



Special Delivery! Heroes on Horseback

June 9, 1860

Howdy, Billy,

Good news, I've got a job for you! There's a new company called the Pony Express. They're the fastest mail service in America. Now it takes just 10 days to send letters from St. Joseph, Missouri—where the railroad and telegraph lines end—to Sacramento, California! That's a lot quicker than the four weeks it takes a stagecoach or steamship, canoe, and pack mule to get there. I've been with the Pony Express for two months and it's really fun! The boss is looking to hire more skinny, wiry, hardworking orphan-boys under 18. They must be expert riders who have a strong sense of duty and are willing to risk death daily. I reckon that's you.

The Pony Express route runs through the Kansas and Nebraska territories, over the Rocky Mountains, through the Utah Territory, over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and finally California. It's almost 2,000 miles long but it's broken up into five sections. I've been assigned to ride 80 miles of a 500-mile route between Salt Lake City and Horseshoe Creek, Wyoming. There are relay stations every 10-15 miles where station keepers supply fresh horses. I have two minutes to throw my leather mochila filled with 20 pounds of letters onto a new horse. Every 70-100 miles there is a home station where I hand off my mochila to another rider before he races off to the next relay station. In all, I ride eight different horses in one route.

The company owns 400 of the healthiest, fastest, toughest horses around. They are mostly half-breed California mustangs. We have to meet tight deadlines, so I get to ride full speed, up to 25 miles an hour, on these feisty little beauties.

I like being my own boss and exploring the frontier. I travel through plains, mountains, wilderness, and deserts. You sure can't beat the views!

Delivering mail is important work. Half a million people live in the West and it's very difficult to communicate with the East, so people think we're heroes and thank us for our courage. Only 80 fellows are chosen to do this work—we're called the "Pick of the Frontier."

Sometimes things get rough. I travel alone, day and night, sometimes in bad rain, snow, dust storms, and heat. We have to watch out for wolves, cougars, and grizzlies. Once my relief rider couldn't work because he'd been bitten by a rattlesnake, so I had to ride his 50-mile route too—I was so tired I fell asleep in my saddle!

We get some food and rest at home stations. The food's not great and there's not much of it because we're so far away from everything. They cook prairie-style on a campfire. We eat bacon, dried fruits, beans, bread, molasses, pickles, and cornmeal. No one has time to hunt for fresh meat. Sometimes wagon trains pass through with supplies but it's mostly grain and hay for the horses. We sleep on bunks in dugouts or hovels with dirt floors. But I don't mind—it's part of the adventure. There's never a dull moment with the Pony Express!

Indians and bandits are the biggest threat. They've burned relay stations, killed station keepers, and scalped one of our riders, which is why you'll need to be good with a pistol. But that doesn't stop us. We're committed to delivering the mail on time.

I earn \$100 a month. Back home it took me six months to make that much money. We also get a Bible from one of the three owners, Mr. Majors, who is a man of faith and expects us to live by its teachings. We say an oath before the Great and Living God that we will not fight, curse, or drink alcohol and we'll conduct ourselves with honesty and faithfulness in our duties.

All in all, this job is a great opportunity and I'd be glad if you joined me, but you should get here quickly. People say the transcontinental telegraph will be finished in 18 months, and when that happens it will be the end of the Pony Express. Maybe then we can buy a couple of the mustangs for ourselves!

Your pal,

Jack Tatum