



Packing the West - Curriculum Guide

The Pony Express - Bill Cody

To be used with Western Legends Film - Bill Cody

Content Standard - Time, Continuity, and Change - Students analyze events, people, problems, and ideas within their historical contexts.

Content Standard - People, Places, and Environments - Students apply their knowledge of the geographic themes (location, place, movement, region, and human/environment interactions) and skills to demonstrate an understanding of interrelationships among people, places, and environment.

General Introduction

1,966 miles in 10 days!

“Men Wanted” The undersigned wishes to hire ten or a dozen men, familiar with the management of horses, as hostlers, or riders on the Overland Express Route via Salt Lake City. Wages \$50 per month.”

— Ad in Sacramento Union, March 19, 1860

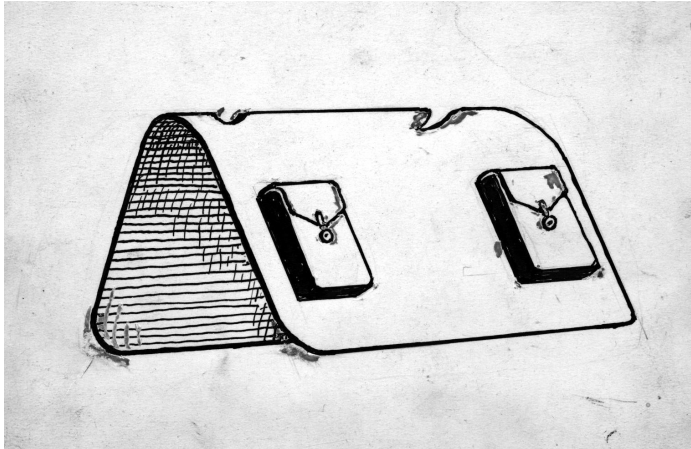
In operation for only 18 months between April 1860 and October 1861, the Pony Express operated between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California. The Pony Express was the thread that tied East to West. The young men who rode for the Pony Express could deliver a letter faster than ever before.

There were other mail services in the West in the 1800s, but the Pony Express became important to history because the riders delivered mail more quickly than any other service.

Most often called The Pony Express, the official name of the company was the Leavenworth & Pike’s Peak Express Company. It was owned by William H. Russell, Alexander Majors, and William B. Waddell.

Activity 1: Vocabulary

- **Oath:** A declaration to keep a solemn promise, no matter what happens
- **Mochila:** A mochila (Spanish pronounced [mo-chee-lah], for "knapsack", "pack", "pouch") is a removable lightweight leather cover put over a horse's saddle. In the 19th century, it was used to carry mail by the Pony Express. Slits were cut through the eighth-inch leather so it could be easily placed over the horn and back of the saddle (candle)



(Drawing by William Henry Jackson)

- **Hostile:** To be unfriendly, warlike, act like an enemy.
- **Loyal:** To be faithful and true to an obligation, cause or duty.
- **Telegraph:** A machine that sends messages by electric impulses through a wire hung on tall electric poles. Uses Morse code signals (an alphabet made up of dots & dashes/short & long sounds or flashes) sent by tapping a key.



A Pony Express rider gallops past a crew putting up a telegraph pole.

(Drawing by William Henry Jackson)

Activity #1 – Vocabulary Matching

Purpose: In order to understand information about the Pony Express, students are to match new, introduced vocabulary with their definitions.

Word Bank: Write the correct vocabulary word in the blank.

oath mochila hostile loyal telegraph

_____ to be unfriendly, warlike, act like an enemy

_____ a declaration to keep a solemn promise, no matter what should happen

_____ pack or pouch made of leather to put over a saddle to carry mail for the Pony Express

_____ a machine that sends electrical impulses through a wire on poles using Morse Code

_____ to be faithful to a duty, obligation, or person

Activity #2 Map Activity

Purpose: Students will learn the route of the Pony Express and see the states where the mail was carried.

This map shows the route and the territories the trail crossed.



Using the map above as a reference, first draw or find a map that includes these states (for younger students this might be a class or group activity):

1. Missouri
2. Kansas
3. Nebraska
4. Colorado
5. Wyoming
6. Utah
7. Nevada
8. California

Second, cut out the photos and place them onto the correct state to highlight the locations on the trail route (Note: some states have more than one photo)



Patee House, St. Joseph, Missouri



Hollenberg Station, Kansas



Gothenburg Station, Nebraska



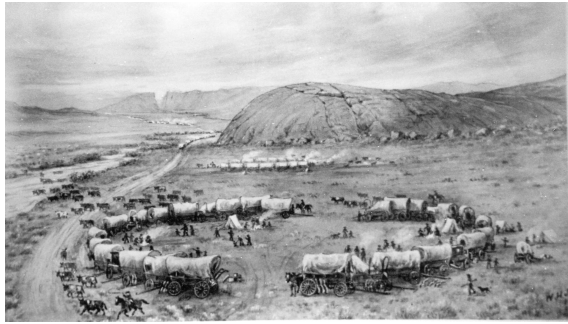
Julesburg, Colorado



Platte Bridge Station (Fort Caspar), Wyoming



Red Buttes, Wyoming



Independence Rock, Wyoming



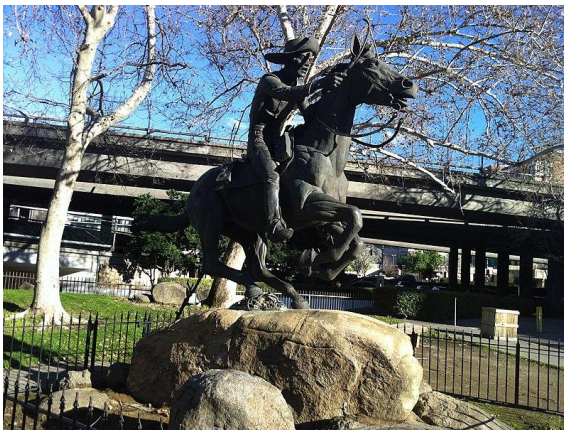
Echo Canyon, Utah



Fort Churchill Station, Nevada



Buckland's Station, Nevada



Sacramento, California

What's in a Station?

There were two types of Pony Express Stations developed along the trail.

One was called a *relay station*, which was sometimes referred to as a swing station, and the other was a *home station*. All stations were manned by a station tender, who took care of the horses, maintained the station, and assisted the Pony Express riders.

Relay stations were stops along the trail where only the horse and the mail were exchanged. Built usually of wood or stone, they consisted of a small cabin-like building and corrals. It was here that the rider would arrive on his horse, dismount, remove the mochila (mail bag), and instantly put it on the waiting saddled horse. He would then remount and continue on the relay route. It was the station tender's job to have the fresh horse ready to go, as the company wanted these exchanges to happen in two minutes or less.

At *home stations*, riders and horses were both replaced during a relay. These stations had larger buildings and bigger corrals than the relay stations. At the home stations the riders could eat and sleep so they would be prepared for their next relay when it arrived. Since riders would relay -- or ride -- traveling either east or west over the same areas from these home stations, they got to know the terrain of the trail very well. This was extremely helpful during bad weather or rising rivers.

Activity #3 - Create a Mochila

Purpose: Students will create a small mochila in order to understand its function on the Pony Express.

- 1) Gather brown paper sacks to use as old leather. To increase the effect of leather, cut the bottom off of the sack, wet and crumple the paper, and lay the sack out flat to dry.
- 2) Once dry, fold the brown paper in half lengthwise so that both sides might resemble saddle bags.
- 3) Staple or glue two large pockets on each side, using ziplock bags, old jean pockets, lightweight material scraps, large envelopes, or other bits of sack cut to size.
- 4) At one end on the top of the fold, cut a 1" long half-circle (dip) into the fold so that when the mochila was opened up flat, there would be a circular opening for it to fit over the saddle horn.
- 5) Students may attach a twisty-tie or paperclip to the flap of the four pockets to represent a lock.
- 6) The mochilas can be used for carrying papers back and forth from school to home, as temporary storage for unfinished work, or as a display on the Pony Express.

Activity #4 Writing a Letter

Purpose: Students are to write a descriptive letter to their classmates that will be carried and delivered by the Pony Express.

1) Each person is to write their name on a slip of paper for a drawing. Students will take turns randomly drawing a specific classmate to be the recipient of their letter.

Some possible topics to write about could be:

- ◆ Sharing info on their difficult journey across the plains in a wagon.
- ◆ Hunting for food while crossing the mountains.
- ◆ Informing their friend about Abraham Lincoln's election and what that means to the country.
- ◆ Asking about home and life in the California gold fields.
- ◆ A modern-day letter sharing about their favorite pets and why.
- ◆ What kind of horse you would have liked to ride on the trails.

2) Write the letter, fold it, and put it in an envelope. Address the envelope and put a sticker on the corner as a stamp.

3) Put the envelope in one of the pockets of the mochila.

4) Once the riders have collected all the mail and have run their route, distribute the letters to each person to read. Students may share their letters individually with each other or read them orally for the entire class to enjoy.

Activity #5 - Ride the Pony Express

Purpose: Students will experience what it would be like to actually run the Pony Express by traveling from location to location with the mochila filled with mail.

There are many different creative ways to do this! Instead of specific mail, the class could actually be delivering memos, notices, or bulletins to other classrooms. Items that add to the experience are a stick horse, cowboy hat, and a bandana.

Another fun possibility is to choose to have a few students pose as Indians that "attack" the rider to slow him/her down. An additional idea is to run the route with a stopwatch and see if the riders can deliver the mail faster each time, especially if using outdoor locations.

Here is a potential school scenario:

- 1) Decide on how many stations would be feasible for your location (classroom to classroom, classroom to gym, classroom to office, classroom to playground, outside, etc.)
- 2) Divide up the students so that there is at least one person per station. You may need to circle around to be able to include enough stops for all students.
- 3) The first "rider" takes off with the mochila and hands it to the next station "rider." That person then takes off to the next stop to deliver the mochila.
- 4) Continue passing off the mochila at each station to a "rider" until the mochila arrives back to the starting point.
- 5) Once the mochila has made a full circuit, deliver the letters from Activity #4 to each student.

The End of the Pony Express

In 1861, telegraph wires joining the East to the West were connected. On October 24th of that year, the Pony Express made its last run. These telegraph lines across the country made it possible to send news and information rapidly from one place to another. Messages were sent over the wires by tapping out the letters of each word on a telegraph key, using Morse Code. The Indians of the plains called the telegraph "singing wires" because the telegraph wires made a humming sound as messages were sent over them.

After the telegraph wires were connected, there was no more need for mail delivery by horseback. The Pony Express became another frontier memory.

Today, the Pony Express National Historic Trail runs through eight states. When the original express riders carried the mail, many of these states were only territories. The National Pony Express Association, an organization of people interested in the Pony Express, worked with the National Park Service to mark the original trail, establish monuments, and restore relay stations. Each year in June, members of the NPEA conduct a re-ride -- carrying US Mail in the leather mochila on horseback. Non-stop for 10 days, riders relay between St. Joseph, MO and Sacramento, CA -- to celebrate and preserve the history of the Pony Express and this unique time in our country's story.

Send a Letter TODAY via the National Pony Express in their annual Re-Ride

You can still send a letter by Pony Express. More than 700 riders along the original 1,966 Pony Express Trail carry mail each year in the re-ride. They relay the mail across the original trail route riding across eight states in only 10 days, just as it was done in 1860.

To learn how to send your letter by Pony Express, find the form and relay information for Commemorative Letters and the NPEA at nationalponyexpress.org

Additional Resources

Elementary Pony Express Books

Glass, Andrew. *Sweetwater Run: The Story of Buffalo Bill Cody and the Pony Express*. New York: Doubleday Books for Young Readers, 1996, 48pg.

Harness, Cheryl. *They're Off! The Story of the Pony Express*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1992, 32 pg.

Coerr, Eleanor. *Buffalo Bill and the Pony Express*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996 (I Can Read Book Level 3), 64pg.

Spradlin, Michael P. *Off Like the Wind! The First Ride of the Pony Express*. New York: Walker Childrens, 2010, 40 pg.

Rose, Caroline Starr. *Ride On, Will Cody! A Legend of the Pony Express*. Park Ridge, IL: Albert Whitman & Company, 2018, poetry style, 32 pg.

Kroll, Steven. *Pony Express!* New York: Scholastic, 1996 (adds CA gold rush, mini-museum in back), 40 pg.

Middle and High School Pony Express Books

Corbett, Christopher. *Orphans Preferred: The Twisted Truth and Lasting Legend of the Pony Express*. New York: Crown, 2004, 288 pg.

DeFelice, James. *West Like Lightning: The Brief, Legendary Ride of the Pony Express*. New York: William Morrow, 2019, 368 pg.

Plain, Nancy and Rocky Gibbons, Editors. *Why Cows Need Cowboys: and Other Seldom-Told Tales from the American West*. Guilford, CT: TwoDot, 2021, 152 pg.



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