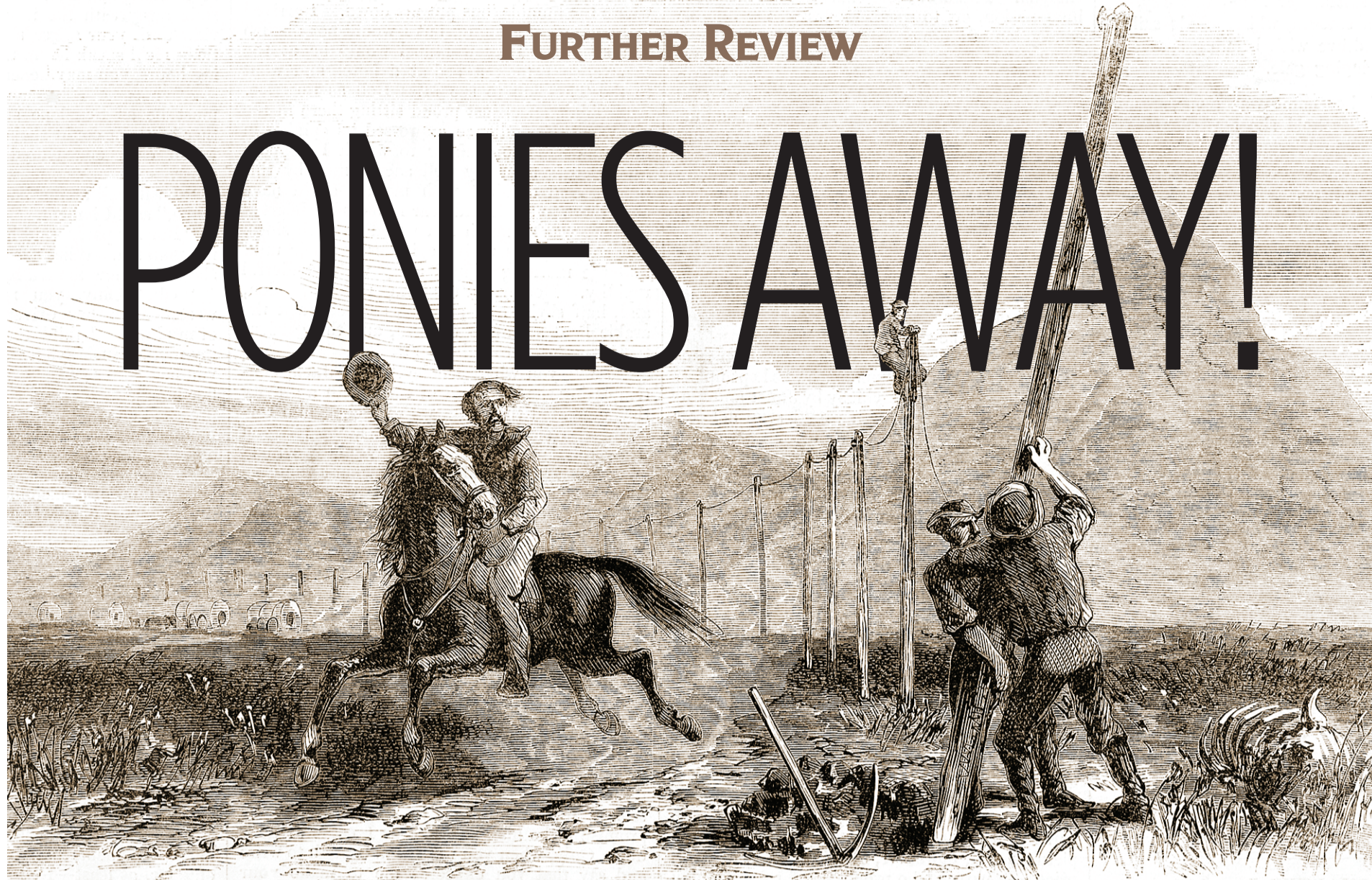


FURTHER REVIEW

PONIES AWAY!



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

There was an awful lot of distance between what had been the Western frontier — Missouri and Iowa — and the new Pacific coast states of California and Oregon. It could take three months or longer to travel that 2,000-mile gap. There were no telephones or telegraphs or radios to help the coasts communicate.

The idea: A team of horse-mounted mail carriers who could tag-team deliveries between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California. The Pony Express delivered its first mail on April 3, 1860 — 165 years ago Thursday.

THE CONCEPT: END TO END IN JUST TEN DAYS

The Pony Express was dreamed up by three men who were already in the shipping business: William Russell, William Waddell and Alexander Majors. Their Stagecoach company delivered army supplies to western army bases and forts across the west. The idea: to add speedy mail delivery.

They reasoned that a team of riders could ride a few miles a day and hand off mail to the next rider. They plotted a 1,966-mile route between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California and calculated they could deliver mail in 10 days. Their goal: To win a lucrative government contract.

They began hiring drivers and about 6,000 support staff. They also bought 400 horses, 75,000 oxen, thousands of wagons, and hundreds of warehouses. They built stables and barracks and 156 waystations, set up every 10 to 15 miles along the route.

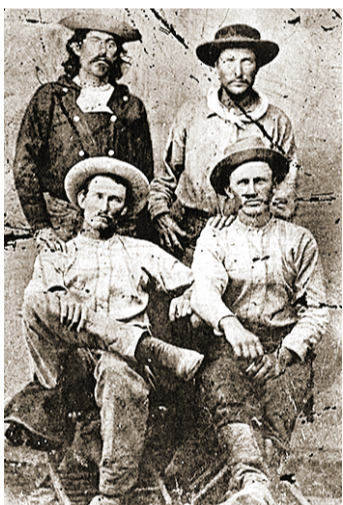
Express riders would ride day and night, stopping at each waystation to change to a fresh horse — a process that would take only two minutes — and get a quick bite to eat. They'd ride about 75 miles per day, finally handing off their mail pouch to another rider.

STAFFING UP FOR THE PONY EXPRESS ROUTE

The goal of the Pony Express wasn't reliability or safety of its employees. The thing that mattered most was speed.

In order to lighten horses' loads, the Express hired small, wiry men who weighed between 100 and 125 pounds — about the size of a modern horse jockey — to ride the trail.

The average age of a Pony Express rider was about 20, but teenagers were common. The 120 or so Pony Express riders were paid between \$100 and \$150 month.



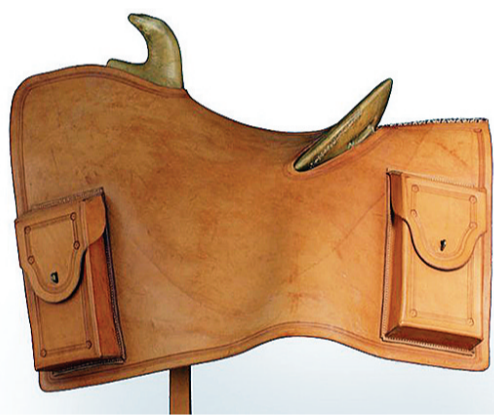
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At left are four Pony Express riders in 1860.

The two in the rear, Billy Richardson and Johnny Fry, are said to have carried the first Pony Express mail.

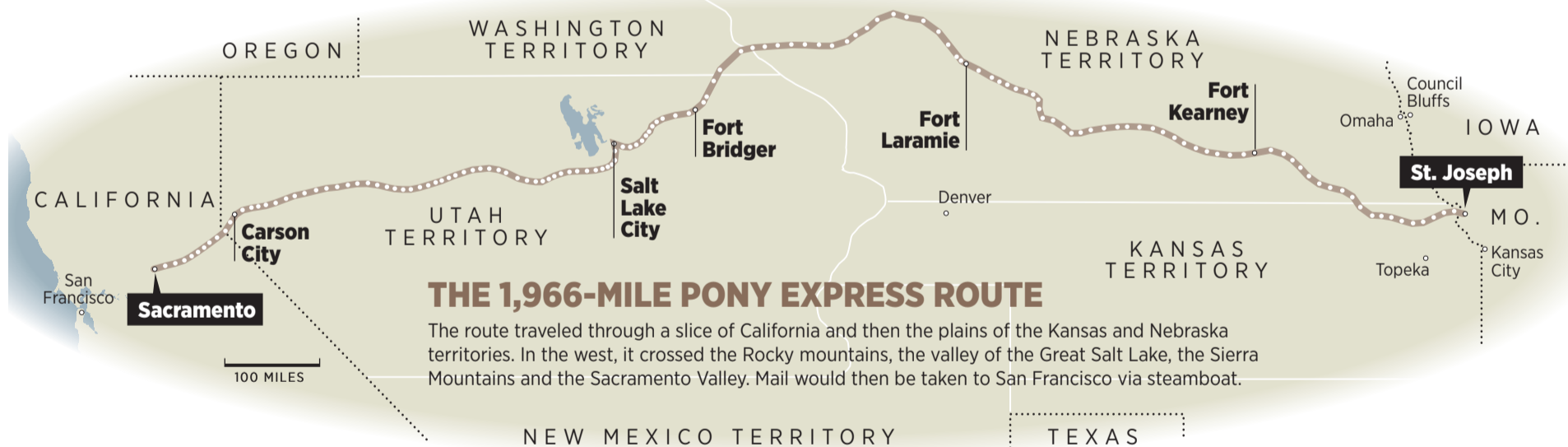
Riders were each presented with a bible and required to take an oath:

"I do hereby swear, before the Great and Living God, that during my engagement, and while an employee of Russell, Majors and Waddell, I will, under no circumstances, use profane language, that I will drink no intoxicating liquors, that I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm, and that in every respect I will conduct myself honestly, be faithful to my duties, and so direct all my acts as to win the confidence of my employers, so help me God."



SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL POSTAL MUSEUM

Riders rode in a specially-constructed saddle — called a mochila, which is Spanish for "knapsack" that incorporated four pockets that could be locked. Each rider could carry 20 pounds of mail.



THE 1,966-MILE PONY EXPRESS ROUTE

The route traveled through a slice of California and then the plains of the Kansas and Nebraska territories. In the west, it crossed the Rocky mountains, the valley of the Great Salt Lake, the Sierra Mountains and the Sacramento Valley. Mail would then be taken to San Francisco via steamboat.

SUCCESS AT FIRST ...

The first Pony Express mail run was a big deal in St. Joseph, Missouri, on April 3, 1860. A large crowd of townspeople showed up to watch mail from the East Coast — which arrived late via train — placed into a mochila.

A cannon sounded to mark the departure of the first east-to-west rider, reportedly Billy Fry. The crowd cheered him on as he made his way through the streets of St. Joseph and to a ferry that took the rider and his horse to the other side.



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This was one of the letters carried on the first westbound trip from St. Joseph to Sacramento between April 3 and April 14, 1860.

That rider would travel at high speed for about 90 miles that evening before handing off to the next rider.

Meanwhile, the first west-to-east packet departed Sacramento at noon that same day. The first delivery arrived in Sacramento in the wee hours of April 14. The first delivery in the other direction arrived in St. Joseph at 5 p.m. that same day.

The feasibility of 10-day delivery of mail between Sacramento and St. Joseph was proven.

'BUFFALO BILL'

One of the most enduring legends of the Pony Express is that of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who wrote in his autobiography that he had worked as a rider for the Pony Express at age 14 and that, at one point, had ridden 384 miles in a single run. There is no evidence he did any of this. There is evidence he was in school in Kansas in 1860 and 1861.



EASTMAN HOUSE William Cody

... BUT THE PONY EXPRESS DIDN'T LAST LONG

Sending mail via the Pony Express was expensive: It cost \$5 to send a ½-ounce letter in April 1860. That's more than \$190 in 2024 dollars and was 250 times the cost, at the time, to mail a letter through the U.S. Post Office.

In order to pull in more customers, the Pony Express cut its rates in half

and then lowered them again, on July 1, 1861, to just \$1 — \$38 in today's money.

Yet, expenses continued to build up. In the summer of 1860, war broke out between settlers and the Paiute Indian tribe in Nevada, destroying eight stations and disrupting delivery. At least 16 employees were killed and 150

horses were stolen or set free.

Russell, Majors and Waddell had hoped for a government contract delivering speedy mail. But their hopes were overtaken by technology.

On June 16, 1860 — just ten weeks after the Pony Express began operations, Congress authorized the building of a transcontinental

telegraph line to connect the Missouri River with the West Coast.

On Oct. 26, 1861, San Francisco was put into direct telegraph contact with New York City. On that day, the Pony Express announced it would end its service, having lasted about 18 months. The final mail packets were delivered early the next month.

Sources: "United States: An Illustrated History" by Ron Fisher, "Chronicle of America" by Dorling Kindersley, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, National Park Service, PonyExpress.org, NationalPonyExpress.org, Center of the West.org, History.com