

THE BLACK CANYON STAGE

BY WILL C. BARNES

“Forty Years Ago, November 15, 1892.”

The old timer scanned the “forty years ago” column in his Arizona paper. Two of the items caught his eye.

Hon. William O. O'Neill, Chairman of the Territorial Worlds Fair Commission arrived in the city last night by stage from Prescott.

Just below this another.

Hon. Will C. Barnes of Apache County is in the city from his cattle ranch near Holbrook. He will be a visitor to the territorial grand lodge of Masons during the coming week. He came down from Prescott via the Black Canyon Stage.

As he read the items the old timer smiled. He recalled the day very well.

Six o'clock in the morning, dark and cold, a foot of snow on the ground. The huge Concord “thorough brace” stage stood in front of the hotel at Prescott. The passengers were already climbing into its dark depths. He recalled them all as if it had been but yesterday: two women of middle age, Sisters of Charity, dressed in their distinctive garb; William O. O'Neill alias “Bucky,” tall, dark and handsome, politician, sheriff, outlaw hunter (a few years later as captain of Rough Riders he was the first soldier to fall at San Juan hill in the Spanish war); Price Behan, politician and ex-sheriff; a young commercial traveller from San Francisco, making his first visit to Arizona; and the writer, range cattleman of that day; together with the stage driver, a typical character of the old stage days.

Every nook and corner of the lumbering vehicle was filled with U. S. mail sacks and Wells Fargo express mat-

ter. The passengers stowed themselves away inside the coach as best they could. For the first five or six miles the road was decidedly up grade. The snow made progress very slow. Under the weather conditions the driver had the seat on top all to himself. At the top of the grade, six miles from Prescott, the driver pulled up the team and clambered from his high seat. Daylight had come, but the sun did not penetrate the heavy clouds. Muttering and cursing to himself, the driver stumbled through the deep snow to the heads of the leaders. O'Neill, watching him from the "swing" seat of the coach, saw him pull a bottle from his overcoat pocket and take a long drink. A minute later the driver took his seat on top, gathered up his reins, threw the brake off, and gave a wild Apache yell. The team started off down the steep grade at a keen trot, the coach swaying and rocking like a ship in a heavy sea. It took but a few minutes to convince the men inside the coach that the driver was drunk and could not or would not control his team.

The heavy coach rocked and plunged along the rough road, skidded recklessly around the curves, and dropped into deep chuck holes covered by the snow. The driver with shrill yells even encouraged his team to increase their speed. The long lash curled over their backs as they tore down the rough grade. Drunk as he was, he wielded the whip with skill and accuracy.

Inside the coach, the four men hastily decided on a plan of action. No time was to be lost. Prompt action alone could avert a bad accident. On the back seat the two Sisters of Charity clung, one to the other, as the coach rushed along.

Behan, a deputy United States Marshal at the time, sat inside on the left or near side. The drunken driver on top was clear over on the other side, half hidden by the top of the coach. Behan opened the door carefully, stood on the iron step, reached up and grasped the iron railing that ran around the top. Before doing this both he and O'Neill took their heavy six shooters from the leather holsters at their sides and shoved the weapons inside their trousers' waistband for quick action. They also took off their heavy

overcoats. Standing on the iron step Behan gave a foot to O'Neill like a woman mounting a saddle horse, a lusty boost landed him on top the stage directly back of the driver's seat. Behan's left arm shot round that worthy's neck with a choking grip while his right hand grabbed the reins from his clutching fingers. O'Neill, closely behind, pulled the Jehu from his seat and back onto the top of the stage. A clout on the side of his head from O'Neill's heavy six shooter cured all desire on his part to fight back.

A pair of handcuffs was snapped onto his wrists. Then as the team was stopped he was dragged unceremoniously to the ground, the big leather "boot" behind the stage was unstrapped, and with his hands still in the embrace of the steel shackles the gentleman was bundled into the boot, the cover pulled back into place and strapped down tightly. He made no further trouble.

At noon, under Behan's expert driving, the stage reached the regular mail station where always a new driver and team were furnished. The drunken driver, not yet sobered up, was turned over to the station keeper to be sent back to Prescott as a prisoner on the up stage.

No other driver being available, Behan agreed to drive the team down to the next station, Gillette, some thirty-five miles south. The new team was a notable one in that region. Four fine mules, each as white as snow, perfectly matched as to size and gait;—one of the most picturesque and unusual stage teams in all the far west. Young, lively and full of pep they were "just rarin' to go," when hitched up. The road now ran down the mountain side on a narrow shelf cut from the rocky walls. There was a mass of sharp curves and dangerous corners. As the stage dropped down into the lower altitudes it grew milder. The snow disappeared, deep mud took its place. Rain also began to fall in torrents. Progress was very slow. Darkness found the stage at the head of a long, narrow grade which ran for fifteen miles down the Black canyon.

The "down" and "up" stages usually met on this stretch. At every turn each driver stopped his team and "stopped, looked and listened." Each peered into the stygian dark-

ness, seeking the dim blinking lights of the other stage, a two-candle power lighting system that didn't shed its beams very far ahead. Each driver carried a long tin horn such as New England fishing smacks use in fogs. These were blown at regular intervals. A long blast was a warning; two short "toots" an acknowledgement. The system called for the "up" stage to crawl into the first wide place in the road and wait for the "down" stage.

Crude as it was the method worked fairly well for years. Occasionally a crash of thunder or some other noise would kill the sound of the horn. Then the two stages met perhaps at some point where passing was not possible. Then the "up" team was unhitched and with two men at the tongue of the stage to guide it the heavy vehicle was rolled carefully back down the grade until a place was reached where it could be snuggled into a corner and allow the other to pass. There was plenty of adventure and excitement travelling in those days.

Where the Black canyon came out into the vast open valley in which lay the Salt river and the city of Phoenix, a lively mountain stream, the Agua Fria (Cold Water) must be forded to reach the stage station on the southern side. The "up" driver warned his side partner that this stream "was running banks full and more."

It was nearly midnight when the stage rolled out of the dark canyon onto the gravelly bank of the Agua Fria. The river was surely booming. O'Neill had taken turns driving and both men were soaked through and through and half frozen. The night air was keen and raw. Behan stopped the stage a few yards from the water's edge. Across the boiling, turbulent river they could see the lights of the station. They blinked and glowed in the dark like will-o'-the-wisps. Over there warmth and food awaited the weary, chilled travellers.

The four men stood at the water's edge in the pelting rain studying the situation. Adventurers all, used to meeting difficult situations, they personally were willing to risk the crossing. But the two Sisters. What of them? The men went to the stage door. The two women were huddled

together in the dark stage shivering with cold. O'Neill told them briefly of the situation, of the danger in crossing under such conditions. They could wait for morning and hope for a drop in the stream's flow.

It was a scene for a word painter. The pouring rain, an occasional flash of lightning, a sound of thunder; the stage with its dim candles only emphasizing the darkness the more, the four white mules like great ghosts, and the dripping men. Behind them were the dark walls of the canyon. Ahead were the swift waters of the stream; across them, the station lights, food, shelter, and warmth.

Clear eyed and unafraid the elder of the two women spoke. "Gentlemen," she said, "we are but two frail women. You men must decide. We leave it all to your good judgement. All of us are in the hands of our heavenly Father. He will surely answer our prayers for guidance and success."

Thus encouraged the four men stood on the gravelly bank and made their plans for the crossing. Just below the crossing, the stream entered the canyon again. No one knew how deep the water was on the crossing. If deep enough to float the heavy stage the whole affair might be swept down stream into the canyon and all be lost.

Cold and numbed as they were, no one could possibly hope to swim in such a swift current. It was agreed that Behan was to drive. A water bucket hung under the boot at the rear of the stage. O'Neill was to fill it with small stones with which to hasten the movements of the mules should they need any action of that sort. The other two men, each with a Sister of Charity at his side, were to stand on the upstream side of the vehicle. There, holding tightly to the rail on top they were to lean far back and act as a sort of counter balance against the tremendous pressure of the swift stream against the side of the stage. They hoped the combined weight of the four would meet any tendency of the stage to overturn. In the event it did happen, it was agreed that each of the two men was to grab a Sister and devote his very best efforts to get her safely to shore.

Behan and O'Neill climbed to the driver's seat.

"All ready?" queried O'Neill, looking back at the four figures clinging precariously to the side.

The two men looked inquiringly into the faces of the women. "All ready, gentlemen. The good God has us all in His protecting arms. He will not forsake us in the time of need." Behan loosed the brake and with a wild yell the mules lunged into the whirling water of the stream. O'Neill did his best by pelting the animals with rocks aimed with fine precision. Both men yelled like wild Indians. Behan lashed at them with his whip.

As the gallant little leaders struck deep water and began to swim they were swept around with the current and down stream. The longer legged "wheelers" kept their feet a little while then they too were forced to swim. Finally the huge stage itself floated free. The water was up to the knees of the four clinging to the side. Each was leaning back just as far as his arms would allow to keep the stage from overturning. Behan, cool and collected, did his best to keep the team headed towards the farther bank and also from becoming entangled in the harness and draft rigging. As the stage swung around in the stream the wheels on the lower side struck a submerged rock. The stage began to rise slowly, due to the tremendous pressure against the upper side. For one or two dreadfully agonizing minutes it seemed as if it would be turned over in the water and all be lost. Just at this critical moment, however, when it looked as if nothing could save them, the two little lead mules touched the bottom with the points of their front feet. How those little fellows did claw and tear at the steep bank. Gradually they got the stage to move ahead. The long legged wheelers also touched bottom and they clawed and dug at it as if they realized the need of using every ounce of power available.

Inch by inch, second by second, the heavy stage began to move through the water towards the bank. Gradually it settled back onto an even keel. The going out was very steep and it took the last rock in O'Neill's water bucket, plus much yelling and slashing of the whip, to get the whole outfit safely out onto the solid land. Three min-

utes later Behan drove the team through the grove of cottonwoods to the station. The door flew open, a flood of light was in their eyes. Once inside the two Sisters, wet and cold as they were, dropped to their knees, the men standing uncovered beside them in silent prayer.

