

An Alpine History Mystery:

San Antonio – San Diego Overland Mail

August 2015

James Birch had an idea. He wanted to establish the first coast-to-coast mail route connecting California to the major cities in the eastern US. As you will see, Birch was not just a dreamer or schemer – no, he had quite good business acumen for such a young man. Back in 1849 this 21-year old adventurer moved to Sacramento to make his fortune in the California Gold Rush, but he found that the cost of gold prospecting was much higher than he expected. Then this bright young fella' observed that the towns of



James Birch

northern California lacked any reliable means of transporting supplies, mail and passengers to the gold mining fields inland. Well he was an experienced stage coach driver, having learned the trade a few years earlier in Providence, Rhode Island, so he started up the California Stage Company, which quickly became the biggest and most far-reaching stage line in the entire state. Within five years, Birch's stage line provided service to nearly every part of northern and central California and even as far south as Los Angeles. By 1855 his company was so successful that Birch decided to step down as President and go back east where he could vigorously promote his new idea.

Over the next two years James Birch spent considerable time lobbying politicians in Washington, DC, trying to persuade them to award him a contract for coast-to-coast mail service. Although he was unsuccessful in this pursuit, the US Post Office, in 1857, awarded Birch the first single-contract Overland Mail route to California. And so it was that on June 22, 1857, the San Antonio – San Diego Mail Line was established to provide semi-monthly service between these two southern cities.

Having made all the arrangements ahead of time, Birch was ready for the task. Just about two weeks later, on July 9, the first mail was sent out of San Antonio heading west to San Diego, and the second mail was dispatched two weeks later. Tragically James Birch died at sea shortly after the first mail arrived in San Diego along his newly established route. His superintendent, I.C. Woods kept the mail line running and then in March of 1858 his young bride transferred both the mail contract and the business to his partner, George H. Giddings.

Now you may be wondering what all this has to do with the history of Alpine. Well, that is the mystery that we want you to solve this month. And while you are at it, see if you can uncover the unflattering nickname that was given to this mail service by its competitors.