UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities Podcast
Season 7 Episode 3: The Legend of "One-Eyed Charley"
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TRANSCRIPT

Deb Fowler: Hello, and welcome to *UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities — A Podcast*. I'm Deb Fowler, co-founder of History UnErased.

Imagine for a moment that you have time-traveled to the 1850s in California, where thousands of people are in a rush, a Gold Rush, which means they need to travel over some of the most rugged terrain in North America. There are no trains yet (that won't happen for another twenty years), but there are stagecoaches. And there is a high demand for skilled and courageous drivers.

In this episode, our host, Kathleen Barker, will introduce a stagecoach driver who, in addition to their legendary status, challenges much of what we think of when we imagine the Old, Wild West.

Take it away, Kathleen!

Kathleen Barker: Who is ready for a road trip? Before we introduce you to the infamous Charley Parkhurst, let's set the stage and take a look at the wild and dangerous world of the American stagecoach.

Stagecoaches were essentially wooden boxes on wooden wheels, protected from road damage with an iron hoop, and pulled by teams of four to six horses. The routes through the rugged terrain were manageable with a series of "stages," or stops, spaced roughly 10 to 20 miles apart, where coaches would change horses and/or drivers, and passengers could rest and resupply.

Passengers were crowded together on wooden benches, inhaled dust from the road, and endured extreme temperatures and weather, and both passengers and the driver might go days without a good night's sleep. Doesn't that sound like the road trip from hell? Well, it gets worse! Traveling by stagecoach included the potential for all sorts of additional dangers: crashing on mountain passes, being attacked by bandits, and what if the horses took flight?

Given these conditions, who would sign up for any of it? The men who drove these coaches were revered, and called "whips", "reinsmen," or "Jehus" (which is a reference to the Biblical figure Jehu, whose furious and fast driving style became his signature trait!). The drivers needed extraordinary skill and nerves of steel, as well as incredible strength, to control the horses and keep their passengers and valuable cargo safe.

One of the most famous of these stagecoach drivers was Charley Parkhurst, also known as Six-Horse Charley, One-Eyed Charley, and Cock-Eyed Charley.

Born in 1812 in either Lebanon, New Hampshire, or Sharon, Vermont, Charley Parkhurst was born Charlotte Darkey Parkhurst. Charlotte was abandoned by her parents and spent her early childhood in an orphanage. Around age 12, Charlotte donned boys' clothing, ran away, and became Charley Parkhurst.

Parkhurst traveled to Worcester, Massachusetts, and found employment at a livery stable. Charley earned his keep by mucking out stalls, cleaning tack, and scrubbing down carriages. The stable owner, Ebenezer Balch, eventually relocated to Providence, Rhode Island, and brought Parkhurst with him. He taught Parkhurst how to handle horses and command a stagecoach team.

By the 1840s, Parkhurst began earning wages as a stagecoach driver and soon built a reputation as one of the most capable drivers in the profession, working the Providence to Worcester route.

Fast forward to 1848, when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill. At the time, the only way to reach the California gold fields was on foot or with the assistance of a horse or a mule. Wouldn't a stagecoach be faster? Recognizing a great money-making opportunity, some of Charley's co-workers in New England moved to California and started the California Stage Company.

So, Charley headed into the Wild West and joined his former colleagues. Charley transported all sorts of passengers, including prospectors, politicians, and even a few prisoners, around the San Francisco Bay area and the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Charley was so well known for his stagecoach driving that he was even featured in an article in Harper's Monthly Magazine in 1865. The author, John Ross Brown, traveled throughout Northern California with Charley. In Brown's riveting portrait, Charley was described as "one of the boys," who drank, smoked, and played cards, often in exchange for alcohol. Brown writes…

"Imagine yourself seated in front of the stage by the side of that genial old whipster, Charlie, who knows every foot of the way, and upon whom you can implicitly rely for the safety of your life and limbs. Holding the reins with a firm hand and casting a penetrating eye ahead, he cracks his whip and away go the horses with inspiring velocity - six magnificent chestnuts superbly adorned with flowing manes and tails.

Despite his skills, Charley knew that he couldn't work forever, as he explained to Brown:

"Fact is I've traveled over these mountains so often I can tell where the road is by the sound of the wheels. When they rattle, I'm on hard ground; when they don't rattle, I generally look over the side to see where she's a going…. I calculate to quit the business next trip…. I'm no better now than when I commenced. Pay's small and work's heavy. I'm getting old. Rheumatism in my bones – nobody to look out for old, used-up stage drivers. I'll kick the bucket one of these days and that'll be the last of old Charlie."

The stories about Charley's skill and daring grew into legend. There's a famous account of Charley outsmarting the notorious bandit Sugarfoot, who attempted to hold up the stage. According to the story, Charley whipped the horses into a gallop and barreled straight through the ambush, later reportedly saying, "I'll be damned if I'll give up my stage to any two-bit road agent."

On another occasion, Charley supposedly kept the stagecoach upright and under control when the brake failed on a steep mountain descent—a feat that would have killed most drivers and all of their passengers.

One account from the San Francisco Morning Call described a driver—almost certainly Charley—as "the most dexterous and celebrated of the California drivers" who "handled the reins with the precision of a concert violinist."

For nearly twenty years, Charley drove the mountain routes. But as the 1860s progressed, the era of the stagecoach was ending. The transcontinental railroad was coming. One by one, stage routes were being replaced by rail lines.

By the 1870s, Parkhurst had left stagecoach driving behind and bought a small ranch and way station in the Santa Cruz Mountains. On December 28, 1879, Charley Parkhurst died, and what happened next shocked everyone who had known the legendary driver. When colleagues prepared Charley's body for burial, they discovered something that had remained hidden for more than sixty years.

The news exploded across California and beyond. Newspapers from San Francisco to New York ran sensational stories about the female stagecoach driver who had lived as a man for decades.

Charley Parkhurst's gravestone reads:

"Noted whip of the Gold Rush days. Drove a stage over Mt. Madonna in early days of valley. Last run San Juan to Santa Cruz. Death in a cabin near the 7 mile house, revealed "One Eyed Charlie", a woman. The first woman to vote in the U.S. Nov. 3, 1868"

Harper's author John Ross Brown aimed to ensure that Charley's name was never forgotten:

"All hail to thee, old Charlie! … Here, in the pages of this magazine, your name shall be rescued from oblivion. Sweet and gentle ladies shall pay the tribute of admiration to your manly features; and honest men shall award you honor, to whom honor is due. For in the vicissitudes of my career have I not found Brave and Sterling qualities in all classes of men; Heroes whose names are never known; hearts and souls, human affections, and the fear of God and the bodies of stage drivers?"

Additional information about Charley Parkhurst comes from contemporary newspaper coverage following Charley's death and recollections from fellow stagecoach drivers and passengers gathered later. Official documents—census records, employment files, property deeds—fill in some gaps. But Charley Parkhurst's story leaves us with many questions we can never answer. What we do know is that Charley Parkhurst lived a remarkable life and built a reputation founded on exceptional ability and courage. Now that's a story worth remembering!

DF: Kathleen Barker is History UnErased's program director and podcast host, and is a library and information specialist and public historian with over 20 years of experience as a museum and library educator.

This podcast is funded by the New York City Council. It was developed by History UnErased and produced and edited by Dinah Mack, our youth equity program director and podcaster.

Our theme music is “1986” by BrothaD via Tribe of Noise. Please rate this podcast and share! I’m Deb Fowler. Thanks for listening. And visit UnErased.org to learn how we are putting LGBTQ history in its rightful place - the classroom.

Primary Sources:

1. The Death of Charley Parkhurst - Digital Transgender Archive
2. CHARLEY" PARKHURST OBITUARY FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES - Karen Kondazian
3. “For (S)he Driveth Furiously” - Celebrate California
4. Biographical References to Charley Parkhurst: Charley Parkhurst and Her Times

Charley stood five feet tall and had only one good eye after a horse kicked him. He dressed in tailored coats, handmade boots, and a broad gray hat. No matter the weather, he wore long-fringed, beaded gloves – perhaps to hide small women’s hands. He drank whiskey, chewed tobacco, smoked cigars, and talked to his horses. His profane vocabulary sometimes left his passengers spellbound.