



# The Pony Express

April 1860 – October 1861



The Fastest Mail in the West

## **HAPPY 150<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY TO THE PONY EXPRESS!**

**This lesson plan was put together by Linda Hearty at the request of Kenny Martin who is the Chairman of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Committee for the National Pony Express Association. This historic event will be commemorated in 2010.**

**This booklet includes a 5 day lesson plan to be used with students. It is part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies Curriculum. You may use any or all of these items with your class. You may copy any or all of the pages. We suggest that you at least cover the general information about the Pony Express, which we have divided into 4 days. You can put that information together into a 1 or 2 day unit if you prefer, and then pick and choose the activities as they work for your class room. In each of the first 4 days, there is information about the Pony Express and suggestions for activities and material to use for those activities. For the 5<sup>th</sup> day, there is a review game and an assessment, if this unit is to be graded. Some additional activities and pictures were added at the end of the unit to use if you'd like.**

**We would like to express thanks to the Utah Division of the National Pony Express Association for paying to have this unit copied and sent to each of the 8 states along the Pony Express Trail, and others who have expressed interest. Thanks to every member of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee for the countless hours and work that has gone into this celebration. Thanks to Dave Kittle of Nevada for putting this unit into electronic format. A special thanks to Ken and Arleta Martin who have dreamed the dream and done the work to see wonderful events take place in many states.**

**This spring and summer, celebrations starting in Washington DC, and continuing along the 8-state trail route, will commemorate this historic event. Contact your State Pony Express Presidents or check the National Pony Express website for events going on in your state or community. We would love to see the children who have studied these units, with their parents and teachers, along the trail and at some of these fun celebrations.**

**For more information or a copy of this unit online, check out The Pony Express website: [www.xphomestation.com](http://www.xphomestation.com) or for questions about the unit contact: [lindabheartv@hotmail.com](mailto:lindabheartv@hotmail.com)**

**Sincerely,  
The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee**



## **The Pony Express**

The story of the Pony Express, which carried mail between Missouri and California, is a famous chapter in the early days of Western History. The pony express riders were a group of young men who were hired to carry the mail by horseback across much of the country. The daring deeds of this small group of riders will long be remembered. The Pony Express service began April 3, 1860, and ended on October 24, 1861. It lasted about 18 months or until the telegraph line was completed. The trail stretched from St. Joseph Missouri, to Sacramento California. The horses galloped across a distance of almost 2,000 miles. Scattered over these miles, there were about 190 relay stations, where every 10 to 20 miles the rider would stop to change horses. At a home station, anywhere from 45 to 85 miles apart, a new rider would take the mail and continue the journey.

California became a state in 1850. It was many thousands of miles away from the east coast of the United States. There were not many people in between. There was a big problem with sending messages between the east to the west. Stagecoaches carried passengers and mail over this great distance. It took them 3 weeks, traveling mostly day and night, to make the journey. The Pony Express Riders covered 250 miles a day. This distance was twice as far as a day's travel by stage.

By 1860 there were over 500,000 white settlers living west of the Rocky Mountains. As the population grew, a faster mail service was needed. A large freighting firm call Russell, Majors, and Waddell, started the Pony Express, hoping to win a government contract to carry the U.S. Mail. Two riders started their first ride on the same day, which was April 3, 1860. Johnny Fry left from St. Joseph Missouri heading west, while the second rider, Billy Hamilton, left Sacramento, California riding east.

It is estimated that about 100 riders were hired for the Pony Express. They were mostly young, skinny, hardy, and daring. An advertisement for riders in one newspaper described the kind of men the company was looking for: " Young, skinny, wiry fellows anxious for adventure and chance to see our great West. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily." They were paid well, up to \$100 a month.



## **Day # 1 Activities:**

**Show the advertisement used to encourage riders to sign up as a Pony Express Rider, or make a copy for each child. Then have them make their own advertisement. Ask them to think about these questions: What kind of riders would you want to hire? What would you say to make them want to take this dangerous job? On their own paper, have them create an advertisement that would make a young man be interested in taking this important job.**



# PONY EXPRESS

St. JOSEPH, MISSOURI to CALIFORNIA  
in 10 days or less.

➡ **WANTED** ⬅

**YOUNG, SKINNY, WIRY FELLOWS**  
not over eighteen. Must be expert  
riders, willing to risk death daily.

**Orphans preferred.**  
**Wages \$25 per week.**

**APPLY, PONY EXPRESS STABLES**  
**St. JOSEPH, MISSOURI**

## Day # 2

Russell, Majors, and Waddell, the owners of the Pony Express Company, bought good horses for their men to ride. A rider on the trail in Indian country could be in danger, but pony express horses could usually outrun Indian ponies. Riders were told by the company not to fight but to outrun the Indians or outlaws whenever possible. Horses and riders traveled light. The bag used for carrying the mail was called a mochila. It fit over the saddle and had four pockets called cantinas in which the mail was placed. Three of the pockets were kept locked and the fourth was used to put letters in that were picked up or delivered along the way. The mochila was transferred by the rider from one horse to another. Only the mochila made the entire trip across the trail.

The mochila was a square leather saddle covering with a mail pocket sewn on each corner. It fit over the saddle horn and could be removed in seconds. When in the saddle, the rider's legs came over the mochila between the front and rear pockets.

Mail was wrapped in oil cloth to protect it from rain or snow and from the sweat of the horses. Postage rates to send mail by Pony Express were \$5.00 per half ounce. Later they dropped to \$2.00 per half ounce.

Riders joining the Pony Express were asked to take an oath that they would use no profane language (swearing), drink no alcohol, and not quarrel nor fight with any other employee. They were expected to act honestly and to be faithful to their duties. At first each rider carried a Bible, a sheath knife, a horn, a cavalry rifle, and a pair of Colt revolvers. Every pound of weight slowed the horse. Soon the riders carried only a Bible and a single revolver.

Some of the written histories of the Pony Express tell that each rider was issued a red shirt and a pair of blue jeans. It is believed that this was the official uniform for the riders. But, because the weather and availability of clothing was different in each area, many historians believe that the riders wore what they had and what was appropriate for the conditions they faced.



**Activity for Day # 2:**

**-Color the mochila**

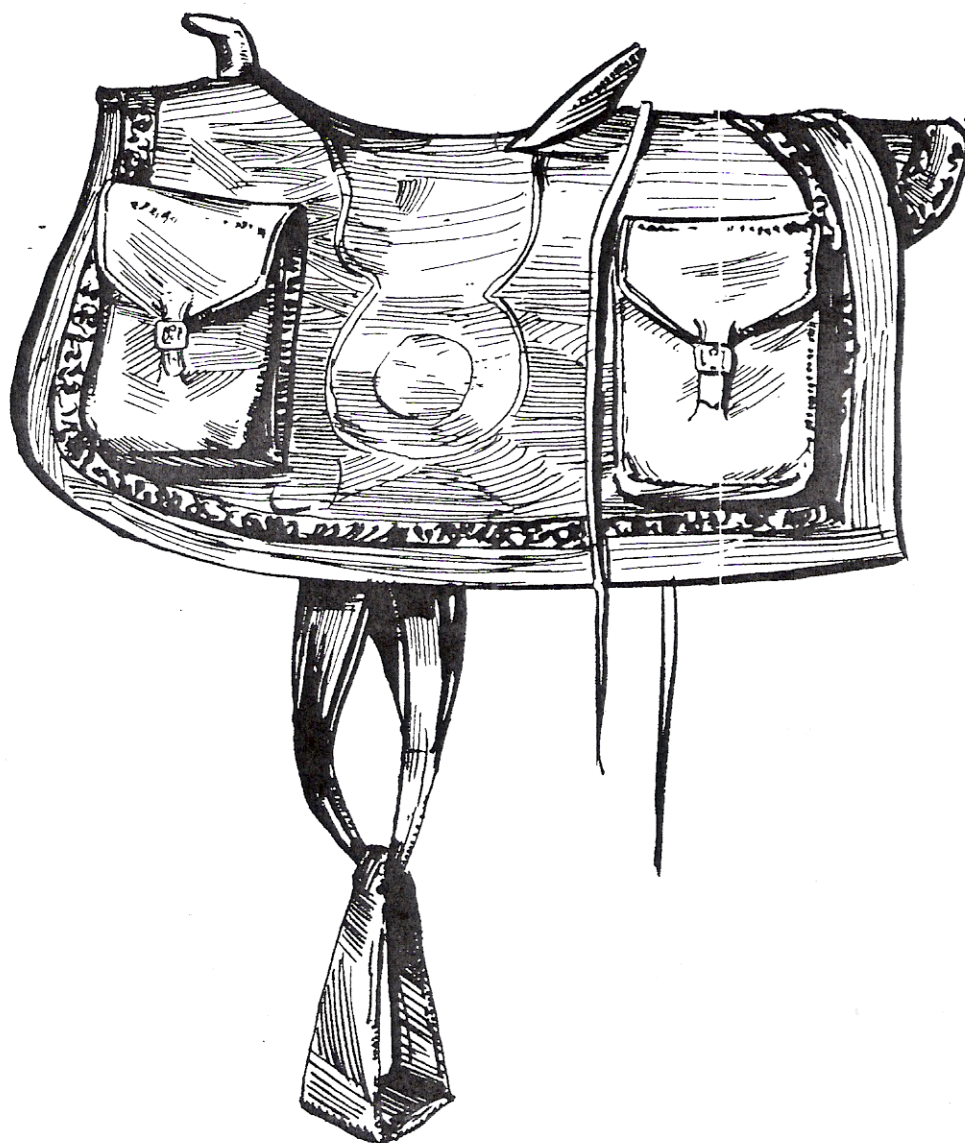
**-Color the Pony Express Rider and pony, using the official uniform of the rider. (red shirt and blue jeans)**

**-You could have the children pretend to be a child living in 1860 and write a letter to a friend or family member that lives far away, to be carried by Pony Express.**

**-Members of the class could make a large mochila out of brown paper with pockets to hold the letters written by others in the class.**



PONY EXPRESS RIDER



## MOCHILA

The mochila fit over the saddle and had mail pockets in each corner. Only the mochila made the entire trip.



## **The Pony Express Oath**

**I do hereby swear, before the great and living God, that during my employment as a Pony Express rider, I will under no circumstances use profane language, drink intoxicating liquors, abuse my mount, quarrel or fight with any other riders and so that in every respect, I will conduct myself honestly, be faithful to my duties, and so direct my acts to win the confidence of everyone.**

The most dangerous job of the Pony Express was probably that of the station keeper at lonely outposts. Often they were attacked by Indians. The station man had the job of having a fresh horse saddled and ready to go before the rider was due. Two minutes were allowed for changing horses, but often less than half a minute was used. The transfer of the rider and mochila was made in a twinkling of an eye, and the rider was soon out of sight.

Although the spotlight of admiration and praise mostly focused on the Pony Express riders, their success was impossible without the humble, mostly forgotten station keepers and stock tenders. These were the unsung heroes, without whom no rider could have operated very far or for very long. They formed a standby group, mostly too old or too heavy to withstand the strain on human and horse flesh, but who were always ready to serve as substitute riders in an emergency.

There were horseshoers, artisans and mechanics at home stations, and stationmen and stock tenders at outlying, sometimes remote relay stations. Their sole job was the preservation of connecting links between home stations, and having ready for an incoming rider a fresh mount, saddled and bridled and ready to keep the mail moving at top speed. Theirs was a lonely, dangerous life, far from immediate help against hostile Indians and outlaws. Several station keepers lost their lives while performing their duties.

That the Pony Express mail moved smoothly, swiftly, and dependably was due in no small part to their ingenuity and loyalty, and to their ability to accomplish so much with so little. Courage, endurance and the ability to live under the most primitive, harsh, and in many cases very dangerous conditions, were their primary characteristics. The remarkable success of the entire enterprise is evidence that they did their work well.

### **Day # 3 Activities:**

**- Talk about what it would have been like to be a station keeper. Show the picture of the drawing of the statue found at "This Is The Place" Heritage Park in Utah honoring both the riders and the station keepers.**

**-Show the page with the drawing of the Nebraska and Wyoming Stations.**

**Rock Creek Station in Nebraska was the station where Wild Bill Hickok got into a gun battle, and as a result of that event, he gained his reputation as a tough man and a gun fighter.**

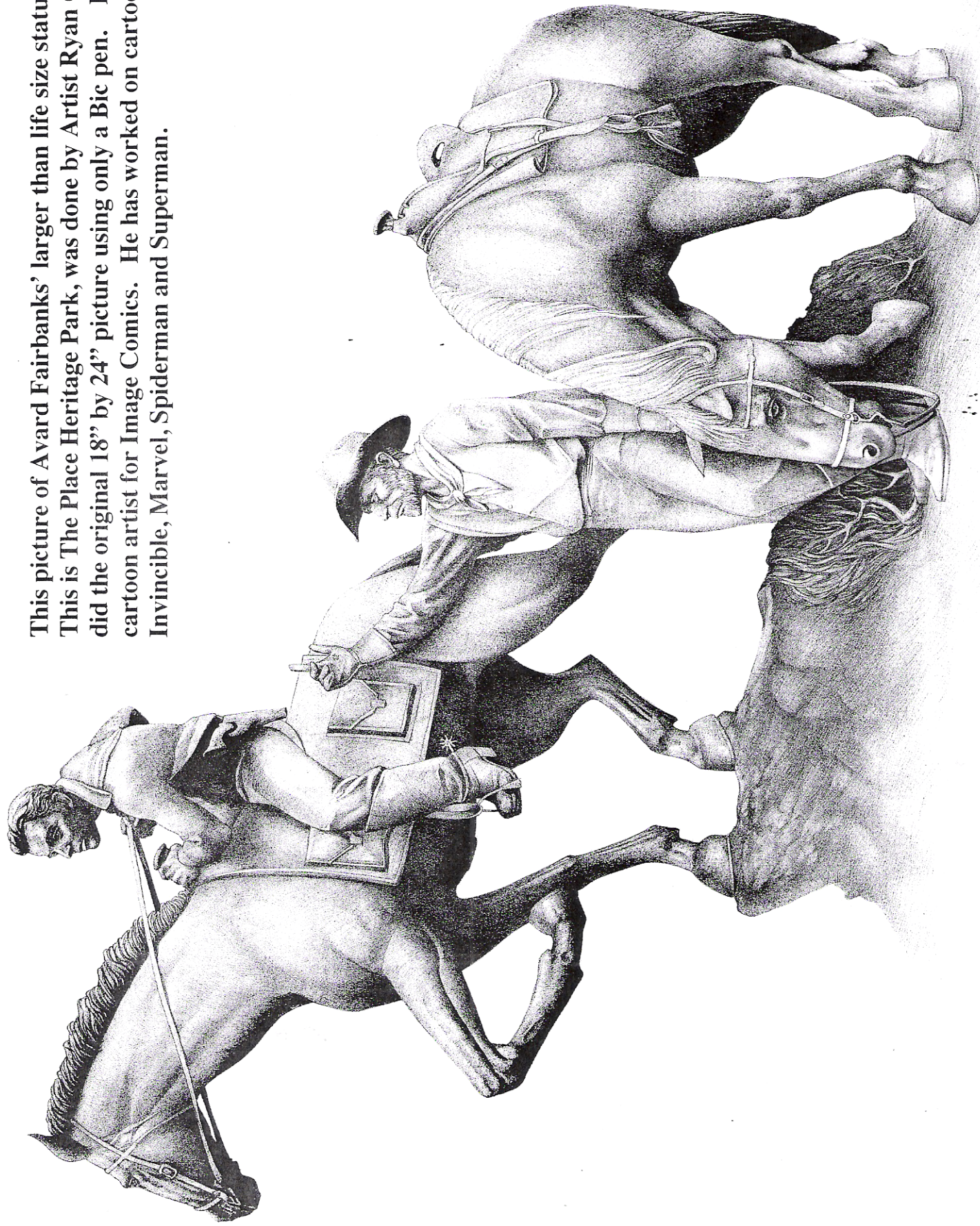
**Deer Creek Station was where The Deer Creek met the Platte River. It was a favorite Buffalo hunting spot for the Indians. They would drive the buffalo over a ridge that was inclined. The buffalo would often stumble and fall and they could then shoot them with their arrows and kill them for meat and hides.**

**-Draw a picture of a Pony Express Station. Maybe you could put in a horse and Pony Express Rider and/or station keeper.**

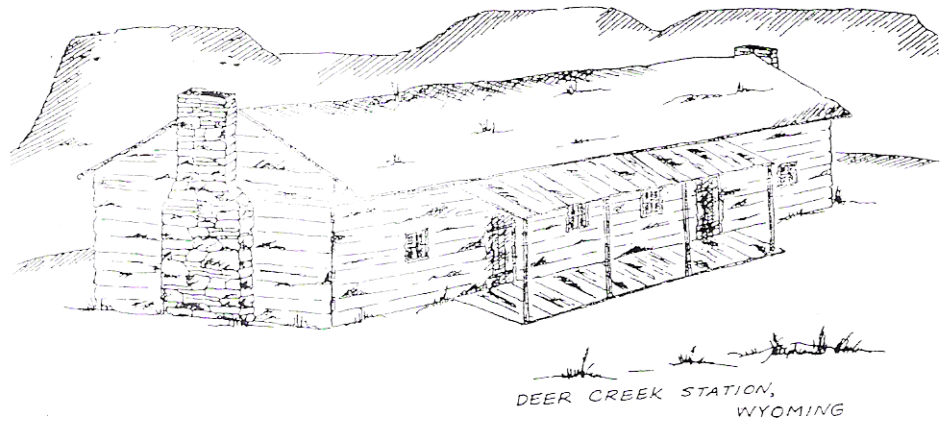
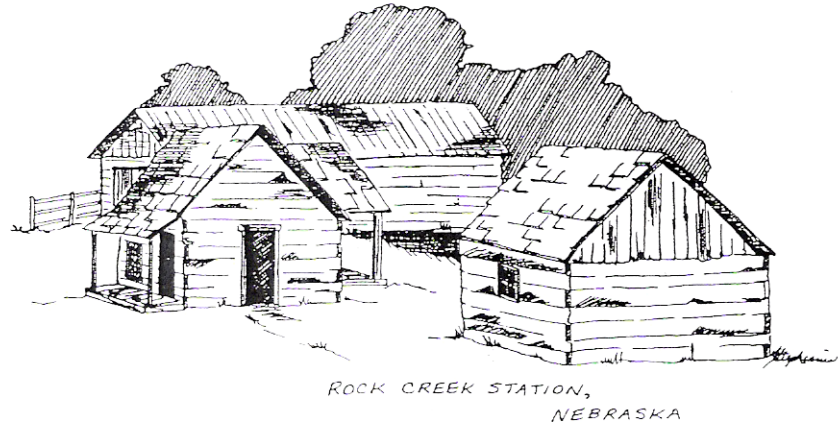


### About the Artist:

This picture of Avard Fairbanks' larger than life size statue, found at This is The Place Heritage Park, was done by Artist Ryan Ottley. Ryan did the original 18" by 24" picture using only a Bic pen. Ryan is now a cartoon artist for Image Comics. He has worked on cartoons including Invincible, Marvel, Spiderman and Superman.

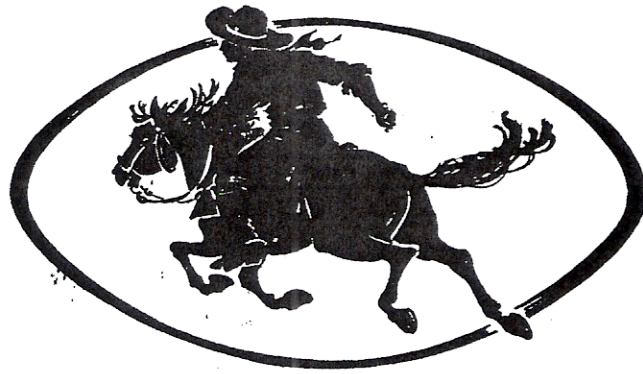






### About the Artist:

These drawings of Pony Express Stations are done by Stephanie Johnson of Gothenburg, Nebraska. Stephanie grew up loving to draw. In High School she was asked to draw some maps for Gothenburg City. Her father, Lyle Gronewold the Nebraska State Pony Express President, asked her to draw some of the stations along the trail. Several of her drawings will be on the Pony Express 150 Anniversary Map coming out in 2010.



**Day # 4**

### **The End of the Pony Express**

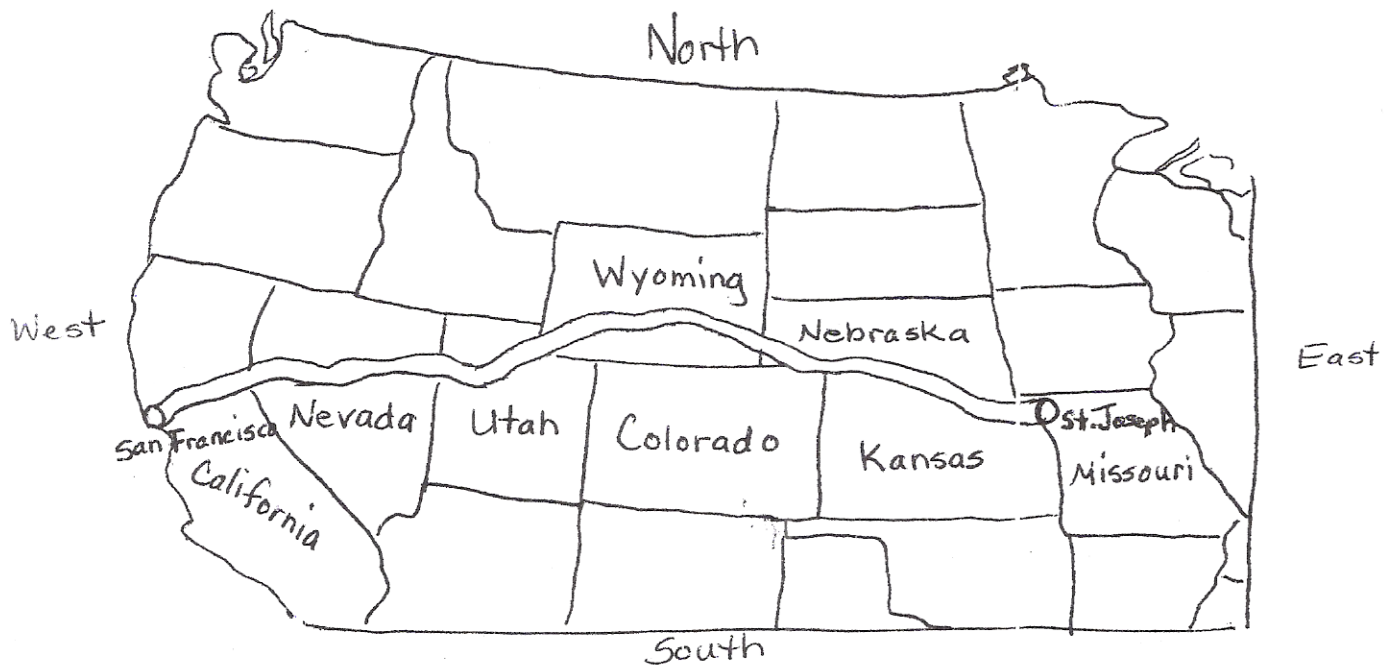
**In 1861, telegraph wires joining the East to the West were connected and on October 24<sup>th</sup> of that year, the Pony Express made its last run. The telegraph lines across the country made it possible to send news and messages rapidly from one place to another. Messages were sent over the wires by tapping out the letters of each word on a telegraph key. The letters were tapped out in Morse Code. The telegraph wires made a humming sound as messages were sent over them. The Indians of the plains called the telegraph “singing wires.” After the wires were connected, the chatter of telegraph keys and the hum of the wires replaced the clatter and pounding of horses’ hooves, and the Pony Express became another frontier memory.**

**Today, the Pony Express National Historic Trail runs through 8 states. When the ponies and riders carried the mail, many of these states were only territories. Historians and other interested people work with the National Park Service to mark the original trail, establish monuments, and restore stations. Each year in June, members of The National Pony Express Association conduct a re-ride to celebrate the story of the Pony Express and help others remember this great time in our country’s History. During this event, a leather mochila is carried in horseback relays between St. Joseph, MO, and Sacramento, CA.**



**Day # 4 Activities:**

- Color each of the 8 states that have the Pony Express route running through them a different color.**
- Color the trail through the 8 states red.**
- Answer the questions.**
- Do the Pony Express Word Search**



**Answer the following questions:**

- 1. Name the 8 states that the Historic Pony Express Trail goes through today.**

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- 2. Which state is the farthest North on this map?**

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- 3. Which Pony Express state is the farthest West?**

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- 4. Which Pony Express state is the farthest East?**

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## Pony Express

MOCHILA  
EXPRESS  
UTAH  
RUSSELL  
PONY  
WYOMING  
KANSAS  
COLORADO

MAIL  
NEVADA  
TELEGRAPH  
CALIFORNIA  
WADDELL  
NEBRASKA  
RIDERS  
TRAIL

HORSES  
SADDLE  
STATIONKEEPERS  
MAJORS  
BIBLE  
MISSOURI

S R E P E E K N O I T A T S A I I S L  
T E L E G R A P H Y S D I O I M R R S  
M O C H I L N X D N D N O A N O U I H  
J C S A R A F S H O R S E E R Y O D O  
O R O I K S T R A P R L S R O W S E B  
K P E L S O N W A D D E C S F L S R N  
M R O I O E A L A A D R A D I R I S O  
U I D L L R L W O S O L L D L R M R A  
A A S B K M A J O R S L E T A E S S S  
E D I S E A M D A U E I R R C D S G E  
R B A A O R N L O D M A L A R I E S I  
N E P V P U I S D T T M H I S R S N A  
E S A X E H R A A T A R N R F O L V E  
B A E O C N W U M S R L L E S S U R U  
R A U O L A K S A R B E N N I M A S B  
A A M T F R R O L O C E A E T R A I L  
P T P E E K N O I T A T S U T A H G L  
S B E X P R E S S L R W Y O M I N G E  
A R A S N A K G X S E S R O H I I N L  
R F H P I S E N A M E T P M S S R T A

Find each word one time



William Russell



Alexander Majors



William Waddell



## **Day # 5's Activity:**

**Run off 2 copies of each sheet so that each word will have a partner of itself.**

**Cut out the 32 words and glue them to construction paper or card stock.**

**Mix up all the words and put a number on the backside of the words (1-32).**

**Put them up on the board in number order.**

**1-8 on the first row**

**9-16 on the second row**

**17-24 on the third row**

**25-32 on the fourth row**

**Let the students take turns picking 2 numbers looking for 2 words that match. When they find a match talk just a minute about why that word is important to the Pony Express.**

**When all the matches have been found you have just completed a review of some of the important facts.**

**If you want to give an assessment of this unit, you can use the one on the following page or make up your own.**

**California**

**Nevada**

**Utah**

**Wyoming**

**Colorado**

**Nebraska**

**Kansas**

**Missouri**

**18 months**

**Majors,  
Russell &  
Waddell**

**Mochila**

**Mail**

**Station**

**Station  
Keeper**

**Rider**

**Telegraph**



Name \_\_\_\_\_ Assessment/ Pony Express Unit

1. The 3 men who started the Pony Express were \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. What year did the Pony Express begin? \_\_\_\_\_
  3. How long was the Pony Express in business? \_\_\_\_\_
  4. What brought about the end of The Pony Express?
- 

5. The original trail goes through 8 states today. What are those states?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What was the mail pouch that went over the saddle called? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Why were the owners willing to pay a lot of money for men to work for them?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. What was probably the most dangerous job of the Pony Express? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What year did the Pony Express end? \_\_\_\_\_

Answers:

1860, 1861, 1862, 1863, Station Keepers, telegraph, Alexander, Majors, 2 years, Wyoming, dangerous, Kansas, Nevada, Waddell, Arizona, Colorado, Mochila, Utah Russell, 18 months, Nebraska, Missouri, California

## **Optional Extra Activities :**

**These are the alphabet symbols used in the International Morse Code that is used today.**

**Practice writing your name and then write a message to one of your classmates.**

A · -

B - · · ·

C - · - ·

D - · ·

E ·

F · · - ·

G - - ·

H · · · ·

I · ·

J · - - -

K - · -

L · - · ·

M - -

N - ·

O - - -

P · - - ·

Q - - · -

R · - ·

S · · ·

T -

U · · -

V · · · -

W · - -

X - · · -

Y - · - -

Z - - · ·



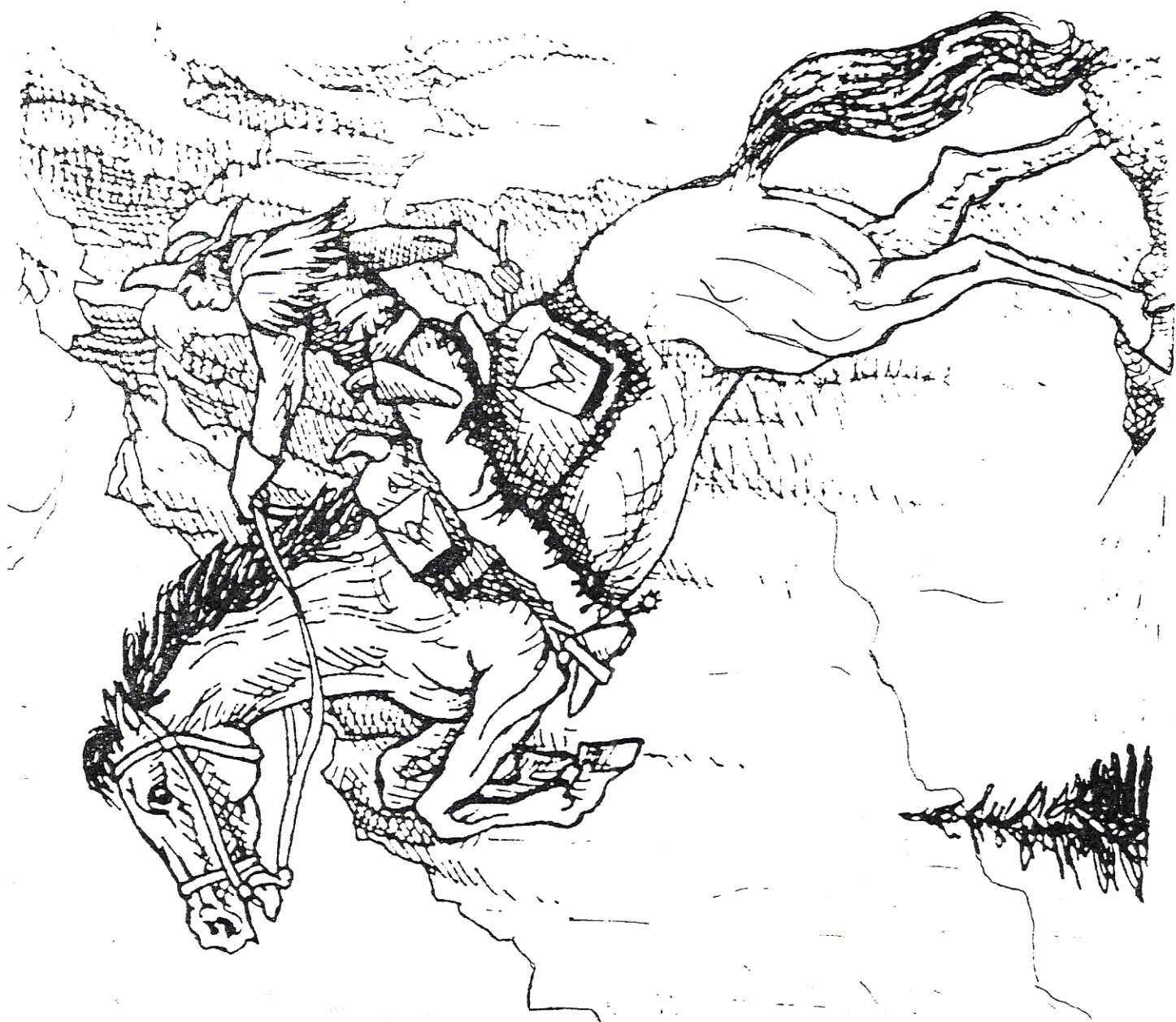
## How many words can you make from the letters

## in the words:

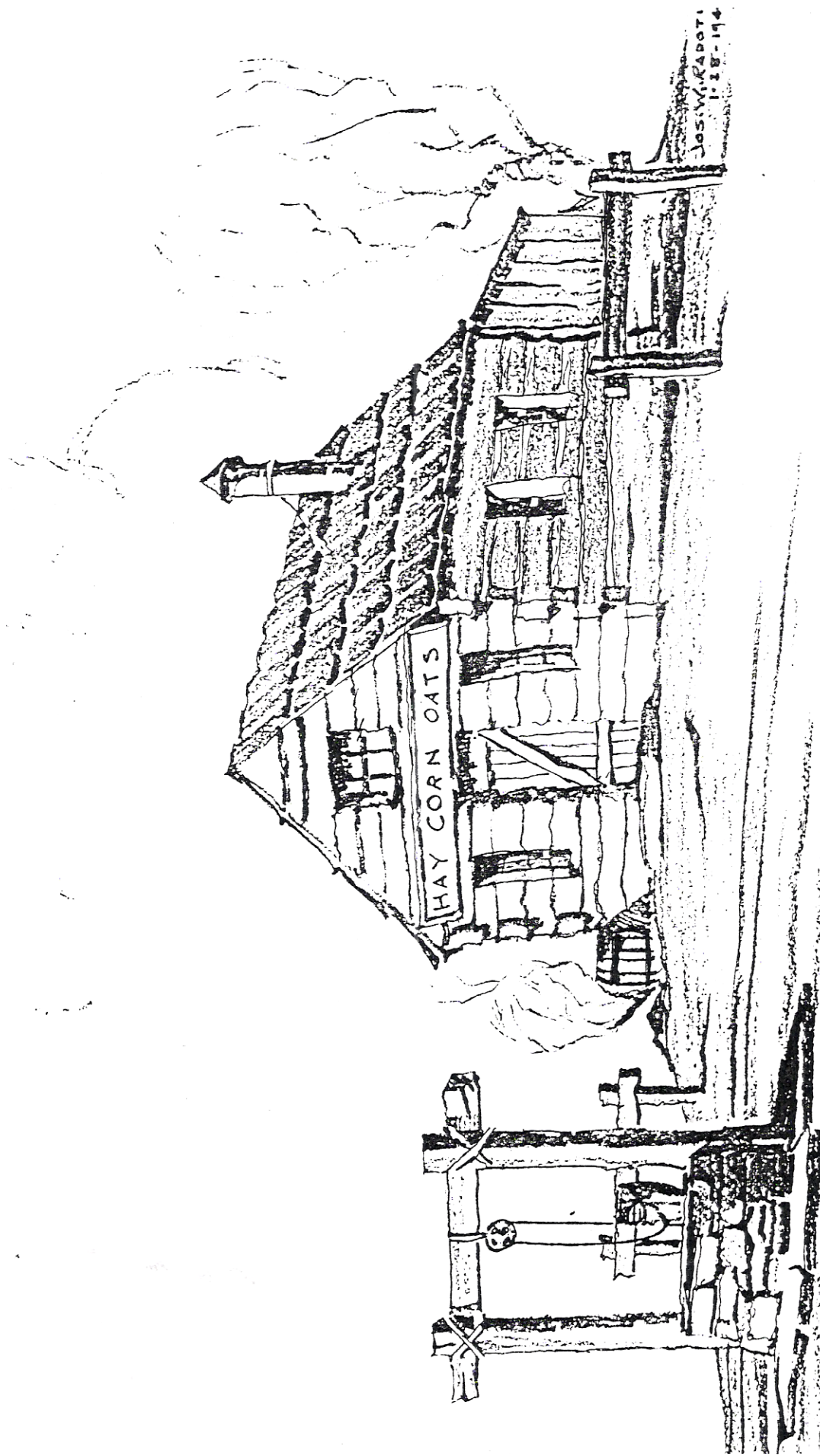
# Pony Express Rider

[illegible]









PONY EXPRESS POST OFFICE - 1860.  
KENNEKUK, KANSAS

Jos. W. Radotinsky  
1-28-1941

