

Flagstaff's Original Tourism Adventure Retraced

Ultrarunners Follow Historic Stagecoach Route to Grand Canyon

By Bonnie Stevens
Flagstaff Business News

It may well have been Northern Arizona's first ultimate wildland adventure for tourists and the start of organized tourism in Flagstaff. In 1892, the Flagstaff Board of Trade, in partnership with the railroad, promoted the Stagecoach Line from Flagstaff to the Grand Canyon. Public relations efforts included a free trip for travel writers, who praised the journey and the views, and even an appearance by Buffalo Bill!

That historic route – through majestic ponderosa pine forests, alpine meadows, aspen groves, the wide-open spaces of the Babbitt Ranches CO Bar Ranch, and the south rim of the world's largest canyon – has been rediscovered by historians Richard and Sherry Mangum, Arizona Trail blazers and now, extreme runners. The first Flagstaff to Grand Canyon 100 Mile Stagecoach Line Ultra & Relay Race occurred the weekend of Oct. 19 and 20.

"This is one of the most beautiful spots in the state and on the Arizona Trail, and to



run all the way to the Grand Canyon from Flagstaff, it can't get any better than that," said Arizona Trail Association Executive Director Matt Nelson.

Hosted by Babbitt Ranches, the Kaibab and Coconino National Forests and the Arizona Trail Association, the event saw ultrarunners braving high altitude climbs, sub-freezing overnight temperatures, and rocky forest trails by the light of an almost full moon.

Aid stations, featuring relics from a

century ago such as wagon wheels and restored cabins, were dotted across the landscape every eight miles or so at historic points. The Nature Conservancy's Hart Prairie Preserve was an original stagecoach stop, as was the CO Bar's Cedar Camp and the Moqui Stage Coach Stop Interpretive Site in the Kaibab National Forest. Another stop was the 1884 Hull Cabin, the oldest standing cabin on the Tusayan Ranger District.

"The whole stagecoach route is like a



The late 1800s Stagecoach Line made a stop at Hart Prairie where Stagecoach Line Ultrarunners traveled the same trail and experienced similar views more than a century later. Photos (left) by Kristen Wilson and (above) from the Richard and Sherry Mangum Collection.

step back in time," said Neil Weintraub, Kaibab National Forest archaeologist, distance runner and Arizona Trail volunteer. "There hasn't been much change except more trees that have grown in. Runners got a feel for what it was like to live here 125 years ago."

Richard Mangum says most of the stagecoach trips of the late 1800s left Flagstaff early in the morning and arrived at the Grand Canyon in the evening. Travelers could purchase the excursion for about \$15 when they bought their train tickets at stations in Chicago and other big cities on their way to and from Los Angeles. Guests rode in, and on top of, elegant Concord coaches.

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"These were the stagecoaches you'd see in old Westerns," said Mangum. "They were considered quite elegant, with wood finish and plush, upholstered seats. The ride was probably fun for about the first hour. Passengers were dealing with intense sun, rain at times, bugs flying into their eyes, and a lot of dust. Also, the wheels were wooden and suspension was just non-existent. You felt every bounce in the road. You can imagine by the time they got to the Grand Canyon after 12 hours in a stagecoach, they were whipped!"

The 17 individual Stagecoach Ultra runners who finished the 100-mile run were, no doubt, whipped, as well.

"I was in one of the darkest spots I've ever been in running, physically and mentally," said 28-year-old Michael Versteeg of Prescott, who finished first. "At mile 53 I had just run on 30 miles of double-track and dirt roads and was mentally fatigued and anxious to get back on the awesome single-track of the Arizona Trail. The cold was wearing on me. It wasn't suddenly cold, but constantly cold. For about five miles I wasn't prepared with gloves and a coat. I was feeling physically poor and thought it wasn't going to happen."

Like the below-freezing temperatures, what felt like "wasn't going to happen" set in just before midnight, Saturday, Oct. 19. Traveling through the night over unfamiliar, rugged terrain was challenging for even the most seasoned runner. However, with

sunrise came victory for Versteeg after 17 hours and 41 minutes.

It was a great honor, he says, to win the inaugural Stagecoach Ultra. "I was very emotional at the end of the race, not just because I finished first, but because I finished at all. Whether it's 100 miles, 50 miles or a 5K, each race is a huge, personal accomplishment for each individual."

"This is a wonderful event for ultrarunners, history, the Arizona Trail, Babbitt Ranches and the Forest Service. We're highlighting the very landscape that everybody's working to preserve," said Weintraub, who participated in a relay segment of the Stagecoach Ultra.

Since the early days of the Stagecoach Line, the Flagstaff tourism industry has exploded. Today, it generates more than \$390 million in direct annual spending, while creating more than 5,400 jobs.

"Flagstaff has been leading the state in hotel occupancy rate, average daily spending, and revenue per available room for the past five years," said Flagstaff Convention and Visitors Bureau Director Heidi Hansen.

Babbitt Ranches President Bill Cordasco says the Stagecoach Ultra 100-mile run was an extremely difficult race that required a great deal of personal commitment from participants. "It was a top-notch event that will continue to encourage more people to experience the area. Through the Babbitt Ranches Foundation and our Open Hands

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program, we're able to share this awesome countryside with others."

Cordasco had long hoped for a race across Babbitt Ranches. He worked with Ian Torrence, an accomplished ultrarunner, coach and event director, Weintraub and Nelson to make the vision a reality.

"Without Babbitt Ranches' support and permission, this event would have never happened," said Torrence. "You cannot get from here to there without setting foot on Babbitt land. They provided ideas on aid station locations and access points. They also became instrumental when the government shutdown was looming and possibly forcing this event to fold. They helped in the design of an alternate Plan B course had we not been able to participate on the public National Forest lands. They provided awards for winners and also supported the event financially."

"Babbitt Ranches is one of the best land managers in the state," said Nelson. "At the Arizona Trail Association, we work with every land manager you can imagine. Babbitt Ranches is an exemplary steward of the land."

Cordasco says he hopes the Stagecoach Ultra will become as much of a signature event for Babbitt Ranches and visitors as the Ranches' Annual Colt Sale. FBN

people special is because your people are humble, they are not haughty, they're easy to work with, they take instruction, and they don't think they know it all and they get along with others."

He learned this lesson as a young broadcaster who was irritated by the amount of drama that went on in the newsroom.

"When I got to my second station, I noticed how much the new employees were lacking – not in their technical skills or their abilities to cover stories – but I would say probably the biggest thing that hit me was attitude," Hoskins explained. "And what was a neat, wonderful job – pressure-filled, but rewarding – is tough because of the animosity, the competitiveness of the people that are there. And I thought, you know, this could be a lot of fun if we all just be nice."

He sees his award and the Emmys won by students and NAU-TV as a sign that the university is on the right track and has what it takes to compete with the larger broadcast programs like the Cronkite School of Journalism at Arizona State University.

"Just because you're big doesn't make you good – maybe it's what you actually do," Hoskins said. "It's the quality of what you do. And so I think this [award] kind of confirms the things that we've done." FBN

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