

# The short, swift life of the Pony Express

Equine mail-delivery system lasted less than 19 months, but its legend lingers

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

**I**t wasn't what I expected — finding a statue of a Pony Express rider and a shack-like relay station alongside the road just east of Salt Lake City, Utah.

We had stopped at This Is The Place State Park on our way to Park City, where I wanted to check out the sights and have lunch at Robert Redford's restaurant, Zoom. The park is a wonderful place to learn about pioneer history, but nobody during the trip had even mentioned the Pony Express.

Both the park and the Pony Express will spark your imagination.

In 1847 Brigham Young sought a haven from religious persecution for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as Mormons. Legend holds that when he completed his 1,300-mile trek across the continent and first laid eyes on the isolated Salt Lake Valley stretched out before him, he exclaimed, "This is the right place. Drive on."

Young's Mormons settled in the valley on July 24, 1847, and promptly planted potatoes and turnips. Nearly 2,000 Mormons moved to the valley by the end of that year and settled a city of 2 square miles.

Today, you'll find a statue of Young and two colleagues on a towering monument overlooking the valley. The statue is located in This Is The Place State Park at the mouth of Emigration Canyon.

If you want to know what pioneer life was like for settlers in those days, the park will help you envision it. Folks in period dress explain their life and work in the 40-plus restored or re-created buildings of Old Deseret Village.

You can visit a blacksmith shop, see how type is set for a newspaper, learn how herbs are blended for medicines, dip candles, and eat a meal typical of the era.

You can also take a carriage ride, go to church, watch people tend their gardens, join the children at play, or visit an old-fashioned barbershop.

It's education. It's entertainment. And visitors find it magical.

For me, however, the Pony Express held more allure. Perhaps it was because nothing was said about it, and nobody staged re-enactments. There was just a statue and the "typical" relay station sitting unobtrusively among the sagebrush at the side of the road.

I looked at them and my mind raced.

As I traveled that day over white salt flats and through forbidding canyons and mountain passes in an air-conditioned van, I thought constantly about the Pony Express riders and the hardships they endured.

Now for a bit of Pony Express history that I hope will fascinate you as it did me.

## Pony Express lore

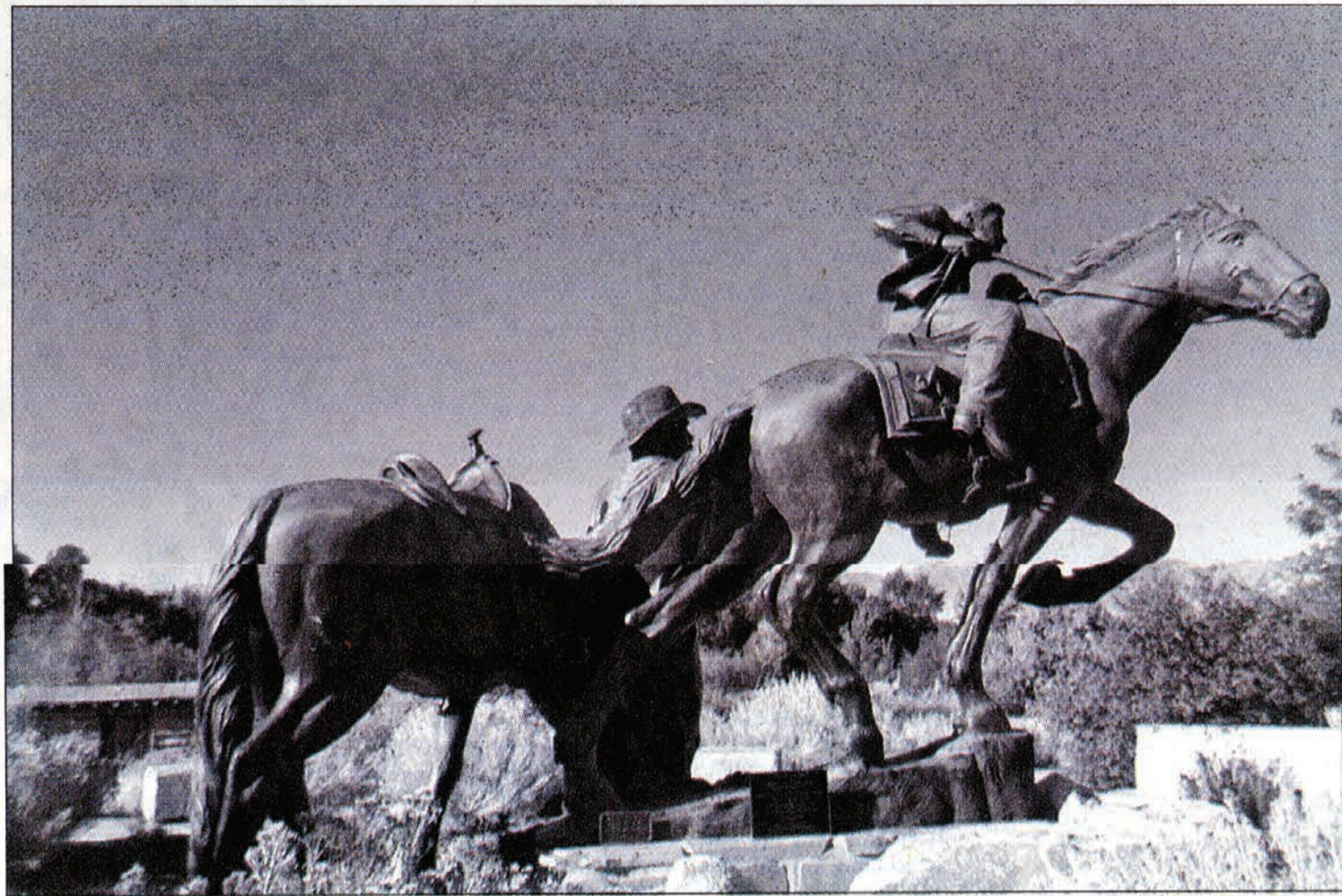
Wanted — young, skinny, wiry fellows, not over 18.

Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily.

Orphans preferred.

So, according to some sources, went William Russell's California newspaper ad in March 1860. Russell's goal was for the young men to deliver mail 1,966 miles between Missouri and California in less than 10 days. The relay mail delivery system would enable pioneers to receive their mail much more quickly than in the past.

Before the Pony Express, mail departed from the East Coast by steamship, traveled



BETH PARKS PHOTOS

The Pony Express monument, designed by Dr. Avard T. Fairbanks and created by sculptor Robert Shure, is in This Is The Place State Park east of Salt Lake City.

across the Isthmus of Panama by mule or rail, and then went on to San Francisco by yet another ship. The process was painfully slow, often taking a month or more. Imagine waiting a month to hear who was elected president or if our country is at war.

Pre-Pony Express mail also traveled west by stagecoach or wagon, but it still took several weeks to reach its destination. Congress even appropriated \$30,000 in 1855 to explore the possibility of using camels to carry mail between Texas and California. Camels, quite simply, were a bad idea.

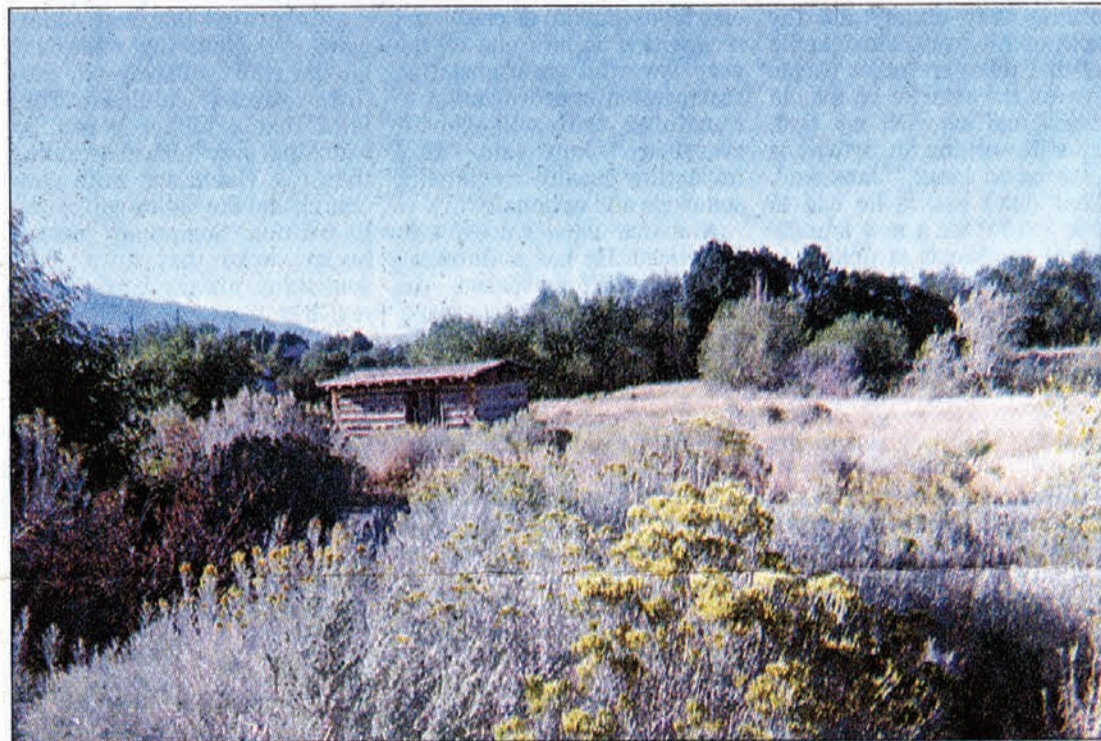
A relay system using ponies and young riders seemed the most promising concept to Russell and his partners, Missouri businessmen William B. Waddell and Alexander Majors. The three entrepreneurs put up about \$200,000 to purchase several hundred first-class horses and a series of relay stations.

The course the Pony Express owners designed headed west from St. Joseph, Mo., and went overland until it reached Sacramento, Calif. Part of the route followed the Oregon Trail, but it also traveled through territories that later became the states of Kansas, Wyoming, Nevada, Colorado and Utah. Mail reaching Sacramento was placed on a steamer and then floated down the Sacramento River to San Francisco.

Men who signed up as Pony Express riders began their employment by taking a solemn oath. Among other things, they pledged never to use profane language, drink intoxicating liquors, or quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm.

Although the original Pony Express uniform was a red flannel shirt and blue trousers, riders usually preferred to wear more practical outfits. Their clothing typically included a buckskin shirt and ordinary trousers tucked into high boots, and a slouch hat or cap.

Early riders carried revolvers, bowie knives and even carbines for self-protection. Such weapons proved cumbersome and heavy, though, and many riders preferred not to burden themselves or carried a single revolver. Since the company's policy was flight instead of fight when facing conflict, some riders even traveled the route unarmed.



A typical Pony Express relay station.

A rider's pay was about \$50 per month, plus room and board. That amount eventually rose to \$100 to \$125, and riders in especially dangerous situations received as much as \$150. This doesn't sound like much until you realize that many men at the time considered \$1 per day to be good wages.

Pony Express mail initially cost \$5 per half-ounce. That rate soon dropped to \$5 per ounce or fraction thereof. Special lightweight tissue-type paper further reduced the cost to \$2.50, and then ultimately to \$1 per half-ounce.

Mail was wrapped in oiled silk to help protect it from rain and sweaty horses. The wrapped mail was placed in a mochila, a type of saddlebag. The leather mochila had a hole that could be placed over the saddle horn and cantle so the rider could sit on it.

The mochila included four hard-leather padlocked pockets, or cantinas, that could carry 12 to 15 pounds of mail. Designated station keepers held the keys to the padlocks.

Pony Express riders rode mustangs, pintos, Morgans and other horses prized for their toughness, speed and endurance. Riders changed mounts at relay stations set 10 or 15 miles apart. Often arriving in a cloud of dust, a rider would jump from his spent mount, throw his mochila over

## If you go

If you're traveling in Utah, check out This Is The Place State Park and the 133 miles of Pony Express trails across the state's public land. For more information about the trails, contact one or both of the Bureau of Land Management districts that share management of the area. They are the Salt Lake District Office, Pony Express Resource Area, 2370 South 2300 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84119, Tel: (801) 977-4300 and the Richfield District Office, 150 East 900 North, Richfield, UT 84701, Tel: (435) 896-1500. You can also go to the main Web site at [www.ut.blm.gov](http://www.ut.blm.gov) and click on the links to the offices.

the saddle of a fresh horse held in check by the station keeper, and gallop off again toward the next station.

Riders covered 35 to 100 miles a day, depending on weather and terrain. The trail could be isolated and hazardous, passing through snow-choked mountain passes and across seemingly endless plains, deserts and salt flats. Riders routinely encountered excessive mud, dust, heat, cold, and hostile Indian tribes.

miles in 21 hours and 40 minutes using 21 horses.

Records, however, fail to confirm that Cody was ever a rider. Credit for the longest ride actually goes to "Pony Bob" Haslam, who rode approximately 380 miles round trip when his relief rider refused to leave the safety of the relay station. He discovered on the return trip that the station had been looted and the keeper killed.

Unlike Cody, Hickok was definitely a Pony Express employee of some type. He killed at least one man in a gunfight at a relay station in Nebraska and initially was charged with murder. He later was acquitted.

One legend holds that rider Johnny Frye (or Fry) had trouble grabbing hunks of fried sweet dough right out of the Dooley girls of Troy, Kansas, as he galloped by. The girls started putting holes in the dough so that Johnny could spike the fried goodies with his index finger without slowing down. Thus, according to the legend, doughnuts were born.

Researchers over the years have had considerable difficulty separating Pony Express facts from fiction. Neither stories nor statistics seem to be as accurate as researchers would like. However, they generally accept some of the following figures as "true."

Most Pony Express riders were around 20 years old. The youngest was reputed to be 11 or 13, and the oldest was in his mid-40s. Billy Campbell, one of the youngest riders, was also one of the last. He died in the early 1930s at the approximate age of 90.

Despite its fame, the Pony Express existed less than 19 months. Approximately 183 men served as riders, and they traveled more than 600,000 miles carrying 34,753 pieces of mail. At least one rider was killed and one mochila lost, and one horse showed up at a relay station without its rider.

The Pony Express operated as a private enterprise from April 1860 through June 1861. It came under contract as a mail route on July 1, 1861, and officially ceased operations in October 1861. Because mail in transit still needed to be delivered, the final ride didn't end until November 1861.

The demise of the Pony Express came not as a result of poor business practices, political pressure or the onset of the Civil War, but with the connection of copper wires at Salt Lake City in October 1861. Completion of the transcontinental telegraph signaled the death knell of the Pony Express and a new era in speedy communication.

Now that we're in the holiday season of 2003, we may think that our surface mail travels more slowly than it did during the times of hard-bodied young riders and the Pony Express. Even if it does, the cost of "snail mail" in terms of today's dollars still makes delivery of our cards and letters a real bargain.

As we approach 2004, be thankful for our current U.S. mail system. Congress could still be considering the use of camels.

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