

The Pony Express

This is an undated three page article by Louis Palenske titled, "The Pony Express." Palenske was very well-traveled, and he developed a fondness for the American West, the subject of his panoramic photography. The Pony Express, which moved mail from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California using a series of relay horseback riders, was a subject of great interest to Palenske. The Pony Express only operated for nineteen months from April of 1860 through October of 1861. Funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission through the Kansas State Historical Records Advisory Board.

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THE PONY EXPRESS By L. Palenske.

As an illustration, will apply the Missouri River as the dividing line; to the east, the "ax" played quite an important part in clearing the virgin soil; while to the west, the "pony" played as important a part as the ax did to the east. The Indians, with their ponies had already displayed the usefulness of the pony. White men after having crossed the Missouri, soon accustomed themselves to conditions which would have puzzled the tree-levelers during the days of Daniel Boone. Horses were broken to the saddle. Riders raced with the coyote and the deer in speed. The earliest deeds of the new frontier were mostly domineered by men on horseback. If a message was to be delivered, man and horse stood ready at command. Long before the arrival of the cowboy, the West had developed a school of riders, hardened against saddle fatigue; who were always eager for some new trial of their skill and endurance.

Kit Carson, the famous scout and guide for Capt. John C. Fremont, and others; made several record-breaking rides between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Independence, Mo. and other points. F. X. Aubrey, a noted frontiers man, also had demonstrated what could be done in getting over "space" with a good horse. Carson made a trip from Bent's Fort, 600 miles west of Independence, Mo., in six days; and Aubrey rode from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Independence, 900 miles in 8 days. And there were other records equally as good, or better. The endurance of a man on horseback was well known, which in a way was considered in formulating the Pony Express.

The most long-sustained and grueling test of Western horseman's stamina was soon to come. Thousands of Californians, cut off from the east by waste of sage, desert and mountains, were desperately homesick. They wanted letters from home and news of the world, without the delays attendant upon steamship delivery plus re-handling at the Isthmus of Panama. These Californians had wrought good trails with their slow-moving ox-teams,--coming there; why then, could not the most direct of these trails be used as a lane of postal communication?

But in considering that question, one must remember there were two sides to be considered at that time. The pressure from California was well-founded; but just at that time, the South and the North were quarling - the South even threatened to SECEDE? That in itself, one would believe, was the most important. So it came about that to please the Californians; A PRIVATE COMPANY FINANCED AND INSTALLED THE PONY EXPRESS. The Government was too busy at that time to give it much attention. Congress, with the staggering question of



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slavery, finally doubtful of the experiment, subsidized an infrequent service scoffed at as the "Jackass-mail" between California and the Mormon settlement at Salt Lake City; and a few creaking wagons carried an occasional mail to Independence, Mo. and return; and both contracts were soon annulled and a stage line, under a more generous subsidy, was installed. This mail route, chosen in the face of protests, extended thru the Southwest, and was nearly a thousand miles too long. (it passed thru S.E. Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona thru Southern California, up to San Francisco) It saved ^{but very} little time as against steamer--Isthmian delivery.

California was more than impatient. The delay in getting mail was engendering suspicion and discontent. The main route of the pioneers was direct enough - why was it not used? Then came a time when the horseman and his pony was called upon. The Pony Express was formed, nearly a hundred riders and many hundred horses were pitted against Father Time in a race which is unique in Modern History. As time went on, the question between the North and the South became more and more acute, and less attention was given to the demands of the Californians by the Postal Department. Therefore, the Pony Express was not organized as a Government institution. It is said that one may search the records of Congress for the years 1860 and 1861 and you will find only one or two brief references to the frontiers fast mail, then functioning.

Private enterprise built and maintained the Pony Express, and kept it going through every month of the year, at a monetary loss. The "pony" as it was soon affectionately called, was one of the outward expressions of a certain business audacity which was common at the time. At that time, there was so much excitement going on, war in the East, and taking out gold in the west. Men in the whirl of frontier activities in the West, seldom stopped to figure costs. The mines were paying - the wealth of the new, raw West was inexhaustible. Fantastic schemes lost all respect of distortion. Men plunged, and, if they lost, were game in defeat. The Pony Express could not have been born in any other era.

When the telegraph line had reached Placerville, and the last horse galloped into Sacramento, with its end close on its heels, a failure was posted on the record - one of those few financial failures, which can be translated into terms of GLORY.

For nearly two years the curiers of the Pony Express flitted back and forth between Missouri and California. Sometimes they carried messages on which hung the fate of the Nation. Beyond the Westward-creeping telegraph-line, (which was then being constructed the Pony Express brought the first news of battles, as well as other Eastern events, very interesting to Californians.

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Editors in California looked at their watches and wondered if the Pony would be "on time" with the latest news about the Civil War, as it was at that time raging. And newspapers in the East would wonder and hope to give the latest news from California and the "mines". Wall Street at that time, was also harvesting from the events that had been going on since 1849.

The Pony Express seldom failed those who so anxiously awaited its arrival; like a shuttle it wove back and forth across a 2000 mile loom. If a horse gave out and died, the rider seized the foam-covered container of mail, and staggered on foot to the next relay station. Indians, outlaws, blizzards and cloudbursts were only a few of the dangers to face along the way, but the MAIL WENT THRU. The shuttle had to be kept moving. What it wove into the pattern of American life will be admired as long as we care for such things as adventure, romance and rugged devotion to duty.

Since then, many towns have grown up where many Pony Express riders bunked with scarcely more of shelter and comfort than a badger in its burrow. The trails along which the hoofs of the ponies shot "fire" have been lost in a maze of cultivated farms. Records have been destroyed and many of the names of riders have been forgotten; yet - it was only in "Yesterday's-twilight, that this all happened."

(To be continued)

In the next, I expect to give names of riders, stations, and where they were located etc. and also the outline of the route, etc. etc.