



Riding the Pony Express Trail through Nevada

by Craig Olsen

Historical Background

To lay the framework for this article a little historical background is in order. With the acquisition of the Territory of California by the US from Mexico in 1848 and the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill the same year, more than 100,000 people migrated to California in 1849. California joined the union as the 31st state in 1850, and two years later the population had swelled to 225,000. In 1860 it was 380,000. With a rapidly growing populace isolated on the west coast in California there was an increasing demand for faster and more efficient communication with the rest of the US located a half a continent away.

In 1847 the US Congress passed a bill to build five steamships under the direction of the Secretary of the Navy. Contracts were let to transport mail from the Atlantic Coast and New Orleans to Panama and from there to San Francisco and some ports in Oregon for monthly mail service. Even with the completion of a railroad across the Isthmus of Panama in 1855, mail delivery was slow and unreliable, often taking more than a month one way in transit.

In 1851 a contract for carrying the mail over the well-worn California Trail along the Humboldt River from Sacramento to Salt Lake City once a month in thirty days was awarded to George Chorpenning. His first trip was on May 1, 1851, and he carried about 75 pounds of mail upon the back of a mule. He arrived in Salt Lake City 53 days later, having been delayed by snow in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Samuel Woodson of Independence, Missouri, had been carrying the mail between Salt Lake City and Independence for about a year at that time.

By 1858 Chorpenning had a new contract to carry the mail in stage coaches, and a new route south of the Humboldt River was laid out (called Egan's Route) with stations established at Rush Valley, Deep Creek, Ruby Valley, Smith's Creek and Buckland's. The Pony Express later ran along this route through central Nevada.

The Post Office Appropriation Bill for 1856 was amended to provide mail service in four-horse coaches or spring wagons capable of carrying six passengers, three sacks of letters and one sack of newspapers. This contract was awarded to John Butterfield (Butterfield Overland Mail Company), and he competed with the steamship lines. He chose the southern route beginning in St. Louis, Missouri, to Little Rock, Arkansas, and from there through Preston and El Paso, Texas, to Yuma, Arizona, where it forked going to San Diego and San Francisco, California. It was 2,700 miles along this southern route from San Francisco to St. Louis, and it took an average of 21 to 23 days to complete a one way trip. When put into operation, his company had 800 employees, 100 Concord coaches, 1,000 horses and mules, and many stations along the way.

By 1855 William Russell, Alexander Majors and William Waddell formed a business partnership in Nebraska City, Nebraska, to engage in the business of selling goods, wares, and merchandise, general trading in stock, wagons, teams and other items used in outfitting persons for crossing the plains, and in freighting for the US government or anyone else. They founded the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company (COC & PP Express for short) transporting goods to the western US and had contracts for delivering army supplies to the West frontier. They employed more than 4,000 men, 3,500 wagons and some 40-50,000 oxen.



The Pony Express

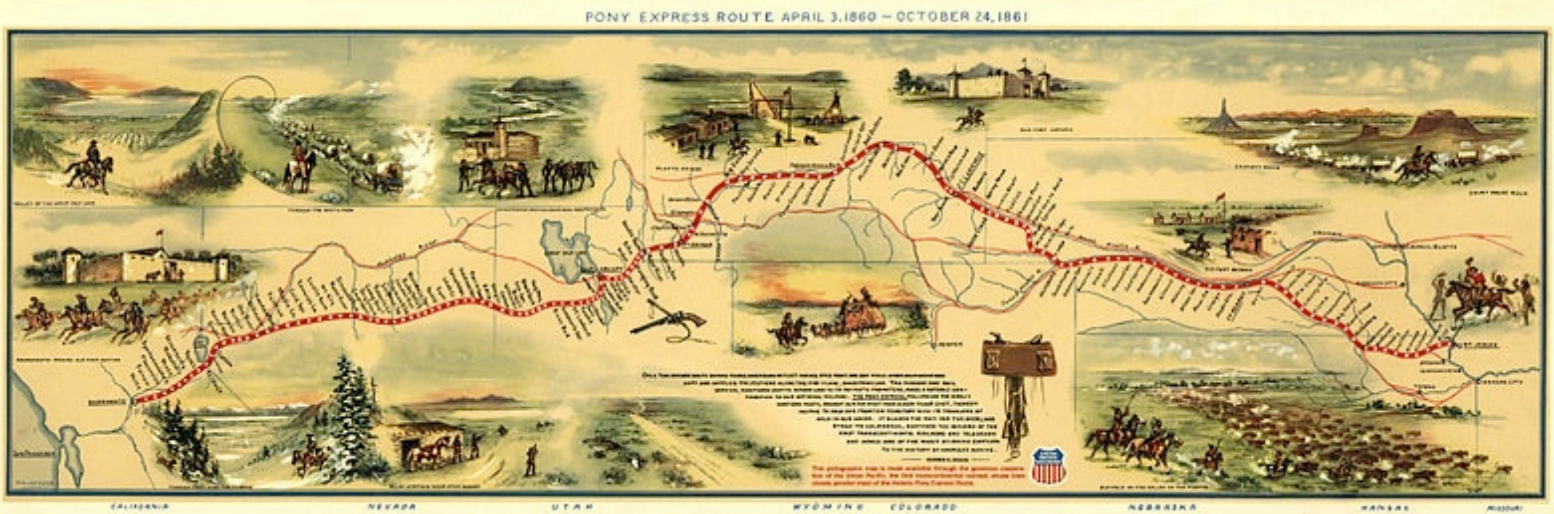
The COC & PP Express became the parent company for the Pony Express. Russell, Majors and Waddell proposed having a short route using mounted riders rather than traditional stagecoaches between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California. They hoped to win an exclusive government mail contract, but never did so.

The Pony Express was undertaken as a private enterprise without government contracts or funding. They organized and put together the Pony Express in two months during the winter on 1860. The undertaking involved 120 riders, 184 stations spaced approximately every ten miles along the trail, 400 horses, and several hundred personnel during January and February 1860. The Pony Express Trail was divided into five divisions with one or more home stations in each division to provide needed supplies to the intervening stations.



Founders of the Pony Express (L to R): William Russell, Alexander Majors, and William Waddell

The inaugural Pony Express trip left St. Joseph, Missouri, on April 3, 1860, and arrived ten and a half days later in San Francisco, California, on April 14. The first eastbound Pony Express trip left San Francisco, California, on April 3, 1860, and arrived in St. Joseph, Missouri, April 13, ten days later. Express mail was sent from from the western terminus twice weekly on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and from the eastern terminus twice weekly on Thursdays and Sundays.



Pony Express map, by William Henry Jackson, 1861.

The Pony Express route covered 1,900 miles roughly following the Oregon and California Trails to Fort Bridger in Wyoming, and then the Mormon Trail (known as the Hastings Cutoff) to Salt Lake City, Utah. From there it followed the Central Nevada Route to Carson City, Nevada before passing over the Sierras into Sacramento, California. From Sacramento it was taken by steamboat to San Francisco.



Pony Express riders carried the mail in special Mochilas, leather skirts with hard leather cantinas fastened at each corner into which the mail was secured. The Mochilas were designed to fit over the special light weight Pony Express saddles and was held in place by the weight of the rider, such that it could be quickly exchanged from one horse to the next at each station.

Despite its short existence, the Pony Express became the West’s most direct means of east-west communication before the telegraph, and it demonstrated that a unified transcontinental system of communications could be established and operated year round. Unfortunately, for the COC & PP Express company it was a money losing venture. The Pony Express grossed about \$90,000 and lost over \$200,000. The COC & PP Express company became



Pony Express saddle with mochila in place
Wells Fargo History Museum, San Francisco

bankrupt by the end of 1860. Its employees dubbed it “Clean Out of Cash and Poor Pay.” The company was dissolved in January 1861 sitting debts of \$1.8 million, and it was taken over and operated by the Overland Mail Company. The Pony Express continued under new management with Wells Fargo acting as the agent to collect and distribute its mail at each terminus.

The Pony Express only operated from April 3, 1860, to October 26, 1861. It ceased operations two days after the first official transcontinental telegraph message was transmitted from Chief Justice Field in San Francisco, California, to President Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C.



A Pony Express rider passes workers constructing the telegraph system that will eventually contribute to the demise of the legendary mail delivery system. (Courtesy of the Granger Collection.)

The Pony Express Across Nevada

During the existence of the Pony Express, there were about 42 stations used at different times to span the approximate 400 miles across Nevada. They varied from 8 to 25 miles apart, averaging 12.2 miles between stations. Each rider road 80 to 100 miles before being relieved, changing horses at each station along their route.



The Nevada portion of the Pony Express Trail had some of the most difficult and dangerous sections of the entire trail. Pony Express deliveries were suspended for approximately two months in May and June 1860 when the Paiute Indian War broke out east of Carson City. Several Pony Express stations in Nevada were attacked and a few were burned. Several station managers were killed in these uprisings, and the Pony Express riders were frequently attacked and harassed by marauding Indians. The Paiute War cost the COC & PP Express Company about \$75,000 in livestock and station equipment in addition to the loss of life to 16 employees.

Riding the Pony Express Trail Today

Four Idaho Adventure Motorcycle Club members participated in this epic ride, Sam Stone, Doug Patchin, Steve Joyce and myself. Sam organized this ride and created the route after much investigation and research. His ride report is an on going project started on the Adventure Rider Forum (see selected references).

All riding DRZ 400s, we began our ride from Denny’s on Airport Way in Boise and progressed southeast to our starting point at Ibapah, Utah, located about 60 miles south of Wendover, Nevada. Just south of Ibapah is the Deep Creek Station, the last Utah station heading west. There are some old buildings and structures from the Pony Express era.



Beginning the Ride (L to R): Sam Stone, Steve Joyce and Doug Patchin



The Goshute Indian Reservation begins at the Utah-Nevada border, and the first Nevada station, Prairie Gate, was located just to the west of the reservation about 15 miles southwest of the Deep Creek Station marker. Only a smaller PE Marker is found here.

Pony Express Monument at Deep Creek Station.



Pony Express Marker at Prairie Gate Station Site.

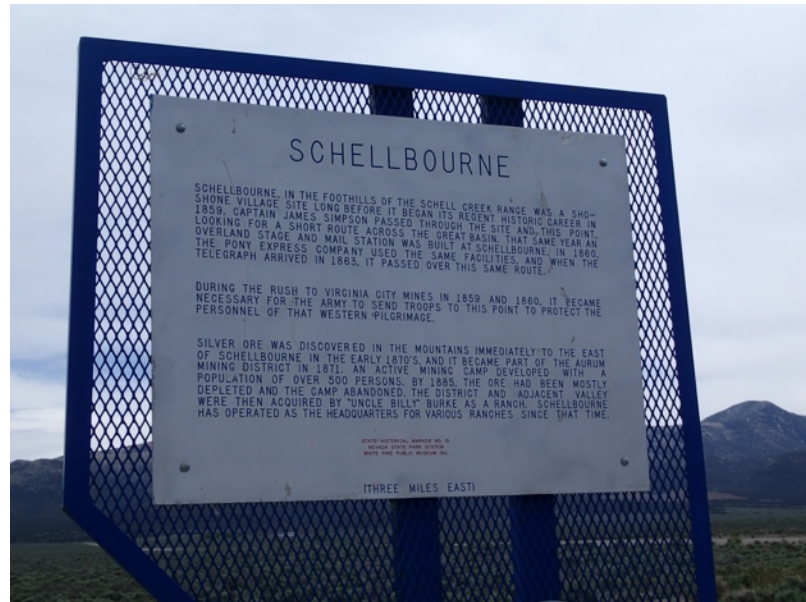


Next was the Tippett Ranch. It was not an original Pony Express station, but was used after Antelope Station was burned during the Paiute Indian War. The rock walled corral, initially used to house the horses, is now used as a reservoir collecting water from a small stream from the Antelope Range located immediately to the northwest.

The Antelope Springs Station was constructed in 1859 as a stage stop on Chorpenny’s line (Egan’s Route). It was never rebuilt after it was burned in June 1860, and is only indicated by the GPS coordinates (N39.82981 W114.38469).

Rock buildings located at the Tippett Ranch

The location of Rock Springs Station located over Rock Springs Pass is by another Pony Express Marker similar to the one found at Prairie Gate Station. There are no remains at the Rock Springs or Spring Valley Stations. The latter station was added after July 1861, and it was here that rider Elijah Nicholas “Nick” Wilson received a a severe head wound in an encounter with some Indians stealing their horses from behind the station corral. At the age of 47, “Nick” Wilson later pioneered the region of Wilson, Wyoming in 1889 that was later given his name to honor him.



After descending Stage Canyon, the Schell Creek Station at Schellbourne on Highway 93 in Steptoe Valley is the next station traveling west. It originally served as a stage stop and subsequently was used by the Pony Express.

Schell Creek Station Marker at Schellbourne on Highway 93.

Egan’s Station in Egan Canyon was burned by the Indians in July 1860. It was rebuilt and continued to serve as a Pony Express station until the Pony Express ended, and then it serve as a stage station until 1869. Only a stainless steel stake marker remains today (sorry, no picture).

The only remains of the Butte or Robber’s Roost Station in Butte Valley is a portion of a rock wall, but there are no signs or markers, which we did not find. Likewise, the monument at the original Ruby Valley Station was vandalized and destroyed. In the 1960s the upright log station was dismantled and move to the Northeastern Nevada Museum in Elko some 57 miles to the north.



Pony Express Trail stretching across Butte Valley.



Pony Express Trail across Ruby Valley (Maverick Spring Range in the background).



Over two Overland Passes with Long Valley in between and down Telegraph Canyon you will come to Diamond Springs Station of which only part of the wall with the fireplace remains today. The foundation in the foreground is from later construction. This station is fenced off on private ground

Diamond Springs Station (part of chimney and wall).

The monument to the Diamond Springs Station is located about one mile south of the actual station on County Road 1 (101) next to the Thompson Ranch.

Diamond Springs Station Monument.





Adjacent 21 miles north of Eureka along Highway 278 where the Pony Express Trail intersects it, you will find this information kiosk along the Pony Express. Robert's Station about 15 miles north of Highway 50 was burned during the Paiute Indian War and subsequently rebuilt. It also served as an Overland Stage station as well as a telegraph station. It now lies on the Robert's Creek Ranch, and the old station was obliterated long ago by the owners.

Information kiosk along the Pony Express Trail just off Highway 278.

Grubbs Station was built as a station for the Overland Stage by August 1861 and was used briefly by the Pony Express until October of that year. The current structure was probably built after the Pony Express and an early Pony Express Monument is located nearby along the trail. The dead cow attests to the harsh Nevada conditions still existing today. We found two or three other



Present day site of Grubbs Station.



Centennial Monument near Grubbs Station.



To the west of Grubbs Station the trail is temporarily interrupted by locked gates onto private land and cultivated fields obliterating the trail. It is a short detour around this private property to pick the trail up again on the other side.



Centennial Pony Express Monument at Dry Creek Station

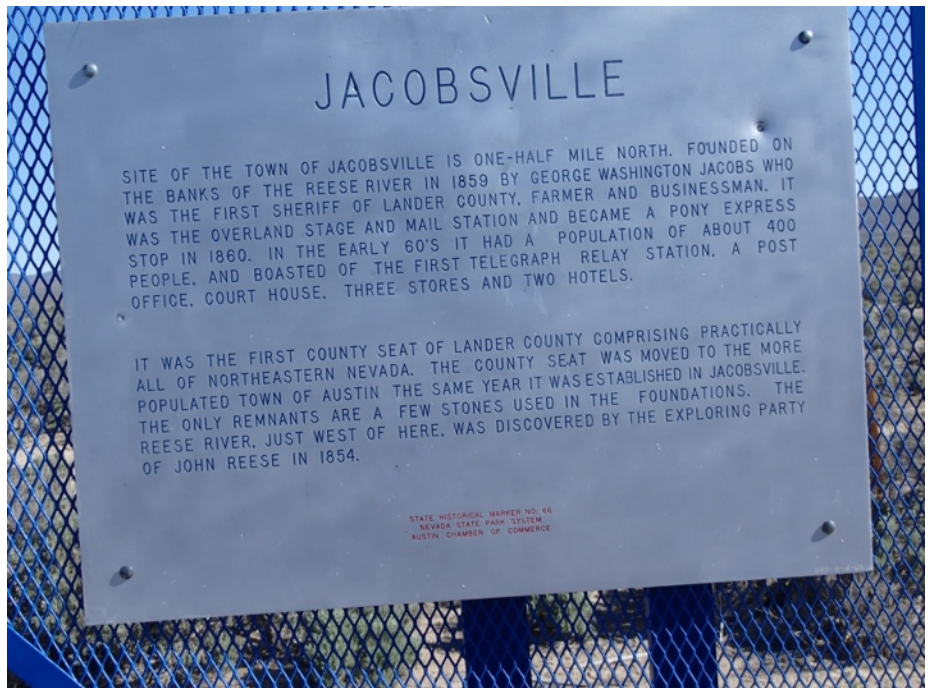
Single track trail west of Dry Creek Station.



The Dry Creek Station Monument is located about a mile southeast of the Dry Creek Ranch, which is privately owned. About a mile west of the monument the primitive two track trail, which is clearly indicated with carsonite markers, dwindles to a very narrow, rough and steep single track going over the Simpson Park Range into Austin, Nevada. This portion of the trail is intended as a hiking or horse trail. I doubt you could negotiate this trail even on a dirt bike.

Between Dry Creek and Austin, Simpson’s Park Station was one of the original Pony Express stations built in the spring of 1860. It was also used by the Overland Stage Line until the route was changed to go through Austin in 1862 or 1863. The very few remains of this station are now on private land at the mouth of Simpson Park Canyon (sorry, no pictures).

About six miles west of Austin along Highway 50 near the Pony Express Trail just to the north is a marker for townsite of Jacobsville. Founded in 1859, it became the first county seat





of Lander County and was a station for the Pony Express as well as Overland Stage. Hardly any remains exist to indicate its existence today. Because Jacobsville is adjacent to the Reese River, it was sometimes called the Reese River Station.

Crossing over Smith Creek Summit from Reese River Valley into Smith Creek Valley, you will pick up the Old Overland Stage Road that parallels Smith Creek up to the Smith Creek Ranch near the top of the Desato Mountains. As you enter the property, you will note the sign to the right. There is a large reservoir above the main ranch and the gates beyond the reservoir are locked with no trespassing signs. Before proceeding past the ranch buildings, inquire from the owners if you may have permission to proceed through their property. They are friendly and willingly to make arrangements to open the locked gates for you if they know that you respect their property. Please respect their property and always politely ask for permission to cross their property. Remember, it only takes one or two "bad apples" thinking they are above the rules by trying to sneak around to permanently ruin permission for all the rest of us.



Original Smith Creek Station.



This is a large privately owned ranch on which the original Smith Creek Station lies and is intact. It has been very well maintained and renovated by the owners. This was one of the home stations for the Pony Express. Above the station is a single room adobe building that served as the school house. It is fenced off and is likewise well preserved and maintained by the owners.

One room adobe school house.



After crossing over Basque and descending Edwards Creek Canyon, you will come to the Overland Mail Station, which is quite well preserved. At the mouth of the canyon, you will find the stone wall remnants of the Edwards Creek Station built sometime in early 1861. It was used by the Overland Stage by July 1861 and also briefly by the Pony Express. It was also the site of Indian conflicts

Overland Mail Station.



Remains of Edwards Creek Station.



The next three stations are very close to Highway 50. The first of these is Cold Springs Station built in March 1860. It is one of the two largest stations built in Nevada. It was rebuilt and fortified in June 1860, along with several other stations, after coming

under attack during the Paiute Indian War. It was rebuilt of large rock and mud, measuring 121 feet by 53 feet with walls 2.5 to 3 feet thick and 4 to 6 feet high. It had a living space, smithing area, corral and stable area. There was a fireplace in the living area as well. There is an interpretive center near the highway explaining the station.



Remaining stone walls of Cold Springs Station.

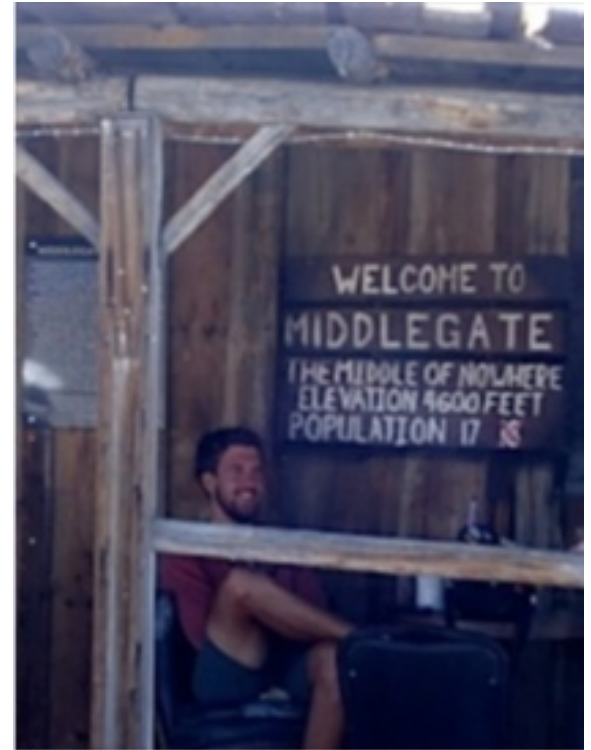


Information Kiosk explaining Cold Springs Station.



The exact location of the Middle Gate Station is unknown, but was probably located somewhere between Middle Gate and West Gate Passes along Highway 50. At Middlegate, we re-encountered Andy from New Zealand who was bicycling across the US from New York to San Francisco. We first met Andy on our way into Eureka where we ended up staying at the same motel and eating at the same restaurant. Each day he beat us to our destination, first to Austin and the next day to Middlegate.

Sand Springs Station is just west of Sand Springs Pass near the Sand Mountain Dunes OHV site. These dunes are about two miles long and over 600 feet high. Sand Springs Station served as both an Overland Stage stop and a Pony Express station. It is the second largest Pony Express station in Nevada measuring 100 feet by 53 feet. Its construction is similar to that of the Cold Springs Station. This station



Andy from New Zealand bicycling across the US.



continued to be used by the Overland Stage Company and the telegraph during the 1860s, and it was used occasionally by other freighting companies, such as Wells Fargo, until about 1900. There is interpretive signage at this station explaining the use of this structure and life during the time of its use as a Pony Express station.

Rock walls of the Sand Springs Station.

Between Sand Springs Station and the next, Carson Sink Station, we encountered one of the most difficult sections of the trail, riding through miles and miles of deep sand going over and down Simpson Pass.



Stuck in deep sand approaching Simpson Pass.



Carson Sink Station was first used in 1859 by Chorpenning as a stop for his stage line. In March 1860 employees of the COC & PP Express Company built an adobe station there. It was described as a frame house inside an adobe enclosure, and was one of the Nevada stations along the Pony Express Trail. Today there are no remains of the structure, and a marker now identifies the approximate location of the station.

Carson Sink Station Marker.

Hooten Wells is identified by some as a Pony Express station. It probably served as one only during the last few months of its existence. It later served as a freight and stage stop. It is located about 12 miles from Buckland's Station. This site appeared to have wells and had the remains of some old rock building, but I am not sure if this is the actual site of the Hooten Wells Station.



Presumed Hooten Wells Station.

From here it is a short ride back to Alternate Highway 95 just south of Buckland's Station, which was settled in 1859 and serve as a Pony Express station in the summer and fall of 1860.



Above: Buchland's Station; Right: Signage about Buchland's Station.



Fort Church was built in response to the Paiute Indian War (sometimes referred to as the Pyramid Lake Indian War), and construction started in late July 1860. The Pony Express station was housed in the headquarters building of the fort when it stopped using Buckland's Station sometime in the fall of 1860. Constructed from adobe, the fort was one of the most expensive constructed at the time, and was the largest calvary battalion in the west. It was closed in 1869 and today serves a Nevada state park. There is a visitor's and interesting museum recounting the fort's history.



Officer's quarters at Fort Churchill.

From Fort Churchill the Pony Express Trail follows the Carson River into Dayton, one of the first settlements in Nevada. The Union Hotel now occupies the second site of the Dayton Station. The free-standing rock wall to the west of the hotel is the original wall of the Overland Stage Station and Pony Express stop. A Pony Express monument is located across the street from the Union Hotel.



Original rock wall of the Overland Stage Station and Pony Express stop located to the west of the Union Hotel.



Pony Express monument in Dayton across from the Union Hotel.

Carson City was founded in 1858 and named for Kit Carson. In 1860 there was only one street existing of a double row of saloons, a few assay offices, a general store and a hotel that served as the relay station for the Pony Express and the headquarters of the western superintendent of the Pony Express.

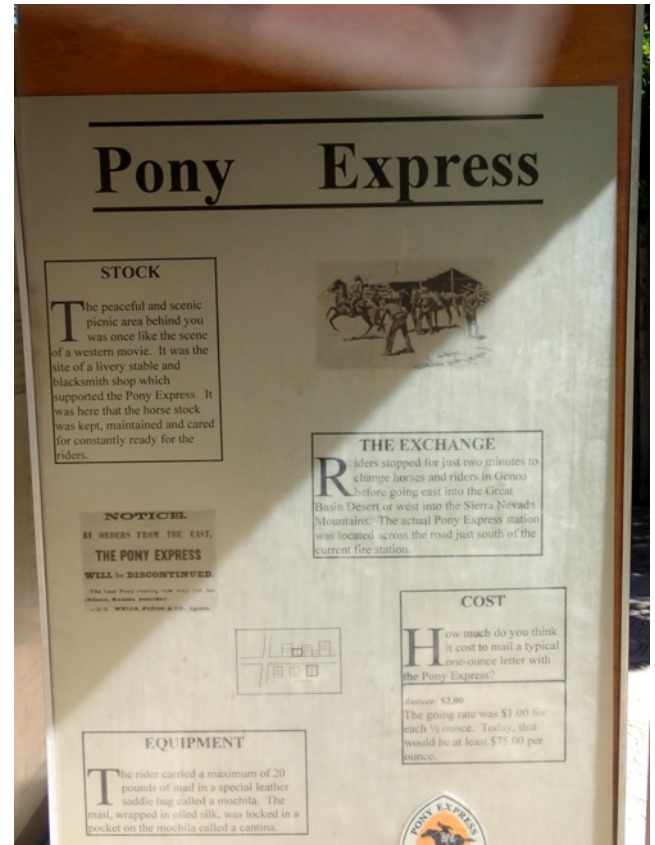


It was located between 4th and 5th Streets near the original Ormsby House. The original site has long since vanished.

A little over 12 miles south of Carson City, is Genoa, Nevada's oldest permanent settlement. The Old Mormon Station is believed to be the site of the Pony Express station. An information kiosk outside the museum tells about the Pony Express.



Old Mormon Station in Genoa.



Information kiosk at Old Mormon Station.

Private property were Lakeside or Friday's Station stood.



To reach the last Nevada Pony Express station take Highway 207 (a nearly 3,000 foot climb up Kingsbury Grade over about five miles) south of Genoa to Stateline on the Nevada-California border. Here Lakeside or Friday's Station was located. It was a more substantial than most of the Nevada stations and served as one of its home stations. It also served as a way station for the pioneer stage lines and freight teams and wagons on the Bonanza Road. The old station site is currently on private property across Lake Parkway north of the Montbleu Resort Casino & Spa. No buildings are identifiable, but there is a Pony Express sign and faint wagon tracks are still visible crossing the property.



A statue of a Pony Express rider and plaque in front of Harrah's Casino about 0.4 miles southwest of this private property commemorates Friday's Station.

Statue in front of Harrah's Casino at Lake Tahoe.



Plaque at base of statue commemorating Friday's Station.

While about 60-70 percent of this ride could be done on a larger dual-sport, the 30-40 percent we did through deep sand and poof dust would be very difficult, if not impossible, on a larger dual-sport bike for all except the most experienced riders. This is not a ride to do solo. The vast majority of the Pony Express Trail through Nevada is in very desolate and isolated regions of the state. In many areas little has changed since the Pony Express riders rode this route over 150 years ago. We did not encounter another vehicle or any persons on any segments of these trails with the exception of five ATVs on the west side of Smith Creek Ranch coming up Edwards Creek Canyon.

Many thanks to Sam Stone for doing all the research and putting this ride together.

Selected References:

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