

Down on Second Street in St. Joseph, Missouri, just across the street from Patee Park, at 5:00 p.m., April 3, 1860, the doors of the famous old Pike's Peak livery barn were suddenly thrown open and out through its portals came John W. "Billy" Richardson on a coal black steed. This marks the beginning of one of the world's most thrilling means of communication.

As the doors of the old livery barn swung open that day, a cannon boomed, flags were flying everywhere, and people broke into a mighty roar of shouts to speed the first Pony Express rider on his way out into the great American wilderness.

Dashing through the crowd for a few blocks, the rider threw the first leather pouch with its famous four pockets across the pommel of the saddle. In but a few moments the horse was springing from the bank to the steam ferry which at once began chugging away for the Kansas side. As the boat reached the western shore, the bell clanged, the gate was down and the intrepid rider sped away into the vast reaches beyond.

Out over the great stretches of Kansas prairie, across the Big Blue, on up the Little Blue, over the sandhills to the far reaches of the Platte dashed forward the "Fast Mail" to the western coast.

With the Pony Express "a nation was riding that night." About every ten miles a "way" station (where the rider changed horses), was located at a spring or stream, and about every 50 miles a "home" station where riders could sleep, had been established—clear across the western continent along the Old Oregon and California trails.

The riders of the Pony Express were selected from the most hardy, wiry and courageous of the frontiersmen. They had to be of light weight, with a constitution of iron that they might ride through storms of hail, snow, ice and sleet, over snow-capped mountains, across burning sands of alkali desert, through terrific and torrential streams, past the deadly lurking savage foe, carrying mail always into the west and back to the east.

The first trip took nine days and 23 hours. As the rider dashed into Sacramento, he was acclaimed by the ringing of bells, the booming of cannon, the blare of a brass band. The mail

bag was thrown aboard the Antelope, a fast moving vessel, and in eight hours it was in San Francisco. This was less than half the time of the fastest stages.

The first mail east, carried in the same exciting way, reached St. Joseph in 11 days and 12 hours. As Harry Roff rode east from Sacramento, he made the first 20 miles in 59 minutes. He changed his horse in 10 seconds and was on his way to make his total of 34 miles in two hours and 49 minutes. "Boston," the next rider, took the mail pouch his 72 miles at breakneck speed.

The record run over the whole line of 1,996 miles was made in carrying Lincoln's inaugural address over the western half of the continent in 7 days and 17 hours. Bob Haslam rode his 120 miles in 8 hours and 10 minutes—an average of 14.7 miles an hour.

To carry on the Pony Express, a new corporation, the Central Overland and Pike's Peak Express was organized and at once took over the stage and mail business already being carried on between the Missouri river and Salt Lake City. Blooded horses and ponies used at first soon gave way to the wild mustangs from the far west—for the wiry ponies would last much longer than any other kind of animal. It took an expert rider to "break" such wild animals and often they had to be thrown, staked down and held by two men, to be shod.

Salt Lake City was brought within six days of the Missouri River, whence it had taken the great old ox caravans weeks to make the trip.

In all, 80 men were riding at once—40 going east and 40 going west like mad. A half ounce letter that cost at first \$5 to carry across the continent, soon went for a dollar.

In the last week of its service, the Pony Express carried as high as seven hundred letters a week, each transmitted in a special government stamped envelope. At \$5 for each half ounce, some of the letters ran beyond \$25 each.

The cost of maintaining the Pony Express was almost prohibitive, however, for there was needed in all five hundred horses, two hundred men at the stations to care for them, and vast amounts of grain which had to be brought over the Overland Trail at a cost of 10 to 25 cents a

pound.

The founders, Russell, Majors and Waddell, lost 100 thousand dollars in its operation. Due to the completion of the Overland Telegraph, the Pony Express was discontinued after about 18 months of operation.

The Paiute, Bannock and Shoshone Indians had burned the stations, and destroyed all property in certain areas frequently. Service had been interrupted, however, for only a few weeks.

Sometimes at night or in a terrible blizzard, the rider would lose the trail for hours at a time, but would finally locate it, and ride forward as furiously as ever. In swimming swollen streams, the letters were often soaked. But only one rider was killed outright and scalped by the Indians, for the fine horses of the riders could out-run the ponies of the Redman. Many men were killed, however, at the stations.—J.C. Masters.

(Editor's note: This article was reprinted from the Pony Express Times)