

The Pony Express: 1860-1861

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United States History I Semester Project

Period I

The Pony Express: 1860-1861

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“PONY EXPRESS
St. JOSEPH, MISSOURI to CALIFORNIA
in 10 days or less
WANTED
YOUNG, SKINNY, WIRY FELLOWS
not over eighteen. Must be expert
riders, willing to risk death daily.
Orphans preferred.
Wages \$25 per week
APPLY, PONY EXPRESS STABLES
St. JOSEPH, MISSOURI.”¹

This was the advertisement taken out by William Russell, William Waddell and Alexander Majors at the start of a nineteen-month operation known as the Pony Express. The Pony Express, or ‘The Pony’, was created to address the need for faster mail service to the new settlements in California.

The Pony Express was not the first mail service to the west. It was, however, the first to travel through the heart of the United States. Because mail carriers faced snow, mountains and Indian raids, the northern routes were thought to be slower than southern routes. The Butterfield Overland Mail Service, provided by John Butterfield, had a southern route. The mail carried on the Butterfield took three to four weeks to travel from Fort Smith, Arkansas to San Francisco, California. This trail went through El Paso, Texas and Yuma, Arizona Territory. Although slow, Butterfield was one of the most reliable services at the time. Another alternative many people used was the cargo ship. Unfortunately, shipping mail this way was expensive, slow and unreliable. The Pony changed this by promising mail delivery in ten days or less on a reliable once a week schedule. ²

¹ United States. Department of the Interior/National Park Service. Godfrey, Anthony. Historical Resource Study: Pony Express National Historic Trail. Aug. 1994.

² Pony Express Home Station. <<http://www.xphomestation.com/>> and The Pony Express. Kaw Valley Films, Inc. Denver, Colorado.

The Pony Express was the brainchild of the Leavenworth and Pike's Peak Express Company. This company was soon called the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company or Pony Express. The major men involved in the creation of the Pony Express were William H. Russell, contracts; Alexander Majors, field man; and William B Waddell, accountant.³

Russell was a Missouri man with no formal education. He married in 1835, and owned and operated a General Store in Lexington, Missouri. In 1840, Russell found success in the west. By 1848 he had started a company to ship military supplies to Santa Fe. Majors was from Missouri as well. In 1819 the Majors family moved by covered wagon from Kentucky to Missouri. Here Alexander Majors helped his father build a frontier home. He married in 1834, and formed his own freighting service. By 1848, he was also on his way to Santa Fe. Waddell moved from Kentucky to Illinois at age 17. In 1829, he went back to Kentucky to marry and run a dry goods store. Six years later he moved his family to Lexington, Missouri. Russell and Waddell formed a partnership in 1840. This gave an opening for the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell to be established fifteen years later.⁴

Russell, Majors and Waddell became partners in 1855, obtaining a two-year contract to freight military supplies west. The financial troubles that would plague them throughout the years of the Pony Express started with the outbreak of the Utah War. After the war, California's senator, William Gwin, asked for faster mail service west. In 1860, Russell made a bid for the one million-dollar government mail contract. He promised to get mail from St. Joseph Missouri to Sacramento, California in ten days or less. Although impressed by their partner's idea and enthusiasm, Majors and Waddell did not think that this would be a lucrative operation. Nevertheless, 60 days after Russell made his bid, the Pony Express ran its first run. The westbound mail arrived in Sacramento, California, from St. Joseph, in nine days and twenty-three hours. This was one hour before the eastbound mail reached St. Joseph. The horses traveled about ten miles per hour.⁵

The Pony Express system was comprised of 500 horses, 100 men and about 160 stations. Each of the pony boys was issued a rifle, two pistols, a Bible, sounding horn and a bowie knife. For the most part, they elected to carry a single pistol with an extra loaded cylinder. Sometimes

³ Godfrey

⁴ Godfrey: 28-34

⁵ Godfrey: 34 and United States. Department of the Interior. The Pony Express in Nevada. NSO Pub. 6 Rev. 1981

they opted to carry a rifle when riding through dangerous territory. “Pony Bob” Haslam remembers adjusting his Spencer rifle and Colt’s revolver before making his longest ride through Nevada. Jay Kelly also remembers cocking his Sharps rifle and going through a Nevada forest full of Indians like “a streak of greased lightning”.⁶

They used Spencer rifles and Sharps rifles. The Spencer, made by the Spencer Repeating Rifle Company of Boston, was the heavier of the two rifles. The Sharps rifle and possibly “Mississippi” rifles were probably used at the relay stations to fight Indian attacks. The most common pistol used was either the 1851 Navy Colts or the Colt .44 Dragoons. The .44 Dragoon pistols were used at the stations. The lighter Navy Colts or even the Wells Fargo model Colts were preferred defense on the trail. Luckily, the government gave approximately 200 to the pony express for this purpose.⁷

Each boy changed horses at least three times during their hundred mile runs. The ponies they used were half broken mustangs or Indian ponies. These fast, sturdy animals were well adapted and needed for the 500-mile route through Nevada’s deserts and mountains. The horses’ speed was the mail’s first defense against Indian attacks.⁸

The most important parts of the express system were the saddles and mochilas made by Israel Landis and his son Benjamin. Landis opened a saddle and harness shop when he moved to St. Joseph in 1844. Light and simple, Landis’ saddle, mochila and bridle only weighed 13 pounds. The mochila was a sturdy piece of leather with a hole for the horn and a slit for the cantle of the saddle. The mail, carefully wrapped in oil silk was locked in three cantinas or boxes. These were attached to the mochila on either side of the rider’s legs. Mail picked up at stations was put into a fourth unlocked cantina. To change horses, the rider only had to remove the mochila and jump on a pre-saddled horse. Along with regular mail, riders carried special deliveries. One such delivery was Lincoln’s Inaugural Address and another a large sum of money. Henry Tuckett, feeling that someone might rob him of his money, traded places with another rider, and the money was brought to its destination.⁹

One of Majors’ biggest impacts on The Pony Express was his oath of good conduct. Every one involved in the express system took the following oath:

⁶ Godfrey and Pony Express Home Station. <<http://www.xphomestation.com/>>

⁷ Pony Express Home Station

⁸ The Pony Express in Nevada

⁹ Pony Express Home Station

“I do hereby swear before the Great and Living God, that during my engagement, and while I am an employee of Russell, Majors & Waddell, I will, under no circumstances, use profane language; that I will drink no intoxicating liquors; that I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm, and that in every respect I will conduct myself honestly, be faithful to my duties, and so direct all my acts as to the confidence of my employees. — So help me God.”¹⁰

Clear evidence of disloyalty to this oath was found in the form of beer bottles at the ruins of several Nevada stations.¹¹ There were also several gunfights in Nevada, both of which were at Smith’s Creek Station. The first was in August, between Montgomery Maze, a rider and station keeper, and H. Trumbo, the station keeper at Smith’s Creek. During a fight, Trumbo snapped a pistol at Maze. The next day Maze shot and killed Trumbo with a rifle. A later incident involved William Carr and Bernard Cherry. Carr murdered Cherry some months after fighting with him at Smith’s Creek. Carr was the first person legally hung in Nevada Territory.¹²

While the Pony did decrease mail delivery time to ten days, there were many problems with the system. One problem was that Indians would take the livestock. Incidentally, rustlers would steal the horses and sell them back to the express company. Finally, the express ponies were branded with the X_P brand. Another problem was the Pyramid Lake War. In 1860, there was trouble between the Native Americans and silver miners in Nevada. In retaliation against the mining, the Indians went after the easiest targets—the express stations. The real war for the Pony Express started when J. O. Williams, his two brothers and three other men died in an Indian attack at this time. The army put an end to the war in June. Unfortunately, the effect of having seven stations burned, 16 men killed and 150 horses lost put the express company into financial debt. Russell had lost his bid for the million-dollar mail contract. Then, to add insult to injury, Congress approved a bill giving federal money to build the Transcontinental Telegraph Line. The telegraph soon replaced the Pony. In only a little more than a year after the Pyramid Lake War, the Pony Express would become a marvel of the past.¹³

By the time of the Pony’s demise, the company had set up thousands of miles of trails and hundreds of stations. Unlike its predecessors, The Pony set up a central route through the heart of the United States. Of this trail, 500 miles crossed 100 separate mountain chains in Nevada’s toughest territory. The Nevada route was split into two segments, Bolivar Robert’s Division

¹⁰ Reinfeild, Fred. Pony Express. New York: Collier Books, 1966: 49

¹¹ Flardesty, Donald L. The Pony Express in Central Nevada: Archeological and Documentary Perspectives. University of Nevada, Reno, 1979.

¹² Pony Express Home Station

¹³ Godfery: 69 and Pony Express Home Station

and Howard Egan's Division. General Agent Finney ruled the whole western part of the express route.¹⁴

The route was made of two types of stations, home stations and relay stations. The home stations were the bigger stations. Placed 80-100 miles apart, these stations were literally the homes of the boys who rode out of them. Which stations were home stations is unknown. There are educated guesses, but no concrete evidence. Between home stations, there were smaller relay stations. Riders rode 10-15 miles to each of these stations on their route for a new horse. The stations mentioned below are only a few of the Nevada Stations built between 1859 and 1861.¹⁵

Established in 1860, Friday's Station was one of Bolivar Robert's first Nevada Stations. Named for Friday Burk, the station keeper with James Small. Friday's was at the south end of Lake Tahoe. Here the express mail crossed the Nevada-California line. Robert "Pony Bob" Haslam rode out of Friday's on his longest ride. In May of 1860, Pony Bob reached Buckland's Station with the eastbound mail. At Buckland's the next rider refused to take the mail. After being offered an extra \$50, Pony Bob rode all the way to Smith's Creek. Retracing his route with the westbound mail, Pony Bob reached Friday's within a few hours of schedule and \$100 richer. He had ridden 380 miles. Pony Bob made another amazing ride in 1861. He rode 180 miles west in eight hours and 20 minutes. The message he carried was President Lincoln's inaugural address.¹⁶

After passing through Genoa, a largely unidentified station, riders changed horses at Carson City. The station was between what are now Fourth and Fifth Streets. Founded by Kit Carson, the city played a major role in the mining of the Comestock Silver Lode. The fourth station, Dayton, was one of the first settlements in Nevada. Sometimes called Chinatown, it was formed in 1849 during the Gold Rush in Gold Canyon. After the Pony Express, Dayton was used as a stage coach station.¹⁷

Miller's or Reed's Station was one of twenty stations along the Carson River branch of the California Emigrant Trail of 1849-1850. G. W. Reed purchased the land and station on July 1, 1861. Miller's was one of many stations where Pony Bob did not find a change of horse on his longest ride. Samuel S. Buckland and W. C. Marley kept Buckland's Station. It was here that Johnson Richardson refused to relieve Pony Bob on his longest ride. In 1860, during the Indian

¹⁴ Pony Express Home Station

¹⁵ Godfrey: 58

¹⁶ Pony Express Home Station and Godfrey 179-210 and The Pony Express in Nevada.

troubles, Buckland's Station moved to Fort Churchill. It would remain at the fort until the end of the Pony Express.¹⁸

A major player in building the Nevada route was J. G. Kelly. Kelly helped to build the stations from Carson Sink to Robert's Creek. He also tended the Sink of Carson or Carson's Sink Station. Bolivar Roberts and J. G. Kelly built Carson's Sink in 1860. In 1861, Thomas Flynn rode into Carson's Sink and found no relief rider. The riders, keeper and stock had been killed or run off by Indians. Along with Flynn, riders here were J. B. McCall, Emmett McCain and Johnson Richardson. Bolivar Roberts and Kelly also built Sand springs. Even today, you can see Sand Mountain from the station. The mountain is a single sand dune 500 feet high and half a mile long.¹⁹

James Alcott ran Simpson Park. Razed on May 20, 1860, this was one of the stations used to house soldiers from Camp Floyd during the Indian War. One rider, William James, rode the toughest part of the Nevada route. He rode for 60 miles over two mountain chains and through Shoshone country. Amazingly, he took only twelve hours, using five Californian mustangs each way. Dry Creek Station was another station used by soldiers. Here, it is said, Brigham's Boys set out to antagonize the Indians and destroy the peace. Thomas Flynn had bad luck with Indians here, too. Again, the keeper and the stock were taken in an Indian raid.²⁰

Robert's Creek or Willow Creek was the division point between Bolivar Robert and Howard Egan's division. Moses Wright and Mike Kelly were stationed at the creek. They gave food to the Indians and thus had little trouble with them. Diamond Springs was Egan's second eastbound station in Nevada. Diamond Springs was one of the few stations without Indian troubles. It was run by William Francis Cox. Cox was possibly one of the few Mormon* station keepers on the express. Ruby Valley had two station keepers, Fredrick William Hurst and Colonel "Uncle Billy" Rogers. Howard Egan had an Express Store here. William Fisher rode out of Ruby in July of 1860 to Salt Lake Station, in Utah, warning stations along the way about the Indians. Fisher used eight horses to cover the 300-mile route in thirty hours.²¹

Under the direction of Constant Dubail, Schell Creek was Egan's eighth station. Elijah "Uncle Nick" Wilson rode out of Schell Creek to Spring Valley. Here he once found two boys

¹⁷ [Pony Express Home Station](#) and Godfrey 179-210 and [The Pony Express in Nevada](#).

¹⁸ [Pony Express Home Station](#) and Godfrey 179-210 and [The Pony Express in Nevada](#).

¹⁹ [Pony Express Home Station](#) and Godfrey 179-210 and [The Pony Express in Nevada](#).

²⁰ [Pony Express Home Station](#) and Godfrey 179-210 and [The Pony Express in Nevada](#).

* The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

tending the station. During an Indian raid, Nick was shot in the head and the horses taken. The boys ran to the next station, Antelope Springs, to get the doctor. Although Nick was expected to die, the doctor from Ruby Valley Station came. Uncle Nick lived, but had headaches all his life from the flint-headed arrow wound.²²

After the Pony Express, Russell, Waddell and Majors found themselves in \$400,000 debt, all payable to Ben Holladay. In order to regain this money Holladay purchased the express line for use as a stagecoach line. The failure of the Pony Express proved Aaron V. Brown correct. The southern routes were, at the time, better for mail purposes. The Butterfield Overland Mail service won the million-dollar contract.²³

After the Express ran its life of nineteen months, the riders dispersed to all lifestyles. Amos or Moses Wright, a member of the LDS^{**} and rider at Diamond Springs, became a mediator between the Native Americans and the Whites. Other members of the LDS, like Andrew Ole Anderson, became missionaries. Other riders settled the west and some became stagecoach drivers or worked for the stage in some way. Howard Egan had a ranch and store at Deep Creek. He started several mines and became very wealthy. Before he died, Egan became a protector and nurse of the Mormon prophet Brigham Young. Bolivar Roberts was a miner, farmer and ranchman. He also became wealthy.²⁴

Not so much could be said of the Pony Express's founders and creators. Russell became a broker and eventually, plagued with failure, he was reduced to doing whatever work was on hand. Majors stayed in the freighting business. Later he started prospecting the mountains of Utah. Failing in Utah, Majors set out to write his life story: "Seventy Years on the Frontier." Waddell had it hardest, the Civil War took one son's life, and many lawsuits were filed against him. Each founder of the Pony died in a daughter or son's home.²⁵

The proud men and boys of the Pony Express did not receive the honor of being heroes. Heroes they were, for nineteen months they had braved the toughest elements of nature and man to bring the mail from one side of the country to the other.

²¹ Pony Express Home Station and Godfrey 179-210 and The Pony Express in Nevada.

²² Pony Express Home Station and Godfrey 179-210 and The Pony Express in Nevada.

²³ Godfrey: 255

^{**} The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints

²⁴ Pony Express Home Station

²⁵ Pony Express Home Station

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