

Gronewold, others gear up for Pony Express milestone

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Lyle Gronewold was in the saddle one overcast morning when all he could see were power poles and road ditches.

As he carried mail in during a Pony Express reride south of Brady, Gronewold identified with how original Pony Express riders probably felt when they lost their way.

“They didn’t even have poles or ditches to guide them and they rode in snowstorms,” Gronewold said. “They rode in everything.”

On Sunday morning, Gronewold will saddle up his brown gelding Cisco—along with other area Pony Express Rider members—to replicate a leg of the frontier mail service offered by riders who changed spent horses for rested ones about every 10 miles across two-thirds of the country.

The National Pony Express Association is commemorating the 150th anniversary of the ride which started in April 1860 and lasted until November 1861.

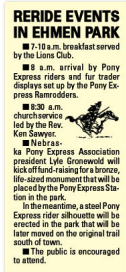
Local and area riders will ride the original trail south of Brady to Gothenburg and stop in Ehmen Park for a celebration before carrying mail on to Cozad.

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Their ride is part of a 20-day national event that kicked off June 6 in San Francisco, CA, and will end in St. Joseph, MO, on June 26.



Gronewold said the importance of the commemoration is that there are few historical events still as fresh in the nation's memory.

"The Pony Express is one of the few things that is still romantic about American history," he explained. "Nebraska was still a territory then."

Probably the most modern building of the area at the time was the log Midway Pony Express station—a structure that still stands on the original trail site on the 96 Ranch south of present-day Gothenburg.

Gronewold compared the station to Pony Express headquarters in the Patee House in St. Joseph, MO—a hotel that boasted such luxuries as flushing toilets.

Another station, re-located to Ehmen Park in the 1930s, was known as the "Machettes" station and was erected on the Oregon Trail near Fort McPherson.

It was used by the Pony Express and later as an Overland Trail Stage Station on the upper 96 Ranch.

Gronewold, a Pony Express history buff, described the mail service as an historical event that didn't damage anything.

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“The riders never shot buffalo or put Native Americans on reservations,” he said.

Instead, the riders provided a service that no one else could do at the time.

Before the Pony Express, citizens in California might wait three months or longer for a letter from the east that was delivered by stagecoach and vice versa,

Even though the service was short-lived because of cost and the completion of the Overland Telegraph, the legend lives on.

Gronewold, who’s ridden the annual rereide every year since 1997, has learned much about history of the mail service and met many riders.

The Gothenburg native is president of the Nebraska Pony Express Association and has helped plan the 150th commemoration as well as yearly rereides.

One of the riders from the early days—William Campbell—was one of the longest-living riders before his death in the 1930s.

Campbell rode all 18 months the service was offered and later stayed and worked in the area when it ended.

What impressed Gronewold about the early rider was a story in Campbell’s memoirs telling of how he came disoriented in the darkness of night on the Nebraska prairie.

“He rode to the Platte River and stuck his hand in the water to see which way it flowed,”

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Gronewold said. "That was how he found his way."

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