

Story: Mike Hanley: Preserving the Old-Fashioned Way

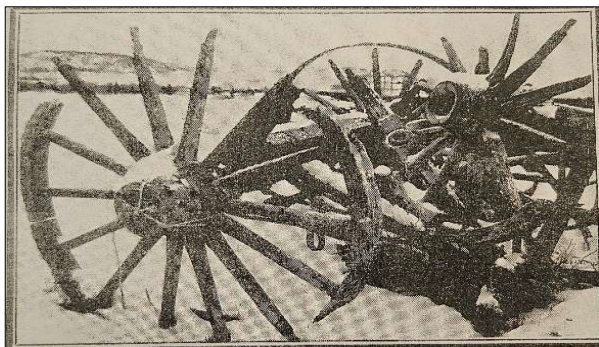
Submitted by Mike Hanley from a 1993 Idaho Press-Tribune article written by Brad Carlson



Many people love history, Mike Hanley lives it. The Jordan Valley rancher and author has dedicated his life to recording and preserving local history. But to Hanley, writing three books soon-to-be four is not enough. Restoring stagecoaches and wagons, using horse-drawn feeding equipment, and blacksmithing is a way of life for the 51-year-old. Even in rebuilding his renowned coaches and buggies, he uses methods of the 1800s. "I can't go back and re-live the old ways. But I can do it today, my way," Hanley said. Complete or partial stagecoaches, wagons, and buggies dot the Hanley workshop.

Appropriately, it is where the old Jordan Valley stagecoach station once stood. Blacksmithing and wheelwrighting are done here, with traditional methods only. Hanley has been featured in many newspapers and magazines, including National Geographic. His stagecoaches have been in photographs and calendars. "Sometimes he acts like he's 80," said his wife Linda. Often Hanley wishes he lived in an earlier time, she said.

A graduate of Eastern Oregon State College with a degree in general studies, Hanley was a student teacher for a single day before deciding to be a rancher, as his father and grandfather were. Even before graduating, he was writing a book. "If you're not interviewing him to find out about Mike Hanley, he's interviewing you. He wants to know about people," Linda Hanley said. Interviews with many local people have filled his books. His new book is in the "box" stage and untitled as of December 1992, he said. It features "tall tales... My wife thinks they're fiction, but they are the truth."



There will be "a lot of short stories, folklore and legends," he said. Photographs from Hanley's stagecoach trips, 1800s-vintage mileage logs, and advertisements will be in the book. Hanley's other books are *Owyhee Trails*, *Sagebrush and Axle Grease*, and *Tales of the I-O-N Country*.

Hanley's goal has been "trying to make an awareness among local people of their heritage and history. I probably helped a little bit, and I'm happy with it," he said. "I feel honored to have interviewed some of the older people," He even interviewed Butch Cassidy's sister. Cassidy, the Old West bank robber, camped at Jordan Valley during an adventure which saw him rob the Winnemucca, Nev., bank and travel through Washington state. Hanley also located the grave of Sacajawea's son. Not only does Hanley document local history, he also helps people track down lost relatives, he said.

Among the many people he interviews or is interviewed by, these information seekers are among his favorites... as well as people who just want to "talk history," he said. "There's a real sense of history around here," Hanley said of the Jordan Valley area. Many small communities have lost their sense of history, aided

by events such as the local newspaper office burning down, he added. An appreciation of Old West history is being lost in the western United States, he said. At rodeos, for example, it's more difficult to find customary parades and pageants, he said.

"It's a way of preserving the West..." Meanwhile, Japan, Germany, and France are "hotbeds" of Western history buffs, he said. A lot of people talk about the rancher's way of life in the past tense period... the way it was. But it's still going on." Hanley noted he is "probably more traditional than most." His craftsmanship and knowledge are displayed frequently in authentic group stagecoach trips to remote destinations, in parades, and in re-enactments at Western history festivals. "When Mike Hanley's going to do a stagecoach run, you want to go. You hop on," said Linda Hanley. Destinations have included McDermitt, Nev., Nampa, and Silver City. The coaches carry the mail. Everyone should have a hobby, Hanley said. Sometimes, daily ranch work leaves only 15 minutes to work in the shop or write, but the time is important, he said. "Some of these things, I've had around for a few years," until he has found time to work on them, he said. Building curve-sided stagecoach bodies is probably Hanley's most difficult task, he said. Like a boat, the coach bodies are supported by ribs. His collection includes five stagecoaches, one procured from Yellowstone National Park in 1916 when the park got tour buses. He bought it in 1973 and restored it.

Another vintage coach was "headed for the landfill" when Hanley got it in 1966 as a restorative project. There is an original Wells Fargo coach trunk, and a one-seat buggy reminiscent of the vehicle used by the *Gunsmoke* TV series character Doc Baker.

He started working with wagons and wheels while a second or third-grader in school, under the tutelage of his father and a neighbor, the late Omer Stanford. The condition was that Hanley pass on the trade.

The Hanley living room is filled with stagecoach photos and Old West memorabilia. "We've found that people just love to do reenactments," Hanley said, noting the writers especially enjoy the secluded areas. Participants dress in period costumes. "Everyone is equal," he said. "When you have six horses on that, going as fast as you can, and you're up on top, that's a thrill," Linda Hanley said.

Amish people in the East supply handling with coach parts. "It's great to do business with them," he said of the group whose doctrine for living requires farming, simplicity, and restriction from modern conveniences. It might take six months for a part to arrive, but it always is of the highest quality, Hanley said. More people are doing wheelwright work, but many are using inferior materials and fast but inadequate methods, Hanley said. "Then they come to me for repairs."

Eastern wood is moist from the humidity in that region. "I like to dry the wheels for a year, then in August treat them with oil." The best wood is kiln-dried or dried and cured in the West, Hanley said. The Hanleys helped to start the Cowboys Then and Now Museum in Portland Ore. His entire family is interested in history, and they have been involved in starting three museums.

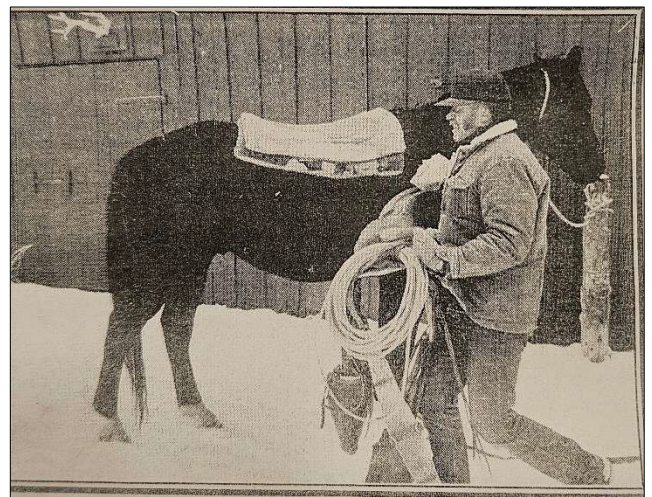


Want to do things Hanley's way? Try hitching a two-horse team to a feed wagon at the dawn of a new day. It will be fun - and rigorous. This is how his approximately 900 head of cattle receive their nourishment in the winter, and it is the best way, he said. If it isn't broke, don't fix it, the saying goes. The method of Hanley and hired man Mike Kershner worked well in the 1860s and works well now, they said. Once, they tried feeding by

truck. "It was only a three-day rest for the horses," Hanley said. With horse-drawn wagons, there is no engine to start and keep running during periodic bitter cold. The method is fast, and the feed is distributed evenly. "It's a way of doing something we want to do, that is effective, he said. The wagons are vintage; one originally had wooden wheels. The newest horse harness is 60 years old. "We make everything we need for them." Feed is placed on the wagons with a modern loader. Each wagon is a one-man operation, so the driver must drop the reins to pitch hay as the horses move at their usual pace.

Hanley and Kershner each run a wagon. Key to success is a well-trained horse team, and good balance afoot, Hanley said. Midwestern ranch boys made excellent naval ship crewmen because they had good balance aboard ship, he said. Like a child who learns to ski at a very early age, a hay pitcher acquires sure-footedness naturally and is confident, Kershner said. Confidence is important as the shock-absorberless vehicle goes over bumps, hills, creek beds, and frozen cow patties while the pitcher is standing in the middle with nothing to hold on to but a pitchfork. Kershner has been with Hanley for more than three years and will have his own ranch soon, Hanley said. "we're pretty selective of who we hire," Hanley added.

"Some guys think they can't get off of a horse," said Kershner as he pitched a fork full of hay, his legs acting as a natural spring to absorb the many jolts on a subzero winter day. "The cowboys don't last," Hanley said. The command, "Boys", keep Hanley's team in the proper direction when the rancher drops the reins to pitch hay. "You're dogging it," he tells one animal after returning to the reins. "There's such a thing as a willing (horse) team," Hanley said. "One is willing to work, and the other is willing to let him do it." When the horses get older, "they'll learn to do it" (loaf occasionally), Hanley said. "They're just like people. You can learn a lot about humans from horses." Hanley became involved with horses and wagons at age 5. "Horses are not smarter than cows," he said.



Feeding cattle on the wagons is physically hard work and must be done seven days a week. "If you like to do a job, you don't think about it," he said. "We do this for 4 1/2 months. We enjoy the winter." A vintage sleigh is used when enough snow is on the ground. It takes about five years for a horse team to achieve top



form. Hanley's team is entering its prime just in time for this year's 150th anniversary of the Oregon Trail. Hanley and his horses will go all over the United States. "They already do a lot of parades." Hanley pampers his horses and never lends them. He does his own blacksmithing, a task he enjoys. The horses wear antique horseshoes. Hanley believes he has a form of "tennis elbow" from many years of pounding at the anvil. Riding on Hanley's feed wagons and stagecoaches, the observer gets a feel for the Good Old Days. But they weren't so good, in some respects, Mike Hanley said. "Stagecoach traffic was an ordeal." Bumpy rides went on for days at a time. If the rider laid over, he had to wait for the next coach, and hope there was room for him. Trekking the Oregon Trail by Conestoga wagon was very grueling, and children were buried along the trail. Sanitation, insects, and pollution from stock animals caused problems. Wood had to be gathered and cut, and lights ran on kerosene. "People didn't survive," Hanley said. The Old West lifestyle was rigorous, if Hanley is any indication.

“You hop on and ride or get left behind. He does not wait. He's on the go all the time,” Linda Hanley said. The typewriter is out continuously, and when he receives a wagon part, “for me, it's the fact that I've lost him again,” she said, laughingly. “He just loves to build things. He has to have something to build all the time. He believes that if he doesn't have anything to do, he won't be here anymore,” Linda Hanley said. “He's seen too many people who've retired, sat down on the couch, and died.”

Hanley “belongs to the community,” she said, noting they have had 40 people for a meal. “He's not mine. But it's never boring around here.”