

THE PONY EXPRESS

By

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A paper submitted to Professor Brian Cannon

History 200

Brigham Young University

June 15, 2009

The Pony Express

The Pony Express rider looks toward the west, watching the horizon for a plume of dust, or any sign of a horse and rider. This is a signal to the rider that the mail is coming. The Pony Express rider's horse, somehow sensing what is about to take place, is anxious and ready to go. He starts pawing the ground in anticipation of the hurried exchange of mail, and the race he will run—the race of getting the mail to the next station—to another horse and another rider. The mochila (mail bag) is heavy and must be handled with precision. As the rider pulls up and jumps off the horse, the mochila is taken off and placed on the saddle of the waiting horse. The fresh rider seems to leap into the saddle and is off in a flash. The year is not 1860 or 1861, but June, 2008. This is the Pony Express annual re-ride.

The annual re-ride is a ten-day, twenty-four-hour-a-day, non-stop event by over 500 riders and horses. This 1,966-mile route is over the original Pony Express National Historic Trail from California through Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado, and Kansas to Missouri. The National Pony Express Association web-site explains: “It is the longest event held annually on a historical trail in the nation, even surpassing the famed Iditarod.”¹

To understand the legacy of the Pony Express, which far surpasses just the annual celebrations of the event, three questions will be addressed. (1) What is the origin and history of the Pony Express? (2) How do we carry on the legacy in the Twenty-First century? (3) What drives us to recreate the past with such dedication and feeling?

¹ National Pony Express Association, <http://www.exphomestation.com> (accessed May 2009).

What is the origin and history?

The Pony Express began on the evening of April 3, 1860. The Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad train had just arrived in St. Joseph, Missouri, carrying the United States mail. The mail was quickly transferred onto the waiting horse and the rider took off to the west. Also on April 3, 1860, a rider left Sacramento, California, racing to the east.²

In 1860, the Pony Express transported the mail from St. Joseph, Missouri, across the continent to California as quickly as possible—ten days. Prior to April of 1860, letters, newspapers, and official government communications were sent with private parties traveling east or west; every company, wagon train and stage coach acted as mail carriers. In 1848, several ocean steamers left New York carrying mail which would eventually reach California. However, steamer transportation was slow—twenty-four days.³ Christopher Corbett stated, “A series of bizarre and foolhardy methods were tried, but they all failed.”⁴ A better way of sending and receiving information was needed. With the discovery of gold in California, the population of the West soared. By 1860, the western region of the Rocky Mountains had grown to over a

² Le Roy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail, 1849-18*, (New York, N.Y., AMS Press, Inc. 1969), 171-72.

³ Kate B Carter. *Utah and the Pony Express*, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Utah Printing Co 1960), foreword.

⁴ Christopher Corbett. *Orphans Preferred*, New York, N.Y. Broadway Books, Random House, Inc. 2003, 35-36. In 1851, the federal government gave a contract to haul mail from Sacramento to Salt Lake City—seven hundred miles of the most barren country in the United States. Instead of horses, mules were used and thus it earned the name Jackass mail. The riders were plagued by Indians, deep snow, and freezing temperatures, so the Jackass mail floundered. Another example was the camel; about 75 of them were brought into the United States from Saudi Arabia. In 1853, Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, proposed the venture. A study on camels, done at the London Zoo, provided the information needed. “Camels could walk tremendous distances without water. They were patient and strong. They were proven and reliable. But the rocky western terrain proved too hard on their hooves; they were accustomed to soft desert sand. The camels had to be outfitted with leather boots; the boots slowed them down and they did not want to wear them anyway. Camels terrified horses and mules, and the smell of one camel could cause a stampede.” Mail traveled over the Sierra Nevada’s by a Norwegian immigrant named John “Snowshoe” Thompson, traveling alone on ten-foot-long, cross-country skis. Crude dog sleds were also tried in these rugged snow-covered mountains to reach the remote Carson Valley in Nevada from California.”

half a million people. Exchange of news with families and business connections was in great demand.⁵

Le Roy R. Hafen explains, “Russell, Majors & Waddell freighting empire was already in operation. Most everything going west traveled on an ox-drawn wagon owned by them.”⁶ In the winter of 1859-60, Mr. William H. Russell spoke in Washington D.C with Senator Gwin of California. Gwin approached Russell to create a swift overland express and agreed to obtain funding from Congress to reimburse the firm for the endeavor. Russell presented the plan to his partners, Alexander Majors and William B. Waddell. Although Majors and Waddell were doubtful that it would succeed financially, the three agreed on the plans and began preparations; within just a few months, the Pony Express was ready.⁷

Green Majors, son of Alexander Majors, summed up the preliminary preparations and costs.

To establish the Pony Express required five hundred of the best blooded American horses; one hundred and ninety stock stations for changing the riding stock; two hundred station tenders to care for the horses and have them ready, saddled and bridled, for the incoming rider to mount and be off like the wind; eighty of the keenest, toughest, bravest of western youths for the riders, with stations all supplied with hay, grain and other needed materials. It required \$100,000 in gold coins to establish and equip the line.⁸

After the Pony Express carried the mail, non-stop, for nineteen months, the transcontinental telegraph line was completed and messages could now travel from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Corbett states, “On October 24, 1861, Horace W. Carpentier, president of the

⁵ Corbett. *Orphans Preferred*, 31.

⁶ Hafen, *The Overland Mail*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Arthur Chapman. *Pony Express: the Record of a Romantic Adventure in Business*, (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1932), 84.

Overland Telegraph Company, sent a message across the wire from San Francisco to Abraham Lincoln in Washington D.C. A few days after the first telegram was sent, the Pony Express went quietly out of business.”⁹

How do we carry on the legacy?

Although the Pony Express ended in 1861, the spirit and memory of the Pony Express is kept alive by the National Pony Express Association (NPEA); it is essentially an all-volunteer, non-profit historical organization.¹⁰ The NPEA is involved in preserving historic trails, education, parades, Olympic events, monuments and annual re-rides.

First, the NPEA is the chief supporter for the preservation of the Pony Express National Historic Trail. The NPEA helps identify, re-establish and mark the original Pony Express trail through the eight states it serves. Patrick Hearty, Utah President of the NPEA, explains, “The National Park Service has the administrative responsibility for the Pony Express Trail, as well as the Oregon, California, and Mormon Pioneer Trails.”¹¹ The National Park Service supports the NPEA financially, running the NPEA office, paying for travel, printing brochures, placing interpretive sites along the Trail, and maintaining and repair monuments and historic sites. Part of the Pony Express Trail through Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada is on BLM land; the BLM contributes supplies and materials for projects at the sites on BLM land and the NPEA donates the labor.¹²

⁹ Corbett, *Orphans Preferred*, 115-16.

¹⁰ National Pony Express Association, <http://www.exphomestation.com> (accessed May 2009).

¹¹ Patrick Hearty, Interviewed by Becky Kimber, May 17, 2009, South Jordan, Utah. Tape in possession of Author.

¹² *ibid.*

Second, education is a big part of NPEA activities. In the colloquial vernacular of Hearty, he explained, “We dress up in red shirts and vests and give talks on the Pony Express to school classes, Boy Scout groups, clubs and historical organizations, etc.” The presentation consists of the history of the Pony Express, the history of the trail and a little about the modern re-ride; a mailbag is displayed and the video from the National Geographic TV is shown. Hearty explains, “This is something we do in return for financial support from the National Park Service, helping to educate the public about the trail and the history.”¹³

Third, Utah NPEA members ride in parades throughout the State, including the Grantsville and Tooele July 4th parades, the Salt Lake All-Horse Parade, the Lehi Rodeo Days Parade, and the Salt Lake July 24th Parade. Hearty enthusiastically recalled, “These Pony Express riders never fail to delight the crowds.”

Fourth, the NPEA was involved in the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Torch Relay. The Torch was carried by horse-and-rider-relay from Julesburg, Colorado, through Nebraska and Kansas, ending in St. Joseph, Missouri, May 16, 1996. Three hundred riders rode one-to-two-mile rides, covering 544 miles; they traveled day and night taking fifty-six hours to complete the relay. To participate in the relay, riders had to be NPEA members and had to have ridden in the 1995 re-ride.¹⁴

During the planning of the Salt Lake City Olympic games of 2002, members of the Olympic planning committee met to preview ideas for ways to host this international event. Hearty explained, “Tom Whitaker, one of the big guns behind the Cowboy Poetry Festival in

¹³ Hearty, Interview, May 17, 2009. Tape in possession of Author.

¹⁴ “Riders see torch relay as chance of lifetime”, *The Marysville (Kansas) advocate*, Sharon Kessinger, May 19, 1996.

Heber, recommended a Western experience village for the foreign visitors and people coming to the Olympics.”¹⁵ Soldier Hollow was the best site for the village; the cross-country skiing and other venues would be going past these western settings. The Olympic committee invited the NPEA to set up a replica of an 1860s Pony Express Station; NPEA members operated the site.¹⁶

During the Salt Lake City Olympic Torch relay of 2002, Pat Hearty carried by horseback, the torch, as well as specially designed mail, into Camp Floyd. He delivered the mail to those students invited to attend the Torch arrival.¹⁷

Fifth, the NPEA is also involved in creating and maintaining a number of statues and monuments along the Pony Express Trail. One of the most interesting statues is The Pony Express Memorial Statue located at the Pioneer Trail State Park in Salt Lake City. This statue is double life size and depicts the station keeper standing beside a spent horse, having just thrown the mail bags on another horse, and waving farewell to a young rider, off balance, still getting into the saddle while his horse takes off. The designer of this work was the late, world-renowned sculptor, Dr. Avarad T. Fairbanks. There are eight other outstanding statues along the Pony Express Trail stretching over seven states.¹⁸

Sixth, the highlight of the NPEA activities is the annual re-ride. The first re-ride to enact the Pony Express was held in 1923; according to the *Ogden Standard Examiner*, on August 31,

¹⁵ Hearty, Interview, May 17, 2009. Tape in possession of Author.

¹⁶ Ibid. The NPEA found an old barn in Heber City; the building was donated, cut up into logs and rebuilt as a Pony Express Station. The Olympic committee also invited other groups to set up a site at Soldier Hollow. Some of the groups were mountain men, a cowboy camp, an Indians camp and BLM Mustangs. After the Olympics, the replica of the Pony Express station was moved to ‘This is The Place Park,’ down the hill from the Pony Express Monument

¹⁷ “Pony Express to ride with Torch in Fairfield”, *Tooele (Utah) Transcript Bulletin*, January 29, 2002.

¹⁸ National Pony Express Association, <http://www.exphomestation.com> (accessed May 2009).

President Calvin Coolidge, from the telegraph room in the White House, "...pressed a gold key and a signal was flashed to St. Joseph, Missouri, starting the race from St. Joseph to San Francisco."¹⁹ This re-ride passed through Grantsville on September 5, involving several riders from Grantsville. The *Tooele Transcript* reported, "The Pony Express riders arrived in Grantsville at 5:50 P.M. Wednesday, delivered the pouch at Wendover at 11:40 P.M.—two hours ahead of schedule."²⁰

In August of 1935, another re-ride was held to commemorate the Pony Express' 75th anniversary. The riders in Utah, mostly Boy Scouts, brought the eastbound mail into Echo. The Echo Utah Celebration Committee placed a letter into the mailbag for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, honoring the memory of the Pony Express.²¹

In 1960, the Pony Express Centennial Commission conducted a re-ride, which was unique—it followed the original Pony Express Trail. This re-ride went through all eight states; from St. Joe, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada to Sacramento, California. Governors from all eight states helped plan and participated in this 100th anniversary of the Pony Express. In Utah, five hundred hopeful riders applied for the opportunity to participate in this re-ride; one hundred riders were chosen. The Philadelphia Mint was commissioned to produce bronze and silver metals. Thirty-seven thousand of these centennial

¹⁹ "Pony Express Riders ready", *Ogden (Utah) Standard Examiner*, August 29, 1932. "The first rider was waiting at the telegraph office for the signal."

²⁰"Pony Express", *Tooele (Utah) Transcript*, September 7, 1923.

²¹"Pony Express Rider Passes Through Echo," *Park Record*, Park City (Utah) August 16, 1935. The letter to President Roosevelt, "It is with great pleasure that we join in celebrating the Diamond Jubilee of the Pony Express. We feel that the Pony Express was a real contribution to the westward march of our American civilization, therefore we honor the memory of its inauguration and the stalwarts who made it possible."

souvenirs were purchased by the public which demonstrated the continued interest in the Pony Express after one hundred years.²²

This centennial re-ride prompted the citizens of Pollock Pines, California to put on a Pony Express re-ride annually during the July 4th celebration. Each year the re-ride expanded to include more of the original Pony Express Trail.²³

On March 3, 1978, the state of California gave an official, nonprofit corporate charter to the Pony Express Association. By 1980, the Pony Express was operating in all eight states through which the original Pony Express Trail ran. Each individual state adopted a re-ride plan that worked best for their state. Utah has three divisions, with a trail captain over each division. The re-ride is run from the Wyoming border to City Hall in Murray City, with the next division picking up the mail and running it to Simpson Springs. The last leg of the run is from Simpson Springs to the Nevada, Utah border. The following year the mail then goes from West to East.

The re-ride, especially in Utah, is becoming more difficult. The rural areas are slowly giving way to urbanization. The Pony Express Trail, through Eagle Mountain, is now paved neighborhoods; care needs to be taken as the re-ride goes through these areas. Permits are needed

²² *Deseret News*, May 5, 1960. These medals were authorized by a special act of Congress. The *Deseret News* explained that the medals were an inch and a half in diameter. One side bears the sculptured heads of Russell Majors and Waddell, founders of the Pony Express. On the other side is the famous Hansen Pony Express horse and rider. "July 1 had been set as the date to start delivery. In addition to the medals available to the public, 1,000 bronze medals were minted for distribution to the 1,000 riders who participate in the re-run. The riders also will each receive a Bible similar to those issued to the original riders. One thousand of these Bibles have been donated by the American Bible Association, the same organization which furnished 300 Bibles to the original riders."

²³ Malcolm MacFarland, *"A first Chapter in the National Pony Express Association History"* (transcribed by Patrick Hearty from a tape from Malcolm MacFarland) June 8, 1994, a copy in possession of Author.

for the re-ride to travel through larger cities, like Salt Lake City and other urban areas.”²⁴ Yet, the re-rides continue.

What drives us to recreate the past?

Patricia Leavy, in her book *Iconic Events*, explains, “All societies engage in practices of collective memory...all societies have cultural memories of national events which extend beyond a person’s own experience...later acting as sites of recollection and remembrance.”²⁵ Some of the obvious benefits of joining in collective and national memory are belonging to a group, with common beliefs and hobbies.

So it is with the Pony Express. Again, Hearty’s colloquial vernacular culminates the whole matter of “what drives us to recreate the past.” Hearty stated that the re-ride is “unique” and “pretty unbeatable” because it combines “the horse, the family and history.” In contrast to the Oregon Trail or the Mormon Trail, “we picture people walking for four months alongside oxen-driven wagons. When we think of the Pony Express Trail, “we picture young, virile, ambitious, intrepid guys, thundering across the prairie on a horse; it is the most romantic episode in the opening of the West.”

Hearty explained the value of connecting with the past.

We like to look back to a simpler time, and in some ways it was a simpler time. The Pony Express was the last mode of communication that was based on flesh and blood. Young men and horse flesh. We can relate to that where everything else is the telegraph, the railroad, the internet, the cell phone—we can’t relate on a personal basis to these things, although they serve us very well.²⁶

²⁴ Hearty, Interview, May 2009, tape in possession of Author.

²⁵ Patricia Leavy, *Iconic Events*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group Inc., 2007), 6

²⁶ Hearty, Interview, May 17, 2009, tape in possession of Author.

There is something about belonging to this group that connects you with five hundred other people each depending on you to do your part. But the connection thing, I am going to answer that in a very different way. I want to compare it to inner city kids who are so lost and in so much trouble because they don't see themselves in space and time...They don't relate to where their people came from and the sacrifices that were made and they don't see themselves in terms of a place in time; who they are and where they are. I think that results in a feeling of being lost. I think our children need to connect, to see themselves as part of something bigger."²⁷

Therefore in conclusion, the legacy of the Pony Express in the Twenty-First Century does far surpass just the annual celebration of the event. It is a history to be remembered, a legacy to be valued, and a re-creation to be continued. It is with preservation of historic trails, with educational involvement, with participation in parades, with Olympic events, with involvement in monuments and with annual re-rides that the history, the legacy and re-creation of the Pony Express lives on!

Raymond W. Settle and Mary Settle described the original Pony Express, "It breathes the spirit of American ingenuity, resourcefulness and daring. Best of all it is a record of youthful courage and endurance and loyalty to a given task."²⁸ This can also be said of the Pony Express in the Twenty-First Century.

²⁷ Hearty, Interview, May 17, 2009, tape in possession of Author.

²⁸ Raymond W. Settle and Mary Lund Settle, *Saddles and Spurs: The Pony Express Saga*, Lincoln University of Nebraska Press 1972, 211.

Raymond W. Settle described the original Pony Express, “It breaths the spirit of American ingenuity, resourcefulness and daring. Best of all it is a record of youthful courage and endurance and loyalty to a given task.” [2] This can also be said of the Pony Express in the Twenty-First Century.

He said I addressed the Legacy of the 21st Century and kind of the 3 question

In 1860 the Pony Express was followed by the American People through the newspaper. It was as if they felt a part of this great adventure, watching from the sidelines. Chapman claims, “the idea of a chain of horsemen braving the dangers of the West, night and day, was something to quicken the imagination.” Chapman 1932

1. In Remembering the Pony Express?? 2.

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4. Ask a Pony Express rider how he feels about the re-ride that re-enact history each year and he will recall the feel of the wind, the loneliness of a starry night, the oneness of horse and rider, and keeping a time schedule in all kinds of weather; he will say, “It is an amazing experience;” (The Marysville Advocate May 9, 1996 by Sharon Kessinger)

Patrick Hearty

Settle p 211 it breaths the Spirit of American ingenuity, resourcefulness and daring. Best of all it is a record of youthful courage and endurance and loyalty to a given task.

Patrick Hearty Some of the best friends that my family and I have in the world are the people we met though the Pony Express, not just on the re-ride but at the conventions and other organization duties. The chance to participate in an historic recreation like this with the combination of the horse, the family, and the history, is unique. It is pretty unbeatable.”

In my interview with Pat Hearty I asked him what, “We like to look back to a simpler time, and in some ways it was a simpler time. The Pony Express was the last mode of communication that was based on flesh and blood. Young men and horse flesh. We can relate to that where everything else is the telegraph, the railroad, the internet, the cell phone, we can’t relate on a personal basis that, although they serve us very well.

We are drawn to that stuff, The Oregon trail, the Mormon trail we picture people walking along for four months along side of an oxen driven wagons. This we picture young, stapling, virile, ambitious, intrepid guys, thundering across the prairie on a horse; it is the most romantic episode in the opening of the west.

“Every newspaper reader who saw the headline, “By Pony Express,” found a dull world brightened. The idea of a chain of horsemen braving the dangers of the West, night and day, was something to quicken the imagination.” (Chapman 1932)

There is something about belonging to this group that connects you with 500 hundred other people each depending on me to do my part. But the connection thing, I am going to answer that in a different way. I want to compare it to inner city kids. Who are so lost and in so much

trouble, because they don't see themselves in space and time. They don't feel like they belong in a place. They don't relate to where their people came from and the sacrifices that were made and they don't see themselves in terms of a place in time. Who they are and where they are They don't connect to a place and time. And I think that result in a feeling of being lost. I think our children need that, to connect, to see themselves as part of something bigger.

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