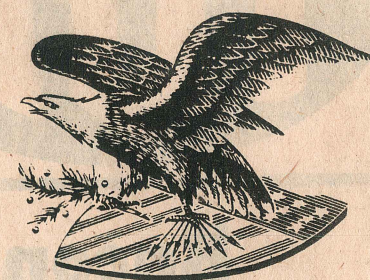


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# BICENTENNIAL



1776-1976

*"Remembrances of Days Gone By"*

## Story Of Martin L. Burke, Stagecoach Driver

The following account is a brief history of Martin L. Burke, stagecoach driver for many years in this area, and some of the tales he told about his years of driving. Much of this information comes from the History of Polk County. The tales he tells are actual occurrences.

Among the old-timers, none are better conversationalists or more largely supplied with reminiscences than the old stage drivers that went through the country following their regular route week after week with eyes and ears open and coming in contact with all sorts of people.

Martin Lambert Burke was full-blooded Hibernian, born on the "Auld Sod" who held the reins over some of Colonel Hooker's nags across the prairies and wild wastes between Des Moines and Fort Dodge, when the latter was in its first years of organization. He was the father of Pat Burke and grandfather of J.P. Burke.

Born in Ireland on August 10, 1830, he came to America when he was seventeen and stopped at Columbus, Ohio, the headquarters of the Western Stage Company, then operating lines in Ohio and Indiana. On reaching Indianapolis, in 1854, the company decided to take field in Iowa.

They purchased all the rights, title, and interest of the firm to Des Moines to Dubuque in 1855. Thirty

empty four-horse coaches and drivers were sent to Knoxville, Ill., fifteen of which went to Burlington and fifteen to Muscatine. Burke was stationed in Muscatine, but was not happy there for all his friends were at Burlington. So, he began working his way towards them. Arriving at Ottumwa, he was put on the box and drove between Chariton and Ottumwa for three months, before being transferred to the Fort Dodge route, from Des Moines to Cedar Falls via Fort Dodge, upon the request of Parmalee, a long-time firend and road agent.

From 1855 to 1862, Burke drove that line before being transferred by Colonel Hooker, superintendent of the company, to the Des Moines and Indianola route as a driver and express messenger, where he served two years. R.K. McMasters was the agent of the United States Express Company in Des Moines at that time.

Listed below are some of the tales and recollections of Mr. Burke in his own words.

"On the Fort Dodge line, we started from Des Moines on Third Street, just across the alley from the Everett House, on the west side of the street. The stage crossed the river somewhere between Court Avenue and Walnut Street—forded when it was low, and when it was frozen, we not only crossed on the ice, but used to come on the ice from Thompson's Bend

clear down. After we got on the east side, we went over along the bluff, past the Small House, and went on out by Thompson's Bend, through Saylorville to Polk City, then to Bell's Points, which is between Madrid and Luther, then to Boonesboro. There we met the coach from Fort Dodge, and each driver turned and went back, I coming back to Des Moines and the other driver going on to Fort Dodge.

Tri-weekly trips were the usual occurrences until the railroad reached Boone in the early 1900's. We would leave Boonesboro—go north through Mineral Ridge to Hook's Point, then across the Boone River by ferry, on to Brushy Creek, and from there on to Fort Dodge. The stations for changing horses were at Polk City, Boonesboro, Bell's Point, Brushy Creek and Fort Dodge. The hotels at the stations were kept at Polk City by a man named Harter; at Bell's Point by Jesse Hull, and eventually at Fort Dodge at the Wahnonsa House.

The first stage barn was south of where the Rock Island Depot now is and it was the old barracks the soldiers left, with two or three wells, etc.

The buildings belonged to two brothers, Henry and Jacob Bunn, and the stage company built a new barn and many shops at the new station.

The first office agent under Hooker before Burke came to Des Moines was a man named Smith whose job it was to look after the waybills, passengers, collect the fares and see to it that everything was right before the stage started.

The book told of Burke's recollection of a particular trip he made from Des Moines to Boonesboro.

"At one time, three passengers, Mrs. Sherman, wife of a Boone banker; her child and the mother of Mrs. Sherman rode with me from Des Moines to

Boonesboro during a cold wet Spring, and I was afraid they would freeze. I gave them my buffalo robe and overcoat and tried to make them comfortable. They were to take the other coach at Boone and I told them not to attempt to cross the Boone River, but they were in a hurry to get home, and when they came to the river, a young man attempted to take them over in a boat. The boat also carrying alot of mail was so overloaded that it went down, and the two women and child were drowned. The young man jumped and left them to their fate."

Burke left from Des Moines after breakfast and if all roads were in good condition, the stage would arrive in Boonesboro by 3:30 or 4 p.m., but if conditions were unfavorable, it sometimes was almost midnight before the trip was completed.

He also recalled when horse racing was a common sporting event in the Madrid area. He stated that he did some gambling, along with other men such as Cornelius Grigsby and Jacob Murray.

He also did good deeds for many of the area people. Burke always would bring back packages of soda from wherever he went and would distribute them to the ladies in Bell's Point so they could make biscuits.

Burke quit driving the stage in 1867, but shortly before, he found a piece of land which the River Land Company had not acquired in Douglas Township near Luther. So, he cleared the land and cultivated that area, upon which he later settled and farmed.

Politically, Burke was a Democrat. He stated that he used to visit Bell's Point because they were Whigs and Hulls. "The Hulls had all the girls, so I became a Democrat, but I still voted for Cummins for Governor."

## The Legend Of Molly Moore And History Of Belle Point

Legends and folk tales are all a part of historical research, some of which turn out to be factual, others, just stories.

One such legend is that of Molly Moore, alleged stage coach robber of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Stories heard from other historians were ones concerning stagecoach robberies, "how Jessie James spent a night with Molly Moore following the Northwood bank robbery; and how she was finally captured and hung from a tree on the Long farm south-west of Luther."

Did Madrid actually have its own notorious robber and gang during the early 1900's, much like that of Al Capone in the Chicago area? Here's both stories about this unknown woman. You can decide for yourself.

Here is the story of Molly Moore as told by Jake Stoneburner, who knew this lady when he was very young and who lived in the same area as she did when growing up in Douglas Township.

She came to the Douglas Township area in the late 1800's where she and her husband homesteaded 100 acres of land in the western half of section 15. The Moores had a daughter, Linda, who married Jack Crummell and she later raised three grandsons, by the name of Powell.

Her home was down along the Des Moines River and the well and cellar, now a part of the State 4-H camp, are still visible today. The house was a two room shack and she lived here almost all her life.

Stories told of this brave woman, wearing pants and smoking cigars, but only part of this was true. Molly wore dresses with large pockets and smoked a clay pipe which contained tobacco that she grew herself.

Ed Powell, the youngest grandson, used to play ball with Mr. Stoneburner on the Pumpkin Ridge team and he later married a Norwegian-girl from Huxley, that Molly never approved of. The grandson sought employment shortly after at the Boone Roundhouse to support his new wife and aging grandmother. He found a house in Boone, but Molly refused to leave her beloved area, so she moved in with the Stoneburner family for almost a month before she went to live with her daughter, Mrs. Jack Crummell. She later returned to live with the Stoneburner family for another short time before she went back to her daughter's and it was here that she died sometime between 1909 and 1913.

She is believed to be buried in the Hull Cemetery, but there is no marker on her grave and records do not date back that far, but it is Mr. Stoneburner's belief that she is buried there.

He verifies part of the legend that Jessie James spent the night at her cabin following his bank hold-up in Northwood. The next morning, he and his gang left by horseback down the river bank, eventually swam the Des Moines river to the opposite bank and continued their get-away through the community of Woodward.

Mr. Stoneburner stated that he too had heard the rumors supposedly involving this lady, but he stated that the majority of them were false to his knowledge and recollections.

Mrs. A.K. Johnson, on the other hand, presents a totally different view of Molly Moore. She recalls stories told by her grandfather, C.L. Lucas about this Douglas Township woman.

Mrs. Johnson tells about Molly Moore being the leader of a gang that held up the stagecoaches as they traveled north out of Madrid.

She also remembers the story about how Molly Moore frightened a woman to death on a farm outside of Luther. Molly then was hung on the "hanging," tree on the Long farm, but Mrs. Johnson does not know where she was buried. This too is believed to have happened sometime between 1909 and 1913.

A large tract of land is still known today as the Molly Moore Hollow. This area begins on a farm one time owned by a family named Jennings and ends one mile north and two miles west of Luther.

### Belle Point

Around the 1840's, a settlement is known to have been established five miles north of Madrid, known as Belle Point. Beyond this, much of the remaining information is just speculation or heresay evidence, recalled by people who had family or relatives living in that area.

An area of discussion is how the settlement came to get its name. One historian reports that the area was originally called Hull's Point and was changed in 1847. This person states that it was named after Elizabeth Hull who was often called Belle by her friends.

Another theory is that it was named after its location setting. The settlement was located in the area where Al Sorensen and Ralph Anderson now live. (The post office was located on the Anderson farm.) In this particular area, the road curves into the shape of a bell, and it was settled at a point where flat land and timber meet.

The third theory says that the name comes from the French language where belle means "beautiful or nice" and point means "spot."

At the time around 1847, the Hull family was the most numerous in the county. Coming from Scotch and German stock, the father of the family was a

pioneer of the Virginia Mountains. They were among the first settlers of Licking County, Ohio.

The Hulls were Methodist by faith and united politically with the Whigs. Due to the enormously large family, it is said that they could carry any election.

In May 1846, James Hull, settled in an area ten miles south of Boone at Belle Point, which was then a stop for the Western Stage Company. The stage, travelling between Des Moines and Fort Dodge would stop at the Hull house where Jesse Hull kept a stage station. Jesse was the third settler of Douglas Township and came with his family from Missouri in the spring of 1847.

In 1849, Jesse Hull was elected county commissioner, being the first county official whose residence was in Douglas Township.

Belle Point also gets credit for having the first post office in Boone County. It was established on Nov. 27, 1849, and was run by Jesse Hull's wife, Elizabeth. The home of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Anderson is the original post office building. For a number of years, Pleasant Township elections were held in Belle Point. It is also claimed that the first schoolhouse in Boone County was located here. It was a seasonal school, meeting during the winter months after the harvest was complete.

Early teachers were Thomas Sparks, Z.J. Vontress, Harry Graves, Clark Luther and V.B. Crooks. The schoolhouse remained standing until 1960 when it was torn down. Byrdie Moss also was a teacher at Belle Point for one term. She recalled teaching 18 youngsters in grades K-8, and that when water was needed at the school, the youngsters walked a quarter of a mile to the Nels Long farm.

When the school closed, or whatever happened to the tiny Boone County Community is not known.