

The Pony Express

In the 1850s, mail delivery was not as fast as it is today. Airplanes had not yet been invented, and neither had cars. Railroads had been invented, but the railroad tracks did not run all the way across the country.

Suppose you wanted to send a letter from New York to California over a hundred and fifty years ago. The railroads could carry your letter from New York to Missouri. That might take a day or two. But the train tracks ended in Missouri. There your letter would have to be loaded onto a stagecoach like the one shown here. The stagecoach would be pulled by a team of horses. It would bump along dirt roads at five or six miles an hour. It would take almost a month for the stagecoach to carry your letter to California.

In 1860 three businessmen came up with an idea. They thought people would be willing to pay extra to send a letter if there were a quicker way to deliver it. All they needed to do was to find a way to speed up delivery time.



I can describe the connection between the Pony Express and Westward Expansion.

The idea they came up with was simple. They would have riders carry the mail on horseback and run a sort of relay race from Missouri to California. They figured that a single rider on a fast horse could travel very fast. He could go much faster than a stagecoach loaded with passengers and luggage. They knew that horses and riders would get tired, so the businessmen decided there would have to be rest stations along the way.

The Pony Express was not an easy venture to start. The businessmen who started it had to spend a lot of money to get things set up before they could make any money. They hoped the U.S. government would support them and pay them to be official carriers of the U.S. mail, but there were no guarantees.



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After they decided which roads and trails to use, they had to set up stations along the route. One rider left from California in the West, at the same time another rider left from Missouri. So riders traveled from both ends of the route to carry the mail as fast as possible.

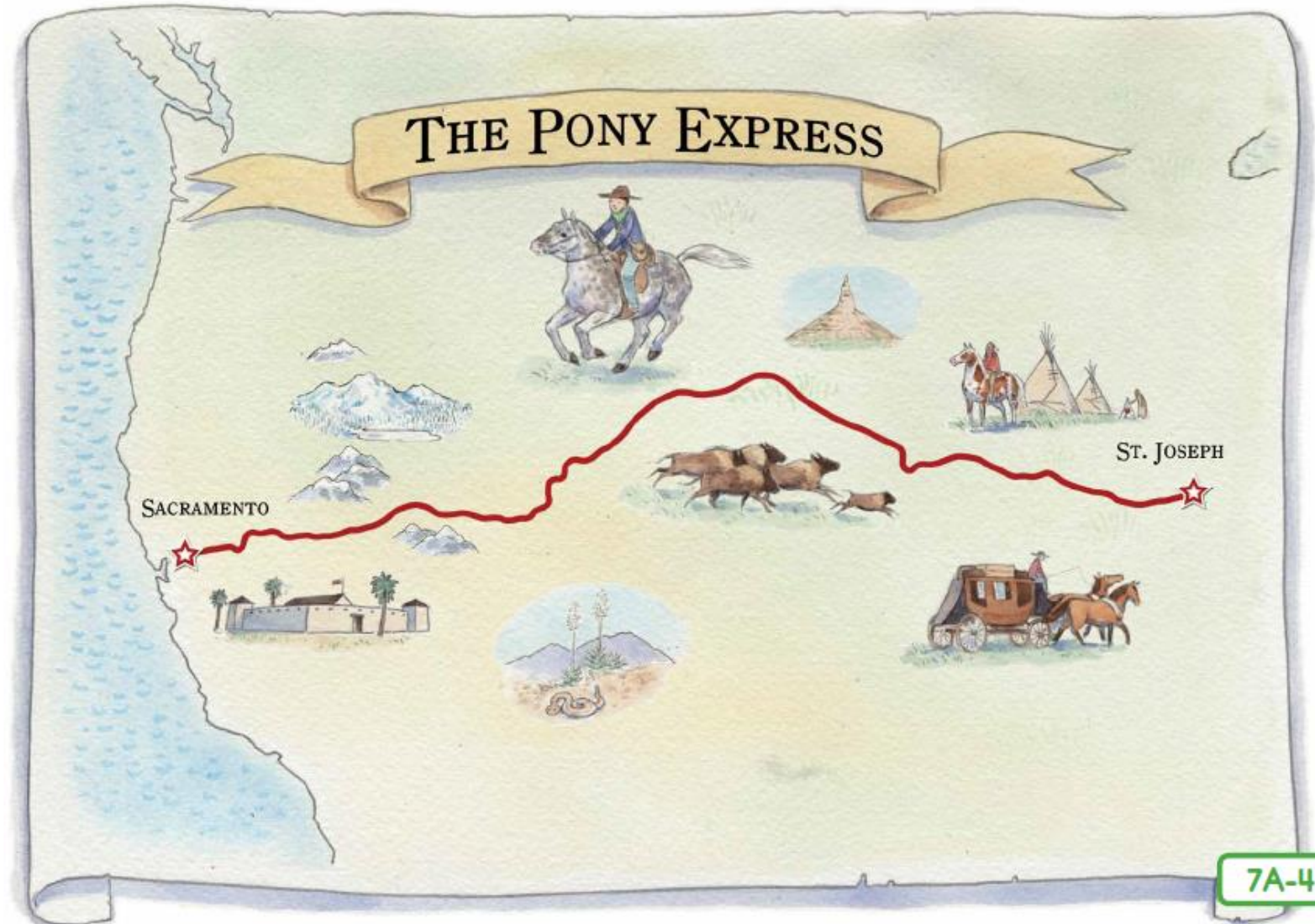
Finally, they had to hire riders and buy fast horses for them to ride. The horses were chosen for their endurance, or for their speed and their ability to continue on for a very long time. Riders were usually young men, eighteen years old or younger. They had to be tough and loyal. Riders would ride a leg, or small section, of this route, changing horses at each station.



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This map shows the whole route of the Pony Express. It started in St. Joseph, Missouri, where the train tracks ended. The Pony Express went all the way to Sacramento, California.

The thick red line on the map shows the route the riders followed. The pictures above and below the route show some landmarks the riders rode past.



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Pony Express riders had to be ready to jump into the saddle and ride fifty miles on a moment's notice. They rode in the scorching heat of the day. They rode at night, by the light of the moon. They rode through rain, hail, and sleet. They galloped across dusty deserts and zigzagged up dangerous mountain paths. They rode across wide-open prairie and through large herds of buffalo. There are stories of riders becoming lost in fierce blizzards and having to lead their horses on foot. Native Americans watched these riders and saw it as more evidence of an endless flow of people moving onto their land.

Not only did a rider have to worry about himself, he had to worry about his horse, too. Because the terrain—or land—could be very bumpy or slippery so that his horse might stumble and fall. Or it could be spooked by wolves or stampeding herds of buffalo.



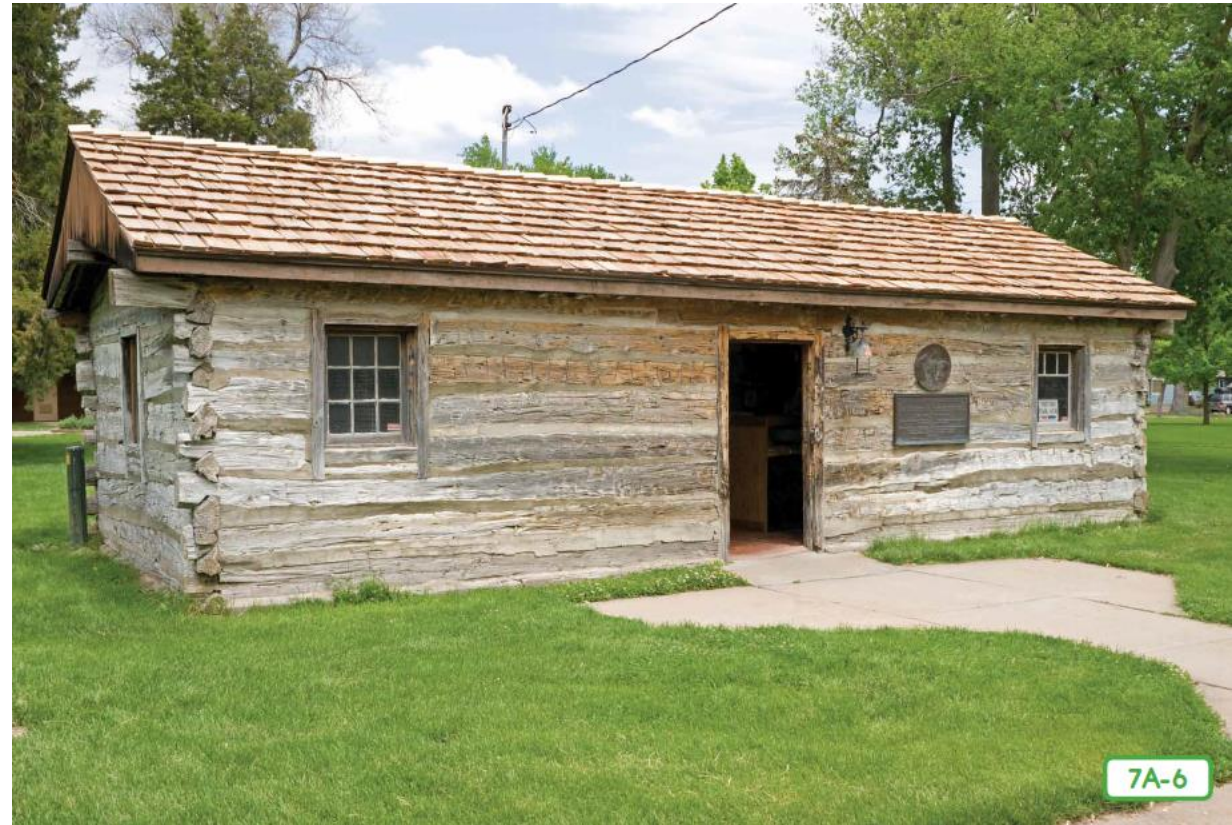
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Here is a photo of a Pony Express station that is still standing today. There were more than one hundred fifty stations like this one along the route. The stations were located about ten miles apart. That was about as far as a horse could gallop before getting tired.

They made swing stations, where a rider could exchange his tired horse for a fresh one and then continue on the trail. They also had home stations, where riders could stay and rest while another rider carried the mail to the next station. The riders waited at their home station until it was time to return with the mail that another rider had delivered.

If all went well, this is what would happen: A Pony Express rider would come galloping up. He would jump off his horse. Another rider would be standing in front of the station holding a new horse. The new rider would unhitch the mail pouches from the old horse and hitch them to his horse. Then he would jump on his horse and gallop away. The rider who had just completed his part of the journey would be fed a simple meal of bacon and beans. If he was lucky there would be some cornbread, too. Then he would get some much-needed rest.

Both riders and stationmasters tried to save as much time as possible and to be as fast as possible in order to get mail to settlers quickly. The horse could move faster if it carried less weight.



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Here is a picture of another Pony Express station. This one is called Simpson Springs. It is located in Utah. You can see that this station is surrounded by a desert, and there are mountains rising up in the distance. Can you imagine how hot it could be riding across the desert during the day, and how cold it could be at night? And of course the rider would be moving in a cloud of dust.



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The men who created the Pony Express were businessmen, and their goal was to make money. They wanted to make sure everybody knew about the service they were providing, so they made posters and ads like this one. It cost \$5 to mail a letter via the Pony Express, which is the same as \$130 today.

In 1860, the American writer Mark Twain took a trip across the United States. He was traveling by stagecoach, but he and his fellow travelers kept an eye out for the Pony Express. In his book,

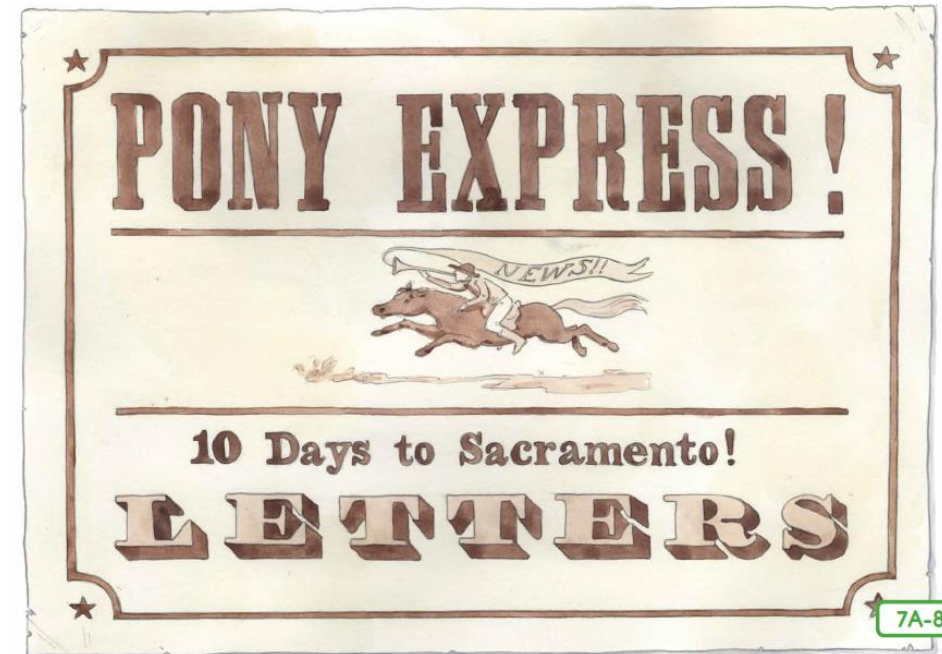
Roughing It, Twain described his first sight of the Pony Express:

“We had had a consuming desire . . . to see a pony-rider. But somehow or other all that passed us . . . managed to streak by in the night . . .

We heard only a whiz and a hail. The swift phantom of the desert was gone before we could get our heads out of the windows . . .

But presently the driver exclaims: “HERE HE COMES!” Every neck is stretched further. Every eye strained wider. Away across the endless dead level of the prairie a black speck appears against the sky . . .

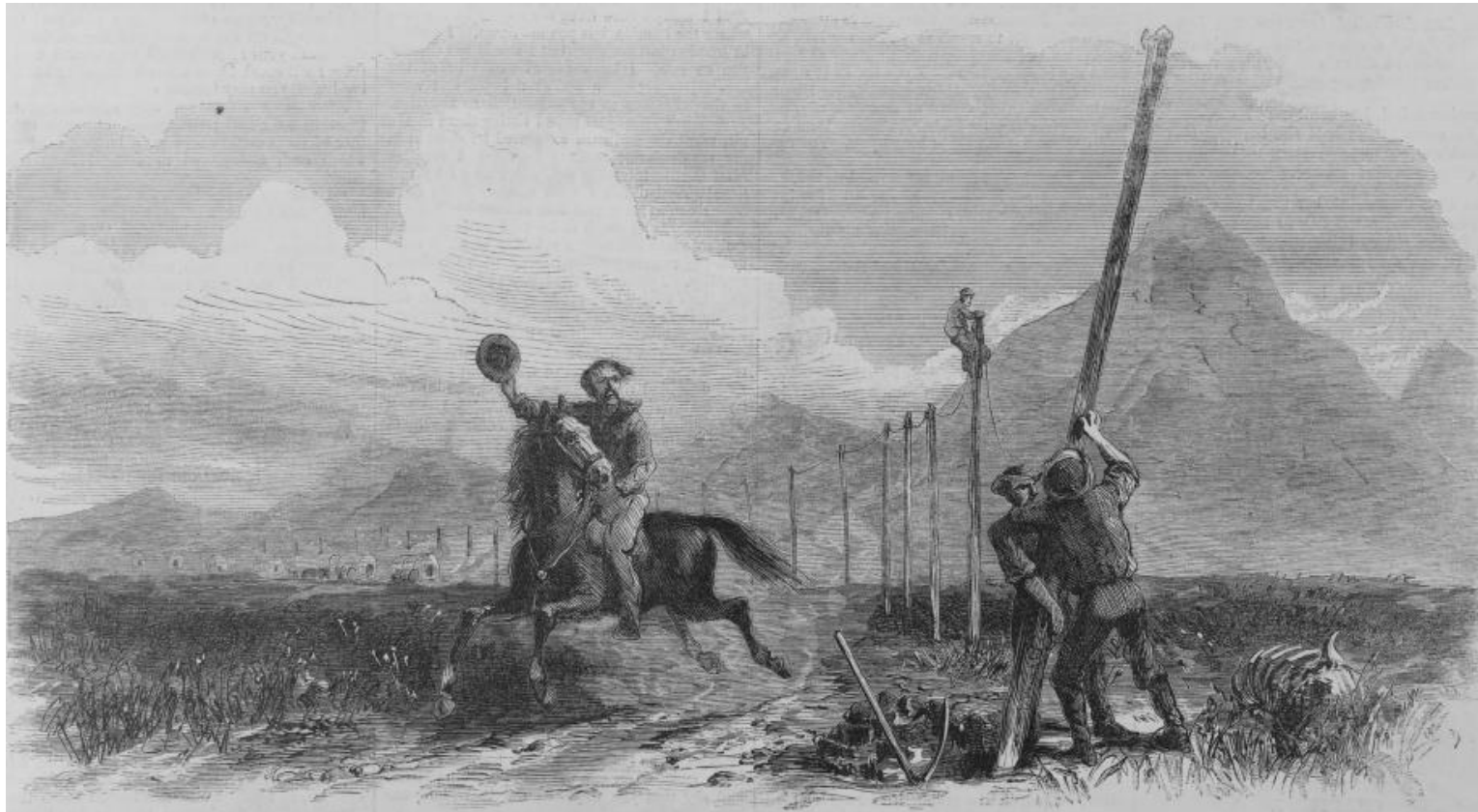
In a second or two it becomes a horse and rider, rising and falling, rising and falling—sweeping toward us nearer and nearer—growing more and more distinct, more and more sharply defined—nearer and still nearer. A fl utter of hoofs comes faintly to the ear. In another instant there is a whoop and a hurrah from our upper deck, a wave of the rider’s hand, but no reply. Then man and horse burst past our excited faces, and go winging away like a belated fragment of a storm!”



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Mark Twain was not the only person who was excited about the Pony Express. Lots of people used the Pony Express to send letters. Unfortunately, the Pony Express did not last very long. This picture can help you understand why.

The men on the ground and behind the Pony Express rider are setting up telegraph poles. Once the telegraph lines stretched across the country, it changed things. People in New York could send telegraph messages to California. A telegraph message could travel from New York to California in a matter of minutes. There was no way the Pony Express could compete with that. The Pony Express went out of business in 1861, after only eighteen months of service.



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Although the Pony Express did not last long, people still remember the can-do spirit of the founders and the bravery of the riders who carried the mail. This statue of a Pony Express rider carrying mail helps us remember this significant event in American history.



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Comprehension Check

1. *Evaluative* What was the main topic of the read-aloud?
2. *Literal* What was the Pony Express?
3. *Inferential* Why did three businessmen decide to start the Pony Express venture?
4. *Literal* Who carried the mail on the Pony Express, and how did they travel the route from Missouri to California?
5. *Inferential* Why were the young men who carried the mail required to be small? What special characteristics did the horses chosen for the Pony Express need?
6. *Inferential* Was the route for the Pony Express riders hazardous or safe? Why?
7. *Literal* How was mail carried along the Pony Express? Did one rider carry the mail the whole way?
8. *Literal* How did the Pony Express riders know where to go?
9. *Evaluative* Was the Pony Express venture successful?