

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-One

The Pony Express

LESSON IDEA

To learn more about the expansion and development of our western frontier, by learning how the Pony Express riders and later the telegraph made communications faster and easier.

PREPARATION

So that family members can appreciate the distances and rugged terrain travelled by the Pony Express riders, have a map of the western states available to trace the route they followed.

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YOU HAD TO BE a pretty tough character to be hired as a Pony Express rider back in the West more than one hundred years ago. You had to be as strong and stubborn as the half-breed mustang you rode, as quick-witted and as good a marksman as the Indians who often chased you across the prairie.

For \$120 a month you would carry the mail through settlement, Army post, and western town, over flooding creeks and through Indian territory on a mad gallop which took you seventy-five miles a day or farther — especially if you found your relief station in a smoldering ruin of ashes and horseflesh.

If you somehow had the courage and stamina to ride the entire Pony Express route, you'd leave the frontier town of St. Joseph, Missouri, travel over rolling hills, through scrubby brush up through the vast pine forests of Wyoming to Fort Laramie, then weave down through the mountains to Fort Bridger, push on past Salt Lake City across the desert,

then up into the forbidding Sierra Nevada Mountains until you reached Carson City. From Carson City you would begin the final leg of the journey to Sacramento and San Francisco. The whole trip took ten days, if everything went smoothly.

THERE WAS MORE to see on the trail in 1860 than the beaver and buffalo of Kit Carson's day; stage coaches bumped along rutted roads; caravans of Conestoga wagons wound through the prairies and mountain passes; log cabins and corn fields were sprinkled between settlements and Army posts; banks, hotels, and saloons huddled together in the small and growing towns. Lured by the discovery of gold in California in 1848, and the reports of scouts and explorers like John Frémont and Kit Carson, the West had become dotted with people and farms and towns.

San Francisco had grown in a few years from a cluster of shanties to a large and wealthy city — the center of trade and travel to and from the gold mines. Mail between the east and west coasts had to travel by steamer around the Cape, by stage-coach, or by personal courier. All three routes were longer and slower than most Californians wished.

So with typical American ingenuity, the owners of the Overland Stage Line — Russell, Majors and Waddell — decided to solve the problem by putting mailmen on horseback. With an initial investment of \$100,000, these three businessmen bought 500 horses, constructed 190 relay stations, and hired approximately 200 rider-mailmen. Their Overland Stage Line from St. Joseph to Salt Lake City

already had quite a few stations along the way. But from Salt Lake City to California, they had to build new relay stations, usually ten to fifteen miles apart, and find men to man them.

By April 3, 1860, everything was ready for the first run. In St. Joseph, Missouri, an eager crowd gathered around the horse which would carry the first rider west and plucked hairs from the animal's tail as souvenirs. At precisely 6:30 P.M., after a long and loud celebration and a string of political speeches, rider Billy Richardson mounted his horse, dug in his spurs, and galloped away amid waving banners, cheers, and handclapping. The plan was very simple: As Billy neared the first relay station, the sound of hoofbeats would alert the men at the station to ready a horse. Within two minutes of the time Billy reined in, he would have pulled the mail satchel from his saddle, tossed it on the fresh mount, and galloped off to the next station. After a ride of seventy-five miles, and, perhaps five station changes, he would give his mail pouch to a new rider, rest, and either return to St. Joseph or wait for a new assignment. Six days later, Billy's mail pouch would be in Salt Lake City; in five more days, San Francisco.

THINGS DID NOT always run that smoothly, however. Rider Robert Halsam, or "Pony Bob" as he was known to his friends, recalled a ride through Nevada that turned into a marathon. As he passed through Virginia City, then only in its infancy, he found the town preparing for a Piute Indian attack. A stone hotel, still under construction, had been hastily transformed into a fort for the protection of women and children, and all available men and horses had been pressed into service. Indian signal fires could be seen on every mountain peak.

"When I reached Reed's Station, on the Carson River," said Halsam, "I found no change of horses, as all those at the station had been seized by the whites to take part in the approaching battle. I fed the animal that I rode, and started for the next station, called Buckland's — afterward known as Fort Churchill, fifteen miles farther down the river. It was to have been the termination of my journey . . . and I had already ridden seventy-five miles; but, to my great

astonishment, the other rider refused to go on."

Even the offer of extra pay refused to budge the relief rider, so Halsam agreed to go to Cold Springs for an additional fifty dollars. "Within ten minutes," he wrote, "when I had adjusted my Spencer rifle, which was a seven-shooter, and my Colt revolver, with two cylinders ready for use in case of emergency, I started . . . When I arrived at Cold Springs to my horror I found that the station had been attacked by Indians, the keeper killed, and all the horses taken away. I decided in a moment what course to pursue — I would go on. I watered my horse, having ridden him thirty miles on time, he was pretty tired, and started for Sand Springs, thirty-seven miles away. It was growing dark, and my road lay through heavy sage-brush, high enough in some places to conceal a horse. I kept a bright lookout, and closely watched every motion of my poor pony's ears, which is a signal for danger in an Indian country. I was prepared for a fight, and the stillness of the night and the howling of the wolves and coyotes made cold chills run through me at times; but I reached Sand Springs in safety and reported what had happened." For his extra effort and his determination to get the mail through on schedule, "Pony Bob" was paid one hundred dollars instead of the promised fifty.

What character traits did "Pony Bob" exhibit when he continued to ride, even though the dangers were so obvious? [*Ask family members for their opinions. One trait that should be emphasized is a sense of responsibility to the job he had agreed to do. Contrast "Pony Bob's" attitude with the excuses that are so often heard when someone fails to complete a job — such as, "I was just too tired to do more;" "it wasn't my responsibility;" "I did what I was supposed to do;" or "I wasn't going to stick my neck out unnecessarily."*]

The life of a Pony Express rider was seldom dull or routine. William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, one of the most famous of these mailmen on horse-

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

For a more detailed story of the telegraph, we recommend *Wiring A Continent* by Robert Luther Thompson and *Everyday Life On The American Frontier* by Louis B. Wright. For more about the Pony Express and "Wild Bill" Hickok, we suggest *James Butler Hickok* by Richard O'Connor.

