

THE PONY EXPRESS

Started April 3, 1860 and ended October, 1861

Approximately 2,000 miles traveled by horse in 10 days



Reason for the start of the Pony Express

Fast and reliable communication between the eastern United States and the west coast was needed. Before the Pony Express, mail was delivered in a variety of ways: by ship around South America, taking two or three months; by mule freight wagons from Missouri, taking three to four weeks; by the Butterfield Stage along the “southern” route from St. Louis to Los Angeles, via Yuma, to San Francisco, taking around 30 days.

The Pony Express cut U.S. Mail delivery time to 10 days and operated 24 hours a day, twice a week delivery, after the initial once a week schedule.

Reason for the end of the Pony Express

It operated for only 19 months, from April 1860 to October 1861. It was discontinued when the intercontinental telegraph was completed, and the immediacy of the telegraph replaced the need for the Pony Express. The Pony Express was a very expensive operation to set up and operated as a financial loss to the owners. With the start of the Civil War and southern states seceding from the Union, the expected mail contracts with the U.S. Government never materialized.

Facts about the Pony Express

The Company (officially known as COC&PP – Central Overland California & Pike’s Peak Express Co. and nick-named the Pony Express) was formed by Russell, Majors, & Waddell, owners of an established freighting firm in the Western United States. The Pony Express was never a government operation

The Riders -

- ◆ Riders were generally boys who were skilled with horses, 16 to 20 years old and weighing approximately 125 lbs. They were described as “thin, wiry, and hardy pony-riders.”
- ◆ There were usually round 85-100 active riders at a time. Out of the 200 or so who were hired, perhaps 12 boys lasted the full 19 months.
- ◆ Depending on the risks of their routes, riders were paid \$120 to \$160 a month, plus room and board. Excellent wages for 1860!

The Equipment –

- ◆ Saddle – A specially designed saddle based upon the Calvary saddle – strong, light and open so air could circulate. It weighed about one-third of a normal saddle of the day.
- ◆ Mochila – A special saddlebag that draped over the saddle which was strong, rugged, secure, not too heavy and easy to change from horse to horse.
- ◆ Arms – It is believed that the riders were issued a Navy Colt model 1851 but were probably required to pay for it. So, other weapons might have been carried: Wells Fargo colt five shot percussion .31 caliber, Dragoon Colt .44 caliber, Model 1841 .54 caliber “Mississippi” rifles, 24/25 Sharp’s carbines (could have been the 1852, 1853 or 1859 model.)
- ◆ Horn – In order to notify the station keeper that he was approaching and in need of a fresh horse, the rider would sound the horn when in earshot.
- ◆ Oath and Bible – The riders were required to give an oath when hired and were issued a small bible to carry with them if they chose.

The Horses -

- ◆ The Pony Express had up to 500 horses at a given time. Thoroughbreds were used along the eastern end, frequently Mustangs were used on the western end of the trail.
- ◆ The horses had to be healthy, strong, have good stamina and kept in good condition.
- ◆ Horses galloped 8 to 10 miles an hour.
- ◆ Horses were fed grain, which meant they could outrun horses which grazed, such as the Native American horses in the Great Plains.

The Mail –

- ◆ Mail cost \$10 per oz, and was later reduced to \$5 per oz. in addition to regular postage.
- ◆ Most of the mail carried by the Pony Express was business or government related when speedy delivery was important
- ◆ The first westbound rider carried 49 letters, nine telegrams and several newspapers
- ◆ Riders carried on average between 15 lbs to 20 lbs of mail
- ◆ One estimate puts the total mail delivered at 308 runs, 34,753 letters, and only one mochila lost.
- ◆ The Station Keeper wrote on a card kept in the mochila when the Pony Express rider arrived and left his station, and if he was running late the rider would know how much time he had to make up before the next stop
- ◆ The exchange of mochila and horse was expected to take place in two to three minutes.
- ◆ The recipients of the mail in San Francisco were published in the newspaper, alerting them to the fact that they needed to pick up their mail at the Pony Express Station.

The Route –

- ◆ The Eastern Terminus was established as St. Joseph, Missouri because the railroad and telegraph had crossed the Mississippi River to this point.
- ◆ The Western Terminus was established as San Francisco, California. At first, the rider took the mail to Sacramento and then in went by boat to San Francisco.
- ◆ As the railroad and telegraph lines crept eastward from Sacramento, the terminus for the Pony Express riders moved to Folsom and then to Placerville.
- ◆ There were 154 relay stations over the almost 2,000 miles of the route
- ◆ Riders changed every 75 to 100 miles, and the horses changed every 10-15 miles

The story of the Pony Express has remained very popular. In fact, it is now difficult to tell fact from fiction. Very few documents survive from the COC&PP, the company that operated the Pony Express, including employee records. Many people claimed to have ridden for the Pony Express, and the Wild West shows, dime novels, and early movies helped to embellish the already popular tales of this short lived, but colorful phenomenon of our country's history.

El Dorado County Historical Museum
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