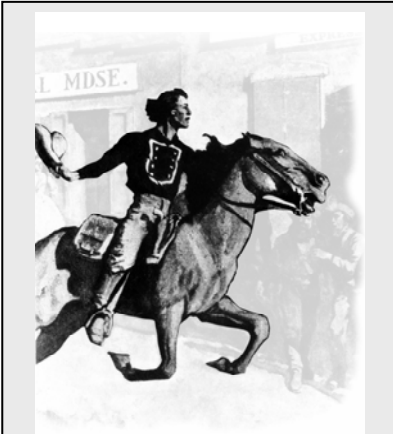


The Pony Express



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The legend of the galloping riders of the Pony Express endures, though the service lasted only 18 months, from April 1860 to October 1861.

American transportation pioneer William H. Russell advertised for hostlers and riders to work on the Overland Express Route via Salt Lake City in March 1860.

Russell had failed repeatedly to get the backing of the Senate Post Office and Post Roads Committee for an express route to carry mail between St. Joseph, Missouri — the westernmost point reached by the railroad and telegraph — and California. St. Joseph was the starting point for the nearly 2,000-mile central route to the West. Except for a few forts and settlements, the route beyond St. Joseph was a vast, unknown land, inhabited primarily by Native Americans.

Many thought that year-round transportation across this area was impossible because of extreme weather conditions. Russell organized his own express to prove otherwise.

With partners Alexander Majors and William B. Waddell, Russell formed the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company. They built new relay stations and readied existing ones. The country was combed for good horses — hardy enough to challenge deserts and mountains and to withstand thirst in summer and ice in winter. Riders were

recruited hastily but, before being hired, had to swear on a Bible not to cuss, fight, or abuse their animals and to conduct themselves honestly.

On April 3, 1860, the Pony Express began its run through parts of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and California. On average, a rider covered 75 to 100 miles daily. He changed horses at relay stations set 10 to 15 miles apart, swiftly transferring himself and his mochila (a saddle cover with four pockets or cantinas for mail) to the new mount.

The first mail by Pony Express from St. Joseph to Sacramento took ten days, cutting the overland stage time via the southern route by more than half. The fastest delivery was in March 1861, when President Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address was carried from St. Joseph to Sacramento in 7 days and 17 hours.

On July 1, 1861, the Pony Express began operating under contract as a mail route. By that time, the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company was deeply in debt. Though it had charged as much as \$5 a half ounce for a letter at a time when ordinary U.S. postage was no more than ten cents, the company did not make its operating expenses.

The Pony Express officially ended October 26, 1861, after the transcontinental telegraph line was completed, and became an enduring legend.