

California carrier 'expresses' herself in reenactment



An original Pony Express rider

Valerie Burt's modern-day mail route doesn't include the risk of falling off a horse, freezing to death or an Indian attack. But last month, she and her horse Reba sampled just a taste of the difficulties dozens of brave letter carriers experienced a century and a half ago riding for the Pony Express.

"Orphans were preferred" for Pony Express work, said Burt, "because it was such a dangerous job." The company, she said, didn't want its riders leaving behind mourning parents in case they died while racing along their routes.

Not surprisingly, Burt, a member of San Bernardino, California Branch 411, and Reba, an American Paint Horse mare, had a much safer trip than their forebears, as they completed four three-mile legs of a re-ride of the Pony Express trail from San Francisco to St. Joseph, Missouri, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the famous express delivery service.

Unlike those first Pony Express riders who carried mail through the dangerous, wild and largely unexplored West between April 1860 and November 1861, Burt and the 600 other re-riders rode only in daylight, and their progress was tracked live on the Internet thanks to the GPS units they each packed for the trip. But the reenactors did wear Pony Express-style uniforms—complete with blue jeans, long-sleeve red shirts, brown vests, yellow neckerchiefs, and brown Western hats and boots—

together they traced the 1,966-mile route. And like the first riders, said Burt, "we rode very, very fast!"

Burt's participation in the ride was just the latest chapter in a life spent in love with horses. After letting her ride a horse at age 3, her father could see immediately that she was enamored with the animals.

"Neither of my parents were into the horses," the letter carrier recalled. "Mom wanted me in ballet and tap and tennis."

But the budding horse-lover persisted. Soon she was riding with horse clubs, her college equestrian team, in the New Year's Day Tournament of Roses Parade in her hometown of Pasadena, with rodeo drill teams, and at her ranchette in Norco, California, a small town about 50 miles east of Los Angeles that bills itself as "Horsetown USA." The Norco station even has a hitching post outside for customers who arrive at the post office on horseback.

Burt, who carries mail in nearby Mira Loma, marked her 25th year as a letter carrier by driving to Sacramento to take part in the commemorative Pony Express ride, with Reba in tow in a horse trailer.

Ω Making a connection Ω

The Pony Express didn't stay in business long—less than two years—thanks to a competing stagecoach company that wound up grabbing the government mail contract and a transcontinental

Valerie Burt and her horse Reba prepare for the reenactment ride.





telegraph line that at last electronically connected the country's two coasts. The Civil War also cut off mail that came by rail from the east to St. Joseph.

Even so, the legend of the ambitious and daring project lived on. At the time, mail sent between New York and San Francisco often took a month to arrive by sea, since the Panama Canal would not be completed for another 50 years. Railroad and telegraph lines had yet to completely span the continent.

The Pony Express experiment managed to almost miraculously cut the transit time for coast-to-coast mail delivery to a mere 10 days. And a record seven-day westward delivery of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address in 1861 is credited with convincing California to remain part of the Union at the beginning the Civil War.

But putting together a Pony Express mail delivery service was no easy feat. The company's ads truthfully sought "young, skinny, wiry fellows"—lighter riders meant faster horses—who were "willing to risk death daily." Trains carried letters between New York City and the Missouri end of the Pony Express trail. Then, special express carriers, who earned about \$120 a month (around \$2,800 today), rode at a full gallop between each of the 190 stations along the route carrying special letter satchels, called *mochilas*, that they could quickly transfer to a fresh, rested horse at the next station. After carrying the mail on a dozen or so horses for a typical segment of 75 to 100 miles, the rider then handed his *mochila* off to the next rider.

And the service wasn't cheap—Express postage was the princely sum of \$5, which works out to be more than 15 times that cost in today's dollars.

In June's ride reenactment, Burt and Reba carried a pair of *mochilas*, each holding more than a thousand commemorative letters plus copies of Lincoln's 1861 inaugural speech.

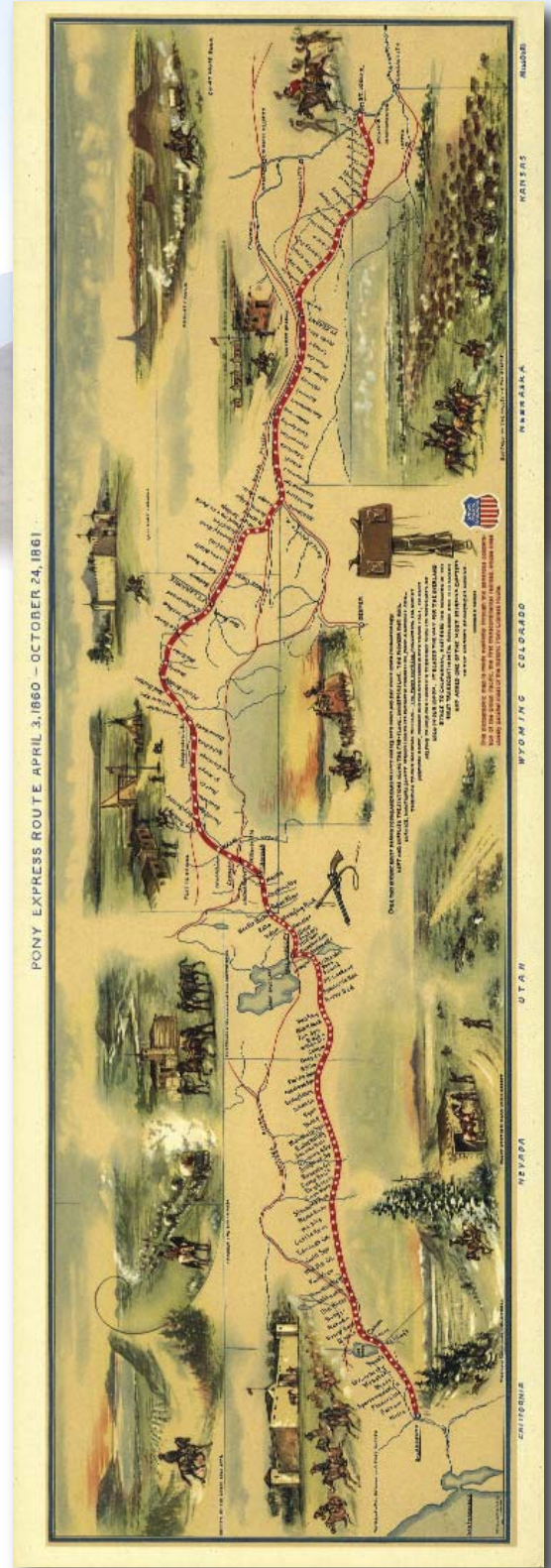
⌚ Rough ride ⌚

Pony Express carriers rode day and night, sometimes through freezing weather and heavy snow, and they were frequently harassed by Native Americans who were trying to protect their territory from further encroachment by settlers from the East. Despite the long odds and numerous close calls, Burt said that only one original rider died and just one *mochila* was lost.

Burt and her fellow re-riders kept to the original route as much as possible, following the modern-day designated Pony Express National Historic Trail. Along with wearing commemorative uniforms, each reenactor took an oath nearly identical to the one pledged by the original riders:

I do hereby swear, before the great and living God, that during my engagement, and while I am an employee...I will, under no circumstances, use profane language. I will drink no intoxicating liquors; I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm, and in every respect, I will conduct myself honestly, faithful to my duties, and so direct my acts as to win the confidence of my employers. So help me God.

"They were daring young men who battled the elements and the Wild West to earn a living," said Burt. "There are days when I feel we carriers have much in common with these early pioneers." ✉



An illustrated map of the original Pony Express route