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THE PONY EXPRESS*

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The riders are dead, their ponies dust,
The years have buried the trails they made,
The mouldering posts are strewn with rust
From stockless gun and harmless blade;
Where once the savage lurked in force,
The settler sleeps in his calm abode,
*And only the ghost of rider and horse
Streaks down the path over which he rode.*

The riders are gone, their ponies rest;
Nor can the years dim the fame they won.
By glade and pool and on mountain crest
A marker of bronze proclaims anon
How man and steed in the days of old
Carried the mail over plain and hill,
*But only the shade of the rider bold
Can tell the tale with the rider's skill.*

While no more important than a number of other enterprises organized in the West, the Pony Express gripped the imagination of the world far in excess of any other event, happening, or undertaking of its day. This successful attempt to bring the communities of the West Coast into closer communication with their eastern relatives and friends caught the fancy of all mankind. In England and France, Italy and Germany, the deeds of its heroic riders were recounted wherever people congregated. The papers of Britain and France were filled with accounts of their

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intrepidity and courage. Pictures that have come from the newspapers of France depict a dandified horseman that to us would seem to be an utter impossibility. But to the French he was real and expressed the national trait of cherishing the deeds of all brave men.

What was it that caused this enterprise to fasten itself on the imagination of the world? Certainly the decade immediately preceding it had witnessed the most stupendous migration in history and one fraught with great consequences to mankind. Caravans and wagon trains crossed the plains in unbelievable numbers every year after the discovery of gold in California in 1848. The following year it is said that 42,000 people arrived in the Golden State from the East. In some of the years thereafter the westward bound emigrants numbered more than 50,000, and by 1860, the population of the state had reached 430,000. With Washington and Oregon the number was swelled to nearly 500,000. Some of these came from the four corners of the globe. Surely here was something to make the world sit up and take notice. Only once in history has a similar migration exceeded this in numbers, and that was the immigration of thirty million Chinese into Manchuria in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth. But even with sixty times as many people engaged, this great crossing of frontiers does not compare in its impact on civilization with the great trek in western America.

What was it, then, in the Pony Express that so won the attention of the world? It is true that it was intensely dramatic, but that alone does not account for such unparalleled interest. Perhaps the answer may be found in the fact that this enterprise reduced the time consumed in crossing the continent from thirty to ten days, thus giving one more example of man's conquest of nature. Just so did Lindbergh win the applause of all mankind when he flew over the Atlantic from New York to Paris in thirty-odd hours. New horizons opened up to the race are always received with loud acclaim, whether it might be a Columbus giving us a New World, or a Magellan circumnavigating the globe.

It is noteworthy that the majority of the human race, up to 1860, had not increased its rate of travel since the days of Moses and Abraham. The steam engine, it is true, had been invented and was in use on all the seven seas. But only recently had the steamship taken the place of the American clippers which parted the waves of all the oceans during the decades following the War of 1812. The first successful locomotives, both in England and America, were operated in 1829, a little over three decades before. So far as the vast West was concerned, in 1860, the horse was the speediest and most satisfactory means of travel, just as it had been in the early empires of Egypt and Babylon. Since then the mad race for speed has transformed all the earth and made distances on this planet a thing of naught.

But in 1860, when huge masses of humans were moving like armies of ants across a continent, it was another story. Those who undertook the journey expected to spend several months in its accomplishment. My father's family left Liverpool on the good ship *Manchester* in May, 1862, and arrived in Salt Lake City in October of the same year, five months consumed in reaching the Promised Land! And this was the rule and not the exception, as hundreds of thousands of living descendants of pioneers can testify.

Before the Pony Express was set up, four routes might be taken to reach the Pacific Coast. The first and most important one was the Southern, or Butterfield, route. It led from Independence, Missouri, through Kansas and part of Colorado to Santa Fe, thence westward to the Pacific and up the coast to San Francisco. It usually took more than a month. The second one involved a ship voyage from an eastern port, or from New Orleans, to Panama, thence across the Isthmus, and then another voyage up the Pacific to San Francisco. It usually consumed not less than a month's time. The third meant still a longer trip around Cape Horn, thence up the coast of the two Americas to the Golden Gate. Sometimes this took six months. The fourth and direct route left St. Joseph, Missouri, thence through Kansas to the Platte River, along its course to forts Kearney and Laramie, to the Sweetwater, down the Rockies to Ft. Bridger and Salt Lake City, southwestward to Camp Floyd, west to Ruby Valley, Eureka, and Austin to the Sinks and Carson City, over the

Sierras, missing Lake Tahoe by three miles, and on to Placerville and Sacramento. In passing, it is interesting to note that for countless generations the Indians of the plains had used the same trail in their trade with their brethren of the Southwest. It is presumed that they branched off towards the south after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley.

The Platte Valley, in 1860, abounded in all kinds of wild game—the buffalo, the antelope, the bear, the deer, and wild fowl indigenous to this climate. The grade up this river was comparatively easy till the Rockies were reached. If one desired to travel straight west, after arriving at the Mormon capital, the chief difficulty lay in crossing the desert. This was an additional hazard to that of the Indians, who infested the trail all the way across the sagebrush state.

Where there was plenty of game, and in Nebraska this was abundantly true, were also plenty of aborigines, who held undisputed sway over the vast region before the white man came. This is not to say, however, that they did not have competition among themselves, for the different tribes and nations were constantly at war with each other. When the immigrants began their westward journey, the Indians looked upon them with great surprise. They didn't see how so many whites could have existed. At first they let the newcomers go through unmolested. Their surprise first gave way to concern, then to hatred and action, as they saw their meat supply so wantonly destroyed by these intruders who slaughtered the buffalo and all other game with perfect abandon. The red men had occupied all these lands for ages; they looked upon them as their own, and rightfully so. Is it any wonder that they struck back when they were attacked and their homes despoiled? It is a long story and we have no place for it here, but generally the white man's treatment of the Indian is not to his credit. However, all I wish to say is that hundreds of thousands of red men occupied the plains, the deserts, and the mountains of the country under discussion.

The continental area of our country has not changed since 1860. It was then, as now, 3,022,387 square miles. The population was 31,443,000. The region west of Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana, consisting now of seventeen states,

embraces 1,831,000 square miles, or 60 per cent of the area of the entire country. This vast territory, in 1860, had 1,068,000 people, or 3.4 per cent of the population of all the United States. Roughly this is one person to two square miles. If we eliminate four of the most populous of the seventeen states, Texas and the three coast states, which in 1860 had a population of 731,000, the other thirteen territories then embraced 1,241,000 square miles and had a total white population of 327,000. Thus 1.4 per cent of the population occupied 41.6 per cent of the land of the whole country. This was about one person to four square miles. Translating this into terms near at home, Salt Lake County, with 762 square miles, would have had 190 people within its borders.

Thus we see that the great expanse of territory from the Missouri River to California was practically uninhabited. *And this was ninety-three years ago!* Of these 327,000 inhabitants in the thirteen territories in 1860, Utah had 40,273 or twelve per cent. At that time Utah embraced all of Utah and what we now know as Nevada. These figures are given that you may recall how sparsely settled Western America was less than a century ago and what difficulties men had to encounter in making the journey overland.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the new and main route to the coast was now humming with activity. The discovery of gold in California having started the tide westward, the migration continued with undiminished force. Wagon trains, stage coaches, men on horse and mule back, handcarts, and every other possible mode of travel had been requisitioned in making the way across the continent. One enterprising citizen is reported to have loaded all his world's goods into a wheelbarrow and transported them to Placerville (Hangtown). By 1860 the tide was in full swing. At Fort Kearney 600 wagons were counted as passing that place in one day. Five thousand Mormons came into the valleys of Utah in 1860, and about an equal number the following year. Russell, Majors and Waddell had a daily stage service between the Missouri River and Salt Lake City. Freight trains, unbelievably large, took supplies to the mining camps from Sacramento to the Sierras and beyond, charging one dollar per pound for the haulage.

But this was the main traveled road. Once off the great continental highway, the Indians were supreme, now and then swooping down on small wagon trains or still smaller bodies of horsemen and killing without pity. Part of the time of the operation of "The Express," the northern route through Wyoming had to be abandoned because of these depredations.

Given the conditions already enumerated, it can easily be seen why the Pacific Coast was clamoring for more speedy mail service from the East. Most of the inhabitants of the Golden State were young men who had left their wives, parents, or sweethearts in the East. Naturally they were anxious to get mail as speedily as possible, and a month or six months was a long time to wait for news from home. Business houses were doing a tremendous trade not only with the Orient but also with firms in New York and other ports on the Atlantic seaboard. The national government was having difficulty in keeping its far-flung interests working harmoniously together. Especially was this so immediately before and following the commencement of the Civil War. In view of these facts, one can readily imagine the immense pressure that was brought to bear in securing better mail service. The stage coach and the wagon train were the dependable commercial activities of the day and time.

Finally, one F. X. Aubry made a wager that he could travel horseback from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Independence, Missouri, in seven days, a distance of 860 miles. The wager was for \$1,000.00, and its conditions permitted the use of relays of horses. He won and accomplished the journey in 5½ days. This event set men to thinking. They recalled the reign of Genghis Khan seven centuries earlier and his success in keeping his great empire together by using the same method as had Aubry.

In 1859 Senator William M. Gwin of California met Mr. Russell of the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell in Washington, and they talked over the matter of establishing a pony route between the points we have so often mentioned. A tentative agreement was entered into, Mr. Russell telling the senator that he would have to get the consent of his two partners. When Russell returned to his company's headquarters, he told

of his discussion with Gwin, but his partners refused their approval, saying that it could never be made to pay. (In this decision they were in the right, for they lost about \$300,000.00 on the venture.) He replied that he had practically given his word, to which they said that, if he had given his word, it must be kept. This firm was the largest freighting and passenger concern in all the West, and it needed a company of such vast resources to whip the proposed enterprise into shape. To give some idea as to its size, Russell, Majors and Waddell owned 6,250 wagons, 75,000 oxen, and innumerable horses, and had tried employees to draw from in establishing the enterprise. Experienced men were dispatched at once over the West to gather the necessary men, horses, and equipment together.

Such men as Bolivar Roberts went over the route, surveyed the situation, and purchased horses to the number of 500, mostly half-breed California mustangs, than which "no better horse ever bore a man on its back," according to Buffalo Bill. These horses often cost \$500.00 each. Roberts and others established about 200 stations, and hired 80 riders and 200 keepers to attend to the posts. In the beginning the distance between posts varied, often running as high as thirty miles, but for the most part, after the venture was well under way, the average was ten miles. Stations consisted of cabins, dugouts, shacks, tents, and whatnot. To the keepers was assigned the most dangerous job, for if attacked they had to remain and fight. The riders had fleet mounts and could easily outrun any Indian horse.

The riders were all young men, with the exception of Major Howard Egan, who was forty-five years old, and whose son "Ras" was also in this service. All riders were alert, eager, and quick-thinking, and could not weigh more than 135 pounds. Their pay was from \$40.00 to \$125.00 per month. Their saddles were fitted with a *mochilla*, which could be thrown over the horn and the cantle of the saddle. The *mochilla* contained four pouches which held the mail. Letters cost \$5.00 per ounce. Horses were driven to the limit of their endurance for the ten to twelve miles between posts, when the rider changed horses, threw the *mochilla* over the new saddle and sped on. The usual tour of duty of the rider was thirty miles, but sometimes, through force of circumstances, they had to go farther. Buffalo Bill speaks of Bob Has-

lam's having travelled 380 miles with practically no rest.¹ Cody mentions his own ride of 322 miles as the longest ever made by any rider on the "Express." This is an apparent contradiction, but Cody may have thought that his was the longest *continuous* ride without rest.

The route was 1,996 miles from St. Joseph, up the Platte to Fort Kearney, Chimney Rock, North Platte, Laramie, Sweetwater, Bridger, Salt Lake City, Camp Floyd, Fish Springs, Ruby Valley, Eureka, and Carson; thence to Genoa, up over the Sierra, to Placerville and Sacramento. From there the mail was carried to San Francisco by steamboat. Two-thirds of the way was infested by Indians. West of Salt Lake City was by far the worst part of the entire route, as the riders had both the desert and the Indians to contend with.

The fastest time ever made was when Lincoln's first message went across the continent. It took 7 days and 17 hours, which is 10.78 miles per hour, or 258 miles per day. Considering the distance, this is the fastest time ever made anywhere, at any time, by horse-flesh. The average trip took 11 days. The Express was in operation but eighteen months, from April, 1860 to October, 1861. The construction of the telegraph line made the Express obsolete at once, for messages sent by electricity travel 900,000 times faster than sound at sea level. The age of modern speed had been ushered in. But the story of how the mail was carried in those memorable days still lingers in the hearts of men.

The dispatch with which the mail was transported and the efficiency of this wonderful organization describe more loudly than words the character and courage of the men who formed it and the trustworthiness of those who carried out its program. Visscher says that 650,000 miles were covered by the Express during its operation and that only one bag of mail was lost.²

This was the end of the famous mountain men and trappers. The age of the Indian scout and the plainsman had been ushered in. The names of Kit Carson, Jim Beckwourth, John C. Fremont,

¹ Colonel Henry Inman, *The Great Salt Lake Trail* (New York, 1898), 178.

² William Lightfoot Visscher, *The Pony Express* (Chicago, 1908).

California Joe, Jim Baker, Buffalo Bill, and a host of others were on every lip. Stories of their prowess under the most trying of circumstances equal those of any heroes to be found in history. Kit Carson was to the West what Daniel Boone was to those who crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains and settled Kentucky. California Joe was already an almost legendary figure when the Express began. Buffalo Bill declared him to be the "best all-round shot on the Plains." Six feet three inches in his stocking feet, he was the prototype of the best the West produced. With a dry, whimsical wit and a gift for telling tall stories, he was a welcome guest wherever men congregated. He wore his hair long, a custom affected by the plainsmen, and always rode a mule, instead of a horse, declaring that the former was the more dependable animal. As he rode leisurely along, with his hair a foot and a half long hanging down his back, dressed in moccasins and deer-skin hunting clothes, he must have been a sight to inspire respect and the ejaculation, "Here is, indeed, a man!" One of his stories which I have written in verse is as follows:

CALIFORNIA JOE'S STORY

Thar's wonderful sights and powerful strange
I've met with in ridin' over the range,
From mountain to valley, from valley to hill,
With Beckwourth an' Bridger an' handsome "Wild Bill,"
Some thrillin' my bones from A to izzard,
An' ticklin' my soul clean through to the gizzard;
But the funniest thing I ever did see
Took place in Corvallis in Fifty-three.

A widder there lived with three strappin' daughters
In a tumble-down shack by Willamette's waters;
She kept a few cows an' furnished the milk
To trappers an' freighters an' other such ilk.
These gals wuz all dressed in homespun an' tatters,
Knowin' nothin' of clothes an' other such matters;
Bare-headed they went an' the shoes that they wore
Wuz what natur' had giv' them an' nothin' much more.
Why, the skin on their soles, from runnin' through shale
Wuz as thick as the hide on a kangaroo's tail.

One mornin' I went to buy me some cream
An' butter an' aigs, an', crossin' the stream,

I com' to the hut. The ole woman sat dreamin'
An smokin'; the kittle wuz lazily steamin'
By the open hearth fire; the cat lay apurlin'
Her music like smooth-flowin' water acurlin'
Down a pebble-strewn brook. The place wuz that still
A ghost town graveyard at midnight would fill
It with noise, An' outside, amilkin' the cows
An' callin' the chickens an' feeding the sows,
Wuz the gals, who done most of the chores
An' all of the work that lay out of doors.

One maiden traipsed in an' stepped close to the fire,
Her dresses all damp from the grass an' the mire;
Bare laigs an' bare feet, right down to the toes,
Wetter by far than her slobbery clothes.
As she stood thar afryin', the heat of the blaze
Surrounded her body with a vaporous haze.
Contented she wuz, beyond shadder of doubt,
Her soul dry within, her skin wet without.
Not battin' an eye, ner movin' a hand,
The mother sang out as if in command:
"Sal, yer foot is atop of a burnin' live coal;
I smell it from here as it singes yer sole."
Not stirrin' an inch fer fear of a blister,
"Which foot is it, mammy?" queried the sister!

Major Howard Egan was one of the original band of Mormon Pioneers. He had already had a distinguished career as a member of the Mormon Church and had received his commission as a major in the Nauvoo Legion, but was now engaged in gathering cattle and driving them to California for sale. He had established a ranch with his sons in western Utah, and was perhaps more intimately acquainted with the terrain between Salt Lake City and Sacramento than any other person. He is said to have made fifty trips to the coast before the Pony Express was organized and had explored and surveyed his own trail between these points. Naturally the men who were backing this enterprise wanted a man of his character and experience in their service. He built a post for the Express in Egan Canyon, about sixty miles over the present line between Utah and Nevada. Here occurred one of the most thrilling episodes of Indian warfare ever recorded.

Egan Canyon was attacked by the red men early one morning. The station keepers were Henry Wilson and Albert Armstrong. These two men held the attackers off until their ammunition gave out. Then the savages stormed the post, gutted the interior, trussed the two men up, gathered huge quantities of giant sage and made ready a pyre, to which the whites were strapped, side by side. One of the braves held a torch in his hand and had already received the nod of his chief to apply it to the fuel, when a rifle shot rang out and the torch-bearer fell dead. Immediately the Indians scrambled for their horses and fled, but not before a number of them were killed. The soldiers were led by Colonel Steptoe of the United States Army. In my poem I have had Armstrong express his feelings at the time:

When Gabriel's trump blows reveille on that last great
 camping ground,
'Twill never be any sweeter to me than that rifle's
 welcome sound
As I lay lashed to Wilson's side and the redskin brought
 his fire
To burn us into kingdom come and glut his master's ire.

Next to Bob Haslam, Buffalo Bill was perhaps the best known of the riders in this historic enterprise. He had hardly grown to man's stature when he entered its service. He had many thrilling experiences and participated in exploits that sometimes chill the blood. It doesn't seem possible that a boy of fourteen or fifteen years could have accomplished the deeds accredited to him. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* gives his birth as 1846. As a marksman he had few equals and not many superiors. At the Utah State Fair in 1903 or 1904, I saw him do marvellous shooting with the ease of a perfect craftsman. He himself tells of several events that took place when he was a rider on the lonely Sweetwater area. One in particular happened in the vicinity of the Three Crossings on that stream. With the exception that it is told in verse, the story is exactly as Cody wrote it down and published it.³

At Sweetwater, choosing a pony as fleet
As ever Arabian mounted to meet

³ Inman, *The Great Salt Lake Trail*.

The lady he loves, I soon fasten my load
And clatter away on the hazardous road.
Precipitous cliffs and a zigzagging trail
Are associates fit for the murmuring wail
Of quivering willow and tremulous pine
That grow by the wayside in alternate line.

The canyon has widened; I look up the glen;
Behind a great boulder are hiding some men.
"They're redskins," I mutter, "who're ambushing me;
In the fringe of that timber are others I see.
No chance to escape, for the left is not clear
Where those shivering aspen are quaking with fear."
I glance to the right; here the bulwark is high,
But at its huge base is a path I descry.

"I'll make for that cliff and the valley above,
For the passage is narrow and tight as a glove."
So saying I hold to the regular way,
Not checking the rein to uncover my play.
Ere reaching the range of a rifle I wheel
And beat a tattoo with rawhide and steel;
Nor swifter is arrow let loose from a bow
Than speed of my mustang as upward we go.

From aspen and boulder, from bracken and hill,
The redskins come howling like wolves to the kill;
With war-paint and bonnet, with ax and with gun,
They gallop like demons, they shoot as they run;
The bullets are pattering under my steed
Whose hoofs are upturning the turf in my need;
One ear is bent forward, the other turns back
To heed my cajoling, to keep in the track.

Five furlongs we hurtle at desperate pace,
And the warriors are eager to win in the race;
They beat and they curse as they charge up the way,
But cayuse is not born that can distance my bay,
Whose legs are extended in mightier stride
Than horse ever took since man learned to ride.
I gain the rock haven, I sweep up the vale
With only one Indian hot on my trail.

The deference shown on that furious chase,
The trappings adorning his leathery face,
The feathers that stream from the bonnet he wears,
Proclaim him a chief; the roan gelding that bears
This menacing load with such terrible force

Is rushing athwart my too perilous course,
To gain in advance (Mark that savage's guile!)
The sheltering walls of the narrow defile.

He lashes the gelding; he glowers at me;
And his blood-lust increases the faster I flee;
As nearer and nearer we draw to the gap,
Our paths come together like lines on a map.
I glance up the gorge and I glance at my foe;
I measure the distance we both have to go;
I'll arrive thirty paces ahead with my bay;
"By heaven, we beat him," I silently say.

The strawberry roan is all spotted with foam
And he races along like a duck scudding home,
But his lungs are awhistling, he sucks in his breath,
His master is losing this gamble with death.
He senses his failure as quickly as I
And notches an arrow. As soon as I spy
This action, I whip from its holster the gun
At my hip, a report, and the combat is won.

He lets out a yell and he clutches the air,
He reels and he sways and the saddle is bare,
And over and over he rolls on the ground
With never another articulate sound.
The death of their chieftain is seen by the braves,
Who shower their arrows in sibilant waves,
But I dash up the canyon and on to the post,
Unscathed and unhurt by that Indian host.

Like all stories, good and bad, this one comes to an end. But
an end that blazed the way for the telegraph, the railroad, and
the speed of this modern world. So the narrator says in con-
clusion:

No shaft ever flew from a twanging crossbow
As swift to the heart of a fear-stricken doe
As the flight of my courser along the last mile
Of this race over desert and mountain defile;
No trooper e'er rode in a martial parade,
In all of his trappings and tinsel arrayed,
With the tithe of my joy and exuberant pride,
As through Sacramento, triumphant, I ride.

No conquering hero of Venice or Rome,
Rich-laden with spoils for his city and home,
And returning with honor, the darling of fame,
Was ever accorded more royal acclaim,
By the wealthy, the poor, the wise and the clown,
Than I on attaining the streets of this town,
 For I have come through to the end of the trail
 And I have delivered the government mail.