

Myth #111: Riding High: Hank Monk and Horace Greeley by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Did one of the most famous rides in American history cost a presidential candidate the race for the nation's highest office? As the story goes, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley's stagecoach ride with the colorful Hank Monk at the reins later played a major role in Greeley's loss to incumbent Ulysses S. Grant in the 1872 presidential election.

More people today recognize the famous phrase, "Go West, young man, Go West," credited to Greeley, than know of the much-maligned social reformer of the mid-19th century. In 1859, the forty-eight-year-old former New York congressman, outspoken abolitionist, and women's rights advocate, was touring the West he had been touting to the nation. On July 30, he found himself at an inn south of Genoa running late for a lecture on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. Turning to the stagecoach driver, Greeley asked the thirty-three-year-old Monk if it was possible to cross the massive mountain range in time to make his presentation in Placerville, California that evening. Monk assured the worried Greeley that he would get him there on time.



Leaving around dawn, the stagecoach followed the Carson River to Hope Valley, then turned north over Luther Pass to Lake Valley. From there, the stage climbed Meyers Grade to the top of Johnson Pass and shortly after noon pulled into Strawberry to change horses. According to Monk's version of the story, Greeley, in some distress, asked the driver if he was certain that he could get him to Placerville by 5PM. Knowing Strawberry was the last telegraph station before his final destination, Greeley wanted to send a telegram notifying the reception committee if he was going to be late. Monk emphatically responded, "I'll get you there."

The New York City editor experienced the ride of his life. He later wrote, "Yet at this breakneck rate we were driven for not less than four hours or forty miles changing horses every ten or fifteen, and raising a cloud of dust through which it was difficult at times to see anything."



"Just before I got to Dick's [Station] I looked into the coach and there was Greeley," Monk told a writer for San Francisco's *Golden Era* the following year, "his bare head bobbing, sometimes on the back and then on the front of the seat, sometimes in the coach and then out, and then on the top and then on the bottom, holding on to whatever he could grab."

At one point, according to Monk, Greeley cried out, "Driver, I'm not particular for an hour or two!" Monk responded, "Horace keep your seat! I told you I would get there by five o'clock, and by God I'll do it, if the axles hold!"

The shaken and disheveled Greeley arrived in time to meet the reception committee some twelve miles east of Placerville. Monk traveled on to the town, arriving there before Greeley. When the two men met up again upon Greeley's arrival, the Eastern greenhorn bought the daredevil stagecoach driver the finest suit of clothes available in Placerville as a token of his appreciation.

Greeley wrote his version of the harrowing ride on August 1. It was published in the *New York Tribune* after his account reached New York City by mail. Hank Monk, with the *Tribune* story and other

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accounts making him a national figure, regaled all who would listen to his role in the now famous ride. Mark Twain heard the story from Monk while he was living in Nevada Territory in the early 1860s, comically recounted it in his 1866 western lecture tour, and embellished the tale in *Roughing It* (1872).

Humorist Artemus Ward, after hearing the story during his visit to Nevada in December 1863, wrote an anecdotal account of Greeley's stagecoach ride from hell in his work *Artemus Ward: His Travel and Complete Works* (1865). On March 29, 1866, Ward's comical version was read in the House of Representatives by New York Congressman Calvin Hulburt as a jab at his nemesis Horace Greeley and entered into the *Congressional Record*.

While Greeley tried to disassociate himself from Monk and the unflattering story; it continued to dog him right up to the 1872 presidential election. Some writers have suggested that the story may have actually cost him the election. In truth, historians have noted that Greeley was a long-standing controversial figure and savagely satirized by cartoonist Thomas Nast, independent of the exaggerated stories surrounding his stagecoach ride in 1859. Essentially, his stand on the major issues of the day led to his resounding defeat in the presidential election.



Shortly before the election, Greeley suffered a major financial loss in a famous diamond mine swindle, and then his sickly wife died. Overwhelmed by the devastating turn of events, America's premier social gadfly sank into a severe depression, dying before the electoral votes were cast.

Hank Monk, on the other hand, died in Carson City in 1883, eulogized as one of the greatest stagecoach drivers in American history and remains a folk hero.

For further information, see *Hank and Horace An Enduring Episode In Western History* (1973) by Richard G. Lillard and Mary V. Hood; *Hank Monk: He'll Get You There On Time* (1995) by Rich Pitter.

Photos: Nevada Historical Society, Reno, Nevada.

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