

from Gary McCarthy's

OUR AMERICAN WEST



*The Pony Express
A Bold Gamble*

By the end of 1859, the highly profitable freighting firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell was frustrated in its effort to convince Congress that a Central Overland mail route was superior to the existing southern one. For years, Congress backed by strong lobbies and southern sympathizers had managed to keep the government subsidizing an extended mail route that looped through Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona then north up to San Francisco. The southerners argued persuasively that the United States could not depend on a central route through the rugged Rocky and Sierra Nevada Mountains; one that could not be protected from hostile northern Native Americans like the Cheyenne, Sioux, Ute and Paiute. Finally, Senator William Gwin of California convinced Russell, Majors and Waddle that a speedy horseback mail delivery service would prove to a stubborn Congress that the central route was both shorter and faster. Do this, he advised and Congress might well reward them with a very lucrative contract—one as high as a million dollars a year.

In the early months of 1860, the dramatic news splashed across the nation's headlines that the newly forming Pony Express would deliver mail from St. Joseph, Missouri to San Francisco, California in only ten days—half the time necessary to send mail along the Southern Route. Crude little Pony Express stations were quickly built at intervals of ten to fifteen miles, depending

on the distance a horse could run over the terrain. Every horse selected was the finest that money could buy. Tough mustangs were preferred; horses not only fast but deep of chest and possessing great stamina. Many were chosen from the best of the Army stock while others were bought at an average price of two hundred dollars each which was about five times the prevailing rate for ordinary saddle mounts.

Across the western frontier, men were drawn more by the excitement and glamour of the job than the pay of fifty dollars a month plus board and room. The eighty initially chosen riders were selected not only for their riding ability but also because they were young, strong and weighed less than 125 pounds. It was taken for granted that each candidate possessed exceptional courage. Those fortunate enough to be picked became instant celebrities.

On April 3, 1860, the first exciting ride westward out of St. Joseph began with a huge crowd in attendance. The Pony Express route followed the Oregon Trail which was worn down enough so that it could easily be followed in the dead of night. The trail nipped the northeastern corner of Kansas, and then crawled across the flat table of Nebraska, crossing under the shadow of the famous immigrant landmark, Chimney Rock. Wyoming was a drier, harder land and both the horse and rider were punished by the climb up to the Continental Divide's South Pass before they galloped down to Salt Lake City. Next, the riders were faced with three brutal days and nights of Utah and Nevada deserts. Finally, a last, heart-bursting sprint over the towering Sierras, then a mad dash down to Sacramento where cannon were fired and the California State Legislature adjourned to join the welcoming throngs. The Pony Express horse and rider were then ushered onto a fast mail packet that would carry them down the Sacramento River the final miles to their San Francisco destination where another thunderous celebration awaited.

Total distance covered—1,966 miles!

The Pony Express operated for eighteen months and always delivered; no rider was ever overtaken and killed on his run. The

riders carried only handguns and relied on the pure speed of their grain-fed horses to outdistance danger. Pony Bob Haslam claimed the record for the longest continuous ride; he covered an incredible 380 miles in thirty-six hours. Richard Erastus Egan, who later became a prominent Mormon bishop, rode 330 miles just to spell his friend who wanted to take the day off to court his sweetheart. Buffalo Bill Cody once rode over 300 miles after his relief rider had been gunned down the night before in a drunken brawl. The handsome Johnny Fry had to watch his weight because girls lined his path through towns offering cookies and cupcakes in exchange for the thrill of his smile.

As many had predicted, the Pony Express was a financial disaster. It proved to be the ruination of Russell, Majors and Waddell who lost nearly half a million dollars before the telegraph lines met in Salt Lake City on October 24, 1861. Those three daring entrepreneurs ended up broke and bitter for they had never won the coveted mail contract they had gambled so courageously to earn from Congress. But history records that they did prove the central overland route was passable year around and, out of that, the idea for the transcontinental railroad was born, an idea that would follow in their historic hoof prints.

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