



Steve and Bobbi Olson; Jeff Barnes (opposite page)



# THE PONY EXPRESS

Annual re-ride keeps mail service alive

STORY BY JEFF BARNES

**O**AK RESIDENT PAT BRUSSEAU joins the excited crowd gathering on Main Street. She has her granddaughter and three neighborhood kids in tow and bides the time snapping photos as they fidget in front of a stone marker in the town park. Others arrive; a good number are the stars of today's show. They're dressed alike in cowboy hats, red shirts, yellow scarves, brown vests and blue jeans – and Brusseau's half-pint posse busies themselves picking them out. The June air is equal parts humidity and anticipation, and a single horse snorts impatiently.

When it comes to Nebraska's wild west history, colorful Oak, Neb. (pop. 65) stands tall. Legend has it the town was named for a hanging tree. Situated along the Little Blue River and 10 miles north of the Nebraska/Kansas border, this territory was the backdrop to some of the fiercest Indian raids ever recorded, including the Oak Grove Massacre of 1864. A stage station was built here in 1856, making the settlement a natural stop along the Mormon and Oregon trails as well as an ideal location for one of Nebraska's 53 Pony Express stations. In fact, Oak is the only Nebraska town actually positioned along the historic Pony Express trail, and that accounts for the excitement along Main Street this morning.

Lyle Gronewold waits impatiently for this day all year round. He's the president of the Nebraska chapter of

the National Pony Express Association (N.P.E.A.) and resides in Gothenburg – home to two original Pony Express stations and, justifiably, Nebraska's self-proclaimed Pony Express Capital. Gronewold is in charge of Nebraska's leg – the longest leg in the country – of the annual Pony Express re-ride which, for 10 days in June, follows the original 1,840 mile Pony Express route from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, Calif., or vice versa.

"The Pony Express is probably the neatest story of western expansion for this simple reason: Even though it was short lived, have you ever read anything bad about it?" Gronewold asks. "They didn't shoot all the buffalo. They didn't run the Indians out and put them on reservations. Everything they did was to tie together the nation; they united the east and west."

From April of 1860 to October of 1861, the Pony Express provided the fastest mail delivery and is credited for maintaining vital communication between the east and the west at the start of the Civil War. Only expert riders were employed, 183 in all. An ad in a California newspaper read: "Wanted: Young, skinny, wiry fellows. Not over 18. Must be expert riders. Willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred."

While certainly fast for its day, the Pony Express was never a profitable venture. Its official name was the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express

All riders participating in the Pony Express re-ride wear the official National Pony Express Association patch, commemorating the 150th anniversary of the first trek from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, Calif. Opposite page, spectators gather at the foot of Scotts Bluff National Monument to watch as Terry Hauf, of Mitchell, anticipates the brief mail pouch exchange before heading off through Mitchell Pass on his way toward the Wyoming border.



Company, but the riders said its initials – C.O.C. & P.P. – stood for “clean out of cash and poor pay.” It was run on anticipation of getting a government mail contract, but the introduction of the transcontinental telegraph in October of 1861 stole its thunder, and it ceased to operate later that same month. Since 1980, the Pony Express has been remembered nationally in this annual re-ride.

N.P.E.A. President Les Bennington – some say the spittin’ image of John Wayne – lives in Glenrock, Wyo., but he follows the entire route of the re-ride every year. When a substitute rider is needed, he’s the first to volunteer, and on his vest are the commemorative patches and pins from the past 28 years. “This is the 30th year of the run, and we couldn’t do it without all of the volunteers we get here,” he said. “Nebraska is nearly 500 miles of the trail and it’s no small task to find the number of people it takes for that many miles.”

Gathering around Nebraska today are nearly 270 N.P.E.A. members of which approximately 170 will ride. “The horses are bigger, and we’re bigger,” Gronewold added. “We’re older, too.”

An exception is Kaley Bondegard, who was 16 the first time she saddled up. This is her fourth time around, and she’s planning to run her palomino quarter horse “Pally” the second mile out of Oak and then another six miles toward Hastings. She gets a head start to the Narrows, a historic pass near the Little Blue River, where she’ll wait for the arrival of the first rider.

“You have to be 14 just like back then to ride, but we’ll let grandkids and kids buddy ride their own horse alongside their dad, mom or grandpa,” Gronewold said. He’s known for



Jeff Barnes

**Jamie Watts, of Fairfield, signs the mochila, a leather mail bag, dedicated to Merlin Greer, who helped found the Oak Saddle Club, which became involved with the National Pony Express Association. Greer died in 2004.**

his impressive historical expertise, gleaned from books and oral tradition and brimming with colorful characters like a 14-year-old version of Bill Cody and a saddle-sleeping Billy Campbell who awoke to discover himself almost back where he’d started, thanks to a horse with a sly u-turn.

The N.P.E.A. tries to follow the original route as closely as possible, but roads, ditches and fences interrupt the direct path of 150 years ago. The re-ride was making good time after entering southeast Nebraska at Steele City at 8 this morning, having passed through Rock Creek State Histori-



Christopher Amundson

cal Park and just outside of Fairbury and Alexandria before its scheduled arrival at Oak.

“They must have had some problems,” Gronewold said, tracing his finger along the route highlighted in his atlas and gazetteer. “You never know what you’ll find out there after a storm.”

And, while he’s a little bothered that the ride is delayed so early into his territory, he’s done this enough to know it’s not an exact science . . . and besides, storytelling fills the time. “We were riding just south of Brady one morning,” Gronewold begins, “and it was so dark and foggy that the rider said, ‘I hope these horses can see better than we can.’ Then I remember riding south of Cozad one day when it was raining so hard that the water was running out of the cornfield and across the roads. It was just dumping, and I thought: This is what they did!”

With a spring in his step, Gronewold gathers Nebraska’s contemporary riders into a circle to administer the oath of the Pony Express rider, nearly the same one taken by their predecessors: “. . . under no circumstances use profane language . . . to drink no intoxicating liquors . . . not quarrel or fight with any other member of the association.” Each participant receives a pocket-sized Bible, symbolic of the early riders.

**NEARLY AN HOUR** behind schedule, a rider astride her spotted horse makes the turn into Oak. She’s wearing the same gear as the rest of the group and pulls up to the intersection to dismount. Across her horse is the mochila, a reproduction of the leather bag which was transferred from horse to horse and could accommodate up to 800 letters, or 20 pounds of mail. This particular mochila was made in Cozad by Gordy Musil. Actually, he made two – one for the re-ride and another to be



Nebraska State Historic Society

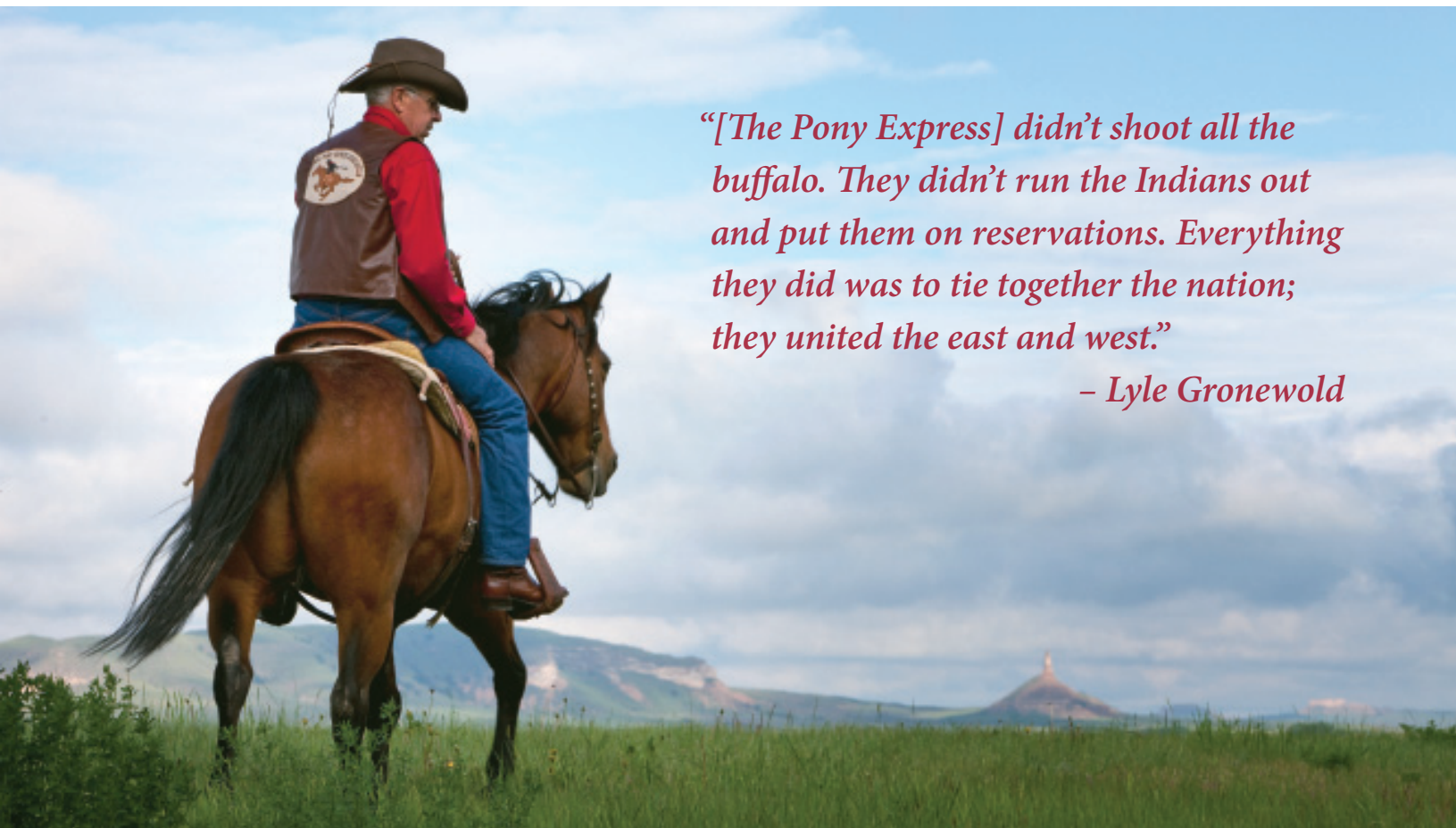
**A 1953 Dunlap-Henline postcard depicts Gothenburg’s Pony Express Station. The scene shows a hurried toss of the mochila from rider to rider, but Pony Express riders stopped for brief rests and to eat and socialize. Top, the Sam Machette Station today is a historic centerpiece in Gothenburg’s Ehmen Park.**

used in parades. At \$800 a pop, it’s easy to see that Nebraskans take their history seriously. Members of the Oak Saddle Club gather to sign their autographs before the first horse and rider take off from Main Street.

In spite of a rainstorm during the night, the cool weather and rain-softened ground is helping to put the riders back on







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*– Lyle Gronewold*

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Gering rider Roger Palmer rides past familiar landmarks, including Chimney Rock, in the distance, along Highway 92 south of Bayard. Of the eight-state 1,840-mile Pony Express route, Nebraska’s leg is the longest at nearly 500 miles.

schedule. A decision to stick to the road will help, too.

The original Pony Express riders were expected to ride 75 to 100 miles, stopping eight to 10 times to change horses at stations along the way. Legend has them running non-stop but, truthfully, they averaged a speed of 10 mph and took regular breaks to eat, drink, socialize and stretch their legs – which makes a layover at the historic Midway Station south of Gothenburg highly appropriate.

Some contend that the log building is not the original Midway Station and, more than likely, is a stage station. No one knows for sure. There’s no doubt that it’s on the route, however, and near the halfway point along Nebraska’s Pony Express route. And that’s good enough for the chamber of commerce which has gathered this drizzly morning to serve coffee and doughnuts to participants and fans alike.

As for delivering the mail, Gronewold is eager to make the first ride out of his hometown station. Following the Platte River Valley will take him and others past the historic sites of Gilman’s Ranch, Fort McPherson, Cottonwood Springs and Jack Morrow’s Station.

After meeting a new horse and rider on the south side of North Platte, the route will likely reach the Colorado border before midnight. But that’s far from the end of the

line for Nebraska. Beneath a star-studded sky, the last lucky riders will make their way up the North Platte River Valley. They’ll witness the sun rise and, by 11 a.m., the final rider from Nebraska will transfer the mochila to the first rider from Wyoming at Scotts Bluff National Monument.

Like the historic mail delivery system itself, the re-enactment is over too soon. Gronewold and other diehard N.P.E.A. members and fans will have to wait a full year – and none too patiently – for another run of the legendary Pony Express. 🐾

**SIDNEY, NEB. WILL BE THE RECIPIENT** of a new Pony Express Monument. Plans are underway to unveil the project on June 18, in conjunction with the 2010 annual re-ride and marking the 150 year anniversary of the early mail service. Unlike any other Pony Express Monuments nationwide, Sidney’s bronze and granite tribute will be the only of its kind with tributes to all eight Pony Express states: Missouri; Kansas; Nebraska; Wyoming; Colorado; Utah; Nevada and California.