

Travel was not easy in the 1850s

By Jerry Bowen

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There has been a lot in the news lately about frustrating airport delays and gridlock on the nation's highways. Our lives have become so fast-paced even short travel interruptions are quite frustrating.

In the 1850s everything took longer, but even then, unexpected delays took their toll in patience and in some cases, much more. Consider the trip a Vallejo resident, Catherine Sheldon, made in 1856 from San Francisco to New York by way of Nicaragua.

It would be 1869 before transcontinental travel by rail would become a reality. In 1856, when Mrs. Sheldon decided to make the journey to New York, she had to plan well ahead for a voyage which averaged a little over a month.

On April 5, Catherine's husband, James, made a contract with the Accessory Transit Company of Nicaragua for her passage from San Francisco to New York. She was to leave on the steamship, Uncle Sam, sail to San Juan Del Sur, Nicaragua, where she would be transported across the Isthmus to San Juan Del Norte, then board another ship to New York.

The Sheldons were unaware that an American marauder, William Walker and his filibusters (soldiers of fortune) had seized power in Nicaragua. It is interesting to note here that Cornelius Vanderbilt owned the Accessory Transit Company of Nicaragua and was secretly financing the invasion and using his shipping line to supply Walker and his force. Vanderbilt's support was withdrawn when Walker declared himself President of Nicaragua with dictatorial powers.

After the ship left San Francisco, a company official, Mr. Cross, boarded the Uncle Sam at sea to hold a private conference with the captain. He brought news that Nicaraguan rebels were revolting against Walker and traveling there was dangerous. He also cautioned the captain that company property was to be protected as a first priority.

Vanderbilt and company officials knew of the problems before the Sheldons and others contracted for passage but continued to accept bookings without informing them of the possibility of unsafe passage across Nicaragua.

While at sea, the captain announced the ship would proceed to the city of Panama instead of San Juan Del Sur and passengers would be transported by train across the

Panama Isthmus to Aspinwall.

Arriving in Panama during a raging rainstorm, the passengers of the Uncle Sam were ferried to shore in an open boat. Thoroughly soaked to the bone, they were given no opportunity to change out of their wet clothes until they reached Aspinwall.

Although Mrs. Sheldon had paid for "First Cabin" accommodations, she, as well as the other first cabin passengers were treated as though they were in second class during the voyage. In Panama, first priority train accommodations was afforded the steerage passengers and they occupied all the seats available in the passenger cars. The first cabin passengers, including the very wet and miserable Mrs. Sheldon, were forced to ride in unventilated coal cars that were thoroughly infiltrated with coal dust. However, they did receive a little ventilation when coal was loaded into a portion of the cars, although I seriously doubt they enjoyed any relief!

There were more unpleasant surprises in store at Aspinwall. The first cabin passengers were forced to wait in sheep pens while the steerage passengers boarded the ship bound for New York. With all the available space now taken, these unfortunate souls, including Gov. Bigler of California, were forced to find their own accommodations while they awaited another ship.

Mrs. Sheldon, having experienced some sea sickness on the voyage, and still wet from the open boat ride was beginning to fall ill with fever. She and another woman, Hannah Warner, finally found accommodations at a way-house that would be described today as a flop-house. In their room she finally had the opportunity to change out of her wet clothing after another day's delay in retrieving her baggage.

Stranded in Aspinwall, they had no choice other than to pay their own expenses for the next 17 days while they awaited word on a New York bound ship. The water was so offensive they had to add some kind of flavoring to make it fit for drinking. Ice was another commodity that was an expensive luxury, but unbearable without it. The food was barely palatable, and the beds were nothing but cots with weeds stuffed into the mattresses. The expenses for this trip continued to mount with no help from Vanderbilt's company.

Finally, word was received that a ship, the Philadelphia, was available for passage to New York.

By this time, Catherine had become quite ill with a high fever, but with the help of fellow passengers, was able to set sail. At least she had a stateroom on this leg of the voyage. Seasickness and fever plagued her all the way to New York. She remained seriously ill for three months after her arrival and was probably very lucky to have

survived what could have only been described as “the trip through Hades.”

One can only imagine how she must have felt when faced with the possibilities of the return voyage home.

On the 27th of September, 1859, James and Catherine Sheldon filed a \$10,000 suit against the steamship, Uncle Sam, in District Court, 7th Judicial District in Solano County for damages and expenses suffered on the voyage from San Francisco to New York.

The jury found in favor of the Sheldons, but the judgment was overturned for a vague reason concerning tort law and remanded for retrial. After much legal maneuvering including an attempt at a change of venue, Catherine and James Sheldon finally prevailed. After two-and-a-half years on June 12, 1862, she received a final judgment and collected \$1,000 in damages, one-tenth of what she sued for.

I know the next time I am sitting at an intersection with an interminably long red light or trapped on the highway in gridlock, I'll think of Catherine and give some thought to just how much we take for granted and how fortunate we are today in our traveling endeavors.

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