

# Horses of the Pony Express

By Kim Mariette

Galloping across the Nevada desert in 1860, a lone rider sounds his horn to alert the upcoming relay station that he's coming in, and fast...the station attendant hurries to saddle a fresh horse and have it ready for the incoming rider. In less than the allotted two minutes to change horses, the rider jumps off of his horse, grabbing the mail pouch as he does so, runs to the waiting horse, throws the mail pouch back over the saddle, vaults on the already running little brown Mustang, and together they race back out into the desert.

The horses of the Pony Express were a varied lot and types used depended upon the areas of the route from which they were purchased. The horses that were employed on the eastern portion of the route—Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming—were well-bred, well-fed Thoroughbred-type animals, many of them purchased from cavalry units stationed along the route. They were quiet, steady horses that were routinely cared for and exercised regularly. They enjoyed diets of grain and hay and performed according to their care. Many times it was the diet of grain and hay that a rider claimed saved him from Indian attacks, as his well-fed horse was able to outrun the native horses that grazed on prairie grass.

Horses purchased on the western route—Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California—were an entirely different animal from the eastern equines. They were rowdy, wild mustangs rounded up or traded for from local Indian tribes and coerced into

the service of the Pony Express by quirts and spurs. Many a time a rider dismounted from an exhausted horse and stepped up onto a barely—and rarely—broke horse at the western relay stations. Usually a rodeo ensued on the spot, with the chosen horse rearing and bucking until the rider could get it into a gallop (which is probably where the image of a madly-dashing horse with a cowboy using the quirt came from) and off they would go. In order to get shoes on some of these horses, they had to be lassoed and tied-down so the poor farrier could try to get his job done without too much harm to himself or the horse he was working on.

No matter which end of the Pony Express route they found themselves on, the estimated 400 horses originally selected for service were chosen for swiftness and endurance. (Approximately 150 more horses were added during the 18 months that the Pony Express was operational to replace horses that were stolen, injured, sick, or worn-out.) Most of the horses averaged just under 14.2 hands and weighed approximately 900 pounds, which gave the horses the nickname of "pony," whether it was applicable or not.

Regardless of type or size, horses were expected to travel at a constant speed of about eight to 10 miles per hour, with a quicker pace when the terrain and conditions allowed for it. At times, horses were urged to faster speeds, but the horsemen among the riders kept their horses at a steady pace and galloped only when it was necessary. The horses carried

a saddle designed especially for use on the Pony Express, with a lighter tree and stirrups and a minimum amount of leather skirting. A horse was not required to carry more than 165 pounds.

Most of the 157 relay stations where a horse would be switched were situated five to 10 miles apart, depending upon the terrain. This was in direct relation to the distance a horse could travel at a relatively steady pace. Some relays ended in towns along the way, where a horse could be put up in a formal stable, some even with gas lighting. More often than not though, some stations wound up being built in very remote spots, with crude structures or dugouts for stalls and hay, grain, and water having to be hauled in for the horses.

Treacherous footing, possible Indian attacks, traveling quickly in the dark, and extreme weather conditions, all combined to make the five to 10 miles of a horse's relay very dangerous. Sadly, two Pony Express horses are noted to have lost their lives, not due to the conditions of their travel but rather the conditions of their care, or lack thereof—they were run to death.

One relay of note was performed by a high-spirited horse aptly named "American Boy." He broke away from his handler after the mail pouch was swung into place over the saddle but before his rider could get on. He gamely galloping his entire relay riderless, never losing the mail pouch. American Boy lived the motto of the Pony Express: ***The mail must go through!***

