

This Day in History... October 26, 1861

Pony Express Service Ends

After just eighteen months of daring rides across the American frontier, the Pony Express ceased operations on October 26, 1861. Though short-lived, it became one of the most legendary chapters in the history of the American West.

In early 1860, William Russell, Alexander Majors, and William B. Waddell set out to revolutionize mail delivery. At the time, messages and letters to the western territories could take weeks—sometimes months—to arrive by stagecoach. Their new company, the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express, promised a faster and more reliable way to connect East and West. The idea was simple but daring: use a relay system of mounted riders and fresh horses to speed the mail across nearly 2,000 miles of wilderness.



1875 Re-Issue of 1869 Pictorial for the Centennial International Exhibition

In less than two months, the company built 184 relay stations, each about 10 to 15 miles apart, stretching from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California. They purchased more than 400 of the fastest horses available and hired around 80 riders, most of them wiry young men under eighteen who could ride hard and fearlessly. The first official run began on April 3, 1860, with a rider leaving St. Joseph carrying a *mochilla*—a leather mail pouch—with a message of congratulations from President James Buchanan to the governor of California. Just ten days later, another rider galloped into Sacramento, completing the first cross-country trip in record time.

The Pony Express quickly gained fame for its speed and reliability. Riders were paid \$25 a week, a high wage at the time—equivalent to more than \$5,000 today. But they earned every penny. The route was long and perilous, cutting through rugged terrain, blistering deserts, and mountains often blanketed in snow. Riders faced violent storms, wild animals, and attacks from outlaws or Native Americans defending their lands. Yet, the mail almost always arrived.



This \$1 stamp was used to cover the fee for a ½ ounce letter and was used from July 1861 until October 1861.



Issued for the Virginia City Pony Express.

The average mail run took eight to ten days, more than a week faster than the Overland Mail stagecoaches. The fastest delivery ever recorded came in November 1860, when riders carried word of Abraham Lincoln's election from Missouri to California in just seven days and seventeen hours. Over the course of its operation, the Pony Express carried an estimated 35,000 letters, charging initially \$5 per half-ounce, later reduced to \$1—a small price for such speed in an age before the telegraph.

Despite its success in speed and reputation, the Pony Express struggled financially. Maintaining hundreds of horses, stations, and employees across thousands of miles was incredibly expensive. Even as riders raced across the plains, a new invention was on the verge of making their daring rides obsolete: the transcontinental telegraph.

On October 24, 1861, the Western Union Telegraph Company completed the first telegraph line across the United States. Messages that once took over a week by horseback could now be transmitted in minutes. Two days later, on October 26, 1861, the Pony Express officially ended. Its final deliveries were made quietly, almost overshadowed by the excitement surrounding the new era of instant communication.

Years later, the spirit of the Pony Express was revived in a different form. In Virginia City, Nevada, during the 1860s, a new route known as the Virginia City Pony Express was created to carry mail and messages between the booming Comstock mining towns and nearby communities. While smaller in scale and scope, it honored the daring riders who had once conquered the wild trails of the West.

Today, the legacy of the Pony Express endures in annual reenactments and historical trails, where riders once again carry the *mochilla* across the plains. Though the telegraph ended its original mission, the legend of the Pony Express lives on—reminding us of a time when courage and a fast horse were the quickest connection between two worlds.



The 2¢ Pictorials was the first US stamp to not show a president or other important political leader.



When it was revealed that a horse could not run as pictured on this stamp, collectors expected it to be claimed an error and reissued, but it never was.



The Transcontinental Telegraph marked the end of the Pony Express.

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