



## U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management

Standards Addressed:  
SS3.2, SS4.3, SS8.2, SS8.4, SS9.1

### Pony Express Trail

The unit introduces students to the National Historic Pony Express Trail which transported the U.S. mail overland through the territories from April 1860 to October 1861. Students will understand the operation of the Pony Express, create advertisements for hiring riders, examine the Pony Express Oath, map the route and design a mochila.

#### Objectives

- Students will learn about the Pony Express Trail and recognize related vocabulary.
- Students will identify reasons for using the route and understand how it operated.
- Students will develop an advertisement supporting the qualities of real riders.
- Students will locate the route of the Pony Express Trail on a map.
- Students will develop a mochila to accelerate the transfer of mail.

#### Preparation

Print the following handouts for each student.

- [Pony Express Overview](#)
- [Pony Express Vocabulary](#)
- [Pony Express Questions](#)
- [Pony Express Oath](#)
- [Mochila](#)

Gather materials as needed for the activities.

#### Materials

- large paper for posters
- markers or colored pencils
- state maps
- paper grocery bags
- string
- tape, glue, or other adhesives

#### Directions

##### Lesson One: Introduction to the Pony Express

Read the *Pony Express Overview* as a class. Assign each group to complete *Questions on the Pony Express*. Signal to groups that the reporter will be randomly selected from each group. Review *Questions* as a class.

Have groups collaborate to create an advertisement for new riders. Posters should answer the *Advertisement Questions*. Utilize the *Vocabulary Word Search* for individual work or homework as a review of the Pony Express Trail.

#### Advertisement Questions

What skills and qualities are needed by the company to make sure the mail is delivered on time?

What are the duties of the job?

What are the hardships of the job?

How might the job be rewarding?



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### Lesson Two: Pony Express Oath

Read the *Pony Express Oath* in small groups. Assign each group to complete the *Questions*. Review answers as a class and check for understanding. Ask the groups to choose a type of business and possibly even a company name. It is possible to have the groups imagine a classroom oath as well. Then assign the groups to collaborate on the worksheet *Activity* section. Groups should write their finished oaths on a large piece of paper or prepare a digital slide. When finished, the groups will report their modern oaths to the class orally and in written form.

### Lesson Three: Mapping the Pony Express

The class will collaborate to map the Pony Express Trail from St. Joseph, Missouri to San Francisco, California. In small groups, students will research a segment of the trail for mapping. The six research groups are: California, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Kansas/Missouri. Students will draw their maps on large paper or draw them on road maps of the states collected by the teacher. Groups may use the Pony Express map to chart their trail <https://npmaps.com/wp-content/uploads/pony-express-trail-map.pdf> or do individual research. Swing Stations and Home Stations as well as other identifying landmarks should be identified and labeled on the maps. When all the segments are drafted, the students will tape each segment to the wall of a room to display the entire trail. Groups will then report to the class their answers to the *Mapping Questions*.

### Mapping Questions

- How many swing stations are in your state?
- How many home stations?
- How far apart are both types of stations?
- What are characteristics of the landscape the trail travels through?
- Which station would you like to work at as the station keeper?



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### Lesson Four: Mochila STEM Project

Prepare materials for the mochila construction and letter writing. Large paper grocery bags, newspapers, or other materials could be recycled for this project. Include a material such as string for “locking” the pockets. Tissue paper should be cut to letter size.

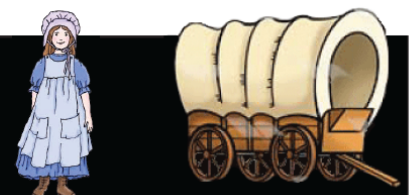
Divide class into small groups and hand out the *Mochila* worksheet to each group. As a class read about the Pony Express mochila. Students will work in small groups to create a mochila to be worn by a student during a relay race. The design needs 1) easy transfer from student to student and 2) pockets with “locks” for carrying the mail.

When the group is finished with construction, assign each student to write a letter to a friend or classmate. You may model the content. Demonstrate how to fold the tissue paper letter into its own envelope. Directions may be found online.

Hold a relay race with the newly constructed mochilas and letters. Stage students at “home stations” throughout the school or playground, with new letters to add to the mochila. Instruct the students that safety is as important as speed in this race; that it is necessary to collect letters from each home station; and any mochilas which cross the finish without all the letters is disqualified. Host the race. Discuss the questions as a class. Redesign mochilas if there is time.



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### Pony Express Overview

Tasked with setting up a central mail route across the United States in 1860 as quickly as possible, the company of Russell, Majors, and Waddell (a freighting company of Missouri) had a challenge. They hired nearly 100 riders and purchased 400-500 horses within the first few months of planning. From the beginning the Pony Express was off to a quick start!

William Russell was the mastermind behind the plan. His failing freight firm ran stagecoaches and mail between Salt Lake City and the Missouri River. He hoped to secure the government mail contract held by the Butterfield's Overland Mail Company traveling the southern Oxbow route (a route that took over 50 days for return mail). Russell's job in the company was to gather money from New York investors and political support in Washington D.C. His partners, Alexander Majors and William Waddell, were reluctant, but eventually fell to their duties of managing the daily operations and running the home office (respectively). The new company was named the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (C.O.C. & P.P.).

Advertisements of: *"young skinny, wiry fellows anxious for adventure and chance to see our great West. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily."* aided in the hiring of swift riders. Riders had to be less than 120 pounds. Speed was the goal. Horses were purchased for their speed and endurance, mainly thoroughbreds for eastern runs and California mustangs for the western portions. The mail was to arrive in 10 days or less!

On April 3, 1860, the first riders of the central overland mail route set forth on what would famously be referred to as the Pony Express. Jonny Fry rode west from St. Louis, MO and Billy Hamilton rode east from Sacramento, CA. The first ride was completed in ten days' time!

The Pony Express stretched nearly 2,000 miles across the Great Plains and consisted of approximately 190 relay stations every 10 to 20 miles and home stations placed 45-85 miles apart. Many of the stations were upgraded from existing stagecoach stations, but operation increased from 86 original stations to 147 stations



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by mid-1861. Riders were responsible for covering distances between home stations and would make between 8 to 10 horse changes in a day. The Pony Express covered twice the distance of a day's travel by stagecoach. It was a hard day's ride with a high salary of \$100 per month.

The Pony Express went to great lengths to protect the mail it carried. The mail was quite expensive to send at \$5 per ½ ounce (which was later reduced to \$1 per ½ ounce.) Mail was carried on a *mochila*, a special rucksack with four large pockets (*cantinas*), where the mail was placed. Inside the pockets the mail was wrapped with oil cloth to protect it from rain, snow and sweat. (Three of the pockets were secured with a lock and the fourth was left unlocked to enable riders to add letters along the route.) The *mochila* fit over a saddle and was easily transferred to a new horse. Riders first carried a bible, sheath knife, horn, cavalry rifle, and a pair of Colt revolvers, which was a lot of extra weight to carry on a long ride. Their supplies were quickly reduced to a bible the size of a man's hand and one revolver. In dangerous situations, riders were told to protect the mail by outrunning outlaws and Indians on their swift horses.

The Pony Express was looking for a particular type of employee. Riders had to swear an oath upon hiring that they would not use profane language, not get drunk, not gamble, and conduct themselves as gentlemen or they could be fired without pay.

Although the riders were often portrayed as the hero in the history books, it was the relay station keepers who held the most dangerous job. These men had to care for the horses in very remote areas and make sure that fresh horses were saddled and ready to go when the riders arrived. It was often the remote relay stations which suffered attacks by outlaws. The home stations were more often located in better areas and staffed by more than one person. Home stations had hired horse-shoers, artisans, and mechanics to keep the Pony Express running.

The Pony Express commenced with running mail once a week in each direction; and except for a brief period of suspended service in May-June, 1860, it ran uninterrupted until its end in 1861. (In 1860, a famine was sweeping through the Paiute Nation in present day Nevada. The Paiutes attributed the devastating hunger to the gold and silver miners destroying the food and water sources. Consequently, the

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Pony Express became a target, and service was interrupted by several weeks of raids.) The greatest challenge to the Pony Express, however, was winter weather. The stretch between Salt Lake City, Utah and Ft. Laramie, Wyoming was a desolate plain with harsh conditions which challenged riders during the snowy months.

The end of the Pony Express began in December of 1860 when the American public became aware of how Russell had secretly tried to borrow bonds from a friend in a government agency. His actions cast a negative reputation on the company and in 1861 Congress granted the much-wanted overland mail contract to Butterfield's Overland Mail Company again. On October 24, 1861, the transcontinental telegraph was completed and two days later the Pony Express stopped its rides. A total of 308 runs each way had been completed and 34,753 pieces of mail were delivered by the Pony Express.

Today the Pony Express lives on in books, movies, and media which idolize this American endeavor.



Photo by Jason Vlcan, BLM

Source: Pony Express Historic Resource Study, NPS.



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### Pony Express Questions

What was the name of the company which ran the Pony Express?

Who were each of the owners of the company and what were they responsible for?

What were the goals of the Pony Express company?

Why was speed so important to the success of the Pony Express?

What choices did the company make to keep the mail run speedy? (at least 3)

1

2

3

What did a normal day's ride look like? (how long, how many horse, etc.)

Why were the station keepers necessary for the success of the mail run?

The mail runs were suspended in Nevada from May to June 1860. Why?

How long did the Pony Express last?

What was its downfall?

Why is the Pony Express idolized today?



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## **Pony Express Vocabulary**

<b>Alexander Majors</b>	owner who ran the daily operations of the Pony Express
<b>Butterfield Overland Mail</b>	stagecoach company that carried passengers and the mail from the east to California.
<b>Central Overland California &amp; Pikes Peak Express Company</b>	the company which ran the Pony Express
<b>desolate</b>	an empty place without people
<b>famine</b>	widespread lack of food causing great hunger
<b>freight</b>	goods for sale
<b>Great Plains</b>	land east of the Rocky Mountains covered in sagebrush and grass
<b>home station</b>	Pony Express location where riders changed and rested
<b>idolize</b>	to admire and love greatly
<b>mochila</b>	leather bag that carried mail on the Pony Express
<b>mustang</b>	small horse with speed and adaptability, good for long distances
<b>outlaw</b>	a person who broke the law and is wanted
<b>Paiute</b>	indigenous person of the Great Basin
<b>Pony Express</b>	nickname for the overland mail route carried by horses
<b>profane language</b>	disrespectful language which includes dirty words or ideas
<b>relay station</b>	Pony Express location where horses were exchanged
<b>stagecoaches</b>	a covered vehicle pulled by horses that carried people or goods
<b>thoroughbred</b>	a horse bred for racing, known to run fast
<b>transcontinental telegraph</b>	a series of wires which transmit messages across the whole continent
<b>William Russell</b>	owner in charge of investment and political favor of the Pony Express
<b>William Waddell</b>	owner who ran the Pony Express home office





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### Pony Express Oath

Employees of the Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company (C.O.C. & P.P.) otherwise known as the Pony Express were required to take an oath of employment. The oath outlines the types of behaviors expected by the company. Although, most companies today no longer require employees to take an oath, the practice has not completely faded away into history. Today, the oath of employment has been replaced in most companies by a code of conduct which employees are required to sign before starting a new position.

Read the oath below and answer the following questions.

*"I, [Name], do hereby swear, before the Great and Living God, that during my engagement, and while I am an employee of Russell, Majors and Waddell, I will, under no circumstances, use profane language, that I will drink no intoxicating liquors, that I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm, and that in every respect I will conduct myself honestly, be faithful to my duties, and so direct all my acts as to win the confidence of my employers, so help me God."*

### Questions

What behaviors do the employees promise not to do? (list at least 3)

What behaviors are encouraged by the company?

Does the oath contain anything that would surprise you to see in a modern-day code of conduct?

### Activity

Now reimagine this oath today. What type of oath would you like employees working for you to make? Adjust the oath to be appropriate for your imagined business and modern society.



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## Mochila

The Pony Express mail was carried in a special bag called a *mochila*, which fit over the horses' saddles and was easily transferred from horse to horse along the trail. The *mochila* had four large pockets, *cantinas*, where the mail was stored. Pony Express mail was wrapped in oil cloth to protect it from getting wet before it was placed in the *cantinas*. It was expensive to send letters along the trail. Thin paper was used to lighten the weight of the mail and save money. To further protect these precious letters, three of the *cantinas* were locked with a padlock while on the trail. The last was left unlocked so that riders could add letters as needed.



### STEM Challenge

- 1. Mochila Design** Construct a mochila for a youth relay. The mochila should be easily transferred from student to student and have pockets to carry the mail. Recycle materials from around the house or use those supplied by your teacher.
- 2. Letter Writing** Write a letter to a friend or classmate on a piece of tissue paper. Fold the finished letter into its own envelope.
- 3. They're Off!** Hold a relay race with the new mochilas. Collect letters along the route as new riders trade the mochila at their "home station." Which mochilas held up to the quick pace of the race? Did all the letters arrive at the finish line? Redesign as needed.

