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The Pony Express Rides Again

BY DAVID & KAY SCOTT
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The Pony Express Rides Again

David & Kay Scott - Max Cawiezel leaves Scotts Bluff for the next leg of the Pony Express trail.

On a beautiful morning in June, the two of us returned to western Nebraska's Scotts Bluff National Monument where we had the good fortune to witness a special event that takes place once each year.

The occasion was the arrival of a rider on horseback who was participating in the 2015 Pony Express re-ride from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, Calif. We had learned of the

Pony Express re-ride from the previous day's local newspaper and were excited that we would be able to visit the monument during a rider's short stop for the change of horses.

It was a beautiful day in western Nebraska with sunny skies, warm temperatures, and a cheerful group of visitors.

One of the great pleasures of travel is the occasional unexpected event that a person runs into by blind luck.

Years ago, we happened upon the annual rendezvous at Fort Laramie National Historic Site in Wyoming. During a visit to Big Bend National Park in Texas, we were startled by a cougar that ran across the terrace of the Chisos Mountains Lodge registration building. An elderly Lady Bird Johnson lit the Christmas tree at the LBJ Ranch when we were visiting one cool December evening.

The Pony Express reenactment stop at Scotts Bluff National Monument was yet another addition to the list.

Scotts Bluff National Monument

We had previously visited Scotts Bluff National Monument on several occasions during trips to the western United States.

Typically, we follow the Great Platte River Road from near Kearny, Neb., to the town of North Platte where we drive alongside the North Platte River to Fort Laramie in southeastern Wyoming. Along the way is Courthouse Rock, Jail Rock, Chimney Rock, and Scotts Bluff, all important mileposts for pioneers traveling the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails.

Each of these was also an important marker for Pony Express riders who traveled the same route and exchanged horses along the way.

Our last visit to the national monument had occurred in 2010 when we followed the Oregon Trail from Independence, Mo., to Oregon City, Ore. The interesting visitor center, trail ruts that visitors can walk, interpretive programs by NPS personnel, and the magnificent view of Mitchell Pass from the top of the bluff always make this a fun and educational stop no matter how many times a person has previously visited, especially for individuals interested in the pioneer trek west.

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Once a milepost to hunters, trappers, and traders following a water source and vegetation aided by the river, Scotts Bluff served as a beacon to pioneers, fortune hunters, and religious migrants heading west.

Initially, the route bypassed the area near Scotts Bluff by traversing the rugged Wildcat Hills via Robidoux Pass. The increasing number of immigrants resulted in a widening of the bottleneck near the bluff while opening Mitchell Pass in 1851.

The national monument offers a visitor center with exhibits, a new 15-minute video presentation, and excellent works by photographer and artist William Henry Jackson. A short trail from the visitor center leads to portions of the original trail used by the pioneers.

Living history programs are presented during summer weekends. Visitors can drive, ride the free shuttle bus, or walk to the top of the bluff for impressive views of Mitchell Pass and the North Platte Valley.

The Pony Express

Most people are surprised to learn that one of our country's best-known business enterprises operated for less than 19 months before it was put out of business by completion of the transcontinental telegraph.

During its short life, the Pony Express completed 300 runs and carried more than 33,000 pieces of mail including newspapers printed on extra-light paper. Mail was carried in a square leather knapsack called a mochila that held four locked compartments and fit over the rider's special lightweight saddle.

The initial cost to send a letter was $5, although that later declined to $1.

Covering almost 2,000 miles from St. Joseph, Mo., to San Francisco, the Pony Express utilized nearly 150 stations and employed 80 riders who were expected to cover 75 to 100 miles per day during which each rider changed horses from eight to 10 times.

Larger home stations located every 75 to 100 miles along the trail were used to house riders between runs. Thoroughbred horses were used for eastern portions of the route, while California mustangs were utilized in the West.

Riders, mostly young boys, took an oath to refrain from cussing, getting drunk, gambling, and treating animals cruelly. The riders couldn't weigh more than 120 pounds and earned

from $50 to $125 per month which is considerably more than writers of National Parks Traveler. Bonuses were occasionally paid for particularly hazardous duty.

The Pony Express became a major icon for America's energy, daring, expansion, and innovation, even though the service proved a financial disaster for its investors. Despite the short lifespan and lack of financial success, the legend lives on.

The Pony Express Re-ride

The annual Pony Express re-ride, currently in its 35th year, is comprised of riders carrying mail while following the original trail as closely as possible.

The beginning of each annual ride alternates between St. Joseph, Mo., and Sacramento, Calif. Riders started on June 15 this year in St. Joseph and headed west with an anticipated arrival in Sacramento of June 25.

While original riders each changed horses multiple times during rides of 75 to 100 miles between home stations, today's more than 600 participants may ride only one to two miles before changing horses, depending upon the trail section.

Like the riders of yesterday, today's participants must cope with unpredictable weather, but have the added burden of dealing with vehicle traffic because much of the historical trail has become a part of our system of public roads.

The rider who entered the Scotts Bluff parking lot to change horses approached while riding alongside the highway that passes in front of the national monument while following Mitchell Pass.

The numerous stops to change horses also serve as places to promote the history of the Pony Express and the organization that sponsors the annual ride.

Lyle Lander, National Pony Express Association president, rides several segments of the route while accompanying fellow riders across the trail to Sacramento.

The rider who would leave from Scotts Bluff was Max Cawiezel, a rancher from the small Nebraska community of Morrill.

The ride continues 24 hours a day during the course of the event, so we were quite lucky the scheduled stop at Scotts Bluff was for mid-morning, not 2 a.m.

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Max stood beside his ride, patiently answering questions from monument visitors who had come out to view the stop. He pointed to the mochila sitting astride his own horse. The leather pouch included his signature among those of each of the previous riders.

He said the mochila was full of letters that would be delivered to Sacramento on June 25. The mail moves faster now that transportation methods have improved, but the bravery of the original riders is something that most of us will not forget.

David and Kay Scott are authors of "Complete Guide to the National Park Lodges" (Globe Pequot). They live in Valdosta.



Along the Oregon Trail at Scotts Bluff National Monument

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Visitors Learn a Living History Lesson about the Pony Express

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Pony Express rider Max Cawiezel speaks with visitors.

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