

Pony riders found Solano shortcut

By Jerry Bowen

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Perhaps nothing excites more enthusiasm about the history of the West than the daring adventures of the young men who rode for the Pony Express.

The "Pony," as it was known, had a short-lived time (18 months) to make its place in history, but it did just that. Today, Pony Express aficionados relive the historic journey by riding and delivering mail along portions of the trail every year.

The Pony Express Trail consisted of many established wagon roads, Indian trails, old exploration routes and stage roads. Many parts of the trail are still intact, especially in Nevada, in places where little has changed since the 1860s.

When the Pony Express was first established, the final western destination for the riders was Sacramento, but the mail still had to go to San Francisco. The plan was to send the mail from Sacramento to San Francisco by steamship.

Of course the best-laid plans of man have a habit of going awry. The riders had to contend with many obstacles during their 20- to 25-mile dash from station to station, such as weather, Indian attacks, bandits and accidents.

Excitement over the fast transport of mail (10 days) from the east was still running high when the second delivery to Sacramento ran into a problem. Unfortunately, the rider was running late because the horses at the Roberts Creek Station in Nevada had been driven off by Indians. As a result, on April 23, 1860, Solano County became a part of Pony Express history.

As soon as the delay was known, an urgent telegraph message was relayed, ahead of the riders, to Sacramento to make other arrangements to deliver the mail to San Francisco.

Because the steamer Antelope ran on a strict schedule, it could not wait for the rider, who would be several hours late. Arrangements were made for the ferry Carquinez (AKA Carquines) to be ready to transport the Pony Express rider from Benicia to Martinez. That still left the problem of transporting the mail from Sacramento to Benicia.

William (Sam) Hamilton had had the honor of making the first Pony Express run east from Sacramento to Placerville. Blazing a new trail in history, he was ready and waiting

at 1 a.m. as the rider from Placerville blasted into Sacramento, down the darkened streets, to the station on Second Street. Now Sam would be the first to ride west on the route through Yolo and Solano counties.

Sam loaded the mochila (mail pouch) and rode off into the night, trusting the keen eyes of his horse to avoid obstacles.

Crossing over the Sacramento River on the Solano-Yolo bridge (known today as the "I" Street bridge) and over swampy land dotted with wooden bridges, Sam sped through Davis and on toward Silveville. From there, his route took him through Vacaville.

No official station had been established in Solano County at the time, but fresh mounts had been arranged for along the way by Sacramento Pony Express Agent Finney after he received notification of the change in plans.

After continuing on through Fairfield, Sam thundered through Cordelia, Solano County's second-oldest town, then headed south to Benicia.

Thomas Bedford was waiting at the foot of the First Street Wharf in Benicia at a few minutes before 7 a.m. when Sam turned down First Street. The Carquinez had its steam up and was ready at the pier. Sam handed off the mochila and Thomas rode his pony on board. Once aboard the ship, he discovered that his pony had thrown a shoe. Without it, he wouldn't be able to complete the ride!

As luck would have it, Casamoro Briones, who owned a blacksmith shop in Martinez, was a passenger on the ferry. Thomas explained his dilemma to Briones. Time was of the essence, because the Pony Express still had to prove it could deliver the mail in the required time stated in the contract. Briones offered to loan Thomas a horse, rather than take the time to replace the lost shoe.

Leaping aboard the borrowed horse, Thomas rode off in the direction of Oakland, passing through Pachecho, then The Corners, then Lafayette, over the Oakland hills, through Claremont Canyon and down Telegraph Avenue in Oakland. He arrived just in time to meet the ferryboat Oakland as it was blowing its departure whistle.

The mail was delivered to San Francisco at 10:30 a.m. with a total of nine hours and fifteen minutes for the run from Sacramento. The Pony Express had met its commitment, an alternate route had been more or less established and Solano County became a part of another chapter in Pony Express history.

Researchers Joe Nardone and Tom Crews have discovered that the alternate route

through our county was used as many as 20 more times because of missed boat connections before the Pony Express was discontinued on Oct. 23, 1861.

In Solano County, according to Nardone's and Crews' studies, alternate stations were established at Silveyville, Vacaville, Rockville, and Benicia. Today, monuments have been placed at Silveyville alongside Silveyville Road and at Vacaville where Gillespie's Store once stood on Main Street. That site is occupied today by the Heritage House Restaurant.

At Rockville, the stage station and Pony Express stop is occupied today by the Rockville Restaurant with a granite monument at the site. Only a parking lot exists at the site of the First Street Wharf in Benicia where another monument has been erected.

Here's an interesting bit of Pony Express trivia. How many "states" did the Pony cross during its heyday?

If you guessed more than two, you are wrong. Only California and Missouri were states at the time. The rest of the route ran through the territories that eventually became Utah, Nebraska and Kansas.

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