

## THE PONY EXPRESS

### I. Introduction

The Pony Express is a symbol of the old West in America. It was a horseback relay system, which provided mail between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California. It was the fastest mail service between the East and West of North America in 1860. They founded it because there was need for a faster mail service.

### II. Middle part

#### 2.1 Location/Situation

We can situate the Pony Express between 2 great events in American history. The gold rush in California in 1848 and the Civil War in 1861. Herewith the Pony Express played a not so unimportant part. Gold was found in California and people moved to this Promised Land. These gold seekers wanted to keep contact with their family and friends in the east. Americans citizens crossed the Great Plains in 1847 and there was the Mormon migration to the Great Salt Lake. The already existing mail services weren't very successful. The overseas route lasted 8 weeks. When the news reached its destination it was already old news. In 1860, the Pony Express was the fastest mail service between east and west. Also at the beginning of the Civil War, the Pony Express brought news of battles and lists of dead to anxious Westerns.

When we look at the geographical situation of the Pony Express, we can see that it passed through to present day states of California, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri. The route went mostly trough prairie, dry and barren country. The Rocky Mountains were also a dangerous passage in the route from east to west. Many horses stumbled over stones or fell in pits. The Indians stayed in this regions and this marked the route as extra dangerous.

#### 2.2 Most important features of the Pony Express

The Pony Express was founded by private entrepreneurs; Russell, Majors, and Waddell. They were already business partners in the firm Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Mail Service in 1854 and had experience hauling cargo and passengers. The reason why they founded the Pony Express was to promote their company and to gather the mail contract for a central overland route the Congress was awarding. They started a new firm and named it the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express, or in short, the Pony Express. It was April 3, 1860. When the Pony Express proved it could carry mail over the Central Route to California, the company could count on government subsidies. Despite they proved it was successful, the contract went to James Butterfield's Overland Mail Company which dominated and controlled the mail service to the West Coast

But how Russel, Majors and Waddell managed to set up the Pony Express? They had to deal with difficult tasks.

The first was to set out a logical route. The Pony Express operation was divided into five operating divisions. The first division ran from St. Joseph to Fort Kearney; the second division from Fort Kearney to Horseshoe Station (above Fort Laramie); the third division from Horseshoe Station to Salt Lake City; the fourth division from Salt Lake City to Roberts Creek; and the fifth Division from Roberts Creek to Sacramento. For the final segment, the stretch from Sacramento to San Francisco<sup>1</sup>. The distance from St. Joseph, Missouri in the east to Sacramento, California in the west was 1966 miles. Horses travelled 10 miles an hour and the riders switched horses every 15 miles in the nearby station, riders switched every 75 to 100 miles. Everyone said lone riders would never make it because they would be going through hostile Gosh Ute, Pah Ute, and Shoshone territory, especially in Utah. Riders must be very careful, Indians sometimes attacked the riders. There are at least three riders known to have been killed by Indians. Even the landscape was not without dangers; they had to pass the deserts of Nevada and the Rocky Mountains. But they used horses that were made for that type of landscape. Some horses are good on sandy ground other more on rocky grounds.

The second thing they had to organize were the different stations along the route. Stations were built every 10 to 15 miles; it was the distance a horse could run on an average speed of 10 miles an hour. The stations were comfortable and were well equipped with tin ware for cooking, stovepipes, dishes. Some were built of rocks; others of adobe and others were dug into hillsides. The station keepers and riders had plain food but probably the food of the horses was much better. In total there were 153 stations.

The third task was to provide each station with horses, men and supplies. And finally they also had to hire station keepers and riders. The Pony Express required 400 to 500 horses, 200 station keepers and 80 riders. They also had to establish central offices in the East and West to handle the incoming and outgoing mail. Here for the hired company agents to manage the business. That they could manage all these tasks in only 2 months proves that these 3 men had a lot of organizing ability. The first ride of the Pony Express was on April 3, 1860. It took seventy-five ponies to make the first trip from Missouri to California. The heroes that time were the Pony Express riders. The Pony Express wanted young, skinny, wiry fellows not over eighteen" and "expert riders, willing to risk death daily," and "orphans preferred," in reality, Pony Express riders probably came in all ages and from all segments of life. Each rider had to take an oath that said they might not use profane language, not get drunk, not gamble and not treat animals cruelly. If they didn't follow this oath, they didn't get paid for their service. On their trip they always had a bible and a colt. The trip wasn't without dangers. The Indians, the weather, the desert.

The first rider of the Pony Express was Johnny Fry. He rode from St. Joseph to Seneca, which is a distance of 80 miles. He was a well-know rider in local horse races. People say it's because of him the donuts were invented. Young women baked cookies for him and it was easier and faster to catch for Johnny Fry if they had a hole in the middle. He was a small person and his weight was 120 pounds. By this he could traverse long distances in a short period. He covered 80 miles at an average of 20 and a half mile an hour!

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nps.gov/poex/hrs/hrs3a.htm>

A more famous rider of the Pony Express is William F. Cody, known as Buffalo Bill. He was born in 1846 and grew up in the prairie of Kansas. In 1859 he tried his luck finding gold in California, the next year he joined the Pony Express, he was only 14 years old. He was sent to a station where it was less dangerous. After his career as Pony rider he served the army during the Civil War in 1861. He gets the name 'Buffalo Bill' in the year 1867, his job was buffalo hunter. People started calling him Buffalo Bill when he killed 4000 Buffalo's in a year and a half. He demonstrated the life of the Pony Express riders in his Wild Wild West Shows in 1867. He died in 1917 in Colorado. He was 71 years old.

Another rider is Pony Bob Haslam, one of the most daring and successful riders of the route. He even helped building stations. His greatest ride, 120 miles in 8 hours and 20 minutes while wounded, was an important contribution to the fastest trip ever made by the Pony Express. The message which he carried was Lincoln's Inaugural Address. Haslam made the longest trip in the history of the Pony Express, 380 miles.

The Pony Express was an efficient mail service but it failed as a successful enterprise. It only won \$90.141 and lost \$200.000!

But the financial situation was not the main reason why the Pony Express had to stop. Through the invention of the telegraph in 1861, which was at that time the fastest way of communication. Because of this the Pony Express had to stop his services. It is maybe ironic but some riders of the Pony Express even helped building the telegraph lines.

The Pony Express has proven his importance. A new legend was born!

### 2.3 Importance for tourism/leisure industry

The Pony Express passes 8 states, which I already mentioned. The trail is an ideal starting point for discovering these 8 states. Along the trail you can see the many statues, which should remember you to the history of the Pony Express. You can also visit the old stations. The most of them are now used as a museum where you can learn about all items of the Pony Express e.g. Mud Springs in south Morrill County. That the Americans have not forgotten this trail proves the many annual celebrations. So when you visit Missouri in November you can celebrate the Pony Pumpkin fest.

### III. Conclusion

I really enjoyed working on this topic. I didn't know anything on this topic but I soon realised that this is still a big issue in America. The Pony Express is a symbol of the American West despite its endurance of only 19 months. We can't ignore the tourist value of this trail. You can set up a trail yourself through the 8 states and visit other curiosities in that state..

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