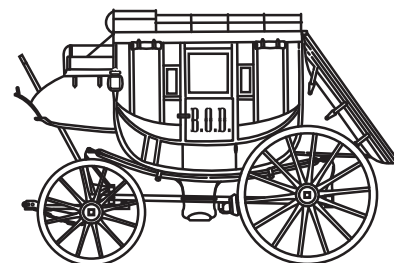


# SMOKY HILL TRAIL ASSOCIATION QUARTERLY OVERLAND DESPATCH



Volume XVI No. II

*Remember the Smoky Hill Trail*

Summer 2024



To all our Smoky Hill Trail Association members, we had our spring meeting in Quinter, KS on March 27. After a very productive meeting, Jim Mayhew announced that he would be stepping down as Vice President at the upcoming convention,

due to problems with his eyesight. As he was leaving Quinter that day, he presented me with some flyers and an outline for upcoming conventions. Then he drove away. On April 1st, just five days later, we received word that Jim had passed away. To say we were in shock would be the understatement of the year. He will be missed by all who knew him. Our heartfelt condolences go out to Pattie and family, along with his brother Tanner and family.

Please keep them in your prayers.

Thank you,



Robert Andersen  
Smoky Hill Trail Association  
President

## Trail of Memories -- a tribute to my brother Jim

By Tanner Mayhew

Brother Jim was 10 years old when I arrived into the family. That decade of time was the only thing that separated us. My earliest recollection of Jim was when he dressed my cousin Greg and I up like Indians -- complete with groin cloth (mom's dish towels and a rope), face paint and feathers. I was a kindergartner at the time. Jim took us across the street to the neighborhood grocery store to show us off. Grandma worked there and gave us all a chocolate fudge bar! Jim was working to earn a boy scout merit badge. As a Scout he reached the highest level of achievement receiving the Eagle Scout badge. *This was Jim.*

By the time I was eight, Jim left home (Marysville, KS) to attend college in Fairbury, Nebraska. While on a visit there with the folks he showed us the discoveries he made in the community. He was excited for me to try this tasty drink

called a "Green River" that was served at the local Hested's Store. As I reflect; he was always opening the world to me to new and different things. He worked part time at Montgomery Wards where he bought a yellow fishing pole for my birthday...my first very own Zebco 33 reel and pole! *It caught a lot of fish!*

A short time later he enlisted in the Army. I remember going with dad to the bus station to see Jim off to boot camp. It was sad to see him go. After his enlistment period he joined the national guard and then attended Officers Candidate School where he became an "Officer and a Gentleman" with the rank of First Lieutenant. A short time later the Kansas National Guard was mobilized into active federal service and Jim was sent to Fort Carson, Colorado. He soon reached the rank of Second Lieutenant at Fort Carson. The folks and I made a trip to Colorado to visit. While there Jim took me to my first hockey game at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs. We had just sat down and "WHAM" a hockey puck hit the seat next to him -- neither of us take our eyes off the puck after that! Peggy Fleming was visiting and honored the crowd with a skating performance at halftime. It seemed something good always happened when I was with my brother.

Jim was transferred to Fairbanks, Alaska and while there he achieved the rank of Captain. He talked my folks into letting me come up to spend the summer. Surprisingly mom let me go. At the age of 16 I boarded a plane in Lincoln and changed planes in Denver to go to Seattle. There I boarded the Alaskan Airline for last leg to Fairbanks. Shortly after takeoff from Seattle, the stewardess offered those small bottles of liquor to add to my drink. I told her, "I don't think I'm old enough" and she said, "we are over international waters and there is no age limit law". My thoughts were; I wonder what Jim would think if I got off the plane tipsy!

In the land of the midnight sun was one of the most memorable adventures I had with my brother. We made a trek north from Fairbanks through the White Mountains where we walked on the tundra. We stopped and panned for gold -- found a few flakes too! During the trip hundreds of snowshoe rabbits crisscrossed in front of us which slowed us down. The road ended when we reached a small village called Circle which is located on the Arctic Circle. A large Eskimo Totem pole stood proudly along with a few small buildings there. Also a directional sign (with city names and miles to) was posted there. One arrow pointing southeast that read: Sunflower, Kansas 3,500 miles; reminding us how far from home we were. We spent that night in Jim's Volkswagen bus parked beside the wide and roaring Yukon River.

Continued next page ➡

## NEW MEMBERS

### *Welcome to the Trail.*

Janet Kejr  
Salina, KS

Joe Martell  
Kiowa, CO

Ken and Elaine Ptacek  
Colby, KS

Joseph Newton  
Knox City, MO

Britt & Linda Colle  
McPherson, KS

### OVERLAND DESPATCH

is the official publication of the Smoky Hill Trail Association, Inc., a nonprofit, 501(c)(3), corporation chartered in the State of Kansas. Primary missions of the Association are to preserve, protect, promote and interpret the Smoky Hill Trail for the benefit of present and future generations, and to promote awareness of the historical legacy associated with the remnants and locations that represent the historical trail and Butterfield's Overland Despatch (BOD) and its successors as well as the railroad that replaced the overland trail. Letters and articles are welcome and can be submitted to [smokyhilltrailassn@gmail.com](mailto:smokyhilltrailassn@gmail.com) or mailed to the address below.

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### MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the Association is open to all. Members receive the **OVERLAND DESPATCH** newsletter quarterly. Memberships are on the upcoming calendar year until December 31. Annual dues are:

- \$25.00 for Individual
- \$30.00 for Family / Living at same address
- \$40.00 for Institution / Nonprofit Organizations
- \$50.00 for Business
- \$100.00 for Patron (Support the Organization)
- \$500.00 Lifetime Membership\*

\* May be paid in quarterly installments during one or two years.

Membership fees may be paid through PayPal using email address: [smokyhilltrailassn@gmail.com](mailto:smokyhilltrailassn@gmail.com) or mailed to the address below. Other donations are always welcome and appreciated.

Smoky Hill Trail Association  
PO Box 978 / Hays, KS 67601

### SHTA OFFICERS

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Newsletter Editor: Tanner Mayhew, St. Joseph, MO

Continued From Front Page

Jim was to be deployed at the end of August to Vietnam. We loaded the Volkswagen bus and headed down the Alcan Highway back to Kansas. At that time the Alcan Highway was just rocks and gravel. We saw a lot of wildlife and scenery along the way. We joked and laughed which shortened the long journey home.

Jim's tour of duty in Vietnam seemed like a lifetime on the family at home. Walter Cronkite's evening news and his daily death count weighed heavy on all of us. Jim received his first company to command in Vietnam. He got all his men home safe. His men presented him with a cigarette lighter with the Big Red One logo that was inscribed with the words "Mother Mayhew". Jim never talked much about Vietnam; he left it behind him. It was years before he even told me that he received two Bronze Stars. After his return back to the states; Jim was stationed at Fort Riley where he commanded the post for a period of time. He ended his military career reaching the rank of Major.

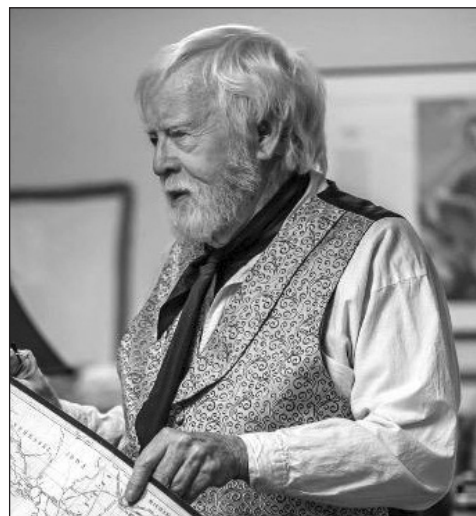
Over the years, Jim or "Bro" as I called him, would call and say, "let's take a trip". I cannot count the many road trips we made heading down the road to search out something of interest. We traveled the roads in Kansas, Colorado and Oklahoma to see sights like Bent's Fort, Fort Supply, Fort Larned, Fort Scott, and searched out markers along the Cattle Trails, Santa Fe Trail, Oregon Trail and Smoky Hill Trail...so many road trip memories that I cherish.

Jim was a birder and got me hooked bird watching with him. We took many trips to see a specific bird so he could add it to his birding life list. We traveled to northern Michigan in hopes to see a Kirtland's Warbler; which we did! Together we partook in Audubon Christmas Bird Counts and froze our butts off, but it was the best of times. Jim birding life list was over 600 different breeds of birds. He served a term as the president of the Kansas Ornithological Society. *This was Jim.*

Anything my brother took interest in he went after whole hog - there was no halfway... but; it was always in a fun way.

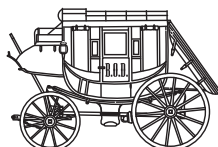
Jim had a passion for the ways of life of the past and the Smoky Hill Trail, as I know you that are reading this do. He found a sincere camaraderie with the Smoky Hill Trail Association. He loved the saga of the trail, the gold rush and the people he met along the way.

I miss Bro dearly. It is hard not to be sad, but I am blessed to have so many experiences and fond memories to hold him in my heart.



Jim Mayhew

September 22, 1943 - April 1, 2024





**Editor:** Following is the continuation of the story that was written by author and poet, Bayard Taylor. This story is from his book - Colorado: A Summer Trip, published in 1867. He writes about his trip from Philadelphia to Denver, crossing the Smoky Hill Trail and returning across the state of Nebraska.

Printed in the last issue of the Overland Despatch is the portion of his travel from Kansas City to Fort Ellsworth. This issue we will follow along with him from Fort Ellsworth to Denver.



Bayard Taylor (1825-1878) Author

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Continued from OD Vol 16, No. 1

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## CROSSING THE PLAINS

At Fort Ellsworth I was informed that the military station between Fossil Creek and Big Creek had been discontinued; yet this is not the case. Toward sunset the driver handed me a mail-bag, asking me to pick out the letters for Fort Fletcher (Fort Hays), the name given to this post; and the assortment had scarcely been made, before the coach was surrounded by a crowd of soldiers (apparently new recruits) clamoring vociferously, first for tobacco and then for newspapers. It was difficult to decide which want was the keener. I gave them what cigars I had in my pocket, but was destitute of papers, and could only inform them that the Fenians had not yet taken Montreal. I felt no less disappointed than the poor fellows themselves, that I could not better supply their wants.

My companions were no less interested than myself in the projected

railroad routes to Colorado, and we therefore scanned the Smoky Hill Valley from every elevation, with regard to two considerations, — settlement and railroad ties. So far, everything was favorable. The Smoky Hill was everywhere marked by a line of timber, and we noticed that at each junction with its numerous affluents, there were large groves. The bluffs on the southern side were frequently covered, to their summits, with a growth of red cedar. All the bottom-land is exceedingly rich and well adapted for farming, while the broad, rolling uplands furnish the finest pasturage in the world. Near Big Creek, coal has been found, and there are also rumors of tin and copper. With a sufficient force the road may be extended from Fort Riley to Big Creek in a year's time, and carry permanent settlement with it.

At Big Creek Station, which we reached after dark, we took on board Mr. Scott, the Superintendent of the Middle Division of the road. There was still no moon, and, fortunately, no mosquitoes also. The night was fresh, yet scarcely cool enough to require the blankets I had procured for the journey. Half-asleep and half-awake, now lulled into slumber by the slowness of our progress, now bumped into angry wakefulness in crossing some deep gully, we dragged through the night, and in the morning found our selves at Downer's, forty-four miles further. Here an empty coach had just arrived from Denver, the third I had met going eastward without passengers. The Colorado people, it seems, are still afraid of this route.

Our breakfast here was another "square meal," — pork fat and half-baked biscuits. At all the stations the people complained of lack of supplies; some were destitute of everything but beans. They gave us what they had, and we were very willing to pay a dollar rather than go hungry; but one would naturally expect that where a stage goes decent food can be transported. As there is but one change of teams at the stations, we were obliged to take the same mules which had just arrived from Cornell Springs, twenty miles further; hence our progress was very slow and discouraging. On arriving there, a second tired team was harnessed to

carry us thirty miles, to Monument Station; so that we lost full four hours during this day's journey.

The driver of the Downer coach informed us that the Cheyennes had appeared at Monument Station the day before, but they had committed no depredations, and appeared to be friendly. The chief had even invited him, on account of his red hair, to join their tribe. Mr. Scott, however, who has had eight years' experience of the Indians of the Plains, seemed to place little faith in their professions. They are reported to have declared that they must and will retain the Smoky Hill country, as it is the best range for game between the Missouri and the Rocky Mountains.

From the first rise after leaving Downer's, we saw, far away to the right, a long range of chalk bluffs, shining against a background of dark blue cloud. They seemed like a stretch of the southern coast of England, breasting the rolling green ocean of the Plains. Over great swells, covered with the short, sweet buffalo-grass, and starred with patches of crimson anemone, pink verberna, unknown orange and salmon-red flowers, we drove for two hours, watching the isolated towers and fantastic masses of rock detach themselves from the line of the bluff. They assumed the strangest and most unexpected forms. Here was a feudal castle of the Middle Ages; there a shattered, irregular obelisk, or broken pyramid; and finally, rising alone from the level of a meadow, we beheld three perpendicular towers, eighty feet high, resting on a common base. Their crests were of a bright orange hue, fading downward into white. Beyond them extended the shattered battlements of a city, sparkling in the sunshine. The blue ridges beyond the Smoky Hill, ten miles away, formed the background of this remarkable picture.

The green of the Plains here began to be varied with belts of dark purple, which we found to be what is called "bunch-grass," a very fine and wiry growth, but said to be excellent forage. At a distance it resembled the heather bloom on the English moors. Over these brilliant green and purple tints, the snowy fortresses of chalk started up with a dazzling effect. There is not

Continued next page ➡

the least approach to monotony in the scenery of the Plains; but continual, in inspiring change.

We were to have another new experience that day. Our route, for some distance, lay over an elevated plateau, around which, for an hour or two, dark thunder-clouds collected. Out of one of these dropped a curtain of rain, gray in the center, but of an intense indigo hue at the edges. It slowly passed us on the north, split, from one minute to another, by streaks of vivid rose-colored lightning, followed by deafening detonating peals; when, just as we seemed to have escaped, it suddenly, wheeled and burst upon us.

It was like a white squall on a tropic sea. We had not lowered the canvas curtains of the coach before a dam gave way over our heads, and a torrent of mingled wind, rain, hail, and thunder overwhelmed us. The driver turned his mules as far as possible away from the wind, and stopped; the coach rocked and reeled as if about to overturn; the hail smote like volleys of musketry, and in less than fifteen minutes the whole plain lay four inches under water. I have never witnessed anything even approaching the violence of this storm; it was a marvel that the mules escaped with their lives. The bullets of hail were nearly as large as pigeons' eggs, and the lightning played around us like a succession of Bengal fires. We laid the rifles in the bottom of the coach, and for half an hour sat in silence, holding down the curtain, and expecting every moment to be overturned. Then the tornado suddenly took breath, commenced again twice or thrice, and ceased as unexpectedly as it came.

For a short time the road was a swift stream, and the tufts of buffalo-grass rose out of an inundated plain, but the water soon found its level, and our journey was not delayed, as we had cause to fear. Presently Mr. Scott descried a huge rattlesnake, and we stopped the coach and jumped out. The rattles were too wet to give any sound, and the snake endeavored to escape. A German frontiers man who was with us fired a revolver which stunned rather than wounded the reptile. Then, poising a knife, he threw it with such a secure aim that the snake's head was pinned to the earth. Cutting off the rattles, which I appropriated, we did him no further injury.

The Monument Station is so called from a collection of quadrangular chalk towers, which rise directly from the plain. At first sight, they resemble a deserted city, with huge bastioned walls; but on a nearer approach they separate into detached masses, some of which suggest colossal sitting statues. It is almost impossible to divest one's mind of the impression that these are the remains of human art. The station-house is built of large blocks, cut out with a hatchet and cemented with raw clay. Here we found stone-ware instead of pewter, although the viands were about as "square" as those at the preceding stations. The Indians had not again made their appearance. They professed to have a camp four or five miles further down the Smoky Hill, and I was a little disappointed that, after so many rumors and warnings, I was likely to get over the Plains without seeing a single redskin.

During this day's journey we kept more away from the Smoky Hill, but

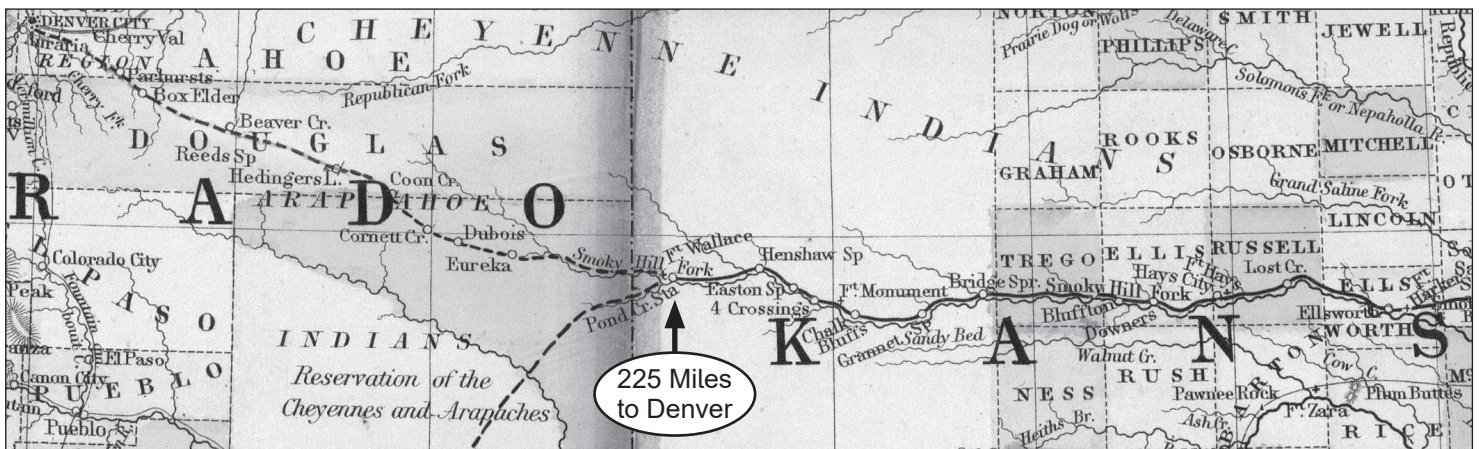
we still saw, from time to time, its line of timber and cedared bluffs in the distance. Near Monument Station we found it much diminished in volume, but with good, arable bottom-lands. Up to this point, two hundred and fifty miles west of Fort Riley, we could not detect the least impediment to the construction of a railroad. Nor was there yet any indication of the Great American Desert.

We had now shorter stations for some distance, and made the distance to Pond Creek, forty-six miles, by two o'clock in the morning. It was scarcely possible to sleep, and yet we were too much fatigued to keep entirely awake. I have an indistinct impression that there was a two-story frame house at Pond Creek, and that we were delayed there for an hour or two.

I know that Mr. Scott informed us, as he took leave, that we were two hundred and twenty-five miles from Denver.

At this point there is a new military post, called Fort Wallace. Fort Lyon, on the Arkansas, is but forty-five miles distant, in a southwestern direction, and the road thence to Santa Fe about four hundred miles further. If the Eastern Branch of the Pacific Railroad should follow the Smoky Hill route (which is certainly the shortest and most practicable), Pond Creek will probably become, for a while, the starting-point of New Mexican travel and traffic.

We reached Willow Springs, eighteen miles, by sunrise. A forlorn place it was! The station-men lived in holes cut in a high clay bank, and their mules had similar half-subterranean lodgings. I saw no provisions, and





**Elasmosaur**  
Length 34 ft.



Officers at Fort Wallace  
Dr. Theophilus Turner is standing second from the left. Turner found the fossils of the Plesiosaur *Elasmosaurus* near Fort Wallace.



*The same year that Bayard Taylor's made his trip across the Smoky Hill Trail, army surgeon Theophilus Turner discovered bones of a large fossil reptile in a ravine. Turner had no paleontological experience but he recognized the remains as belonging to an "extinct monster". He is later credited for discovering the first known elasmosaur.*

*Turner died of a sickness at Fort Wallace on July 27, 1869 at the age of 28.*

they said they could give us no breakfast. The team was speedily changed, and we set out for Cheyenne Wells, twenty-five miles distant, through a country more nearly approaching barrenness than any we had yet seen. The timber almost entirely disappeared; the lateral streams ceased, and finally the Smoky Hill itself, now so near its source, became a bed of waterless sand. Still there was buffalo grass everywhere, and the antelopes were very abundant. The fresh, delicious air of the Plains — only equaled by that of the African Desert — refreshed us after the wearisome night, and our appetites became keen with enforced fasting.

At Cheyenne Wells we found a large and handsome frame stable for the mules, but no dwelling. The people lived in a natural cave, extending for some thirty feet under the bluff. But there was a woman, and when we saw her we augured good fortunes. Truly enough, under the roof of conglomerate limestone, in the cave's dim twilight, we sat down to antelope steak, tomatoes, bread, pickles, and potatoes — a royal meal, after two days of detestable fare.

Here we saw the last of Smoky Hill Fork. The road strikes across a broad plateau for twenty miles, and then descends to the Big Sandy, a branch of the Arkansas. It is a fine, hard, natural highway, over which we made good time. The country swarmed with antelopes, which provoked several

shots from the coach, but without effect. Two of them, to our surprise, appeared to be pursuing a large gray wolf. They made boldly after it as often as it stopped, and were evidently bent on driving it quite away from their pasturage. While we were speculating on their movements, a lovely little fawn sprang up from the grass and made away over the hills. The old antelopes were evidently its parents, and their boldness in facing and intimidating the wolf was now explained.

From the western edge of the water-shed, we overlooked many a league of brown, monotonous, treeless country, through which meandered, not the water, but the dry, sandy bed of the Big Sandy. We really seemed to have reached at last the Great American Desert. At the stage station we found two men living in a hole in the ground, with nothing but alkaline water to offer us. I tasted it, and finding the flavor not disagreeable, drank — which brought later woe upon me. Beyond this point even the buffalo-grass died out, and we rolled along in the burning sun and acrid dust, over dreary, gray undulations of weeds and cactus. At Grady's Station, eighteen miles further, there was but one man, a lonely troglodyte, burrowing in the bank like a cliff-swallow.

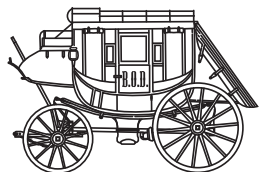
Very soon, however, the grass began to appear again, the country became green, and the signs of desolation

vanished. A distance of forty miles embraced all we had seen of the Desert — in fact, all there is of it upon this route. In these forty miles a scattered settlement here and there is not impossible, but is very unlikely. The adjoining country, for a hundred miles both to the east and west, is adapted to grazing, and will support a moderate population. The road, however, will soon be carried from Cheyenne Wells up the divide, entirely avoiding the Big Sandy. This new route, I am told, shortens the distance to Denver by twenty miles, and has good grass and water all the way. Toward evening I was struck with a peculiar tint in the shadow of a cloud along the horizon. After half an hour's study, I pronounced it to be a mountain — and, of course, Pike's Peak. My fellow travelers dissented at first from this opinion, but as the clouds dissolved, the outline of a snowy peak came out sharp and clear. It was something like that of the Jungfrau, but stood alone, surrounded by no sisterhood of Alps. At sunset we saw not only Pike's Peak, but the tops of the Sangre de Cristo range, and the Spanish Peaks, like little pimples on the line of the horizon.

What a night followed! The hard "hack" bumped and jolted over the rough roads; we were flung backward and forward, right and left, pummeled, pounded, and bruised, not only out of sleep, but out of temper, and into pain and exasperation. At one o'clock yesterday morning we were at Hedingers Lake, ninety-seven miles from Denver. I thanked Heaven that no fifth night in the coach awaited me. The hours dragged on with incredible slowness, until dawn brought some refreshment, showing us a country of high hills, occasional pine groves, and far-flashing snowy mountains.

Before sunset we drove into Denver; but of the last day's ride tomorrow!....

*Editor: This is where I'll end the story. I hope you enjoyed the ride along with Bayard across the Smoky Hill Trail. If you wish, you can read the book in it's entirety on these websites: Open Library at - [https://openlibrary.org/works/OL1147162W/Colorado\\_a\\_summer\\_trip](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL1147162W/Colorado_a_summer_trip) - OR - the Library of Congress at <https://www.loc.gov/item/rc01000442/>*



**Editor:** It's exciting to hear from a member that had family which lived along the Smoky Hill Trail back in the day. The following story was submitted by Brian Smith about his third Great Grandfather James M. Coombs.

Brian is authoring a book about James' exploits. He wishes to ask our readers if they have any information or happen to discover any information about James M. Coombs, to please share it with him. You may email to: [smokyhilltrailasn@gmail.com](mailto:smokyhilltrailasn@gmail.com) and we will forward it on to Brian.

Enjoy..... **Part 1**

## **James Miles Coombs – Biography** by Brian Smith

In August 1903, poet Muriel Strode authored the following quote in *The Open Journal*: "I will not follow where the path may lead, but I will go where there is no path, and I will leave a trail." This line embodies the adventurous spirit of early settlers of the American West. This biography will introduce you to one of those settlers, and my third great grandfather, James M. Coombs.

As an amateur genealogist, I have been researching James and his family for over twenty years. I was fortunate enough to have a close connection to my grandmother, who was in turn close to her grandmother and her sister – James' daughters. Stories, photographs, and ephemera passed down to me through them have helped guide my research. My cousins (once removed) Georgiana and Daniel Christman also researched and co-authored a book in 2005 titled *James Miles Coombs and Deborah Coombs – Their Times, Travels and Families*.

One of the resources that book was based on was *The United States Biographical Dictionary, Kansas Volume*, published in 1879 by S. Lewis and Company in Chicago and Kansas City. Pages 409 and 410 contain a biography for James "Miller" Coombs. Family records show his middle name as "Miles," but the fact that the family owns an original signed copy of the book and the vital statistic information has been verified indicates an error on the publisher's part, or a fact that is unknown at this point. The biography contains many "grand" descriptions typical of the writing of the day, and the effort to validate each fact is how I found the Smoky Hill Trail Association.

As I have become more serious about family research, I have been reviewing all the information I have and applying the GPS – Genealogical Proof Standard. As it turns out, much of what I understood as facts have changed, thanks to the digitization and collaboration made possible by advancing technologies. In particular, the digitization of newspapers has provided an almost monthly accounting of James' activities. I am happy to provide a list of citations but will omit them here in the interest of brevity (there are over 300 news articles alone.)

I'm sharing some of what I have discovered about James and his family in hopes that my fellow association members may be able to help me uncover new information, dispel myths and add to the already colorful story of my relative. In turn, I hope that this small vignette of a life well-lived opens some new avenues of research into the history of the Smoky Hill story.



## **James Miles Coombs**

### **Early Life and Marriage (1824-1857)**

James Miles Coombs was born in Bangor, Maine on the 24th of December 1824 to Samuel W Coombs and Sarah Mayhew – four years after Maine became a state apart from Massachusetts. He had four known siblings – one brother, William Leonard (1831-1918), and three sisters: Sarah H (1828-1920), Diannah (1831-1918) and Hannah Lorraine (1838-1922). His early life and childhood are not well documented, but it is believed that his

paternal grandfather, Samuel Coombs, and his maternal grandfather, William Mayhew, were both participants in the Revolutionary war. His father, Samuel Coombs, reportedly served in the War of 1812. James' death certificate lists no parents to confirm, unfortunately.

Having so many men in his life who experienced first-hand the struggle for independence and had the resolve to take action to ensure it impacted James at a young age. The themes of civil service and upholding the law appear throughout James' life. While it may have been possible for James to attend college or follow a military career, it appears that he chose to serve Bangor as a firefighter with Engine #6, a hand-operated pumper known as the "Tiger."

Nothing factual has been located concerning the meeting and courtship of Deborah, whose last name was also Coombs, but from a different family line and part of Maine. According to town records, Deborah was born on May 3rd, 1823, in Bradford, Maine to Benjamin Coombs, Jr and Betsey (Bradbury) Coombs. James and Deborah were married on April 26th, 1846, in Bangor. James and Deborah had six children: Helen Elizabeth (1847-1886), Samuel Benjamin (1849-1850), Mary Augusta (1851-1852), Della Mary (1855-1911), Clara Bently (1858-1928), Charles J (1861-1898) and Elbert E (1863-1877). (Clara is my second great-grandmother.)

### **New Adventures and Changes (1848-1857)**

One of the earliest newspaper articles found to date for James in his adult life is from the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* in August of 1848. James had written a letter to the paper describing the death at sea of a man named Alfred Dwinal, of Bangor. The event happened in the Gulf of Mexico, which was on a popular route when transiting to California via Central America. James would have been around twenty-four years old at the time, approximately seven months after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California, and a little under two years before California statehood in 1850. It is not yet known if James was on that trip for the gold rush or for some other reason.

There is no indication that Deborah and new daughter Helen were with



James on that trip. However, there are numerous newspaper notices starting in 1849 stating that the family had “letters waiting at the post office,” which often would happen when people traveled for extended periods.

The 1850 U.S. census from Bangor shows James, Deborah, Helen and Samuel living there. James does not have a listed occupation, but had real estate valued at \$400. A few weeks after the census was taken, Samuel died on the 10th of October. Mary Augusta was born shortly after in 1851, but she also died in infancy in May of 1852.

It is likely that James was unable to be present at Mary’s funeral, as he is listed as a passenger on the ship “Blonde” that arrived in San Francisco on April 29th, 1852. On December 19th, 1853, the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* announced James’ return to Bangor in good health, bearing newspapers from California.

By 1853, various civil records show most of James’ brothers and sisters have moved to California, leaving their sister Sarah and parents in Maine. James and Deborah left Maine shortly thereafter, as evidenced by the birth of Della in New York in October of 1855 and Clara in Wisconsin in January of 1858.

During his time in California and Kansas Territory (which encompassed parts of present-day Colorado), the Lewis biography stated that James engaged in mining in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and worked in a wholesale mercantile house. It added that he was involved in various endeavors, including leading a group confronting gamblers and thieves who had taken control of the government in Placerville (then known as Hangtown). These assertions have yet to be confirmed, but the mining and law enforcement narrative does align with contemporary news articles published later.

## Move to Kansas and Role in Free-State Movement (1858-1859)

Attending the Kansas Old Settler’s meeting in Bismarck Grove in 1879, James signed the register, in which he indicated he settled in Lawrence, Kansas on May 15th, 1858. The register also states his place and date

of birth correctly. At the time of the meeting, James and his family were living in Brookville, Kansas.

James moved to Lawrence only four years after its establishment and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and just a few days short of two years from the sacking of the town by the pro-slavery settlers. It was in these circumstances that James became actively involved in the free-state movement. The Lewis biography states that he aligned himself with General/Senator James H. Lane and was recognized as an ardent supporter of the cause. The book also claims he was involved with the protection of abolitionist John Doy after he was freed from jail in Missouri in July of 1859. I have been unable to locate any evidence supporting these claims, but James was most certainly aware of the events.



Dr. John Doy Arrested  
for Missouri Slave Abduction  
January 25, 1859

*Dr. John Doy and his son, Charles, are arrested 12 miles outside of Lawrence for having freed 13 slaves and attempting to take them north to Nebraska. They are arraigned at Weston, Missouri and incarcerated at Platte City. Charles is set free after a March 20th trial, but Dr. Doy is sentenced to five years. Free-Staters from Kansas then break Doy out of jail in St. Joseph, Missouri, on July 23, 1859.*

## Colorado and Continued Adventures (1860-1865)

Another certainty, as we know, is taxes - James owed \$1.00 for delinquent taxes in Lawrence, as posted on page 3 of the *Western Home Journal* from March 22nd, 1860. However, taxes and three daughters were apparently not enough to dissuade James and Deborah from venturing further West. A *Western Home Journal* reporter described meeting James and his wife and a small group from Lawrence traveling the Platte River route in Colorado on the 21st and 28th of June 1860. Of course, changes were afoot that would prevent such free travel for a time.

Kansas achieved statehood on January 29th, 1861, three short months before the opening of the Civil War. I have had a difficult time determining what role James played during the conflict, if any. His earlier association

with Senator Lane could provide support for an entry found in the Colorado Territory Legislative Journal from November of 1862. That document lists a “James M. Coombs” as an Ensign in the “Elbert Guards,” a state militia unit organized in Colorado Territory. The unit was raised at the direction of John Evans, second Governor of Colorado Territory. There is also a muster card showing James Coombs as being part of Cos. K and H of the 6th Kansas Cavalry. There are also several mentions in newspaper articles of James being a veteran of the war, and a member of the Grand Army of the Republic veteran’s organization, based on newspaper articles written later about his business ventures and exploits. I would doubt that James would have been an infantryman.

Add to this the fact that James would have been thirty-six years old or so at the outset of the war – a bit on the older side. He is referred to in later years with the “Captain” sobriquet, but it does not seem to stem from Civil War service. James and Deborah also welcomed Charles James into the family on May 31st, 1861, in Nevada, Colorado Territory. In what may be a coincidence, their last son was born on March 10th, 1863, in Colorado Territory...named Elbert.

Whether or not James fought as a soldier, his travels put him in and around military posts throughout Kansas and Colorado. In fact, he was called to testify in the hearings concerning the Sand Creek massacre, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Cheyenne and Arapaho. James was present at Fort Lyon before, during and after the event. Before the attack, he had a conversation with John Chivington, the commanding officer who led the attack, and recounted details of the conversation to the commission. He then answered cross-examination questions by Colonel Chivington. These details were captured in the report to the Secretary of War by the commission in November of 1864.

One of the other witnesses called was Lieutenant James D. Cannon, who died mysteriously in the Tremont House hotel in Denver in July of 1865. It was widely rumored that Lieutenant

Continued next page

Cannon was murdered by sympathizers of Colonel Chivington. James Coombs posted a thank you note to well-wishers of the Cannon family on their behalf in the *Daily Rocky Mountain News* on August 8th, 1865. This would seem to indicate that James was a personal friend or acquaintance of the Lieutenant.

## Business Ventures and Danger (1866-1869)

While the Civil War concluded in 1865, the Westward expansion was still in full swing, with railroads bringing wealth and the promise of enterprise to the interior of the nation. We all know stage lines preceded the railroads, and many railroads followed the same paths established by the hacks. A three-part history article published in the *Ellsworth (KS) Reporter* between July 13th and 20th of 1876 provides some detail about the coming of the railroad in Ellsworth County, and a hint into James' work.

The article states James was working for the Kansas City and Santa Fe stage and mail line in 1866. At the time, the company was planning to leave the Santa Fe trail and connect their line to the Union Pacific Eastern Division railroad. James was directed to "... establish a station at some point between Clear and Plum creeks." Around June 1st, James headed out in search of the perfect spot, stopping to rest at "Harry Anderson's place" on Alum Creek. James "...selected a spot about five miles from Clear Creek, and one mile east of the Smoky, near a large spring and small stream." The article goes on to say that the station was "...completed by the month of July and it became one of the most important on the Western half of the route." Given the primitive conditions and risk of flooding, James built a boat in 1867 to facilitate the crossing of the Smoky Hill River by coaches when the river was high. This location was near Fort Harker. The town of Ellsworth was originally established just outside Fort Harker in 1867, but a flood destroyed the town on June 8th of that year. James was instrumental in rescuing people and property with his boat during the flooding. Ellsworth was able to rebuild later, and people were still arriving with the promise of the railroad, but the consequences

of progressive settlement and displacement of Native American tribes were becoming worse.

Eight days after the flood on June 16th, two workers near Plum Creek, some fourteen miles from Fort Harker, were approached by a small group of Native American warriors. Shots were fired at the workers, with one of them being badly wounded. The remaining worker was able to drag his companion into a shelter and survive until the warriors left the area. The survivor swam across the Smoky Hill River and was able to get James and some others to bring his boat to retrieve the wounded man. The rescue became a recovery operation when they found the wounded man had died. James took the body to Fort Harker so arrangements could be made. This event was recorded on page 468 of the July 27th, 1867, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, with an illustration of James' boat.



The attacks on settlers also came from within. Also in 1867, the Ellsworth history article provides details of the theft of a horse from James Boyd by Mexican horse thieves. The thieves drew Boyd out of his house at gunpoint and stole the horse. Boyd alerted James at his mail station. The pair were readying to track the thieves when they were joined by John Hudson Cornell. John would soon marry James' daughter Helen on April 4th, 1868, in Douglas County, but he was a member of the posse at that point. The article describes James and his partners confronting the five thieves in a log cabin, and eventually taking them into custody back to Fort Harker.

James, Deborah and the children continued to experience threats from Native American war parties as he conducted his affairs over the next two

years. In most accounts, his actions were in assisting the wounded and relaying information about the nature of attacks he witnessed. I was unable to find any articles that place James in a gunfight or direct conflict with Native American warriors. My grandmother related the story about her grandmother (Clara Bently Coombs) escaping an attack by boarding a locomotive and crashing out of the roundhouse. I have so far been unable to locate any articles describing the event. One online source stated the attack happened in Brookville in the summer of 1867 as part of "Hancock's War," but there was no attribution.

## Mining His Business (1867-1872)

With all of the events previously mentioned happening in 1867, including a cholera outbreak at Fort Harker, James took on the role of Superintendent of the Ellsworth Coal Mining Company. He was elected in Junction City, Kansas on January 17th, 1867. The president of the company was Colonel Edward Wanshear Wynkoop, who also commanded the garrison at Fort Lyon in Colorado Territory in from early 1864 to November of that year and arranged a peace treaty with the Cheyenne at the Smoky Hill Council. Another familiar name on the Board of Directors for the Ellsworth Coal Mine Company was **Daniel Adams Butterfield**, son of John Warren Butterfield, who founded the Overland Mail Company. The appointment is described in an article from the *Junction City Weekly Union* on the 26th of January 1867.

**Union General Daniel Adams Butterfield**

Daniel was wounded at Gettysburg and sent away to recuperate. He then served in William T. Sherman's Atlanta campaign, before retiring from front-line service through illness. He later received the Medal of Honor.

*Daniel is credited with the bugle composition of "Taps"*



While profit was certainly a motivator, James brought his knowledge of mining gained from his time in California and Colorado Territory. In fact, an article from *The Daily Kansas Tribune* dated September 19th, 1869, describes how James spearheaded the operation in 1866 – while still in the employ of the stage company: □

Early in the winter of 1866, when it was definitely settled that the Union Pacific Railway, E.D., would be extended up the valley of the Smoky Hill river, it became apparent to all that the discovery of coal in paying quantities at any point on the line of the road West of the sixth principal Meridian would prove of inestimable advantage, both to the road and to the entire country for many miles on either side.

A number of parties expressed an intention of prosecuting a search for coal, but J.M. Coombs, Esq., then a resident of Fort Ellsworth (now Fort Harker), was the first to inaugurate active operations. Mr. Coombs secured the services of Henry Bradley, an old guide and scout, and during the winter made several trips, prospecting along the banks of the Smoky Hill, and found indications of coal at a number of points. Early in the spring he decided to commence work, at a point known at the time as Cedar Bluffs, on the bank of the river, twenty miles above Fort Ellsworth. In a short time the fact was established that coal existed there, and up to the present time it is the only point on the river where it has been found in paying quantities.

After satisfying himself on this point, Mr. Coombs proceeded to organize a company, under the mining laws of Kansas, claiming the right to mine coal at any point, for a distance of ten miles on each side of the river, commencing at the sixth principal meridian, and running west to the boundary of the State. The incorporators of the company were J. M. Coombs, D. A. Butterfield, E. W. Kingsbury, J. G. Losee, E. W. Wynkoop, U.B. Osborne, H. D. McMeekin, W. N. Roberts and Henry Bradley.

The company soon commenced work, and continued operations for about a year, when some of the members became dissatisfied because

good coal had not yet been found, and withdrew from the company. At about the same time an Indian outbreak occurred in the vicinity, and work was stopped in consequence. On the 16th of March 1868, the company was reorganized, several new members taken in, and work resumed. In a short time thereafter a good quality of coal was found, which was thoroughly tested in July, with an engine on the railroad, giving excellent satisfaction for crop coal. □

James and his business partners believed they'd be able to sell their coal to the railroad, profiting from the expansion of the road West. One thing that James likely did not count on was being arrested for fraud, accused by two former business partners. After S.W. Eldridge and Morgan Cronkwhite left the company, it was reorganized and named the Pacific Coal Mining Company for a time. The two men accused James of obtaining money under false pretenses in February of 1870. James was initially arrested and released on bail, and then exonerated of any wrongdoing a few weeks later. James explained the issue in detail and defended himself in an op-ed article from the *Daily Kansas Tribune* on January 11th, 1870.

It is apparent that James was deeply involved in the operation of the mine. He lived close enough to it, and about eighteen miles away from Fort Harker, that he occasionally had to help mine employees who were being harassed by both bandits and warriors. The 1870 federal census for Wilson Station, Kansas shows James and the family as one of twelve living there at the time. However, the threat of attacks by Native American war parties was diminished by 1872, and there is evidence to support the idea that James had a hand in brokering peace. In a U.S. Senate report on the finances of the Department of the Interior for Fiscal Years 1870-1871, J. M. Coombs is listed as receiving \$2,035 for "Fulfilling treaties with Arapahoes and Cheyennes of Upper Arkansas River."

With relative safety established, James and the remaining partners decided to lease the coal mine to J. T. Stackhouse from Keokuk, Iowa in March of 1872 for a period of fifty years. Breaking away from the mining

business was a strategic move for James. His involvement with the mail station at Fort Harker likely made him privy to changes to services in the area. *The Wichita Eagle* ran a notice on November 13th, 1873, for the United States Mail soliciting bids for mail routes in "Kansas and Indian Territory." In particular, route 33112, between Ellsworth and Peace, was the next target for James' entrepreneurial foray. The contract period for the service was July 1st, 1874, through June 30th, 1878. In the April 23rd, 1874, issue of the *Ellsworth Reporter*, they relayed an article from the *Salina Journal* that confirms James won the bid for the mail hack. The story stated "...the route is the only one connecting the Kansas Pacific and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe roads in one day's travel." The route started and ended at the Sherman House hotel in Ellsworth three times each week. James began placing advertisements for the service in local papers as soon as he was able.

**STAGE LINE!**  
—:0:—  
THE ELLSWORTH & PEACE  
**MAIL HACK!**  
J. M. COOMBS, Proprietor.  
**L**EAVES Ellsworth every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, (via Atlanta) for Peace, on the A. T. & S. F. R. R. And leaves Peace every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. 42.

### A New Sheriff in Town(s) (1871-1875)

The mail hack represented a change in business focus for James, and it seems that he also desired a change of residence – a different place to tackle new challenges and opportunities. As mentioned above, James and Deborah were living in Wilson station in 1870. The change can be seen in an article from the *Saline County Journal* dated July 6th, 1871, stating that James opened a livery stable in Brookville, Kansas. Advertisements for the "Pioneer Stable" begin to appear in August of 1871. On March 7th, 1872, the *Ellsworth Reporter* describes James

Continued next page ➡



Kansas Pacific Railway Roundhouse in Brookville. Photo by Robert Benecke 1873

and his son, Charles (Charley) coordinating and participating in the response to a fire in Brookville, Kansas on March 3rd.

While there is no evidence for the reasons for the family moving, it is likely that, at 47 years old, James was looking for stability and a new way to leverage profit from an association with the railroad. The Kansas Pacific had established a presence there by 1867, with Brookville platted by the railroad in April of 1870. Also, Brookville was at the western end of the line from Salina at that time, which meant cattle, visitors and cargo would transit through the town.

**Mr. L. M. Tuttle has resigned the position of city marshal and Mr. J. M. Coombs has been appointed in his place. Mr. Coombs has the necessary nerve and grit and will make an efficient officer.**

In November of 1874, James was appointed as Marshal in Brookville, taking over from L.M. Tuttle. Since James was running the mail hack out of Ellsworth at the time, he may have moved to Brookville to live, and was "commuting" to Ellsworth and Fort Harker to mind the business on occasion. Work from home and Zoom were not available at the time, and by all accounts, James would want to keep a watchful eye on all his affairs!

Not all days were routine for James when enforcing the law. *The Saline County Journal* from March 11th, 1875, related: "Marshall Coombs, in response to a telegram from Ellsworth, started for Lincoln County yesterday to arrest a young man by the name of Eaton (a herder), who is charged with

having murdered a man named John Lyden." In his zeal to apprehend Eaton, the same newspaper later printed: "Marshal Coombs has been competing with 'Sheridan's Ride.' The day he went to Lincoln County in search of young Eaton he rode from Salina to Lincoln Center - a distance of forty-five miles - in less than four hours."

Interestingly, the 1875 Kansas state census found James and family living in Salina on March 1st, not Brookville. This change seemed to happen every so often as James took on new ventures, or the family was simply there when the enumerator stopped by. *The Saline County Journal* from September 11th of 1879 shows Deborah Coombs purchasing Lot 1, Block 59 in Brookville from the county, but I have so far been unable to locate the records for the livery and any other properties James may have purchased prior to that.

The Marshal position probably did not satisfy James financially, because in July of 1875, he accepted a position as a policeman for the railroad. This position was paid for by the railroad, and basically consisted of watching the depot when trains were loading or unloading.

**Next Up - The Law, Hospitality and Politics... (To be continued)**

**Editor: Thank You Brian Smith for sharing this story -- looking forward to the next part!**

*Members - If you discover any info on James Miles Coombs while researching, please email that info to: smokyhilltrailassn@gmail.com and we will forward to Brian. Thank You!*

**PIONEER**

**LIVERY, FEED AND SALE**

**STABLE,**

**Corner of 2d & Perry streets,**

*(OPPOSITE THE "LOVE STAR SALOON.")*

**Brookville, Saline Co., Kansas.**

—

**J. M. COOMBS, : : : Proprietor.**

—

**Saddle Horses**

**And LIVERY RIGS**

always ready at a moment's notice. Particular attention given to the feed and care of stock.  
I make a special business of

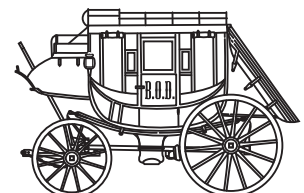
**Locating Texas Herds,**

guaranteeing good water and pasturage:

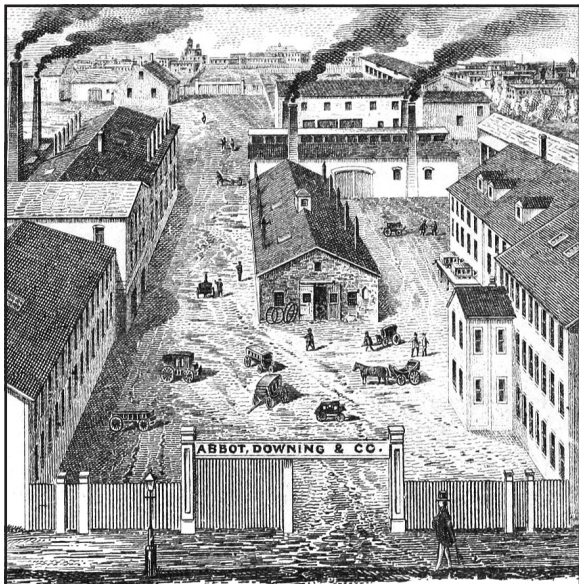
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Donagan & Dyer, livery men, Salina, Kansas.







## THE MUD WAGON

The Abbott & Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire, produced the popular and elegant Concord stagecoach that most folks vision when think of a western stagecoach. They also constructed a style of stagecoach called a Mud Wagon. The mud wagon was lighter, smaller and could be purchased for about one-third of the price of a Concord stagecoach.

Mud wagons were good vehicles for rough mountain roads due to their lower center of gravity. The reinsman or driver was only slightly elevated above the passengers. The canvas roof over the passengers would bear no weight. The only protection provided from bad weather and dusty roads were the canvas side-curtains that could be rolled up and fastened. Mud wagons proved true to their name by being able to move through trails and roads during rain storms; unlike the Concord stagecoach, which could be mired in bad weather. A mud wagon can be easily identified by its low appearance and its boxy square design.

## Report from our Mapping and Marking Committee

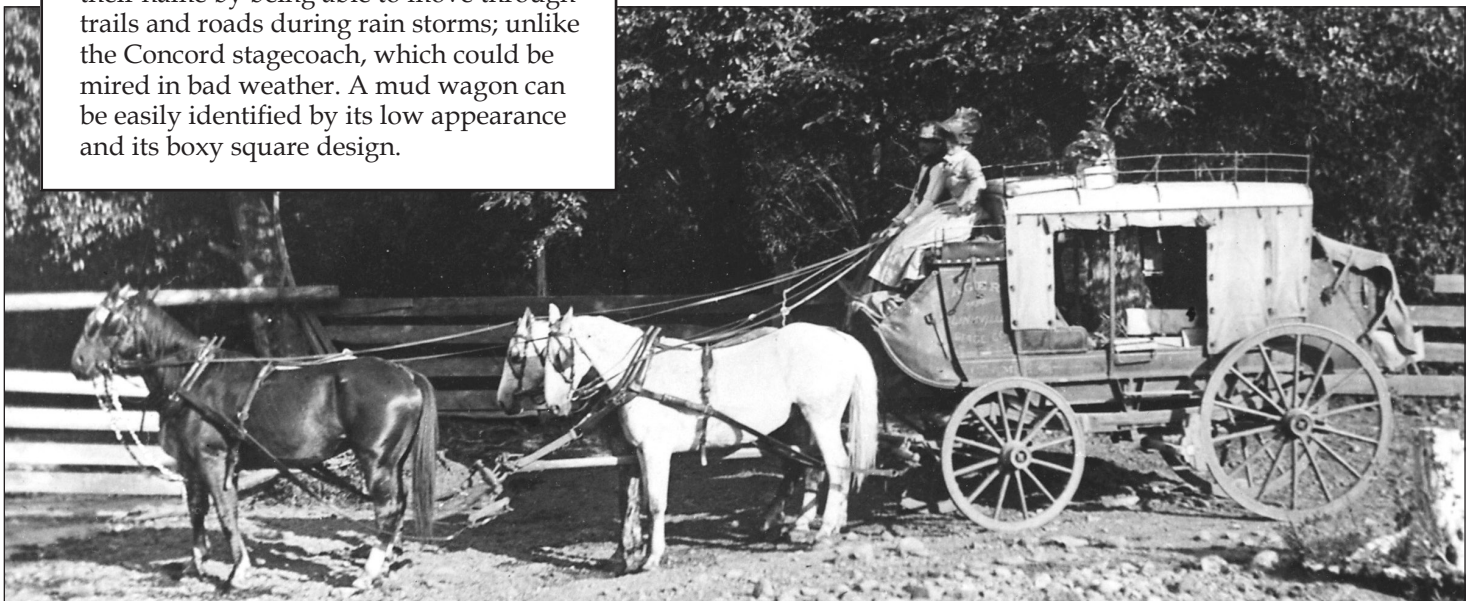
By Nancy Arendt

On May 18, 2024, I drove to Ken Griffin's home in Hays to pick up these items: a five gallon bucket of dry cement mix and road and aerial maps of Ellis County.

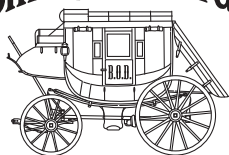
I then traveled to the Phillip Ranch that is located south east of Hays. There I met with Mike and Sandy Sprague to pick up these items: four cement forms, two 80# bags of Portland cement, three trowels, a partial can of water seal, six concrete slabs that are about 1 inch thick bearing the BOD marker imprint (premade imprints) and the imprint form itself. Sandy also provided copies of Raynesford's maps for each county and some stage stations. These items, except for the maps and imprint form, were taken to Neil Unrein in Gorham. Neil had agreed to straighten, reset and replace the markers identified in my completed survey. Leo Oliva had delivered to Neil the two markers which he had stored. In the next few weeks, Neil will be picking up the markers that are being prepared south of Kanopolis and begin the next step of the project.

At the last board meeting it was discussed and voted not to do the imprint onsite because time has revealed the imprint erodes and is unreadable on the majority of the markers. We have discovered that using a premade imprint slab is more durable. The premade imprint can be pressed into the fresh concrete that is poured onsite at the reset markers. We then apply a water sealer to help protect it. The imprint form, which I currently have at my home, will be returned to Sandy Sprague when the project is done.

*Excellent News! Thank you for your report Nancy and "Good Job" to all that are involved in making this happen!*



Smoky Hill Trail



ASSOCIATION

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Hays, KS 67601

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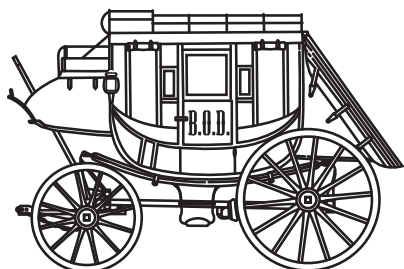
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## IMPORTANT!

Please look above and check the  
YEAR DATE on your mailing  
address. If it does not say 2024, your  
membership needs to be renewed.

*If it says LIFE - you're good!*

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Questions, Ideas, Comments, Newsletter Articles

Email To: [smokyhilltrailassn@gmail.com](mailto:smokyhilltrailassn@gmail.com)

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A Special "Thank You!"  
to Marilyn Copeland,  
SHTA Treasurer,  
for all that she does for  
our organization.  
Marilyn is always  
willing to lend a hand  
and help out.

The photo shows  
Marilyn receiving  
an "Award of Merit"  
plaque from  
Bob Andersen in  
appreciation from  
the association.

