

## The Pony Express

When one thinks of the Old West, trails of covered wagons on dusty roads, men and women on horseback, or even the famed California Gold Rush may come to mind. Others might consider tales they may have heard about famous outlaws like Billy the Kid or Butch Cassidy. Although these ideas do portray prominent aspects of the West, many often forget about the Pony Express and the important contributions it had for the development of the United States. Launching in April of 1860, the Pony Express became a method of mail delivery for both personal and business affairs. At the time, deliveries by stagecoach could take a month before they reached their destination. The Pony Express cut that time frame down to just ten days by hiring lean, yet robust men as riders. These riders would travel across plains, as well as through storms of rain, snow, and hail alike. Despite the perilous journeys that would face these riders, they had an oath to uphold. Not only did the Pony Express impact California's influence in the Civil War, but it also affected the development of the Transcontinental Railroad and has since been a continually enchanting lore for those interested in remembering simpler times. Though the backstory of the Pony Express and its development is important, the riders often steal the show thanks to the adventurous jobs that were documented. It is often unclear what the fate of the Pony Express riders was due to the Pony Express disbanding quicker than it began. The riders were paid handsomely for their courageous feats, but what exactly became of these riders when the Pony Express was ran out of business in 1861? To answer this, riders of the Pony Express were abruptly forced back to living everyday lives. Some may have found other forms of work, while others may have ended up fighting in the Civil war. It is unclear specifically what

each rider did, but history has narrowed down the possible realities former riders of the Pony Express may have adopted.

The very first delivery was documented on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1860. It consisted of forty-nine letters and a few fliers. To commemorate this achievement, many notables and the three businessmen who made everything possible applauded as "...a cannon was fired and the rider bolted off to a waiting ferry boat" (Pony Express, 2021, para. 3). William H. Russel, Alexander Majors and William B. Waddell are coined the three masterminds behind the development of the Pony Express. The three envisioned this form of delivery after meeting with California Senator William M. Gwin. During the meeting, Senator Gwin proposed the idea with the hopes of the Pony Express generating a positive reaction thus ensuring his path to reelection or even a higher political office of power. It was William Russell who primarily organized the unfolding of the blueprints for the project. There were stations built within every ten to fifteen miles apart to ensure that horses were switched out every tenth mile. This guaranteed the horses as well as the riders wouldn't suffer from exhaustion. The Pony Express's purpose was to deliver important parcels within a shorter amount of time. There were many families leaving all they had ever known behind to start new lives out West. Some would open businesses or purchase a lot of land for ranching. This was hard on families that wanted to make an effort to keep in touch. Imagine there being an addition or death in the family but not finding out until a month later. There were also businesses that used the Pony Express to transport ledgers and even government officials that relied on the Pony Express to get important letters delivered. Ultimately, the Pony Express brought together the East and West regions of the United States.

The riders of the Pony Express were paid a total of twenty dollars a delivery. That would convert to roughly \$692.80 in modern currency. The requirements for the riders were simple in nature. There was once a rumor that the Pony Express organization intentionally sought-after orphans so that if they perished, they wouldn't have the trouble of notifying their families. However, history has debunked this theory due to the many different walks of life that took on the dangerous role. The Pony Express wanted lean men with the ability to man a horse. The riders were often young and needed to be in good health to complete deliveries. The riders were even given an oath to swear by. The Pony Express oath forbid the partaking of alcoholic consumption and lewd behavior. Riders were not allowed in saloons and were expected to carry a bible with them at all times. The riders rode by both day and night for the sake of making delivery deadlines. In spite of threats ranging from wildlife, Natives, the beginning of the Civil War, bandits, and severe weather, only four riders ever died on the trail.

Even though the Pony Express began as a very successful alternative, it had its shortcomings. For starters, the Pony Express was very expensive to use for common folk. Businesses and the government often used the Pony Express. The Pony Express began to truly suffer and ultimately dissipated after the invention of the Transcontinental Telegraph. The now ten day wait for communications, was drastically shrunken down to about an hour or so. With this sudden change, the Pony Express announced its closure two days after this major change all while promising that any enroute deliveries would be completed. The final delivery was finished on October 24, 1861. Before this fretful day, the Pony Express even attempted to drop the price down from five dollars a letter to just one dollar. However, their failure was inevitable as the telegraph instantly connected the West and East. The Pony Express only lasted a total of eighteen months. When it was brought to an end, it left the riders jobless and for some, without a sense of

direction. It is documented that some of the former riders would go on to fight in the Civil War, while others attempted to lead normal lives as ranchers, and farmers. There is a debate on the tales of Billy the Kid being a former rider for the Pony Express. While many doubt his claims, there are many aspects of Western history that have been lost over time. It's very believable that riders could have turned to a life of crime afterwards. The sudden change was very problematic due to the sudden cease in income. If that is the case, it's not likely that many of these riders would adopt wicked ways after defending an oath as unadulterated as the Pony Express.

To conclude, I chose this topic because I have an interest in Westerns and often read books as well as watch Western movies in my free time. I enjoy learning about the different societal, and political issues of this era and how it effected the everyday lives of people. It was challenging to find concrete descriptions of the lives of the Pony Express riders after the organization disbanded. However, using historical analysis, it can be determined that the riders had many other options to choose from after their careers abruptly ended. The Pony Express is forever honored, and it is often argued that without its existence, there is no telling how underdeveloped our postal service or nation for that matter would be. It was a Pony Express rider that delivered the copy of the inaugural speech of none other than Abraham Lincoln as well as the blueprints that helped develop the transcontinental railroad. A future historian may also find interest in how the lives of the riders may have been after the Pony Express came to an end. In hindsight, these men will forever be recorded in history as contributors to the further development of the United States.

## References

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