

Travel by Horse-Drawn Coach

Greg Ryan

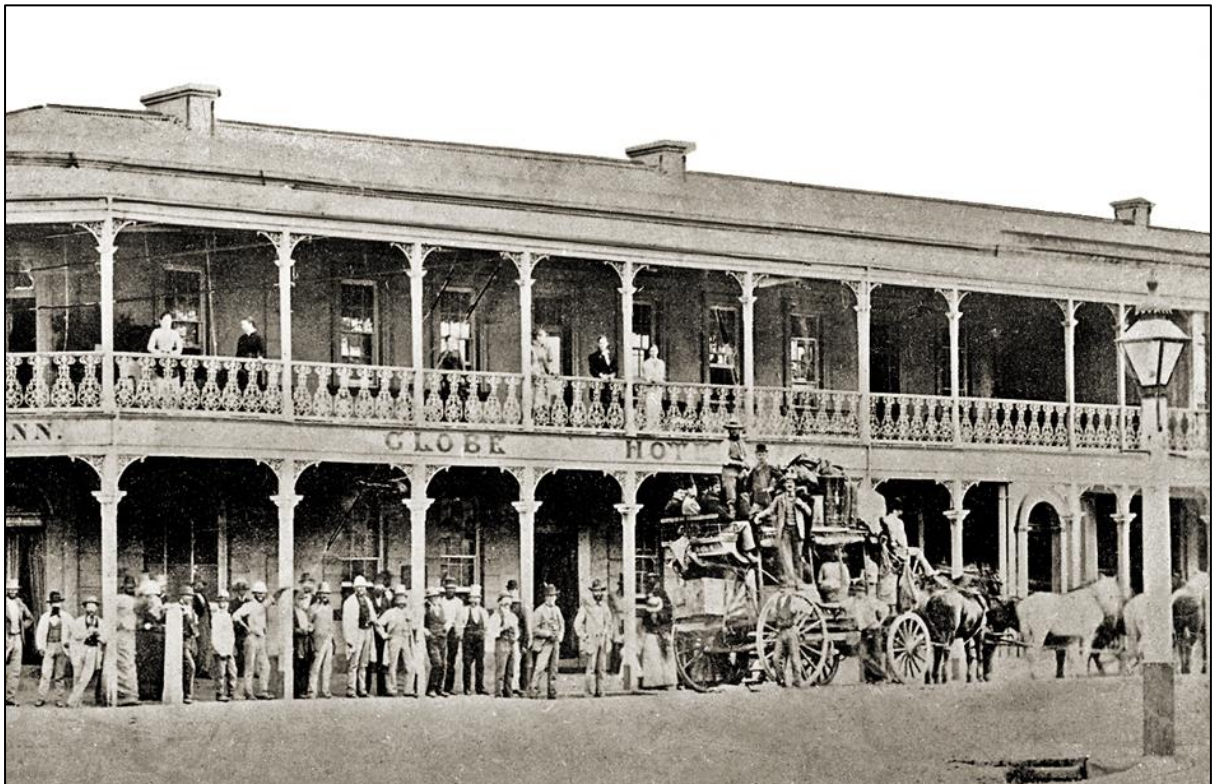
Travel by coach was considerably improved after the arrival of 23 year old Freeman Cobb from America in 1853. He introduced an improved coach with rounded, lightweight and supple bodies resting on leather straps, giving a more comfortable ride than the steel sprung British designed coaches.

Cobb placed changing stations about every 10-20 miles. Fresh horses meant the coaches could maintain higher speeds. The first changing station after leaving Albury was at Bowna, 12 miles north-east. Drivers would sound a bugle about one mile from a change station to alert the groom, who would have a fresh team brushed and harnessed by the time the coach rolled in.

Typically, coaches would be drawn by four to eight horses, and could carry up to six passengers inside and twelve outside, plus the Royal Mail and luggage. Fares seem to have been rather expensive – for example the fare from Albury to Wagga was £2 in 1876.

Cobb & Co's chief competitor locally was Crawford & Co. Hiram Crawford, aged 21, arrived from America in the same year as Cobb. He tried his luck gold mining before coming to Albury. After building a bowling alley and billiard room, he moved to Beechworth and in 1857 started up a coaching line, H A Crawford & Co. He was soon winning mail contracts, eventually becoming the largest mail contractor in our region.

Crawford's started services between Albury and Wagga in May 1872, leaving from Webb's Globe Hotel every Monday and Thursday. Coaches were so loaded with mail bags that they



A well loaded coach about to leave Albury from the Globe Hotel in about 1880.

were jammed into the coach anywhere they would fit, often adding to the discomfort of the passengers.

When rail reached Wodonga in 1873, the firm commenced running from Wodonga railway station to Albury and from there connecting with its coach to Wagga. In 1875 the company purchased from Victorian Railway the exclusive right for coaches to operate to and from Wodonga railway terminus. After rail from Sydney reached Albury in 1880, the company carried rail passengers across the border until the first Murray River rail bridge opened in 1883.

The droughts of the late 1800s and early 1900s caused the cost of feed for thousands of coach horses to sky-rocket. There was competition from railways and as rail lines extended, coaches were transferred to feeder routes, timetabled to link in with trains. The arrival of motor transport saw the horse-drawn coaching industry collapse in the early decades of the twentieth century.