

PONY EXPRESS HISTORY

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Salaries

Pony Express riders were hired at \$50 per month, plus room and board. Over time this rose to from \$100 to \$125. A few whose rides were particularly dangerous or who braved unusual dangers received \$150.

Compared to present day standards the pay may seem small for the services rendered, but when the pay of other company officials is taken into account it does not appear to be out of line. Secretary John W. Russell received \$150 per month and Superintendent Benjamin F. Ficklin received from \$250 to \$300 per month. The five Division Superintendents received \$90 per month each. Station keepers and their men were paid from \$50 to \$100 per month.

The Oath

Each pony rider was required to take the following oath:

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

In keeping with tradition, all National Pony Express Association Riders who participate in the annual Re-Run are required to take an Oath of Conduct very similar to the one required by Alexander Russell of his own Pony Express Riders. Each Rider is sworn prior to the Annual Re-Run and is presented with a small Bible as were the Riders of history.

NPEA Oath:

"I,, do hereby swear, before the great and living God, that during my engagement as a member of the National Pony Express Association Re-Run, I will under no circumstances use profane language, that I will drink no intoxicating liquors, that I will not quarrel or fight with any other member of the Association, and that in every respect, I will conduct myself honestly, be faithful to my duties and so direct all my acts as to win the confidence of my associates. So help me God.

First Rider - Westbound

On March 31, 1860, the first Pony Express mail was dispatched from Washington and New York by a messenger on [board trains](#) to St. Joseph.

As the assembled crowd in St. Joseph watched and a brass band played, the mail was stowed in the cantinas. There were 49 letters, 5 telegrams, and some special edition newspapers, written or printed on tissue paper and wrapped in oilskin.

At about 7:00pm on April 3, 1860, as a canon boomed in salute, the first Pony Express rider was off and one of the most colorful chapters in American history began.

Roy Bloss writes in his book [Pony Express - The Great Gamble](#):

"Alex Carlisle, Charles Cliff, Gus Cliff, Johnny Fry, Jack H. Keetley, William Richardson and Henry Wallace - seven riders in all - have been named as the lad in the saddle of the bright bay mare (or the little sorrel, or the jet-black horse-take your choice), said to be named Sylph, which galloped out of town at 7:15 p.m., April 3, 1860. His identification, not quite settled a century later, has been sifted down by process of literary attrition to a draw between Johnny Fry and William Richardson. The patient reader may study the arguments of their respective advocates, ably presented in various publications and books, then decide for himself, perhaps with the aid of a flipped coin."

[Jack Keetley](#) states in a letter written in 1907 that the first rider out of St. Joseph was Alex Carlisle.

Jackie Lewin, Curator of History, St. Joseph Museum, provides the following:

On the April 7, 1860, [ST. JOSEPH WEEKLY WEST](#) reported "The rider is a Mr. [Richardson](#), formerly a sailor, and a man accustomed to every description of hardship, having sailed for years amid the snows and ice bergs of the Northern ocean." We (St. Joseph Museum) do not know who wrote the article. Was it a person familiar with the people in St. Joseph? Anyway, this is the only place where Richardson is identified as the first rider.

In 1913 the Daughters of the American Revolution were preparing to place a monument in Patee Park designating the Pikes Peak Stables (now Pony Express Museum) as the starting point for the April 3, 1860, ride. Despite numerous

eye-witness reports of Fry being the first rider, the DAR chose to go with the newspaper account. This caused quite a controversy in St. Joseph. [Charles Cliff](#), Pony Express rider, was so angry that he refused to come to the DAR unveiling.

In 1923 the controversy again surfaced in St. Joseph. This time the eye-witness accounts were given a closer look and the St. Joseph Historical Society named [Johnny Fry](#) as the first rider. They also determined that Billy Richardson was only 10 years old in 1860.

Some of the eye-witness were:

Robert Strickland (later a rider): I saw him ride out of the stables at St. Joseph astride a little chestnut mare."

Mary Alicia Owen (from pioneer family and a early historian): "Why, everyone always knew the first rider out was Johnny Fry. My father saw him go. Johnny had a little racing mare of his own and won most of the races run along the river bank, but he didn't ride his own horse."

Mrs. Lewars (Fry's sweetheart in 1860): Said she waved to him as he rode past on that first ride. She said he told her he had to keep his pony in the stable because the crowd were pulling hairs out of her mane and tail.

Michael Whalen (later a rider) was at the April 3, 1860, event and said it was Fry.

There are also other accounts by local people whose name would not be recognized by those elsewhere.

In 1923, Glen Bradley, history professor at the University of Toledo and author of [THE STORY OF THE PONY EXPRESS](#) written in 1913, was contacted. He wrote in a letter:

"I arrived at the conclusion the Johnny Fry was the first pony rider out of St. Joseph; this conclusion as you have observed, is consistently set forth in the book on pages 32 and 106, and I still maintain that Fry was the first rider. In fact, no evidence has ever come to my attention that would warrant changing my assertion. . . Mr. W.E. Connelley of Topeka [Kansas Historical Society] holds the same opinion, which is further corroborated by certain citizens in your community who were eye-witnesses, it seems a little strange that any of your local historians would seek to deprive Fry of his honor."

Finally, in 1938, Billy Richardson spoke out. He had been out of St. Joseph for many years and was older when he heard of the controversy. He died in St. Joseph in 1947 at age 96. He would have been 9 or 10 years old in 1860. His obituary states:

"A writer billed me as the first Pony Express rider but that's not so' explained Billy to his friends. 'Johnny Fry was the first rider. It just happened that my brother, Paul Coburn, was the manager for the Pony Express here and he accidentally threw the mail pouch on my pony instead of Frye's. We set off down the street with the ponies hooves clattering and my pony carrying mail. Down at the ferry, however, the mail was transferred to Frye's mount. He was the one who deserved the credit"

Our research into county records show that Billy Richardson was a ward of Bella Hughes, one of the directors of the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company and that Paul Coburn was his half-brother.

Accounts of the arrival of this first westbound express are found in [Pony Tales](#), a collection of newspaper articles from the 1860's reporting the goings on of the Pony Express.