

TOMBSTONE BY TOMBSTONE

Charley Darkey Parkhurst

Charley was born just about as far as you can get from the Old West, but he was surely destined to make an impact upon its history. He was born during the War of 1812 in Lebanon, New Hampshire. From birth until the time he fled an orphanage in Massachusetts where he had been abandoned, nothing is known of his life. He was thought to be sixteen or seventeen when he fled the home and went to the farm of an uncle. Charley and his uncle had frequent disputes, and Charley did not remain there very long. But for the rest of his life he would bear a secret that he shared with no one.

Leaving his uncle's place, Charley went to Worcester, Massachusetts, where he was hired as a stable boy by a fellow named Ebenezer Balch. His job was to clean the stables and care for the horses. Charley was slight of build but a very hard worker and soon it was obvious that he had developed a rapport with the horses. Balch decided to teach Charley to drive his carriage and a career was born. He rapidly advanced from a one-horse buggy to a team of two, then four and then he was managing a team of six with great skill. When Balch moved to Providence, Rhode Island, to become the proprietor of the Franklin House Inn, he took Charley with him. Soon people were asking for Charley by name when renting a buggy.

Charley was described as about five foot, seven inches tall and broad-shouldered for a man his size. His arms became well-developed from handling all the spirited horses. He always had a mouthful of chewing tobacco and was also known for spitting out the curse words. He always wore loose shirts, denim pants and a wide leather belt. He took a lot of pride in his appearance and always wore a pair of dress pants under his work pants. He wore a cowboy style hat to protect his tanned face from more sun.



Charley eventually grew tired of driving his coach over the same route every day and moved to Georgia where he worked for a man named Hayden and then for Charles Childs. He drove a matched team of six grays and he loved to show off his skill with the high-spirited animals.

While driving in Georgia, Charley became friends with two other "whips" (teamsters or stage drivers) named Birch and Stevens. In 1849 Birch and Stevens got the gold fever and headed for California. Birch was soon hauling passengers from Sacramento to various destinations. Then he bid on and won a contract for hauling mail. Stevens went into the hotel business and then added a stage line. His Pioneer Line carried passengers between Sac-

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ramento and Placerville. Since Birch and Stevens were close friends the businesses of the two were never competitors.

In 1851, Charley was once again bored with his routine and decided to follow his friends west. Except that they went overland and Charley took a boat to Panama, crossed the isthmus and sailed north to San Francisco. Upon arriving in Sacramento he immediately went to work driving a stagecoach for his friends. They then formed a stagecoach monopoly by talking all the other stage operators in the area to form one large company known as the California Stage Company. They controlled over 500 miles of stage lines from the hub in Sacramento.

Charley soon became as well known for his ability to handle the coaches in California as he had been back east. The drivers, being very competitive, would hold contests for proficiency and speed through the mountains from station to station. Invariably Charley was the winner. One driver is reported to have said, "... there is something spooky about him, maybe it is his soft voice. Whatever it is, it's good for the horses; he can do more for them than any horse doctor I know.

To drive a stagecoach or a team pulling a freight wagon the driver had to use a whip in order to control and urge the team on. It was said that Charley could take a cigar out of someone's mouth and never touch the face.

Charley lost the sight in his left eye sometime after arriving in California and no one knows for sure just how it happened. Some said that a rattlesnake frightened his team and when Charley stopped them to settle the lead horses he was kicked in the eye when one of them reared up. Another story says that while shoeing one of the horses it kicked him in the eye. The third tale that I am aware of says that while shoeing a horse the nail broke off and struck him in the eye. Whatever the truth, he lost the eye and wore a patch over it for the rest of his life. And along with the injury came a pair of nicknames, "One-Eyed Charley" and "Cockeyed Charley," which only furthered the legends around him.

The condition of the roads, the curves and the mountains made stage coach driving a dangerous occupation and like all drivers Charley had his close calls and narrow escapes. One passenger reported to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "The team ran away so suddenly as to throw Parkhurst from the box (driver's seat). Still retaining his grip on the lines he was dragged along until he succeeded in turning the runaways into the chaparral, where they were caught among the bushes and stopped. To show our admiration of the driver's pluck, we passengers made up and presented him with a purse of \$20."

There were more dangers to driving coaches than just the roads. There were also those notorious robbers known as road agents. Charley and other drivers would oftentimes carry thousands of dollars in gold. A favorite place for stagecoach robbers to stop a stage was where the stage had to slow down to get up a hill or a sandy or muddy stretch of road that bogged the coach down. Once, as Charley was climbing a hill, four armed bandits jumped from hiding and forced him to stop the coach. Supposedly one of the bandits was recognized as "Sugarfoot" because his feet were so big he could not find boots to fit. Instead he wrapped his feet in sugar sacks. The road agents ordered him to throw down the gold box and Charley complied. As Charley drove away it was reported that he yelled out to the bandits that he would be ready for them the next time.

After that first robbery, Charley bought himself a gun and he carried it on every run that had a gold shipment. And he got a second chance with Sugarfoot. This time Sugarfoot only had one accomplice and when they jumped out Charley did not slow down. Instead he grabbed his gun and at almost point blank range shot Sugarfoot dead and seriously wounded the other bandit. Charley drove away as if nothing had happened.

On another occasion, a muddy road had bogged him down on the way to Grass Valley and a single bandit jumped out of the bushes and demanded that Charley stop. Naturally Charley had his whip in his hand to urge the horses on. With a quick flip of the wrist Charley sent the whip out to the bandit's face. The road agent staggered away and Charley continued his trip. Upon reaching town he reported the attempted hold up. The outlaw was

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found the next day and one of his eyes was completely destroyed and the other was seriously injured.

On another occasion a bandit grabbed the lead horse. Charley snapped the whip and the lead horse reared up and knocked the fellow down. Charley cracked the whip and the stage raced away. The bad guy fired a shot at the back of the stage with no effect.

In 1856, Charley was operating a most profitable run to San Mateo County. The run was at its peak and Charley just quit. No reason why and lots of speculation. What he did for the next four years I do not know. But, in 1864, he settled on a small place on one of the stage routes and ran a stop where he changed horses for the drivers and provided refreshments for the passengers.

In the early '70s Charley seems to have sold everything he had and retired. In 1876 he asked Charles Harmon if he could move into a small house on Harmon's property. Charley settled down for his last time.

In his lifetime Charley would never go to see a doctor. If he had a malady, he would find someone he knew with the same problem and take whatever cure they were taking. In 1879 he began to develop a sore throat and he continued to chew his tobacco. Even when the soreness and swelling spread to his tongue he refused to see a doctor. After suffering through the pain for another year, he finally went to see a Mr. Plumm in Soquel, California. He was known as the "cancer man" and he told Charley he needed a silver tube inserted in his throat to help his breathing. Charley refused.

Charley would often tell Harmon that he had something to tell him, but that there was no hurry to do it. It is too bad that Charley did not share his secret with Harmon. On December 29, 1879, Charley passed away without ever revealing his secret. Charley was buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Watsonville, California, in a grave in a large plot that was donated by a local business man named Stoesser. He bought the lot for his friends, employees and those who did not have the money to buy their own plot. A wooden marker was placed on the grave and soon the grave was overgrown and like all the old wooden markers, rotted away. What was the secret that Charley took to his grave without passing on to Harmon?

We have to go back to the 1860s to find the answer. At that time Charley was working for a fellow by the name of Andrew Clark in Pleasant Valley, California, and living in a small house on Clark's property. Charley would drink occasionally, but he had a hard rule that he lived by—never more than two drinks. On one occasion he broke his rule.

On the day he broke his rule, he really broke it and when he returned to the Clark farm it was most obvious to Mrs. Clark. She directed her son to help Charley to his cabin and be sure he got to bed. The son complied with mother's wishes.

The boy soon returned to his mother all excited. He had learned Charley's secret. Charley was a woman. The Clarks knew that Charley would be very embarrassed if that bit of news got out. So they decided to keep his secret to themselves and they did.

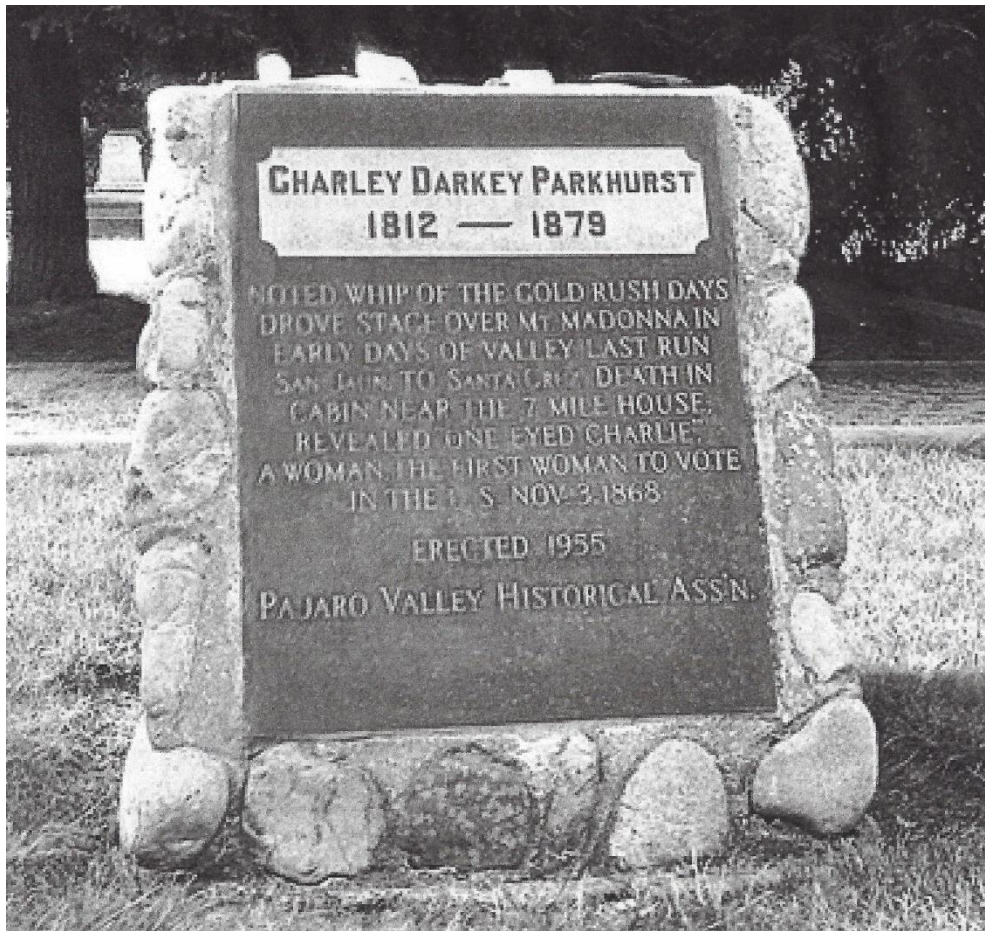
But, in death the body has to be prepared for burial and the news that "One-Eyed Charley" was really a woman resounded through the west. His closest friends were stunned. Then rumors and stories begin to flow, almost all of them false.

Another thing that she really became noted for is the fact that in 1868 she had registered to vote. There was no impact to that at the time. But now everybody is talking about her being the first woman to ever cast a vote in the United States. And maybe she was. She definitely registered to vote, but there is no evidence that she actually cast a ballot. Despite the lack of proof of the actual voting, the city erected a plaque at the Soquel Fire Station that read, "On this site on November 3, 1868 was cast the first vote by a woman in California. A ballot by Charlotte (Charley) Parkhurst who disguised herself as a man." The plaque was destroyed by a flood and replaced in 1974.

The Stoesser family deeded her burial plot to the Pajaro Valley Historical Association which erected a new monument to replace the old wooden marker in 1955. Today she is buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County, California

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There is much that will never be known about Charley. What was her real name? The folks that found that she was a she assigned the named Charlotte probably because it would fit with Charley. Wikipedia says she was born as Mary Parkhurst. I think there is no evidence of that. Was her last name really Parkhurst? Did Mr. Balch in Providence know he was a she? Always being known as a man, how did she handle amorous females that might have been attracted to her? After her death many false stories were conjured by people that never even knew her. Some reported that the doctor or undertaker said there was evidence she had given birth. Some said there were baby shoes in her possession. How much of what we think we know is the truth?



Chaley's Marker in the Pioneer Cemetery in Watsonville, California

**NOTED WHIP OF THE GOLD RUSH DAYS
DROVE STAGE OVER MT. MADONNA IN
EARLY DAYS OF VALLEY. LAST RUN
SAN JUAN TO SANTA CRUZ. DEATH IN
CABIN NEAR 7 MILE HOUSE.
REVEALED "ONE EYED CHARLIE"
A WOMAN. THE FIRST WOMAN TO VOTE
IN THE U. S. NOV. 3, 1868**

Source: Mueller, A. J. "They Called Him Cockeyed Charlie." *Old West*, Spring 1997, p. 35.