

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

MARCH 25, 2020:
[THE PONY EXPRESS](#)

The Pony Express – available for only 18 months in 1860-61, is one of the flashiest relics of American frontier history. And, if you believe the stories, it invented the [donut](#).

THE STORY

Though it was all but certain the Pony would lose money, its founders hoped it would be a loss leader that could bring in government business for their shipping company. They got to work hiring men and purchasing 500 horses, stationing them along the “central route” through the American West.

The eastern terminal of the Pony Express route was St. Joseph, Missouri, a supply stop situated on the Missouri River. From St. Joe's, riders made their way west by relaying through a chain of Pony Express stations, dotted anywhere from fifty to a hundred miles apart along the route from Missouri to San Francisco. In between each home station was a smaller dotted line of transfer points, at which employees waited with fresh horses. Along a given run, a rider would take his horse at a canter for ten or fifteen miles before hopping directly onto a fresh ride, repeating the process maybe half a dozen times before reaching the next home station, tagging in the next rider to take off, and retiring to a nearby hotel or barn for a plate of beans and a snooze before it was time to head back east again.

A breakneck horse relay across the frontier (riders were not permitted to stop until they hit their home station), the venture was well-known almost immediately. The first westbound run left St. Joseph on April 3rd, behind schedule at the outset thanks to a delayed incoming train bringing a mailbag due for California. Riders rode so fast they made up a two and a half hour train delay. Eastbound, the first rider left San Francisco at 4pm on April 3, 1860, and arrived in St. Joseph on April 13th at exactly 4 in the afternoon: ten days to the minute.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

Why would people have been willing to support the Pony despite its high cost (\$10 per paper ounce)?

What led to the Pony Express' demise? (Popular theories include the telegraph, the Civil War, the founders' corruption scandals and cost.)

The Pony Express is steeped in legend. How important is mythmaking in history and how do we address it?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

Jim DeFelice, [West Like Lightning: The Brief, Legendary Ride of the Pony Express](#) (VIDEO)

Primary source: “The Indian Bonds Defense of W.H. Russell,” [The New York Times](#), April 2, 1861

Primary source: [Pony Express Route April 3, 1860 - October 24, 1861](#) (Library of Congress)