

Emporia man ready to ride in 150th Anniversary of Pony Express

For The Love Of Horses
By Frank J. Buchman

The Pony Express will ride again.

It's been a century and a half since Pony Express riders carried mail from St. Joseph, Mo., to Sacramento, Ca., and back again.

"The National Pony Express Association has planned a year-long celebration of this 150th anniversary, including a re-enactment of the ride," according to Fred Miller, 71, Emporia.

An enthusiastic member of the sponsoring group, Miller will participate in the re-ride this year, just like he's done 14 times before, but this one should be especially meaningful.

"I actually rode in the 100th anniversary Pony Express celebration in 1960," Miller noted. "I

was younger then, but this time will be more important for me than some of the other riders." He rode 50 years ago, and then consecutively for the past 13 years.

Activities for the Pony Express anniversary officially kicked off in Kansas as part of the state's birthday party. On January 29, Governor Parkinson proclaimed 2010 as the "Year of the Pony Express" in Kansas during a special ceremony at the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka.

Miller and other Pony Express re-enactors and enthusiasts from a wide area were in attendance to enjoy considerable reminiscing about the famous mail service itself, and previous re-rides, along with exciting discussion about this year's actual event from June 6-26.

"Our ride will take longer than it did for those young riders 150 years ago," Miller admitted. "The mail then would travel the entire 1,966 miles in just ten days.

"Our excuse for the ride being more drawn out this time is that many of the communities along the route are planning special celebrations in

commemoration of the anniversary," Miller continued. "The original riders rode 24 hours a day through rain, floods and tornadoes, whatever the weather, but we'll just be riding during the daylight hours."

The Pony Express route enters Kansas north of Hanover and exits near Elwood, just west of St. Joseph. Miller expects Hanover, Marysville, Seneca, Horton and possibly other Kansas communities to have special events for the Pony Express anniversary.

"Hanover had a relay station where riders changed horses, and Marysville was a home station, so riders could be relieved and rest until their next turn," explained Miller, who'll be riding on the Kansas route to St. Joseph.

Re-run of the Pony Express this year will start when the first rider leaves the western terminus, Merchant and Montgomery Streets, San Francisco, at 8 a.m., on Sunday, June 6. The last rider is scheduled to gallop up to the Patee House in St. Joseph, the eastern terminus, at 10 a.m., on Saturday, June 26.

The Pony Express National Historic Trail from California passes through Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas to Missouri.

"Route from San Francisco to Sacramento will be on the water by ferry, similar to way the mail was carried in the beginning," Miller noted. "In our previous horseback re-rides, we haven't included that part of the trail, but we wanted it to be even more authentic for the anniversary."

This year's event will also commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company of Russell, Majors and Waddell. "Their riders carried letters and telegrams from April 1860 to October 1861 on the central route," Miller said.

Although short lived, the Pony Express created a legacy of daring enterprise and bravery, becoming a symbol of the Old West as retold in books, movies and re-enactments. In 1992, the Pony Express route was recognized as a National Historical Trail, and the National Parks Service

preserves and interprets its historic sites and history.

"There were about 80 original Pony Express riders and nearly 400 horses," Miller described. "Each rider would travel at a canter or sometimes a gallop about 15 miles to a relay station where he changed horses, and then continue at that pace until getting to a home station, which were every 80 to 100 miles."

A lot more riders, horses and modern mechanisms are involved in this year's re-ride.

"There will be about 500 riders and probably that many horses, too," Miller calculated. "We will stick to the original route as closely as possible, but we'll only actually ride a mile or two and then trailer the horses for another portion of the ride. In some areas, they ride four or five miles before changing riders."

Prior to starting, riders must take the Pony Express oath, and each one will receive a commemorative Bible, in the tradition of Russell, Majors and Waddell.

Every variety of horse imaginable will likely

be involved in the entourage, and they will not be tacked like their predecessors. "We use all modern-day Western saddles and equipment," Miller described. "We're required to wear our uniform boots, hat, jeans, red shirt, yellow scarf and a brown vest with Pony Express insignia."

All important though will be the authentic mochila, or the mail bag, which has four cantinas, or separate compartments. "This time, we'll carry commemorative letters with a vignette of the history of the Pony Express in a specially designed cachet," Miller related.

"These documents with the official Pony Express seal and cancellation, will show they were carried by the Pony Express and will be available for purchase by the public for the 1860 price of \$5," Miller continued.

Riders sign the mochila either before or after they ride. "Each year one of the divisions, the same as a state," Miller clarified, "is responsible not only for the cachet, but for having the mochila made and hosting the national directors' meeting"

Biggest difference this time from the original rides will be the modern conveniences. "Communications between riders and ride captains will be provided by amateur radio operators, and a GPS (global positioning system) transmitter will be carried in the mochila," Miller revealed.

While Miller is an enthusiastic participant in the Pony Express activi-

ties, he'll again be riding a borrowed horse.

"I've never had a horse of my own. My folks worked horses when I was a kid, but I've always ridden somebody else's horse," he indicated. "I've thought about getting a horse, but it's worked out just as well to borrow one. I've really had good luck. I've never had one that bucked me off, or one that wouldn't go."

Although Miller has only participated on horseback in Pony Express re-rides in his home state of Kansas, he's traveled much of the entire route by automobile.

"It really is interesting to visit the towns, old relay and home stations, and visualize what it might really have been like, so long ago," Miller commented. "I've always had a good time on these rides, but I'm even more excited this year because of the anniversary."