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The Chidester Stage Lines

By Matt Rotherert, Sr.

The citizens of Camden found the stage lines an important part of their lives during the 1800's. The famous overland stage lines from the Mississippi River went to California. The Butterfield and Holladay Lines are well known by historians to this day.

In the 1840's stage coaches carried mail and passengers from the southern half of the state into Camden. It was the head of navigation on the Ouachita River from New Orleans.

In the 1850's a stage route was established from Camden to the little settlement of Gaines Landing on the Mississippi River where the big river boats could be boarded, and from Camden to Hot Springs and Little Rock in central Arkansas.

The development of these stage lines was quickly improved by the arrival of Colonel John T. Chidester in 1857. He wanted to extend stage coach operations from Camden's central location to the entire southwest.

Born in Cooperstown, New York on November 1, 1818, he operated stage lines in Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, moving westward with the advance of railroads in the east.

He began his Arkansas stage operations as a subcontractor, asked to improve the Little Rock to Fort Smith stage of the Butterfield Overland Mail Route from Memphis to San Francisco. The slowness of this route had brought many complaints.

Chidester had a conference with postal authorities in Washington in December 1858, straightened out the troubles, and formed the Chidester, Reeside and Company stage line of four-horse mail coaches. That year he moved his family to Camden, and in 1859 he took over the route to Gaines Landing, making the 170 mile trip in 28 hours.

His "Great Western Coach Line" used four-horse, nine-passenger coaches. A Camden business man, Mr. R. F. Kellam, wrote this in his diary August 11, 1859:

Left home for New York on the Gaines Landing Stage. Supper at Pennington Hotel, Warren. Stage ran all night, slept some, jolted, jolt, thump and bump. Morning came, we enter the Mississippi bottoms. Rough and tumble all on causeway. Dinner at Lowry's. Good dinner and excellent water. Arrive at Gaines Landing at 4 PM--hot, tired, worn out, full of dirt and dust.

He later wrote "during the rainy winter [1859-60] the streets were knee deep in mud, bridges washed away--sleet and snow."

The Civil War interrupted the stage mail and passenger business. After the war the shortage of horses, the worn out equipment, the washed out bridges,

the unrepaired roads and the lack of capital made the problems very difficult.

In 1866 Colonel Chidester started to rebuild the stage system in Arkansas. An article in the Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, September 25, 1866 stated:

We are glad these [mail] contracts have been taken by someone who will execute them in a manner that will afford our people the convenience of regular mails. Colonel Chidester has had much experience and we believe he has the disposition, as well as the means, to fulfill his obligation.

A tale was told that a Chidester stagecoach was held up by the famous bandit, Jesse James, near Gulpha Creek on the Hot Springs route. We do not have a record of this holdup, but a typical Jesse James affair would begin when his group of five horsemen, often wearing old army overcoats, would suddenly surround the coach. The leader would shout at the driver, "Stop, or we'll blow your head off."

"Get out quick," was the next stern order, and outside, three of the highwaymen stood in a row by the door, their pistols cocked, a fourth was off on the side with a shotgun and a fifth was on the opposite side.

After ordering the passengers out, the outlaws made them form a circle and they began collecting watches, jewelry, and money from them. As soon as the outlaw leader completed the circle, he would ask if any of the victims had been in the Confederate Army. If any said he

had been, and could give a satisfactory statement about his regiment, command and officers, his watch and money were returned to him. The highwaymen would say they were leaving to go south and would depart in that direction, but no doubt they soon turned in the direction of their hideout.

In 1874 Chidester's line advertised "first class coaches, careful, safe and sober drivers, and horses second to none in the state." Colonel Chidester operated the last major link of a transcontinental stage line through rough and uncivilized territory. In 1878 his mail and passenger line from Fort Worth, Texas to Fort Yuma, Arizona was called the Arkansas, Texas and Pacific Mail Company.

His son, Frank B. Chidester, was the superintendent, using 60 Concord coaches, 2,000 horses and 300 men, plus the services of a United States Cavalry detachment, to carry the mail the 1560 miles from Fort Worth to Fort Yuma.

The Concord Stage Coach was made in Concord, New Hampshire. It was considered the very best coach made in the United States at that time. They made four-and-six-horse coaches that seated nine people plus the driver and guard. Made of the best materials available, this company had been building coaches since 1826 and was immortalized by their great Wells Fargo coaches.

The Chidester home in Camden, built in 1847, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in June 1971. It is maintained with the original furnishings, by the Ouachita County Historical Society and is open to the public.

Old stage coach and railroad passes dated in the 1880s were found in a dresser drawer in the Chidester home. Many other stage coach lines in the west, and even some railroads, sent passes to Chidester in exchange for his pass. These very interesting records of these old lines include one from the Western Stage Company, operating in thirteen western states and territories. Others were from the North Louisiana Stage Company; the Steam Ferryboat "John Overton" connecting Hopefield, Arkansas with Memphis; the Great Western Railroad; the Vicksburg, Shreveport and Pacific Railroad; and one of his own passes, "Arkansas, Texas and Pacific Mail Co., Camden, Arkansas."