

# GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (November 2000)

COBB & Co.

By Rob Upson

The means of travel to the Bendigo diggings, during the first couple of years of the gold rush, was by horse and cart, bullock dray or on foot. The 100-mile journey from Melbourne via Flemington, across the Keilor plains, up through the Black Forest, Kyneton and Mt. Alexander would take at least 10 days. And that was when the weather was fine. The Diggers camped out overnight but Inns were soon erected along the way at places such as Deep Creek, Macedon and Porcupine. The tracks were either mud in the winter or dust in the summer. During the March rains of 1852 there were some 300 drays held up on the track between Melbourne and Mt. Alexander, some for up to 24 days. Any kind of public transport was irregular and somewhat confined to the summer months.

It was about this time that an American named Freeman Cobb arrived at the Port Phillip settlement. Cobb was born in 1830 at Cape Cod and at aged 19 joined the goods carting firm of Adams Express Co. as a clerk. He studied banking and commerce and was sent to California soon after their '49 gold rush. When news of the Australian gold finds reached him, he and George Mowton (also of the Adams Express Co.) set sail to investigate setting up a branch of their company in Victoria. On arrival, Mowton decided the time was not opportune, so Cobb persuaded three young fellow Americans, that he had met on the ship, to join him in forming their own company. This they called **Cobb & Co.**

In 1853 they commenced carting goods from Liardet's Beach (Port of Melbourne) to Melbourne. By the end of the year they gave up carrying goods and decided to try passenger coaching instead. Wagons were overhauled to seat passengers and new coaches were imported from America.

Cobb & Co.'s first venture beyond Melbourne was to Forest Creek and on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1854 a daily passenger service commenced between Melbourne and Bendigo (except Sundays). With the addition of mail delivery contracts Cobb & Co.'s business expanded rapidly. Other country services included Geelong, Ballarat, Maryborough and Beechworth. The journey to Bendigo could now be accomplished in a day. The condition of the roads, although improving, was still dependant on the weather.

In May 1856, for some unknown reason, Freeman Cobb unexpectedly sold out and returned to America. Cobb & Co. had obviously made him quite a bit of money. He settled in Massachusetts and reportedly became a banker and a Senator. In 1871 he went to South Africa and established coach runs between Port Elizabeth and the Kimberley gold fields. (Another gold rush had lured him yet again.) He died at Port Elizabeth in May 1878.

Over the few years since Cobb's departure from Victoria, Cobb & Co. changed hands several times until in 1861 a syndicate headed by James Rutherford, another American, took control. Cobb & Co. then began a transformation from a small Victorian company to what became the largest coaching firm in Australia, spreading throughout Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Rutherford remained in charge until his death in 1911 in Mackay. The railway and the motor vehicle gradually changed the transport system and the last horse drawn Cobb & Co. coach ran in 1924 between Surat and Yuleba in southeast Queensland. The name of **Cobb & Co.** continues to this day in the passenger transport business. The name has endured and will remain part of our heritage even though its founder spent less than four years in Australia. Henry Lawson vividly portrays the romance of Cobb & Co. in his poem, *The Lights of Cobb & Co.*

*Reference :- Cobb and Co. by J.E.L.Rutherford*