

The Church in New Zealand

SOME HISTORICAL NOTES.

Cobb and Co's Coaches: Now But a Memory

From time to time reference has been made in these notes to the coaches of the early days and to the Bishops who made use of them when on episcopal visitation. Old-timers will remember the line running from Wellington to and from Foxton, and other connecting services with the farther north centres along the west coast of the North Island; the line from Masterton to Wellington southward, and others northward through the Forty Mile Bush and onward to Napier, while again others linked up districts far and wide. The following interesting pen picture of coaches and coaching in bygone days was given in a recent issue of the *Auckland Star*:—

Alas for the days of Cobb and Co.! Gone are the dashing, swinging, red-bodied coaches that used to bring the mails and a vivid rush of life at intervals into the township settlements of the country. Steam and motor spirit have won out in the long race of half a century against the gallant efforts of willing horse-flesh. The daily appearance of wheeled machines running over specially prepared ways, with calculated and controlled speed, in smooth comfort, to an assured time-table is progress without a doubt. But these machines do not fire the blood nor grip the imagination as did the twice-weekly dashes of the old mail coaches, swinging spectacularly over primitive roads that bristled with natural hazards, the equipage rumbling and bumping along to the drag of mettlesome horses outspread in half-leashed driven fury.

"Royal mail! Royal mail!" How the glorious old bluff used to grab the right of way with superb arrogance, crowding-off, dusting, and splashing mere plebeians on the King's highway! On it dashed, the splendid old road hog. It was the moving picture of the 'eighties; flying hoofs and tossing manes, jingling harness, the swaying, creaking coach with red-painted body and flaunting yellow-lettered insignia, the bobbing passengers atop, dominated by the hard-bitten, capable uncrowned king enthroned at the starboard corner and working wonders of dexterity with lash, ribbons, and voice. Individuality oozed from team, driver, and coach, and bubbled up incessantly from the passengers pent in cramped discomfort through all kinds of hazards. Every trip was a tale rich in human interest, and varied by thrills and sometimes spills.

The identity of the original Cobb and Co. appears to be shrouded in mystery. "An American firm that perpetrated its atrocities chiefly in Australia and New Zealand," was the answer given by one man who had had a deal of travelling experience in both countries, and apparently had painful recollections. It appears to be generally accepted that the firm was one of some standing in America in the old days of the "roaring 'forties," and that men who had been drivers for Cobb in the States started coach

services in Australia for themselves, but used the old name "Cobb and Co." on account of its familiarity to the gold miners, who formed the bulk of the then population. There may also be something in the fact that the style and coach adopted was that first used by Cobb and Co.—a small front boot, limited inside seats, and chief passenger room on top, with heavy springs reinforcing a strap-slung body. Maybe the slinging of the body in straps was the sign of royalty, to denote the carriage of the mails, for the original State coaches of Britain were strap-slung, without springs.

Be that as it may, it seemed to be the tradition and policy of the firm that Cobb and Co. "followed the gold." The firm apparently came into being in California, on the trails of the old gold-rushes. Whether the original firm ever operated in Australia or not cannot be determined, but the recollections of those who have been questioned encourage the belief that the Cobb and Co. lines in Australia were private ventures by ex-Americans and saw profit in passenger transport to the various gold diggings, with the result that the old name became a household word throughout the Australian States. Certain it is that the original firm was never in New Zealand, but various Cobb drivers from Australia started up passenger transport lines to the South Island gold diggings, retaining the old name, and others followed suit in the North Island.

So far as can be ascertained, the first Cobb line in Auckland province was established between Auckland and Onehunga by Ned Carter, a driver from Australia, and this was extended later to the Thames. The names of Cook and Hardington became later associated with the Cobb and Co. service in Auckland, and the stables of the line were on the site now occupied by John Court, Ltd., in Queen Street. Cobb and Co. coaches have entirely faded from view in this province, and probably the last important line of Cobb coaches in New Zealand was running through the Otira Gorge from Canterbury to the West Coast. It lost its natural usefulness with the completion of the railway from Christchurch to Greymouth only a year or two ago. That Cobb line was started in 1865 by a Mr. le Cole, but was acquired in 1873 by Cassidy and Co., who still have the coaches running occasionally through the Gorge.

In Otago the Cobb coaches were run from Gabriel's Gully (now Lawrence) to Arrowtown, and thence along the famous Skippers road to Queenstown. It was on the latter road, with cliffs on one side and precipice on the other that the Cobb coach, dashing downhill round a corner was faced by a traction engine drawing a wagon of wool bales. There was not a chance of pulling up the team, nor space for the two vehicles to more than inch their way past each other, and the dare-devil driver took his only chance. Lashing the team to a smooth gallop, he swerved past the traction engine with

two wheels on the road and two over the precipice, to swing the coach back to safety before it lost its balance past recovery. There is a tale about a similar piece of road at the Devil's Bend in the Otira Gorge, to the effect that the driver over-balanced and fell from the coach going round the Bend, and the unguided horses proceeded on their way, taking coach and paralysed passengers safely to the next station ten miles away. Picturesque tales of dare-devilry and wonderful dexterity by the Cobb drivers, and extraordinary sagacity of the teams, are still told in all parts of Australia and New Zealand, but Cobb and Co. are now but a memory of pre-macadam days.

Old Stage Coach: Relic of West Coast Days

Only those who have actually travelled over the mountain road between Arthur's Pass and Otira can get a mental picture of its hairpin bends, its steep gradients, and its perilous winding along the verge of the depths of the Gorge (says the *Christchurch Press*). Drivers who could match their skill against any whips in the world, and horses which had attained a degree of sagacity probably never excelled in the animal kingdom, gave passengers by the coaches a confidence which allowed them to survey the glorious scenery with that pleasure which only safety could bring.

The old coaches were really wonderful products of craftsmanship, and, with a full load of passengers, made a great picture as they traversed the road. One of the typical old stage coaches which ran between Springfield and Kumara, years before the piercing of the hills by the tunnel, will be seen at the opening ceremony of the Dunedin Exhibition. It has been lent by Mr. E. M. Lovell-Smith, of Christchurch, and will be driven through the streets of Dunedin. For many years this coach carried the late Mr. R. J. Seddon as an inside passenger. With two bags of horse feed on the floor, and the cushions suitably arranged, Mr. Seddon could snatch a refreshing sleep on the journey overland, when returning from Wellington. The vehicle was built, with the exception of the body, which was made by a Nelson firm, by Abbot and Downing, of Concord, U.S.A., and when Campbell Brothers joined Cobb and Co., Mr. Cassidy purchased it for the Gorge Road.

(This old coach is now on view in the Motor Pavilion of the Great Exhibition, and is attracting much attention.)

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