

The Pony Express

*How William H. Russell "Made History"
in the Mail Service of the United States*

By E. A. BRININSTOOL,

(Honorary Companion Order of Indian Wars,) Wash-
ington, D. C. Author: "A Trooper With Custer,"
"Fighting Red Cloud's Warriors," etc.

THE most unique and romantic mail service ever attempted in the United States—or any other country—was the famous "Pony Express," operating between St. Joseph, Mo., and Sacramento, Cal., for a period of eighteen months only during 1860-'61. It was looked upon at the time as one of the most stupendous undertakings of the age.

The "Pony Express" began operations April 3, 1860, and the service was of the utmost benefit to the Pacific Coast, furnishing news from the far East to the leading San Francisco dailies in eight to ten days, which was at least two weeks in advance of the Overland mail coach, and nearly three weeks ahead of the Pacific Mail Company's steamers.

The service proved to be a complete success in every way except financially, for the enthusiastic projector sunk over \$160,000 in the enterprise, while his two nifty partners also lost their fortunes.

The man who lost this great innovation was William H. Russell of the pioneer freighting firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell. The idea was really born in the brain of Senator William Gwin of California, so that the Golden State can therefore claim the honor of originating the scheme.

During the winter of 1859, Mr. Russell happened to be in Washington on business, and he there met and became acquainted with Senator Gwin. The senator was very anxious to establish a line of more rapid communication between California and the distant East, and he broached the matter to Mr. Russell of starting a pony express mail line across the continent. It required considerable urging on the part of Senator Gwin to induce Mr. Russell to undertake such an experiment, but the latter finally consented, providing he could also induce his two partners, Majors and Waddell, to join him.

A consultation was held at Fort Leavenworth between the three partners. Majors and Waddell, after the object of the enterprise was explained, did not enthuse over the proposition. They declared it could not be made to pay expenses. Mr. Russell, however, stated that he had practically given his word to Senator Gwin that he would undertake to start the enterprise, feeling confident that Majors and Waddell would fall in line and co-operate.

The two partners, therefore, were finally won over and decided to back Russell with their money and influence. While the latter was really the "power behind the throne," the great firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell were the backbone of the enterprise.

Few frontier activities can in any way be compared to the Pony Express, looking at it in the light of a matter of great

public importance. No similar undertaking of such magnitude had ever been attempted in America, and so quietly and systematically was it worked up that in a little over four months after the subject was first broached, the entire line was fully equipped and in successful operation.

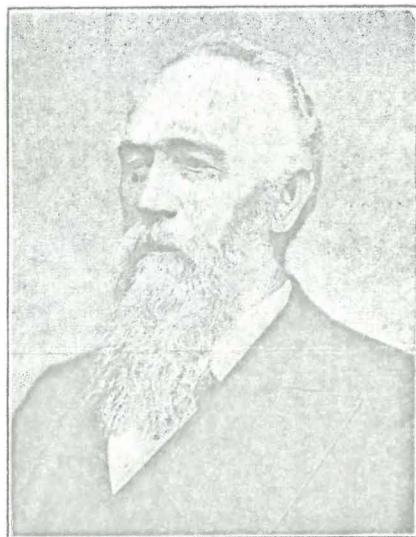
When the three partners had fully decided to try out the experiment, Russell bought at different points in the West, 500 of the best and fleetest horses he could find—steeds noted for their endurance and

and Salt Lake City had to be transported from Missouri and Iowa, across the plains and over the Rocky Mountains, at a freight cost of from ten to twenty-five cents per pound.)

The line of the Pony Express was 1,980 miles in length. Of the eighty daring riders, forty were in the saddle at Sacramento, going east, and forty similarly mounted at St. Joseph, going west. For every twenty-four hours an average distance of 250 miles must be covered, the riders being in the saddle day and night, in all kinds of weather, rain or shine, never stopping, except to change mounts, until the end of their run was reached, the runs often covering from 75 to 100 miles if it developed that a station had been attacked by Indians and burned, the stock run off and the keepers killed, which often occurred. Two minutes only were allowed at stations to transfer saddle and mail pouch to a fresh mount; but so expert did the riders become that this change was usually made in from ten to fifteen seconds. Over some portions of the route, twenty miles an hour was the speed maintained—a remarkable feat for horseback travel.

The route covered was over all kinds of country. There were ravines, gullies, creeks and rivers to cross; mountain torrents to be forded; parched stretches of sand and alkali to cover; weird and rugged canyons to traverse and high and difficult passes in the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada to cross, where deep snows were encountered. A considerable portion of this distance, it must be remembered, was through hostile Indian country on the Plains, swarming with warlike tribes, all eager for the scalps of these daring riders, but seldom able to overtake them, owing to the fleetness of the horses used on the Pony Express. Other portions of the journey were often swept by terrific hail, sleet and wind storms.

The total weight of the mail carried by the Pony Express rider was limited to twenty pounds. The cost of carrying a letter through to the Pacific Coast was, at first, \$5 for each half ounce, though this was shortly reduced to \$1 per half ounce. All the letters were required to be written on a special grade of tissue paper. These were wrapped in oiled silk as additional protection against the weather. It was necessary that each letter and message transmitted by the Pony Express should be enclosed in a ten-cent government envelope. In addition, there were affixed the regular government stamps. Some of these letters cost as much as \$27.50 to transport. This was an expensive luxury, but to the wide-awake business man on the Pacific Coast, time was



ALEXANDER MAJORS.

ability to make the fastest possible time between stations.

It cost an enormous sum of money to stock and keep the Pony Express in operation. One hundred and ninety stations were established, in addition to acquiring the use of many of the Overland Stage stations for housing their horses. Nearly 200 men were employed as station keepers to look carefully after the stock and keep the horses in the pink of condition for their fast runs. The riders—of whom there were eighty—were all young men—wiry, nifty, used to life on the frontier and filled with the spirit of adventure. No youth was employed to ride the Pony Express who weighed in excess of 135 pounds, and one of them, "Little Yank," is said to have tipped the scales at less than 100 pounds. The only arms allowed to be carried were revolver and knife—no rifle, for the riders were not expected to stop and give battle to Indians or outlaws, but to depend upon the speed of the animal they rode to carry them beyond danger of close personal contact with any enemy. Most of the grain used by the Pony Express animals between St. Joseph

money and expense not counted. Needless to say, there were no "flapperized" love missives carried by the Pony Express at these extravagant tolls!

About two months after the establishment of the line, several tribes of Indians in the Northwest—the Bannocks, Piutes and Shoshones—had gone on one of their periodical outbreaks west of Salt Lake City, and the Pony Express route for a long distance was thus interrupted. While on the warpath the Indians burned a number of the company's stations, ran off considerable stock and committed other depredations which crippled the line, in addition to murdering several of the station keepers.

This disastrous raid forced the company to suspend operations for a few trips. Many thought this would be the last of the Pony Express—and doubtless it would have been with any other men behind it but the plucky and resolute firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell. These enterprising men knew no such word as "fail," and determined to keep the line in operation, regardless of the consequences. Volunteers were raised, the outbreak put down, stations rebuilt and restocked and the line was soon again in operation. But the trouble and delay incurred necessitated an expenditure of over \$75,000.

Originally a few of the stations along the route of the Pony Express were twenty-five miles apart, but shortly these were reduced to from ten to fifteen miles. Each rider was supposed to ride three animals in succession, traversing three stations, and to go at least 3 1/3 miles. Quite often, however, it would be necessary for one rider to cover as many as five stations, due to Indian depredations.

The saddle, bridle and pouch used by the riders weighed but thirteen pounds, not including the contents of the pouch; so that the total weight carried by each horse, including the rider, was from 150 to 175 pounds.

When a station was reached—it mattered not what hour of the day or night—the substitute rider would invariably be at his post, ready to grab the precious mail pouch, leap into the saddle and be off like the wind. In all their trips across the continent made by the riders of the Pony Express, and the 650,000 miles covered by them during its existence, only one mail was lost, and that was a comparatively unimportant one.

The first trip was begun on April 3, 1860, starting simultaneously from St. Joseph, Mo., then the western terminus of railway communication, and Sacramento, Cal. The St. Joseph rider was Johnny Frey, mounted on a jet-black steed, while Harry Roff, on a snow-white charger, left from Sacramento.

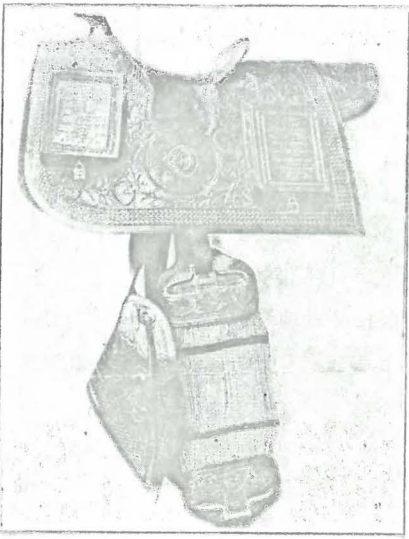
Roff rode out of Sacramento on the dead run, making the first twenty miles, with two changes of horses, in fifty-nine minutes. Ten seconds only was lost by him in changing mounts and he finished his run to Placerville, where another rider carried the mail to the next waiting man. Roff rode fifty-five miles all told, making his entire run in two hours and forty-five minutes, notwithstanding he had a number of hills to climb.

The jet-black animal ridden by Johnny

Frey was watched by one of the largest crowds of anxious spectators that ever assembled on the banks of the Missouri river. Frey was 20 years of age and weighed 125 pounds. He rode to Seneca from St. Joe, a distance of eighty miles, at an average speed of twelve and one-half miles per hour—a most remarkable horseback feat—in addition to making his change of mount.

The first Pony Express to reach Salt Lake City was from the west, which arrived in the Mormon metropolis on the 7th of April, having left Sacramento on the night of the 3d. The first pony out of St. Joe arrived in the City of the Saints on the evening of the 9th. For the first time in all history, Utah was brought within six days' communication with the Missouri River, and within seven days of the nation's capital. For years before that important event, Salt Lake residents had been accustomed to receive news from six weeks to three months old.

The Civil War broke out about a year



"PONY EXPRESS" SADDLE USED IN 1860 BY W. A. CATES, A RIDER ON THE LINE.

after the starting of the Pony Express. Never was news more anxiously awaited than on the Pacific Coast when hostilities were raging between the North and the South. The first tidings of the firing on Fort Sumter reached San Francisco in eight days and fourteen hours. From that time on, a bonus was given by California business men to the Pony Express Company to be distributed among the riders for carrying the war news as fast as possible. The sum of \$300 was collected for the riders for bringing a bundle of Chicago newspapers containing the news of the battle of Antietam, a day earlier than usual.

A number of important events were connected with the history of the Pony Express, perhaps the greatest being the news of the election of Abraham Lincoln, in November, 1860. This information was brought through from the east in eight days.

The quickest time on record made by the Pony Express was in March, 1861, when President Lincoln's inaugural address was carried through from St. Joe to Sacramento, a total distance of 1,980 miles,

in seven days and seventeen hours—a most extraordinary feat, and calling for wonderful tests of endurance on the part of the wiry Pony Express riders. On another occasion an important dispatch was carried from St. Joe to Denver, a distance of 675 miles, in sixty-nine hours, the last ten miles being covered in thirty-one minutes.

Among the important documents carried from St. Joe by the first Pony Express rider, was a brief message of congratulation from President Buchanan to the governor of California. The few words were transmitted by wire from the executive mansion at Washington to St. Joe by wire, where they were taken off by the operator, transferred to the pouch of the Pony Express rider and rushed westward.

In California there were many people who seriously doubted the success of the Pony Express. The newspaper editors of San Francisco were among the first in their belief that it could never be made a success because of the dangers to be encountered from Indians. To use their own language, it "was simply inviting slaughter upon all the foolish young men who had been engaged as riders."

The pay of the riders was from \$125 to \$150 a month, and board, depending upon the dangerous character of the country they had to traverse.

The operations of the Pony Express covered a period of only eighteen months, as stated. Two months before it ceased doing business the Daily Overland Stage was in operation. Four months later came the Pacific Telegraph—in comparison with which the Pony Express was as an ex-train pitted against the present-day racing automobile.

The expenses of the Pony Express during the eighteen months of its existence were, approximately, as follows:

Equipping the line.....	\$100,000
Maintenance	480,000
Nevada Indian War.....	75,000
Miscellaneous	45,000
Total	\$700,000

The total receipts did not exceed \$500,000, leaving a net loss of \$200,000.

A volume could be written of the thrilling adventures and hairbreadth escapes of many of the riders of the Pony Express, whose lives were continually in danger through the Indian country. Probably the most daring of these young men was Robert Haslam, known as "Pony Bob," who died but a short time ago in Chicago. His territory was through Nevada, and on one occasion he made the longest run ever covered by a single rider in the history of the organization, making 380 miles without sleep or rest, due to the fact that the intervening stations had been attacked and burnt by Indians and the keepers and riders killed. Some of the distance on Haslam's route had to be traversed at a pace of twenty-five miles an hour.

With the coming of the Pacific Telegraph, the usefulness of the Pony Express ended, and the enterprise was at once discontinued. While it was a costly undertaking, it demonstrated—at an enormous cost—what could be done by Western Americans of enterprise and determination.

End