

History: Sorting through the Pony Express routes

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By Chuck Lucas

This summer was one of my best in many aspects, and had additional interest for me since I was asked to do a Campfire series at the El Dorado Campground. The presentations were given on Friday evenings at dusk; covering a span of seven weeks. Shown were the films "Washoe" and "Lake Tahoe", followed by a 45 minute talk keyed to some aspect of South Lake Tahoe's unique history. The series averaged 65 persons in attendance. As I met a great many interesting people, it was a rewarding experience for me.



Since I was asked to comment in an article concerning my impressions of the series, I will try to give a few highlights. First, let me begin by saying that I personally feel that the series was a fine success and good public relations channel for the Society.

At the conclusion of my weekly presentation, I would try to answer the many questions from the visitors in attendance. At the end of the film "Washoe" I was asked if the Indians ate the hot rocks dropped into the mush for cooking. Most questions were sincere attempts at obtaining answers, however. I think the classic was asked by a gentleman from the mid-west: "Why didn't they sail the steamers out of the Lake rather than sink them?" Of course, embarrassment followed when he found the only outlet to be a shallow one which terminates in the desert.

In my quest for authentic information I ran across conflicting

dates. I was asked about them by visitors, and then took the plunge to come up with accurate answers. The problem was as follows: April 3, 1860 saw the first eastbound pony leave Sacramento for St. Joseph, Missouri on the 10 day Pony Express. On April 28, 1860 the first pony ran into Yank's Relay Station. The question: If that was the first pony what happened between April 3 and April 28? Surely the rider wasn't lost somewhere for 25 days! Through the assistance of the Nevada State Museum, Carson Valley Historical Society, Mormon Station Museum, many authors and maps I located the answer, which I would like to share with you.

The first eastbound pony left Sacramento April 3, 1860, the mail arriving at St. Joseph April 13. The first westbound pony left St. Joseph April 3, the mail arriving Sacramento April 14, 1860. The first two westbound rides were made from Genoa, Nevada via Woodford's, up West Carson Canyon to a station in Hope Valley. From Hope Valley the route continued to the vicinity of Caples Lake, possibly changing horses at Kirkwood and then down the Canyon [Silver Fork?] to Placerville. The third eastbound ride went to Strawberry, over Slippery Ford to Echo Summit, down Hawley Trail, over Luther Pass to Woodford's and thence to Genoa. The fourth eastbound ride took the same route as the third ride to Echo Summit. From the Summit the rider sped down the Johnson Emigrant Road [Meyers Grade] to Yank's Station on April 28 and then on to Friday's Station.

The route was changed after the first few weeks of service, to Genoa via the newly completed Kingsbury Grade and over Daggett Pass, for several reasons. One reason being that it was shorter and more direct, the other being that the Piute Indian raids on the stations east of Buckland's Station threatened to lengthen the promised 10 day east-west service.

The pony rider had their east-west runs just as a truck driver today would have a route assigned to him.

The South Tahoe relay, or remount, stations were an integral

part of the Pony Express from April 1860 to October 1861. During the summer of 1860 the Overland Telegraph Company repaired and improved their line from Placerville to Fort Churchill. The line was extended eastward the following year and connected with Salt Lake City on October 24, 1861, thus forming thru service between Omaha and San Francisco.

Two days after the wires were connected to Salt Lake City, the last pony rode into Yank's Station, October 26, 1861. Bankruptcy, Civil War, and the telegraph brought an end to the "pony".

The Overland Mail now carried letters and papers between Carson City and Salt Lake City. Wells Fargo and Co. contracted between Carson City and Placerville, but it was the coaches of the Pioneer Stage Line which subcontracted to carry passengers and mail between these two points; thus serving Lake Valley.