

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-One

The Pony Express

LESSON IDEA

To learn more about the expansion and development of our western frontier, by learning how the Pony Express riders and later the telegraph made communications faster and easier.

PREPARATION

So that family members can appreciate the distances and rugged terrain travelled by the Pony Express riders, have a map of the western states available to trace the route they followed.

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YOU HAD TO BE a pretty tough character to be hired as a Pony Express rider back in the West more than one hundred years ago. You had to be as strong and stubborn as the half-breed mustang you rode, as quick-witted and as good a marksman as the Indians who often chased you across the prairie.

For \$120 a month you would carry the mail through settlement, Army post, and western town, over flooding creeks and through Indian territory on a mad gallop which took you seventy-five miles a day or farther — especially if you found your relief station in a smoldering ruin of ashes and horseflesh.

If you somehow had the courage and stamina to ride the entire Pony Express route, you'd leave the frontier town of St. Joseph, Missouri, travel over rolling hills, through scrubby brush up through the vast pine forests of Wyoming to Fort Laramie, then weave down through the mountains to Fort Bridger, push on past Salt Lake City across the desert,

then up into the forbidding Sierra Nevada Mountains until you reached Carson City. From Carson City you would begin the final leg of the journey to Sacramento and San Francisco. The whole trip took ten days, if everything went smoothly.

THERE WAS MORE to see on the trail in 1860 than the beaver and buffalo of Kit Carson's day; stage coaches bumped along rutted roads; caravans of Conestoga wagons wound through the prairies and mountain passes; log cabins and corn fields were sprinkled between settlements and Army posts; banks, hotels, and saloons huddled together in the small and growing towns. Lured by the discovery of gold in California in 1848, and the reports of scouts and explorers like John Frémont and Kit Carson, the West had become dotted with people and farms and towns.

San Francisco had grown in a few years from a cluster of shanties to a large and wealthy city — the center of trade and travel to and from the gold mines. Mail between the east and west coasts had to travel by steamer around the Cape, by stage-coach, or by personal courier. All three routes were longer and slower than most Californians wished.

So with typical American ingenuity, the owners of the Overland Stage Line — Russell, Majors and Waddell — decided to solve the problem by putting mailmen on horseback. With an initial investment of \$100,000, these three businessmen bought 500 horses, constructed 190 relay stations, and hired approximately 200 rider-mailmen. Their Overland Stage Line from St. Joseph to Salt Lake City

