

## Silent Charley—Charley Parkhurst

*By John V. Young*

"UPSET—The stage for Santa Cruz, on Thursday last, containing eight or nine passengers, upset about a mile beyond Mountain Charley's, and rolled down a gulch about 150 feet. The passengers luckily tumbled out, and no one was seriously injured. The accident was caused by some hogs rushing down the hill and jumping among the horses while making a sharp turn around a point, causing them to jump off the grade."

This account of a freak accident appeared in the weekly San Jose newspaper in 1865 and gives a graphic picture of what was then a more or less commonplace incident on the stage road and a firsthand view of the life of the times.

The hogs, incidentally, belonged to Mountain Charley McKiernan, and were more than half-wild. The accident took place at the curve at the head of Lynch hill, which was not named for the famous roping custom but for a "retired" blackbirder and ex-pirate, David Lynch, who had a little ranch in the area, according to the recollections of Herbert Martin from his father, who lived close by.

Among the amusing anecdotes of the road was one which describes the predecessor of the modern automobile horn—the teamster's throaty whistle. So narrow was the Jones road, and so sharp the turns, that encountering another team suddenly was as hazardous as meeting a speeding automobile on a narrow mountain road of today. As a warning, the drivers of that time were accustomed to sounding a blast with their lips as they approached each curve, a sound that carried an incredible distance.

This was the mountain scene when Lexington began back in the 1850s, and when Charley Parkhurst, noted stage driver and a typical character of the period, first appeared to make history in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Charley's full story has never been told and probably never will be, but what little is known gives an intimate picture of the customs, manners, and a little of the dress of the times among that hardy breed—the stagecoach drivers. Almost nothing is known of Charley's early years, but from about 1868 on, Charley became one of the most famous of the drivers on the San Jose-Santa Cruz stage run.

Kicked in the face by a horse, Charley had lost one eye and wore a black patch over the socket. This patch, accompanied by habitually stained lips from an excess of tobacco chewing and a saturnine cast of countenance, made Charley as tough-looking as the most hardened and bewhiskered denizen of the mountains. Oddly enough, Charley went smooth-shaven, unusual for men of the period. Profane to the extreme, cold and unfriendly in manner, Charley presented every appearance of an odd but nonetheless typical "whip" of the 1860s. Until the day Charley died, nobody suspected that Charley was a woman.

She was born in 1812 under the name of Charlotte Parkhurst. She came to California in the early 1850s and drove a stage in the mining country, always masquerading as a man.

Like most knights of the overland stage, she wore a muffler, gloves, great-coat of buffalo hide, and a cap of the same material. Under this she wore blue jeans turned up to reveal the cuffs of a very good pair of trousers, according to Major A. N. Judd, whose recollections of Charley Parkhurst appeared in the Santa Cruz Surf on October 18, 1917. Major Judd said he had traced Charley's history back to the Indian days on the overland stage, where she made her first public appearance.

She learned her trade at a livery stable in Vermont, a job she obtained by pretending to be a young man, this according to another account written by John Royce of San Jose in the Santa Cruz Sentinel in 1917. Royce states that Charley rapidly became the most expert driver in the state first with two horses, then four, and finally six. She was always entrusted with driving parties requiring a showy, but careful driver.

According to Major Judd's account, Charley drove overland stage for three years for Ben Holiday out of Council Bluffs, Iowa. Judd's story of her experiences on this job still makes for lively reading:

*I suppose that here I should make a distinction between the Souix, Blackfeet and others in the East, and the Indians that infested the western slopes of the Sierra, for they all had their fling at Charley Parkhurst.*

*Old Ben Holiday was the moving spirit in the overland stage line. He had his office at Council Bluffs, Iowa. Monday morning was his busy day in hiring drivers to replace those whose hair had been raised either by fear or by the scalping knife.*

*The Indians were not the most fearsome thing to dread, for on the mountain roads were the perils of the steep and narrow grade, so narrow that on some turns the singletree had cut grooves into the banks on the high side, and often the other side was a thousand feet down to the stopping place if the vehicle should go over.*

*It was these dangers that also thinned out drivers fast, and the one under discussion that brought Charley into the limelight for the first time.*

*There were perhaps 50 applicants for the positions that were open on the stage line.*

*'Ever driven stage? How long? How near could you drive to the edge of a bluff with a sheer drop of a thousand feet with perfect safety to your self, your team and passengers?' These were some of the questions fired at the prospective drivers by Holiday.*

*Many answered until nearer and nearer they got to the edge. Finally, one was willing to take a chance with half the tire over the edge on one wheel.*

*About this time Charley's turn came around, and by this time he (she) was getting uneasy. After putting between her jaws a fresh chew, she closed her jackknife that had done duty for years not only for cutting tobacco but for mending harness or skinning a deer.*

*She got up and had almost reached the door before saying over her shoulder, 'I wouldn't do at all for you, Mr. Holiday. I'd stay as far away from the edge of that cliff as the hubs would let me.'*

*'You are just the man I want.' said Holiday.*

*For three years Charley held that job without an accident, and would have stayed longer, but the Mormons were of a marrying disposition and rather than disclose her secret by marrying a few dames with polygamous proclivities, she left for the Pacific Coast. After a short spell on the Pacheco Pass run, she joined up with the Danforth Porter lines that connected with the Santa Cruz stage line.*

*Charley was a great 'whip,' and when she pulled into a stage stop with the beautifully equipped 20-passenger Concord coach, drawn by six mustangs as mettlesome as quarter-horses, it was an inspiring sight indeed.*

*Every move played its part. One would note with what dexterity she plied the brakes just right in order to stop with the door just opposite the main entrance to the hotel.*

*How deftly she whirled the six-horse lash around the stock and carefully laid it up on the deck, all unconscious of the onlookers, and as she wrapped the lines around the footbrake she would turn to hand down the treasure box or mail sack, or perhaps a venturesome female who had insisted on riding with the driver.*

Major Judd recalls how, when the teams were running all out, the stagecoach often would rock back and forth like a boat on its long, leather springs called "thorough-braces."

*Those springs each weighed 50 pounds, and their going price was a dollar a pound, thus a pair would cost not less than \$100 each with its many leaves forming a long oval hoop forming a cradle for the body of the coach. With clamps and fasteners, they made riding as easy as a boat ride in a gentle swell and with more joy for the passengers.*

But this romantic picture faded, Major Judd relates, when the railroad reached the Twelve Mile House (out of Santa Cruz) where Charley had a station on the Santa Cruz–Los Gatos road which was known as Sand Hill Station.

Out of the business of driving stage or tending a station, Charley began raising stock on Bean Creek. Between times she hauled for neighbors, until approaching old age made her infirm. She retired on money raised from the sale of her stock to Charley Moss of Moss Landing and lived for a time near the old Seven Mile House.

Her partner in the cattle venture was another "bachelor," Frank Woodward, and from time to time one or another of the two would work for Major Judd, hauling wood.

In her last days, Charley was attended, all unsuspecting, by a twelve-year-old son of the Harmon family named George, to whom Charley willed all her meager possessions in return for his kindness. The possessions amounted to about \$600 deposited with Otto Stoesser in Watsonville.

Charley died in her lonely cabin in December, 1879, an event that created quite a furor. It was when she was "laid out" that it was discovered for the first time that Charley was a woman.

Charley's partner, Woodward, it is recorded, waxed profane to the extreme when he learned of the deception practiced on him for so many years.

## **Sources**

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