

5. Journalist Waterman L. Ormsby Describes His Trip Through Texas on the Butterfield Overland Mail, 1858

... [W]e crossed the Red River at Colbert's Ferry, eight miles below Preston, and found many improvements on the road in progress on the Texas side of the river, under the liberal management of Grayson County, in which the flourishing town of Sherman is situated, and where we arrived on Monday afternoon, September 20. As we were now a day ahead of time, we should not have found teams in readiness had not an express been sent in advance to notify Mr. Bates, the superintendent between Sherman and Fort Chadbourne. His part of the road was so poorly stocked with animals, and those he had were so worn out in forwarding stuff for the other parts of the line, that he had to hire an extra team of mules, at short notice, to forward the mail to see the next station, and these were pretty well tired from working all day. Most of his stock consisted of wild mules which had just been broken, and the process had not fitted them very well for carrying the mail with rapidity. Our extra team, however, took us along pretty fast.

We left Sherman at 4:40 P.M. on the 20th. Our course lay across a fine rolling prairie, covered with fine grass, but with no trees and scarcely a shrub for eighteen miles—crossing a number of beds of little brooks which were now dry, but whose banks in winter afford plentiful grazing for cattle, where rolling prairies thus intersected extend for sixty miles to the Lower Cross Timbers, a range of wide woodland extending, from the Red River to the Brazos, across this portion of Texas. The first station after leaving Sherman was twenty miles distant, and our team travelled it in three hours, so that before we reached there the beautiful moonlight lit up the vast prairie, making its sameness appear like the boundless sea and its hills like the rolling waves. . . .

Fortunately our express had hastened the preparations, so we were not long detained here, and made our next thirteen miles to Gainesville, another flourishing little town, in good time. After hastily swallowing supper and

changing horses, we were off again and made our next station in the woods, fifteen miles distant, in two hours and ten minutes, Mr. Bates, who accompanied the mail, being determined to make the best possible time. At this station there was nothing in readiness, the express rider having lost his way, and some detention was experienced in harnessing more wild mules.

Another disadvantage under which we labored, this trip, was that our road, for the most of the way, was nearly new, though Mr. Bates claims that from Sherman to Belknap at least forty miles are saved by it. It leads through the counties of Grayson, Cooke, Jacks [Jack], Montague, Wise, and Young, all of which contribute towards its expenses, and certainly it must be a favorite with some, for, though only opened one month before I passed over it, it was already pretty well marked with wagon tracks. There were very few heavy grades, and, with the combined efforts of the countries and the mail company, bids fair to become soon an excellent road. It must of course improve every day of its use. . . .

Another sixteen mile ride, occupying three hours and a half, brought us to Jacksborough [Jacksboro]. This town is in Jacks [Jack] County, and though but a year old contains a dozen houses and, I should judge, nearly two hundred inhabitants. It is on the edge of a large plain which, as we approached it, looked like a passive lake, so even and level was its surface; and one could easily imagine it to be a lake, with this town upon its borders. We took fresh mules, here, and rode all night through a rolling prairie country, studded with mesquite timber—a sort of cross between the crab-apple and scrub oak and seldom larger than a respectable gooseberry bush.

Our mules were exceedingly stubborn and lazy during the night, and required the most constant urging to keep them on a respectable trot. It would seem to me that horses might be employed with both economy of time and labor,

on this and many other portions of the route, though it is barely possible that the mules may do, with patience and hard work—both of which Mr. Bates seems willing to furnish. We arrived at Belknap on Wednesday, the 22nd of September, at 5:25, in just four hours behind the time in which we should have made it, but still twenty-seven hours ahead of the time-table time—which, considering the mules, I thought was doing wonders for the first trip.

Fort Belknap is on the Brazos River and is the county seat of Young County, Texas, and also a frontier military station. About two months since, the whole Second Regiment of cavalry was here encamped, but now there are only two companies of that regiment, under command of Major Thomas. The town has about one hundred and fifty inhabitants, and the houses, most of them, look neat; there are several stores and a billiard saloon and post office. This was about the extent of my observation during our brief stay *in transitu*. I could not see the fort, being detained at a very good breakfast at the postmaster's house. The fort is not very formidable. As we left Belknap we crossed the Brazos River, fording it with ease, as the dirty red water was not deeper than an ordinary New York gutter. The river was, however, very low; but at times there is considerable water here and it has been known to be as deep as sixteen feet—so that the company contemplate establishing a ferry to provide against all possibilities. . . .

The Clear Fork of the Brazos was not very clear, but even its muddy waters were a grateful boon for a bath while our horses were being changed at the station on the banks. Here were in progress of erection a log hut for the station keeper and help, and a corral, or yard, in which to herd the mules and catch them for harnessing. Dr. Birch, the mail agent, had everything in readiness, so that I had to finish dressing in the wagon—so short was the delay. They changed wagons, however, and took a heavier loaded one—which I thought was bad policy.

Our next stopping place was at Smith's station, twenty-three miles from Clear Fork, on the banks of a small creek. No house had been built yet, those at the station living in tents. They had nearly finished a fine corral for the stock, making

it of brush (as no timber could be had) and filling in the chinks with mud. Our supper consisted of cake cooked in the coals, clear coffee, and some dried beef cooked in Mrs. Smith's best style. We changed horses or mules and swallowed supper in double quick time and were soon on our way again.

Our road from Clear Fork lay for a time through a little valley, and wound among the hills almost on a level. On our left I noticed two bluffs whose position reminded me forcibly of East and West Rock as seen on entering New Haven harbor. But they were mere hills, as most of our road lay through rolling plains covered with good grass and mesquite timber—a sorry landscape, I assure you. Our way was, however, much enlivened by "Big Dick," our driver, who amused us with accounts of how he was three days "on the canal and never saw land, because he was drunk in the hold"—and various other things.

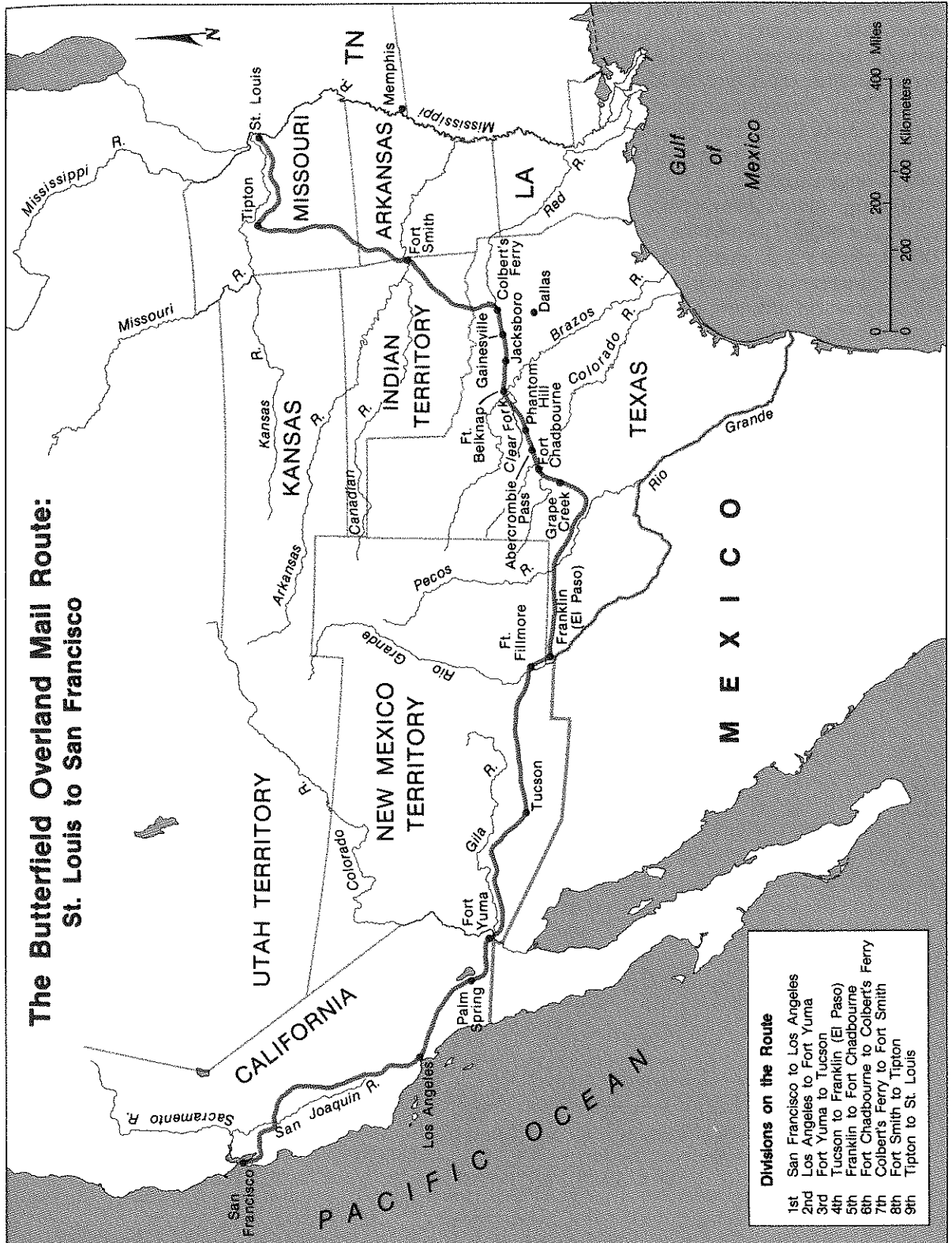
Our next stopping place was at Phantom Hill, a deserted military post, seventy-four miles from Fort Belknap and fifty-six from Chadbourne, on the road between the two.

The station is directly in the trail of the northern Comanches as they run down into Texas on their marauding expeditions. To leave this and other stations on the route so exposed is trifling with human life, and inviting an attack on the helpless defenders of the mail. As I have already said, there will be designing white men as well as Indians whose cupidity must be overawed by adequate military protection. Let but this be afforded, and I predict for the mail route a complete success, as well as a rapid settlement of the many fertile and desirable spots along the line.

We had expected to find a team of mules in readiness for us at Phantom Hill, but as they were not there we had to proceed with our already jaded animals until we could meet them on their way towards us. Our mules had brought us already thirty-four miles at a good pace, but we had to go fifteen miles further, or half way to Abercrombie Peak, before we met another team. The road was across a smooth plain studded with the everlasting mesquite timber.

We stopped at the station called Abercrombie Pass, to get breakfast, which consisted of the

The Butterfield Overland Mail Route: St. Louis to San Francisco



Divisions on the Route

- 1st San Francisco to Los Angeles
- 2nd Los Angeles to Fort Yuma
- 3rd Fort Yuma to Tucson
- 4th Tucson to Franklin (El Paso)
- 5th Franklin to Fort Chabourne
- 6th Fort Chabourne to Colbert's Ferry
- 7th Colbert's Ferry to Fort Smith
- 8th Fort Smith to Tipton
- 9th Tipton to St. Louis

standard—coffee, tough beef, and butterless short cake, prepared by an old Negro woman, who, if cleanliness is next to godliness, would stand but little chance of heaven. There is an old saying that "every man must eat his peck of dirt." I think I have had good measure with my peck on this trip, which has been roughing it with a vengeance.

Leaving Abercrombie Peak, our road led through a rugged pass in the mountains, and up rather a steep hill, which I supposed of course had an incline on the other side. But what was my surprise on reaching the top to find a broad plain stretching before us. The keeper of the next station, as well as of that at Abercrombie Peak, was appropriately named Lambshead, for he had a drove of 300 sheep grazing, growing, and increasing without expense to him, while he was attending to other duties.

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. . . .

. . . 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.

**6. The Overland Mail Company's
Through Time Schedule Between
St. Louis, Memphis, and San Francisco, 1858**

GOING WEST

<i>Leave</i>		<i>Days</i>	<i>Hour</i>	<i>Distance Place to Place</i>	<i>Time allowed</i>	<i>Av'ge Miles per Hour</i>
St. Louis, Mo., & Memphis, Tenn.	Every	Monday & Thursday,	8:00 A.M.	(Miles)	(No. Hours)	
P. R. R. Terminus, "	"	Monday & Thursday,	6:00 P.M.	160	10	16
Springfield, "	"	Wednesday & Saturday	7:45 A.M.	143	37 3/4	3 7/9
Fayetteville, "	"	Thursday & Sunday,	10:15 A.M.	100	26 1/2	3 7/9
Fort Smith, Ark.	"	Friday & Monday,	3:30 A.M.	65	17 1/4	3 7/9
Sherman, Texas	"	Sunday & Wednesday,	12:30 A.M.	205	45	4 1/2
Fort Belknap, "	"	Monday & Thursday,	9:00 A.M.	146 1/2	32 1/2	4 1/2
Fort Chadbourn, "	"	Tuesday & Friday,	3:15 P.M.	136	30 1/4	4 1/2
Pecos River, (Em. Crossing.)	"	Thursday & Sunday,	3:45 A.M.	165	36 1/2	4 1/2
El Paso,	"	Saturday & Tuesday	11:00 A.M.	248 1/2	55 1/4	4 1/2
Soldier's Farewell	"	Sunday & Wednesday,	8:30 P.M.	150	33 1/2	4 1/2
Tucson, Arizona	"	Tuesday & Friday,	1:30 P.M.	184 1/2	41	4 1/2
Gila River, ^a "	"	Wednesday & Saturday	9:00 P.M.	141	31 1/2	4 1/2
Fort Yuma, Cal.	"	Friday & Monday,	3:00 A.M.	135	30	4 1/2
San Bernardino "	"	Saturday & Tuesday,	11:00 P.M.	200	44	4 1/2
Ft. Tejon, (Via Los Angeles)	"	Monday & Thursday,	7:30 A.M.	150	32 1/2	4 1/2
Visalia, "	"	Tuesday & Friday,	11:30 A.M.	127	28	4 1/2
Firebaugh's Ferry "	"	Wednesday & Saturday	5:30 A.M.	82	18	4 1/2
(Arrive) San Francisco,	"	Thursday & Sunday,	8:30 A.M.	163	27	6

^a The station referred to on Gila River, is 40 miles west of Maricopa Wells.

GOING EAST

<i>Leave</i>		<i>Days</i>	<i>Hour</i>	<i>Distance Place to Place</i>	<i>Time allowed</i>	<i>Av'ge Miles per Hour</i>
San Francisco, Cal.	Every	Monday & Thursday,	8:00 A.M.	(Miles)	(No. Hours)	
Firebaugh's Ferry, "	"	Tuesday & Friday,	11:00 A.M.	163	27	6
Visalia, "	"	Wednesday & Saturday,	5:00 A.M.	82	18	4 1/2
Ft. Tejon, (Via Los	"	Thursday & Sunday,	9:00 A.M.	127	28	4 1/2
Angelos to)	"	Friday & Monday,	5:30 P.M.	150	32 1/2	4 1/2
San Bernardino, "	"	Sunday & Wednesday,	1:30 P.M.	200	44	4 1/2
Fort Yuma, "	"	Monday & Thursday,	7:30 P.M.	135	30	4 1/2
Gila River, ^a Arizona	"	Wednesday & Saturday,	3:00 A.M.	141	31 1/2	4 1/2
Tucson, "	"	Thursday & Sunday,	8:00 P.M.	184 1/2	41	4 1/2
Soldier's Farewell,	"	Saturday & Tuesday,	5:30 A.M.	150	33 1/2	4 1/2
El Paso, Tex.	"	Monday & Thursday,	12:45 P.M.	248 1/2	55 1/4	4 1/2
Pecos River,	"	Wednesday & Saturday,	1:15 A.M.	165	36 1/2	4 1/2
(Em. Crossing)	"	Thursday & Sunday,	7:30 A.M.	136	30 1/4	4 1/2
Fort Chadbourn, "	"	Friday & Monday,	4:00 P.M.	146 1/2	32 1/2	4 1/2
Fort Belknap, "	"	Sunday & Wednesday,	1:00 P.M.	205	45	4 1/2
Sherman, "	"	Monday & Thursday,	6:15 A.M.	65	17 1/4	3 7/9
Fort Smith, Ark.	"	Tuesday & Friday,	8:45 A.M.	100	26 1/2	3 7/9
Fayetteville, Mo.	"	Wednesday & Saturday,	10:30 P.M.	143	37 3/4	3 7/9
Springfield, "	"	Thursday & Sunday,		160	10	16
P. R. R. Terminus,	"					
(Arrive) St. Louis, Mo.,						
& Memphis, Tenn.						

^a The station referred to on Gila River, is 40 miles west of Maricopa Wells.

This Schedule may not be exact—Superintendents, Agents, Station-men, Conductors, Drivers and all employees are particularly directed to use every possible exertion to get the Stages through in quick time, even though they may be ahead of this time.

If they are behind this time, it will be necessary to urge the animals on to the highest speed that they can be driven without injury.

Remember that no allowance is made in the time for ferries, changing teams, &c. It is therefore necessary that each driver increase his speed over the average per hour enough to gain the necessary time for meals, changing teams, crossing ferries, &c.

Every person in the Company's employ will always bear in mind that each minute of time is of importance. If each driver on the route loses fifteen (15) minutes, it would make a total loss of time, on the entire route, of twenty-five (25) hours, or, more than one day. If each one loses ten (10) minutes it would make a total loss of sixteen and one half (16 1/2) hours, or, the best part of a day.

On the contrary, if each driver gains that amount of time, it leaves a margin of time against accidents and extra delays.

All hands will see the great necessity of promptness and dispatch: every minute of time is valuable as the Company are under heavy forfeit if the mail is behind time.

Conductors must note the hour and date of departure from Stations, the causes of delay, if any, and all particulars. They must also report the same fully to their respective Superintendents.

JOHN BUTTERFIELD.

Pres't.

Document Sets for Texas and the Southwest in U.S. History



J'Nell L. Pate