INTRODUCTION

COACHING DAYS IN NSW

For hundreds of years horse drawn vehicles were used for transportation, with the era ending in Australia in the twentieth century. Up to the 1940s daily business operated with horse drawn vehicles such as delivery vans and bakers’ carts. The railway and motor vehicles became popular, replacing horse drawn vehicles for every day use.

The story of Cobb & Co. starts in Australia in the 1850s at a time of gold discovery and the opening of inland NSW for pastoral settlement. Travellers covered the distance on foot, on horseback, by bullock drays or horse drawn spring carts. Roads were almost non-existent away from the main settlements. There was a need for a faster and more efficient transport system.

On January 30, 1854 the first advertisement appeared in the Melbourne press announcing the “American Telegraph Line of Coaches”. Cobb & Co. had commenced what was to become the most efficient transport service of its era, at a time when Melbourne was only 16 years old. The company consisted of four Americans, each of whom had been previously associated with the main American coach businesses such as Wells Fargo, Adams & Co. and Ben Halliday. Freeman Cobb and his partners, John Murray Peck, John Lamber and James Swanton established the firm to be known as Cobb & Co.

The Cobb & Co. line operated to the Victorian goldfields, firstly to Forest Creek (Castlemaine), then expanding to link the new goldfields and settlements to Melbourne. Soon mail contracts were awarded to the business and Cobb & Co. developed a gold escort, passenger and mail service based on reliable and efficient schedules.

Cobb & Co. imported American Concord coaches. The coaches differed from the English style of coach previously used in the colony, as instead of a system of metal springs, the American coach was suspended on leather thoroughbreses consisting of layers of thick leather straps. The tension on the leather straps could be adjusted by a turnbuckle. The result was a coach that would react and move with the rough road conditions, providing a more comfortable ride for passengers.

In 1856, Cobb & Co. was sold and Freeman Cobb returned to America. He later moved to South Africa, establishing Cobb & Co. as a coach line to the Kimberley diamond mines, where occasionally zebras were used in coach teams. Freeman Cobb died in South Africa in 1878, aged 45.

The Australian Cobb & Co. firm went through several changes in ownership until 1861 when an American and Canadian partnership purchased the firm. The partners were:-

- James Rutherford, General Manager
- Alexander W. Robertson who operated the Victorian agency of the business
- John Wagner who also operated the Victorian agency
- B. Robertson who operated the Bathurst agency
- Colin Robertson who operated the Goulburn agency
- Charles Pollock who left the business during 1862
- Walter Russell Hall who operated the Sydney agency
- William Franklin Whitney who operated the Orange agency.

Of these men, at least three stayed with Cobb & Co. for the length of their lives. They were James Rutherford, WF Whitney and AW Robertson. Under Rutherford’s expert guidance, the firm expanded from its base in Victoria, to headquarters in NSW and later into Queensland. The move from Victoria into NSW happened in 1862, as an initiative of Rutherford to follow the goldfield trade. An impressive cavalcade of horses, coaches, wagons and drivers arrived in Bathurst on 26 June 1862, the spectacle bringing delight to the residents of Bathurst. The Cobb & Co. team camped beside the Macquarie River until suitable stables and accommodation could be provided. Bathurst was chosen as the location for the business because of its proximity to the rich new goldfields of Hill End, Sofala, Lucknow, Forbes, Parkes and Lambing Flat (Young). It was also the only provincial town west of the Blue Mountains and therefore a centre for business and trade.

Rutherford was a dynamic personality. He was a tireless worker, dedicated to the Cobb & Co. enterprise. He maintained this energetic pace throughout his life and found opportunity to diversify his and the company’s business interests with acquisition of large pastoral holdings, trading in livestock, interests in mining companies, the establishment of an iron works at Lithgow, construction of the Tenterfield to Glen Innes railway line, as well as having a significant community participation in Bathurst.

Within a week of arriving in Bathurst, Cobb & Co. was operating a regular service to Forbes. James Rutherford rode the route, establishing changing stations approximately every 10 miles (16 – 20 km). Horses, harness, stables, grooms and stock feed supplies had to be set up. Inns, shanties and post offices were used to service the coaches and their passengers. Booking offices were established in centres such as Forbes and Orange. The speed and skill of Cobb & Co. was such that an entire day was cut from the previous travel time between Bathurst and Forbes. It was the efficiency of the service and the ability to regularly change horses, that provided the competitive edge to their business operations.

Soon the network of Cobb & Co. services spread throughout the region and across NSW. Cobb & Co. bought out many of the rival firms, whilst Royal Mail contracts established the need for other routes. As the gold rush faded, Cobb & Co.’s services were in demand as a mail contractor and passenger service.

The early Cobb & Co. drivers were Americans, who brought with them experience and new techniques. Other drivers were of English background. It was not long before the Australians became equally talented drivers. The coach drivers were known as “Whips” or “Jehus”. The coaching routes linked settlements and localities throughout Victoria, NSW and Queensland. At the peak of the coaching era it was possible to travel from far northern Queensland to Victoria, into South Australia by Cobb & Co. coach. The name Cobb & Co. became synonymous with coach teams and was applied to many coach lines not directly controlled by the firm Cobb & Co. Coaches with their distinctive colours and style were sold, then operated on other runs, but still showed the mark of Cobb & Co. Sidney Kidman, the cattle king, purchased Cobb & Co. coaches for use in Western Australia. The Cobb & Co. name did not remain an Australian tradition. Cobb & Co. services were established in New Zealand, Japan and South Africa.