

OLD "UNCLE IRA"

The Oldest Stage Driver in the World
Holding the Reins.

HAS BRAVED MANY STORMS

How He Run a Horse Against a Greyhound and Won—Rode in a Race and Won \$10,000.

Macon, Ga., May 2.—(Special.)—The oldest stage driver and United States mail carrier now alive in the world and in active service is Ira Jennings, of the Warrior district, Bibb county, Georgia. Though he is nearly eighty-two years old, he is hale and hearty and travels in his buggy 150 miles every week carrying the mails. The finger of time has traced deep lines in his face and exposure to the elements have furrowed his brow and hardened his skin, but his spirit is still young, his step is quick and the fires of democratic ardor burn brightly and unceasingly in his breast. He has faced and braved many storms, atmospheric and political, and has always rode safely into port on the crest of the foaming waves.

He is known as "Uncle Ira" in this neck of the woods. Upon his favor have hung the destinies of many aspiring politicians. He has elected and defeated numerous can-



IRA JENNINGS.

didates for office, and for many long years it was the practice of those seeking the suffrages of the people to first communicate with Uncle Ira before announcing their candidacy. For thirty-five years he was a manager of the Warrior district precinct, and there was an old political saying, "as goes the Warrior so goes the county." Many candidates, either to their joy or woe, have realized the truth of this. He still takes an active interest in politics and his influence is potent.

"Uncle Ira" has had a remarkable career, and his history is full of thrilling incidents and startling episodes. He was born July 15, 1815, in Danby, Tompkins county, New York, six miles from Ithica, on the Owego and Ithica turnpike. His mother was the first white child born in Owego, Tioga county, on the Susannah river, New York. So delighted were the Indian tribes at her arrival they had a week's frolic in celebration of the event. At the age of thirteen Ira went on the race track in the capacity of jockey, in which position he remained several years. He was a fast rider and once won a purse of \$10,000 for the owner of a half-mile racer, a Pennsylvanian by the name of Correlle. Ira won this race in a very novel manner.

He had trained the Correlle horse with a fleet-footed greyhound. The speed of the two animals was about the same. The greyhound had been taught to race the track with the horse, and the runs between them were neck and neck. The reputation of a fast horse in Virginia reached the ears of Correlle in Pennsylvania, and he determined to race his horse with the Virginia nag. So he took Ira, the horse and the greyhound to the Virginia course, where a great meet was being held. One of the events was a half-mile dash between the famed Virginia horse and another rapid animal. Correlle told Ira that the speed of the Virginia horse must be taken with the greyhound, so when the two horses dashed off, Ira unobserved by the great crowd which was intently watching the start, turned loose the greyhound, who raced down the track with the horses and came out at the finish twenty feet ahead of the Virginia horse, which won the race over the other horse. Correlle then knew that his horse could defeat the Virginia victor, for it was always a nip and tuck race between his horse and the greyhound.

Correlle bantered the Virginian for a race between their horses for a \$10,000 purse.

The banter was accepted and the great audience which assembled to see the race bet their money on the Virginia horse and many ladies wanted to bet their watches with Correlle that he would lose, but Correlle could not take the wagers as all he had in life had been placed in the \$10,000 purse. The race was run, Ira riding the Correlle horse. Ira's nag came out winner several lengths.

Soon after this Ira left the race course and commenced driving a canal boat that weighed 230 tons. He drove two black horses tandem that weighed 1,500 pounds each. After a certain trip from Ithica to Albany he left the horses at Auburn and the crew took the boat into Clougin lake. Ira went down into the hull on a mission and discovered that the boat had sprung a leak. He took off his coat and shoved it into the hole, stopping the leak and saving the boat. This experience satisfied Ira with boating and he left the water and went to Owego, N. Y., and commenced stage driving and carrying the United States mail from Owego to Mt. Rose and between various other points in New York state and Pennsylvania. He was then about seventeen years old. A wooden railroad was built from Owego to Ithica and Ira commenced to drive horses in tandem on that. The tracks, wheels, cars and everything about the road was made of wood. One day on this road he drove Andrew Jackson, president of the United States; Vice President Martin Van Buren, Postmaster General Amos Kendall and Nick Biddle, cashier of the United States bank. On this occasion President Jackson was making a campaign for reelection. Ira says he knew Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren quite well. Ira drove on the wooden railroad six months. He then carried thirty head of horses for John Avery to Petersburg, Va., and commenced driving a stage, and carrying the mails from Petersburg to Richmond and City Point; drove from Lynchburg, Charlottesville and Staunton. Later he drove from Halifax, N. C., to Tarber, on the Tar river, then from Cheraw, S. C., to Patilla creek.

President Jackson ordered an express line to be run from Washington city to New Orleans at the rate of ten miles per hour on horse back. Ira went to Petersburg and got thirty horses and returned to Cheraw to help run the express. He established his horses seven miles apart on the route and he carried the first express into Cheraw that ever entered that city. Orders came from President Jackson one day for every man along the route to be at his post as he desired to see how rapidly his messages could be carried from Washington to New Orleans. When the trial day came Ira received the message at Cheraw and went in full gallop to the end of his route, a distance of 75 miles, and back again to Cheraw, covering the 150 miles on horse back in one day, stopping only to change horses. When Ira quit riding the express he returned to Petersburg and met a Mr. Saltmarsh, who induced him to come to Macon, Ga. He reached here June

15, 1834, at the age of nineteen. On the 19th day of June, 1834, sixty-two years ago, Ira commenced driving a stage and carrying the United States mail from Macon to Knoxville, Crawford county, Georgia, and he is carrying the mail between these points to this day. Stage driving has long since become obsolete in this civilized section and progressive era of railroads, but Ira carries Uncle Sam's mails with horse and buggy. In 1834 his route extended to Crollstand, some distance beyond Knoxville, and four miles beyond the Flint river. In December, 1837, there was a very heavy freshet and Ira attempted to cross the river with several other persons on a flat. Among them was John Toser, the stage agent at Columbus, and a young boy named Tom Hicks. Midway of the river the flat broke loose and floated four miles down the river. The waters were very high and the river far beyond its banks. The flat floated under the limbs of a large oak tree, and the stage, one of the horses that had been unharnessed, and the boy, Tom Hicks, were swept into the raging stream. With great difficulty young Hicks was rescued from drowning, and the horse was saved, but the coach was lost for months, but the following April it was found in an old field, where it had been carried by the waters. The flat and its occupants drifted some distance down the river to an island where the party remained for hours and were finally rescued in batteaus by farmers. When the coach was swept off the flat a mail pouch containing \$7,000 in paper bills was lost. In July, six months after the freshet, the pouch was found by an old man named Patty Carr. The bills were badly water stained and were stuck tightly together. They were forwarded to the treasury at Washington and redeemed. Carr was paid a reward of \$100 for finding the pouch and money.

Ira was married on December 5, 1839. His wife died in February, 1891. They had a happy married life of more than fifty-two years. Seven children blessed their union, six of whom are still living. He has twenty-six grandchildren alive and nine dead. He also has three great grandchildren.

During the late war he helped form the Huguenin Rifles and provided for and took care of fifteen families of the members of the company while the Rifles were at the front.

"Uncle Ira" had a cataract on one of his eyes for seven years and in 1890 or 1891 it was cut off by Dr. Colter.

"Uncle Ira" is a man of much wit and geniality. He is liked by everybody and is true and humane. During the long years he has been carrying the mails he has served the government faithfully and efficiently.