

AT THE ATWOOD HOUSE

Before The Train Came To Town

by Spencer Grey

During most of the 18th century traveling short distances was usually on foot or horseback, even to destinations as far from Chatham as Boston. It was only in the last decade of the century that mail service between Boston and the Cape began. Mail between Boston and Barnstable was delivered on horseback, and the trip took two days.

The preferred mode of travel in the first half of the 19th century was by packet boat, even after the establishment of stage coach service, as a packet could take you to Boston in seven hours, but the stage coach took two to three days. Early in the period most travelers from Chatham took the packet from Brewster, with two vessels, the Chatham and the Sarah, sailing from Brewster to Boston from 1830 on, dividing the trade from Chatham. Passengers traveled from Chatham to Brewster in open wagons, usually provided by farmers looking for additional income. The first direct packet between Chatham and Boston was the Canton, built by Barsillai Harding about 1830 and sailing from his wharf at the east end of Water Street. He was rivaled in the packet trade a few years later by Josiah Hardy, who also had docks at the end of Water Street and sailed packets to Boston. The many Chatham mariners who sailed on ships from Boston to ports around the world used the packet services to join their vessels or to return home at the end of a voyage to faraway ports. By the last quarter of the century packets were sailing from Chatham to Nantucket and New Bedford, some from the Water Street wharves but others from Stage Harbor.

Travel on packet ships was a great social leveler, as 25 to 50 passengers from all walks of life—the squire, the shopkeeper, the farmer, the doctor or the minister—would spend seven hours together, crowded into cabins or on decks. Conversations could range from original sin to the price of codfish, or would turn to personal experiences when other topics were exhausted. When conversation lagged, the passengers might resort to a game of checkers or a few hands of a card game known as “old sledge.” Besides the passengers, packets carried cargo, such as barrels of molasses that had arrived in Boston on ships trading in the Caribbean, hogsheads of rum, boxes of salt from Chatham’s salt works, sides of beef, carcasses of mutton or pork, and jars of vinegar.

Although few people traveled from Chatham to Boston by stage coach because the trip took the better part of three days, when the railroad from Boston to Sandwich began operating in 1848, travel between the depots in Sandwich or Yarmouth and Chatham was most efficiently accomplished by stage coach. Just as with travel by packet boat, the stage coach was an equalizing experience because the passengers, though few, likely would be a mixture of the wealthy leaders of a town and the average store proprietor, laborer, or fisherman. Because of the rutted, bumpy, dirt roads between Chatham and Yarmouth or Sandwich, riding in the coaches was uncomfortable and tiring. In warmer months the small interior of the coach would be hot and stifling, while in winter it would be bitterly cold. To keep passengers’ feet reasonably warm, the floor was strewn with straw. The front and back seats that faced each other were padded and reasonably comfortable, but between those was the middle seat that was merely a bench with a strap for a back rest. Trunks were strapped on the back but the mail bags were piled on the roof. In winter the driver who rode on top was unprotected from the cold or the blizzards, while the four horses did their best to plow through the large snow drifts.

In 1864 the Chatham coach was owned by Rufus Smith, but a few years after that he sold the line to Whitman Howes and Simeon Nickerson, who continued to run the Chatham stage coaches until the railroad came to Chatham in 1887. All along the line between Chatham and the train depot, Whit and Sim were household names. In “Cape Cod Yesterdays” Joseph Lincoln describes his experience as young boy while riding in the stage coach from Harwich to Chatham: *At long last, after the evening train had come and gone, after the Chatham mailbag or bags had been hoisted to the coach roof, and the trunks strapped on the rack astern, you and the other passengers climbed into the black, stuffy interior, Whit or Sim mounted on the box, the whip cracked. “Git dap, you!” And you were off. That was a ride! Lonely and dark and chill. Yes, and smelly. The leather strap and the*

seat coverings smelled; and the straw on the floor—if your legs were long enough you were supposed to bury your feet in it to keep them warm—had its own smell. The coach, bouncing in the ruts, careened like a boat in a rough sea, and tossed me hither and yon.

In 1887 when railroad service to Chatham began, the old coaches came creaking into town for the last time with their load of passengers and trunks. The townspeople welcomed the trains that could whisk them off to Boston in just a few hours, but they surely would miss the snap of the whip and the crack of the well-oiled axles as they rattled over the hills to the distant sound of the trumpet announcing their imminent arrival.



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