident and but little delay.

The most direct course to El Paso would be from this point along the thirty-second parallel, but the much dreaded Llano Estacado, or Staked [Staked] Plain, interposes its waterless barrenness, and our course must still be in a southwesterly direction to the head of the Concho River, a tributary of the little Colorado, and thence to the "Horsehead Crossing" of the Pecos River, taking us a degree further south, which we have to regain by following up the Pecos--all of which might have been saved had the money which has been expended in trying to sink artesian wells on the Staked Plains [Plain] been applied to the purpose of building plain tanks to catch the water when it falls, as it often does in copious quantities. But I had forgotten Chadbourne's. There is now but one company of the Second Cavalry stationed here -- Company G -- the remaining cavalry and infantry having been ordered to look after the Indians in the Wachita [Wichita] Mountains. There are few houses besides the government buildings, and few inhabitants besides the soldiers. The place is almost surrounded by a sort of barricade which was built a few years since in anticipation of a sweeping attack by the Indians--which did not come off. Some of the buildings look unusually neat for this section of the country. The officer now in command is Captain Bradfute, who, I understand, kindly loaned the employees of the mail company sufficient arms and ammunition for their protection until their own could be forwarded.

Some little delay was experienced, here, before the wild mules could be caught and harnessed, by which several hours of our advance time was lost. Mr. J. B. Nichols of Mr. Crocker's division was to drive, and Mr. Mather of Mr. Glover's division, which commences at Chadbourne and ends at Franklin on the Rio Grande, was to proceed on horseback, point out the road, and maintain a general supervision. Whether from the inefficiency of Mr. Nichols' driving, or because Mr. Mather's furious riding frightened the mules, or because the mules were wild, or that the boys had been having a jolly good time on the occasion of the arrival of the first stage, or by a special dispensation of Providence -- or from a combination of all these causes -- I will not pretend to say, but certainly, from some unforeseen and vexatious cause, we here suffered a detention of some hours. The mules reared, pitched, twisted, whirled, wheeled, ran, stood still, and cut up all sorts of capers. The wagon performed so many evolutions that I, in fear of my life, abandoned it and took to my heels, fully confident that I could make more progress in a straight line, with much less risk of breaking my neck.

Mr. Lee, sutler at the fort, who, with others, had come out on horseback to see us start, kindly offered to take me up behind him -- to which, though not much of an equestrian, I acceded with the view of having a little better sight of the sport at a safe distance. In this I was eminently gratified, for the gyrations continued to considerable length, winding up with tangling all the mules pretty well in the harness, the escape of one of the leaders into the woods, and the complete demolition of the top of the wagon; while those in charge of it lay around loose on the grass, and all were pretty well tired out and disgusted, except those who had nothing to do but look on.

For my part, I thought it the most ludicrous scene I ever witnessed, though it seemed a great pity that time which was needed on other parts of the route should be thus wasted or lost here. Both of the leading mules having escaped, and Mr. Mather having become completely anxious that every one should go to the d ---- l, and understand that he did not care a d ---- n for anyone, I thought the progress of the mail, for that night at least, was stopped; but Nichols averred that the mail should go on if he went alone with the two wheel-mules; and, sure enough, he started off

after getting the harness once more disentangled, and kept the road in fine style. I had fully made up my mind by this time that it would be as much as my life was worth to go under the existing circumstances, but, seeing him go off, I rode up to him, and, finding persuasion of no avail, overcame my strong objections and concluded to go, though if I had had any property I certainly should have made a hasty will. When I had become seated I thought I would ascertain all the chances, and the following dialogue ensued between myself and Mr. Nichols:

"How far is it to the next station?"

"I believe it is thirty miles."

"Do you know the road?"

"No."

"How do you expect to get there?"

There's only one road; we can't miss it."

"Have you any arms?"

"No, I don't want any; there's no danger."

Whether there was danger or not, I felt as if I had a little rather have started under other circumstances; but I was bound to go with the mail, though I had not much confidence that our two mules could make the thirty miles. Fortunately our course was a clear and straight one, leading across an apparently boundless prairie, with not a tree or shrub to be seen, the parched grass almost glistening in the light of the moon.

The night was clear and bright, the road pretty level, and the mules willing, and I soon ceased to regret having started. I alternately drove while Nichols slept, or slept while he drove, or rode horseback for the man who accompanied us to take back the team, and, altogether, passed a very pleasant night, though our progress was necessarily slow. But about 2 A.M. we came to a steep and stony hill, obstinately jutting from the prairie, right in our path and impossible of avoidance. One mule could neither be coaxed or driven up, so we had to camp until morning, when, after much difficulty, we ascended the hill and discovered the station fire, miles distant—a mere speck among the trees. We soon reached it and found it to be a corral, or yard, for the mules, and tents erected inside for the men, under charge of Mr. Henry Roylan. They had seen us coming and were herding the mules as we drove up. Their corral was built of upright rough timber, planted in the ground. They had pitched their tents inside, for fear of the Indians, and took turns standing guard, two hours on and two hours off.

The station was near Grape Creek, a fine stream, and also near some fine timber -- two desirable things not to be found everywhere in Texas. The distance from this point to the head of the Concho River being fifty-six miles, and there being no inhabited station between, we had to take, in addition to our own team of four mules, a *cavellado*, or drove, of as many more, for a change at intervals along the route. The change of teams was soon made, and, Mr. Roylan taking the reins, we were off once more at a good pace. Our road lay over the rolling prairies studded with mesquite timber. A few miles from Grape Creek we crossed the Concho, and then, leaving the old road, which follows its winding course, we took a new road, across the country, which has been made under the supervision of the company—a ride of about thirty miles, the new road being very passable. We strike the Concho again at a station about twenty-five miles from Grape Creek and fifty-five miles from Chadbourne, after following the Concho to its source on the borders of

the dreaded Staked Plain, where we arrived about 2:30 A.M. of [on] Saturday, the 25th of September.

We may now be said to have commenced the difficulties of the journey through the great plains or waterless deserts of Texas and mountains of New Mexico and California; while the grandest spectacles of our journey are yet to be seen and described, with the assurance that we are safely at Tucson, Arizona, just beyond the Pinaleno Mountains. I must leave the description of our interesting journey thither for my next letter.

Special Correspondence of the *New York Herald* San Francisco, Oct. 10, 1858

My last letter containing any details of our trip left us at the head of the Concho River, a tributary of the little Colorado in Texas, just on the border of the great Plain Ertacade [Estacado], or Staked Plain, one of the savannas of America. It derives its name from a tradition that many years ago the Spaniards had a road staked upon it from San Antonio, Texas, to Santa Fé in New Mexico. It extends from the 30th to the 35th parallel, being one hundred and seventy-five miles wide at its greatest width, and entirely destitute of wood and water. Its northern boundary is an abrupt precipice nearly six hundred feet high, while on the south it is intersected by a range of barren sand hills rising seventy feet above the general level of the plain. These sand hills are of a very drifting nature, and often cover up the road.

It will not, then, be a matter of wonder that to the emigrant this fearful journey is fraught with many terrors. He sees in his imagination his cattle, and perhaps himself, suffering all the inexpressible pangs of thirst-pains, more unendurable than flaming fire or bleeding wounds. We have read of the anguish of the monarch of Phrygia, whom the gods doomed to unceasing confinement in the sight of sweet waters, which were never allowed to touch his lips; of the terrible tortures of the bold mariners in the Arctic seas; of the sailor with "Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink"; of the fearful tortures of the tropics, and of the trains on the great desert of Sahara-but none can realize the pangs of that terrible gnawing without that sad experience which is almost always death. It was, then, with no little fear that I approached this, what I deemed the most dangerous part of the journey, where for a distance of seventy-five miles-the width of the plain at our crossing place-not a drop of water could be procured for all the wealth of the world. Indeed, I was so carried away with the horrors of the trip that it was some time before it occurred to me that we might carry some water in the wagons-which reflection finally consoled me not a little.

We reached the head of the Concha [Concho] River early on the morning of Saturday, the 25th of September, and found there a most comfortable camp. The men had not yet had time to build a house and were living in tents. They had made a large corral of bushes and had a large stock of mules, which had been left them, before our arrival, by Mr. Glover, the superintendent of the line from Chadbourne to El Paso, who had gone on before us some hours. Our arrival was unexpected, and all haste was immediately made to get us something to eat and start us again on our journey. The good natured Dutchman who officiated as cook quickly ranged the tin cups and plates and got us some broiled bacon, shortcake, and coffee, which was considered quite an aristocratic meal for so early a settlement, and which our long ride certainly made acceptable, however different from New York fare.

At least an hour was lost in catching and harnessing wild mules for our team, and for the *cavellado*, or drove, which we were to take with us, having no other change of team for seventy-five miles. The frightened animals ran in terror round the corral, the greasy Mexicans wielded their *larriettos* [*las reatas*] and frightened them still more, so that by the time a mule was caught and harnessed, often nearly choked to death, he was almost always nearly tired out before his work had commenced. We got a team at last, however, and soon were on our way (with our wagon well supplied with canteens of water) to the great Staked Plain. After passing over a well weeded plain, we came to the Mustang Springs, which are lodgements of water durable during most of the year. It was the last water before the seventy-five miles of desert, and we let our mules drink their fill. It was just after sunrise that we entered the desert road, and I was agreeably surprised to see, instead of a tedious sea of parched sand, a variety of curious though weird vegetation, while the whole plain was studded with mesquite bushes looking fresh enough, certainly. Our start was rather unfavorable, for before we left Mustang Springs two of our mules in the cavalcade made a stampede for home, and the other two soon followed suit, the latter only being recovered after a hard chase and a detention of another hour.

But the road was hard and smooth, and we were enabled to travel at a pretty fair gait when we got started. Indeed, the road was literally baked hard in the scorching sun. The vast quantity of mesquite bushes somewhat surprised me. The leaves much resemble the cedar, but the stalk on the plain seldom grows thicker than a gooseberry bush. Many of the bushes were covered with ripe beans, resembling our string beans in appearance. They are excellent feed for stock, and it is said the Indians make a sort of meal of them.

There was an abundance of large cactus plants of numberless varieties, *chittim* [*chittam*] wood, and soap weed -- the roots of which are used by the Indians for soap -and several kinds of grass. There are many places where it is evident that water has stood for some time since the last rain. One of the most curious plants was what is called the Spanish dagger, which grows in many varieties on this plain. The leaves are long, and tapered to a sharp point, and being very tough may well be called daggers. They are very sharp and tough, and I have been told that an antelope has been shot that had one of these leaves run clear through his foreleg. The plant grows often in large bunches like sheaves of grain and may easily be mistaken for them. In the twilight they may easily be transformed into imaginary Indians by the timid. The leaves may be made to appear as the tuft of his head or his outstretched arms, while its thickness is quite the consistency of an ordinary Indian. I often mistook them for men as we passed along.

As we travelled leisurely through the desert, we were refreshed with a decidedly cool and delicious breeze, while the atmosphere was by no means so unpleasant to me as in New York in a hot August day, though we were then about half way between the thirtieth and thirty-second parallels of latitude. There seemed to be an abundance of animal life on the desert. We saw large droves of antelopes frequently, and numbers of quail, snipe, and other specimens of the feathered tribe, while the "dog towns," or holes, of the prairie dogs were innumerable. This animal seems to be a cross between a squirrel and a rat terrier, and lives in holes which it digs in the ground. As we approached their towns we could see their shaking tails as they rushed frightened to their homes. They live on grass and weeds, and never trouble anybody except by undermining the road with their subterranean borings.

With all these evidences of animal and vegetable life, and the delightful breeze, I could not realize that I was in a desert. It seemed impossible that so much life could exist without a constant, never failing supply of water. But there were the evidences strewn along the road, and far as the eye could reach along the plain -- decayed and decaying animals, the bones of cattle and sometimes of men (the hide drying on the skin in the arid atmosphere), all told a fearful story of anguish and terrific death from the pangs of thirst. For miles and miles these bones strew the plain--the silent witnesses of the eternal laws of nature, which, in the hope of gain, man hesitates not to brave. They are silent but speaking monuments of undeviating fate.

As we proceeded the plain grew more dreary and the vegetation less thick, until finally it relapses into a dull plain with scattered grass spots and stunted mesquite trees. In the morning the monotony of our ride was varied by the sight of a huge rattlesnake, which was promptly despatched by our driver named Jones, of Herculean frame, from which he has been surnamed the "baby." He daringly poked out a stick for the reptile to bite, and then coolly twisted off the rattle on his tail -- which he gave to me.

In the afternoon we got up quite an excitement over a cloud of dust which was at first taken to be Mr. Glover and his train. The mules were whipped up, the horns blown, and a general excitement raised among the four in the wagon. Much to our chagrin, on finding ourselves disappointed, we were obliged to stop frequently and allow our jaded mules to rest and graze, though we had no water for them. It struck me that if one of the men had been left, and his weight of water brought in his place, we should have been somewhat better off. The plain is somewhat rolling, yet we found much difficulty in urging our mules down hill; and, notwithstanding my first favorable impression, I soon pronounced the great Staked Plain a bore. We were nearly twenty-four hours in crossing; and what seemed to me most remarkable was the extreme cold of the night after the warmth of the day. I found that my two blankets were by no means too warm.

As I lay dozing on the seat, about three o'clock on Sunday morning, I heard a cry from Jones that we had reached the Pecos River, and there we were, true enough, right into it. After hallooing and blowing our horn, we obtained an answer, as we supposed, from the other side of the river, telling us to drive up stream, which advice we followed, when to our astonishment we found ourselves in camp on the same side of the river. The fact is, the Pecos makes such a turn here that you can hardly tell which side you are on. It is a swift stream, with a good body of water, rising away up in the Rocky Mountains and emptying into the Rio Grande. It is much the color of the Mississippi. There were no trees nor any unusual luxuriance of foliage on the banks at the point where we struck it; so that if our driver had not been on the lookout we might have been wallowing in its muddy depth.

We found that Mr. Glover had arrived with his train but a few hours before us and had brought the stock for stocking the road. He had employed, here, fifteen Mexicans, or "greasers" as they are more commonly called --and a more miserable looking set of fellows I never saw. They stood shivering over the fire, and had to be fairly driven off to get the things in readiness for our immediate departure; and then ensued another hallooing and lassoing time with the wild mules, occupying more precious time and much patience, besides trying the animals' strength beyond endurance; but we got started at 4:30 A.M. on Sunday, the 26th, for a pretty long ride up the east, or northeast, bank of the Pecos.

The person in charge of the mail from this point was Captain Skillman, an old frontier man who was the first to run the San Antonio and Santa Fé mail at a time when a fight with the Indians, every trip, was considered in the contract. He is a man about forty-five years of age, in appearance much resembling the portraits of the Wandering Jew, with the exception that he carries several revolvers and bowie knives, dresses in buckskin, and has a sandy head of hair and beard. He loves hard work and adventures, and hates "Injuns," and knows the country about here pretty well.