

A STAGECOACH Comes Home

The oldest stagecoach still in operation returns to Missouri.

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PHOTOS BY DENNIS CRIDER



This is the tale of a still-working stagecoach—now fondly named *The Journey*—that has operated in three different centuries—probably the only stagecoach in this country to do that—and how it is coming home to Missouri.

THE COWBOY

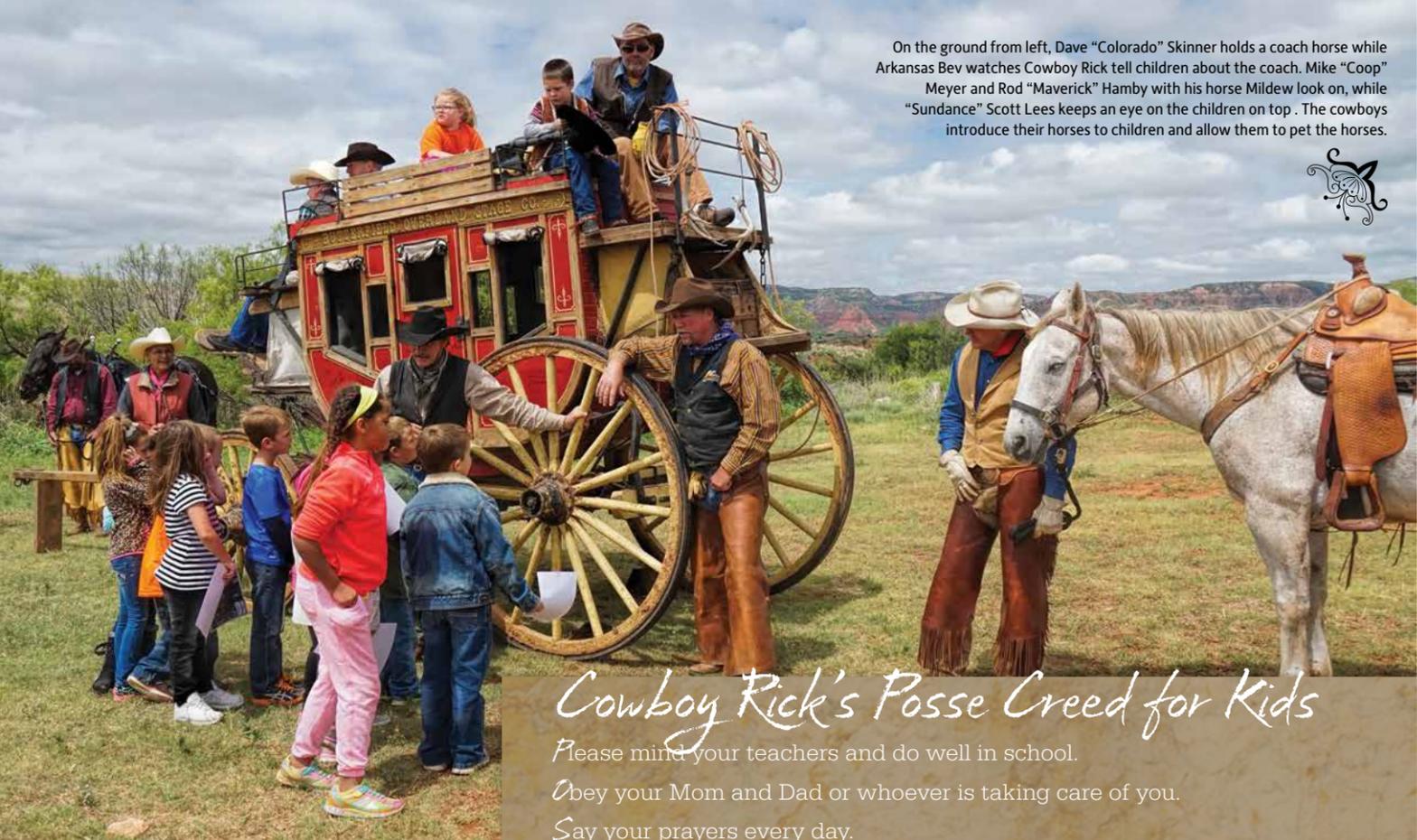
As a little boy, Rick Hamby was enthralled with all things Western, from Roy Rogers to *Gunsmoke*. At age five, he visited Silver Dollar City, and he was king of the world when the marshal asked him if he wanted to ride shotgun on a stagecoach pulled by two Missouri mules.

Fast-forward to 1999, and this little boy had grown up still loving to ride horses and captivated by all things Western. Rick had become a radio personality in West Plains, and he'd made a friend in Arizona who bought all kinds of antiques, such as old wagons and wooden wagon wheels for movie studios in the 1990s. He and Rick made several scouting trips together, and in 1999, Rick saw what he thought was an old wagon tongue sticking out of tall weeds behind blacksmith Wallace Stone's barn in Clarkridge, Arkansas.

But it wasn't a wagon. He saw the Silver Dollar City name on the door first thing and instantly recognized it as the stagecoach from his childhood. It still had the Silver Dollar City inventory tag on it. He bought it on the spot.

"Cowboy Rick" got the blacksmith to restore the undercarriage, but he took the coach box home with him and restored it using as much of the original wood and metal as possible.

As he worked on it, Rick, his parents, his brothers, Rod and Joe, and Rick's soon-to-be wife, "Arkansas Bev," pondered what they could do with the coach that would be unique.



On the ground from left, Dave "Colorado" Skinner holds a coach horse while Arkansas Bev watches Cowboy Rick tell children about the coach. Mike "Coop" Meyer and Rod "Maverick" Hamby with his horse Mildew look on, while "Sundance" Scott Lees keeps an eye on the children on top. The cowboys introduce their horses to children and allow them to pet the horses.



Cowboy Rick's Posse Creed for Kids

Please mind your teachers and do well in school.

ObeY your Mom and Dad or whoever is taking care of you.

Say your prayers every day.

Seek always to do your best.

Every day, help around the house.

"I started thinking about doing a mail run because stagecoaches used to carry mail," Rick says. "I took the idea to my family for advice. I recall standing in a hospital parking lot because my dad had prostate cancer, and I told my mom about it. She said, 'That's not a bad idea.' I told my brother Rod, and he thought it was a good idea. In the hospital I told my dad, who replied how I thought he would, with 'Let me sleep on it.' But then the next day, he said, 'You know, let's do it.' He was a sergeant in the Korean conflict and a drill sergeant afterward, and once he made a decision, it was rock solid. It was going to be done."

By 2000, Rick and Bev and a band of cowboys were taking the stagecoach to schools, talking to children, and collecting letters from Missouri schoolchildren to deliver to pen pals in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

"I probably talked to 17,000 kids at schools that first year before our journey," Rick says. "While sharing the past, instead of protecting gold and silver, we are collecting the mail and connecting the children. The letters are the heart and soul of our journeys."

His goal was to teach history in a memo-

orable and interesting way.

"I think sometimes our culture forgets the heritage and strife of our past," he says. "I also want to show kids what can be done if you set your mind to it."

He points out that he grew up with heroes who might have been fictional, like Roy Rogers, but they still taught moral lessons.

"I want kids to know that God does exist," Rick says. "I think God uses this stagecoach to hitch all this together: history, this iconic image from the Old West, and moral values. If I can present it right, it might make a difference in some lives."

Rick, Arkansas Bev, Rod, his parents, and their cowboy posse left for the first stagecoach journey on March 24, 2001. Since then, various members have made eight journeys, logging thousands of miles across Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, California, Nevada, and Arkansas. Bev handles the complex logistics of taking a stagecoach across a country full of modern highways.

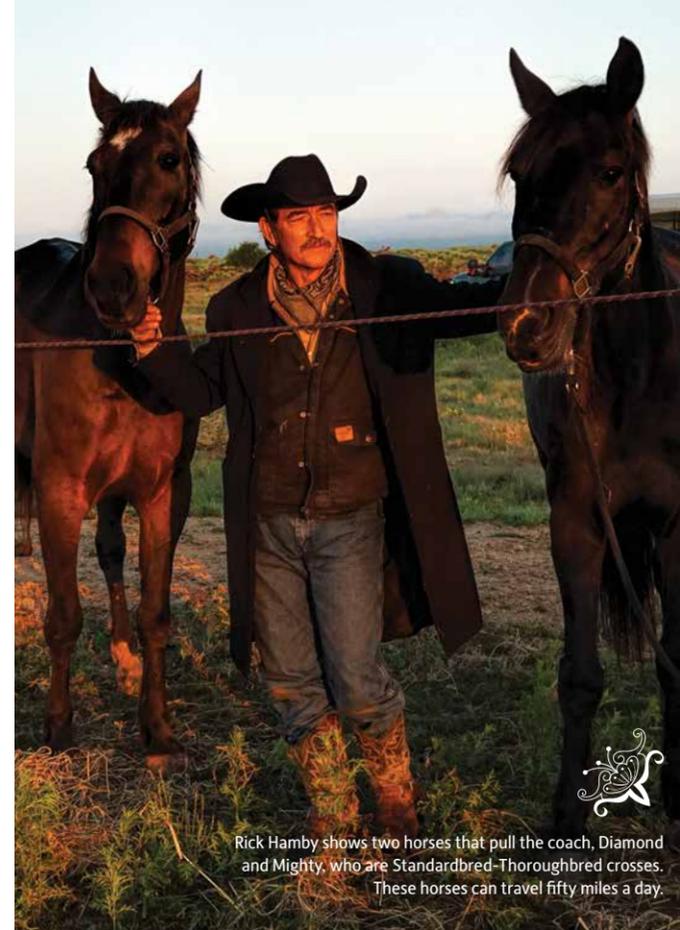
During these journeys, Rick has talked to more than 100,000 children and created thousands of pen pals. He loves telling children of all ages the story of this stagecoach's incredible journey, which began such a long time ago.

SAIL MAIL

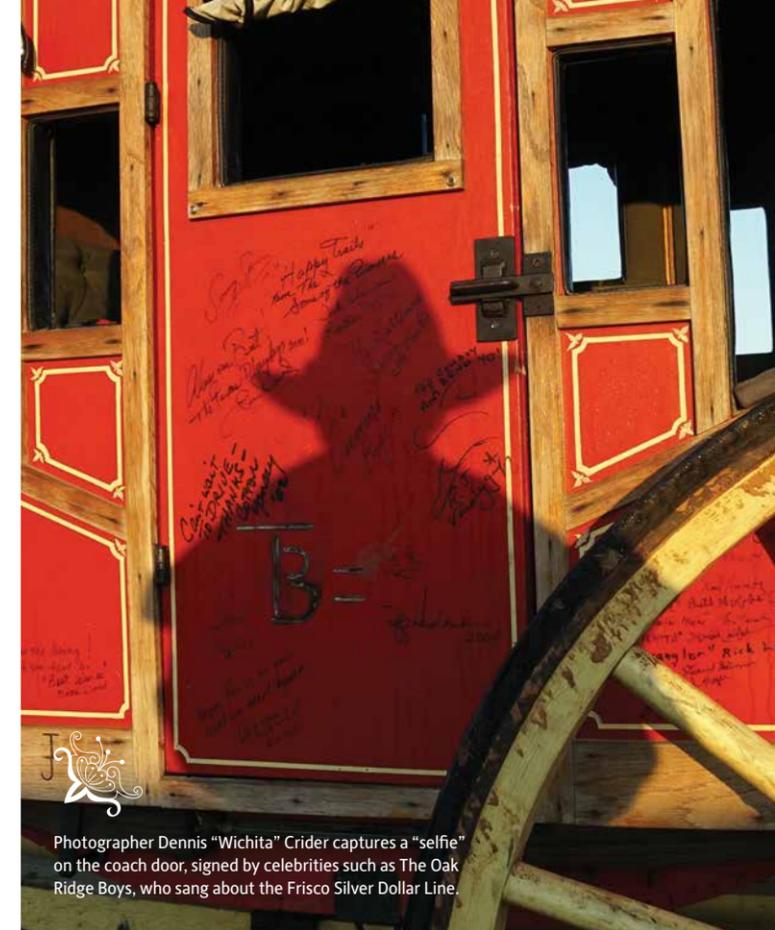
In fact, *The Journey* stagecoach's story began before it was ever built.

During the 1840s and 1850s, mail to the West had to be delivered by ship across the Gulf of Mexico to Panama, where it was then carted across land to meet other ships heading for California. It took months. Even though Congress anticipated railroads would eventually connect the two coasts, in 1857, it authorized the postmaster general to seek bids for an overland mail service.

John W. Butterfield and his associates, including William G. Fargo of Wells Fargo fame, proposed a southern route from St. Louis to California. It wasn't the exact route eventually operated, but the postmaster general liked the



Rick Hamby shows two horses that pull the coach, Diamond and Mighty, who are Standardbred-Thoroughbred crosses. These horses can travel fifty miles a day.



Photographer Dennis "Wichita" Crider captures a "selfie" on the coach door, signed by celebrities such as The Oak Ridge Boys, who sang about the Frisco Silver Dollar Line.

southern route because it could remain open in the winter. And so, Butterfield and his partners won the bid to provide two trips a week to deliver mail for \$600,000 per year.

The Butterfield Overland Mail Trail was born, and it carried both passengers and mail from St. Louis and from Memphis, Tennessee, to San Francisco, California, from 1857 to 1861. These two eastern routes joined at Fort Smith, Arkansas, and then continued westward on a route through Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona before ending in San Francisco. In Missouri, the route ran from St. Louis to Tipton and then on to Fort Smith.

The Overland Mail made two trips a week, traveling 2,795 miles and carrying passengers, freight, and up to twelve thousand letters at a time. The scheduled time between St. Louis and San Francisco was twenty-five days, but most stagecoaches made it in twenty-two.

However, with the Civil War looming, the Pony Express formed in 1860 to compete and deliver mail faster on a six-hundred-mile-shorter route through Denver and Salt Lake City. About the same time, the Overland Stage Company was taken over by a Wells Fargo company because

of debt. Butterfield was forced out of the business, and other companies, which continued to operate on several overland trails, replaced his. Still, the trail that Butterfield's company blazed endured and continued to be used.

THE BIRTH OF THE JOURNEY

The Journey stagecoach was built in 1880 in Concord, New Hampshire. Cowboy Rick has been over the entire stagecoach many times, literally with a fine-tooth comb, but it wasn't until last year that he discovered a serial number and seal on the undercarriage that show the steel was cast in Austria.

"European steel was considered superior to American steel at the time," Rick says. "The undercarriage also has a stamp that reads, 'I. Winter,' the name of the foundry worker who assembled the coach."

From Concord, the coach would have crossed Missouri, either pulled by a hitch of horses or possibly aboard a train on its way west. At the time, stagecoaches were generally run over the same portion of the trail and would have rarely traveled its entire length. Instead, for example, one stagecoach might

have traveled from Tipton to Springfield and then back. *The Journey* stagecoach worked mostly in Arizona on the Butterfield Overland Trail until it was retired in 1905. Then it was shipped back to Concord, where it spent the next fifty years in a barn.

ADVENTURE TOWN

In 1955, the founders of Adventure Town Frontier Park in Alexandria Bay, New York, were seeking a stagecoach and kept hearing about one in a barn near Concord. They scoured the area and found this coach wrapped in the original shipping blankets. They bought it, along with a coach that had belonged to the Vanderbilt family and a steam train Henry Ford had built to entertain guests.

In 1960, the Herschend family, founders of Silver Dollar City, bought *The Journey*, the Vanderbilt coach, and the steam train. Nearly eighty years later, this coach came back to the state it would have crossed in the 1880s; this time it was here not to carry mail, but Silver Dollar City visitors. In the 1970s, both stagecoaches were retired and only used for décor at Silver Dollar City until one was sold to one

of the park's blacksmiths.

That's where Rick found it so many years later, and Western dreams were reawakened.

THE KIDS

Today, when *The Journey* travels, Rick, Bev, and the posse make an extra-special effort when they meet terminally ill children. Rick remembers camping one night on his first journey when an old blue Ford pickup truck came barreling down a dusty road. The man who got out described his nephew who loved cowboys and who didn't have long to live. His nephew, Doug, was on dialysis and a double amputee; his body was shutting down. Rick diverted the route six miles to take the stagecoach to Doug's home. Rick met Doug, who was in a wheelchair, and Doug gave him a ceramic covered wagon.

Then, they took Doug out to the coach, where he met the cowboys and saw the horses. Rick couldn't help himself.

"Why don't you come with us today?" he asked.

Doug looked up doubtfully at the ten-foot-tall stagecoach, but Rick told him it could happen. The cowboys lifted Doug and sat him inside the coach. They stuffed as many of his family as would fit inside, too, and traveled for an hour before Doug tired out and needed to be lifted down. Rick says he'll never forget Doug's precious smile as he said, "You made my day. No, you made the rest of my life."

The coach traveled on, and the next morning, they saw that same old blue Ford pickup coming into camp.

"His uncle came to tell us Doug had died that night, and that's when it really hit us, 'We are being used,'" Rick says. He still treasures the little ceramic wagon Doug gave him.

On another journey more than a decade ago, Rick met Alex Davis, a six-year-old with cerebral palsy who was going blind.

"His family thought he was going to die," Rick says. "They brought him out to pet the horses, and he sat on the stagecoach. He made such an impression on me. We invited him to ride the stagecoach with us the next day, so he did. I stayed in touch with phone calls and letters to Alex for a year or so afterward, but then his family moved. I lost touch with him."

As *The Journey's* final cross-country trek was planned for May 2016, Rick kept telling Bev that he wanted to find Alex's family. They were talking to some ranch women near Animas,



Coach driver "Pawnee Bill" Hobbs keeps his foot on the brake while he spins a yarn for passenger Alex Davis and other children. Scott Lees stays vigilant from the back.

New Mexico, where they had originally met Alex, and the women remembered Alex. Within thirty minutes, one of the women had tracked down Alex's mom's phone number. Rick called and chatted with her about this final journey. Dreading the answer, Rick finally asked about Alex. The answer stunned him, "He's sitting right here. You want to talk to him?"

Alex, now twenty years old, remembered Rick, Rick's horse's name, and other details of his ride into Tombstone. He remembered hearing people lining the streets cheering as the coach passed. Rick invited him to be a special passenger on this journey, too, and he rode the stage on its final three days into Matador, Texas.

Rick is still trying to make an impact in children's lives. On this last journey, several bright yellow buses pulled into a parking area near a campground at Caprock Canyons State Park in Texas. Rick instantly had the excited children quiet and hanging on every word. He told them about cowboys, horses, and stagecoaches. He told them to love one another, to be kind to one another, and to follow the cow-

boy virtues of honesty, respect, and friendship.

"We want to touch lives," he says, by inspiring children, lifting them up during hard times, making them laugh, and sometimes even comforting them. "We want to teach them how to treat each other with kindness and love."

THE FINAL JOURNEY

The final route for *The Journey* was from Clarendon to Matador, Texas. Rick, brother Rod, their mother Phyllis, Bev, and the crew made the journey; Rick's father had passed on. This September, the coach will come home to Silver Dollar City, as Rick and Bev are loaning it to the theme park where he first saw it.

Future plans, aside from a display at Silver Dollar City, will likely include Rick continuing to present school programs with *The Journey* on behalf of Silver Dollar City. The stagecoach and Cowboy Rick will keep touching lives.

You can meet Rick, Bev, and some of the posse and see the stagecoach during Silver Dollar City's National Harvest and Cowboy Festival from September 14 to October 29.



Rod Hamby and Justin "Winchester" Wilson are the cowboys, from left, whose faces you see. At the end of every day, there is always coffee on the campfire. Below, Bev and Rick reminisce with Caprock Canyons State Park interpreter Le'Ann Pigg, who first saw the stagecoach when she was a little girl. She brought her children this time. Below right, Rod and Bill dry their boots.

