



Last month, we held our annual elections – reelecting last year’s officers once again, discussed the impact and problems facing the Scott LLC as it takes control of the hobbies’ information center (Note: the digital editions of the weekly, monthly and catalogues were moved to Scott LLC servers on 11 February).

We did not get to the two other items on the agenda – **Show & Tell – bring your favorite album** and **topics for the 2026 meetings**. We will do these items this month.

Pony Express was an express mail service that used relays of horse-mounted riders between Missouri and California. It was operated by the **Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company**. The service operated between 1860.04.03 and 1861.10.26 — filing for bankruptcy just two days after the transcontinental telegraph opened for business on 1861.10.26.



The idea behind this service was not new – Postmasters’ general John McLean (1823-1829) and Amos Kendall (1835-1840) had sent horsemen racing day and night to speed market information between certain cities for several times the price of normal postage. These express services had indeed cut delivery times—between New York City and New Orleans in half the 14 days required by stagecoaches—but they were soon replaced in the East by the faster, cheaper railroads.

West of the Mississippi River, transportation and communications was dependent on horses and boats. The settlers in the West with roots in the East and South were desperate for news about the looming Civil War, which would test their own loyalties. California “free state”, but with many residents were southerners by ancestry, sympathy, or both and eager to secede. Moreover, they were separated by some 2,000 miles from the nearest other free states, which aggravated the sense of isolation caused by their still slow, inadequate stagecoach mail service.

Next Show							Next Meeting						
February 26							February 26						
Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su
						1							1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28		23	24	25	26	27	28	
February 28 STAMPFEST 2026 St Francis Lions Center 3476 E Howard Ave St Francis WI							Album Show & Tell 						

The federal government was desperate to keep the huge, resource-laden “Golden State” in the Union — enter Bill Russell, the fast-talking money man at **Russell, Majors and Waddell**, a major freight and passenger carrier — a self-made mogul in America’s burgeoning transportation industry and a **gambler**. He bet that if his firm could get the mail to California much faster than the **Butterfield Overland Mail Company**, it could snatch the post’s huge transportation contract from its rival.



Next Meeting:
2:00-PM on Tuesday, 24 February 2026
 Grayslake Historical Society — Any Changes will be posted on: lcpshome.org



Officers:
 Tom Willer - Presidents
 Bill Schultz – Vice President
 Dave Sadler – Secretary
 Gary Olson – Treasurer

Russell knew firsthand that taking on a big federal contract was a risky business. In 1855, he and the "sober", businessman William Waddell had joined forces with the formidable Alexander Majors, a rival "expressman", to snag a huge government deal to haul supplies to Army posts in parts of the West and Southwest that had just been won in the Mexican-American War. During the first two years, the ambitious, capable Midwesterners made a handsome \$ 300,000 profit. Then, in 1857, when the Mormon War erupted, they went into debt trying to meet the Army's stepped-up demands while simultaneously contending with the hostile Mormons who burned their wagons and ran off their horses.

Roller-coaster finances notwithstanding, Russell talked his partners, and John Jones, another businessman, into mounting a flashy campaign to secure the postal subsidy. They created a new firm, called the **Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express Company**, which would operate a stagecoach line from Leavenworth, Kansas, where Russell, Majors and Waddell were based, through Denver to California. To convince Congress of the superiority of their company and its northerly "Central" path to the Golden State, Russell proposed a flashy mail service that was partly a publicity stunt. The mounted couriers of this **Pony Express** would streak across the Great Plains, Rockies, and High Sierras carrying urgent letters and press dispatches to California in just ten days, which cut the stagecoach time by an astounding two-thirds.

Wells Fargo and some other carriers already offered limited local post-rider services in the rugged West, but Russell's proposal for the 1,966-mile, high-speed **Pony Express** was breathtaking in its audacity. The westbound mail would travel by train to St. Joseph MO, where the rail line ended and the new service would be based. Forty riders would race the mail in relays to Salt Lake City through the emptiness of what are now Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, following established trails (now Interstate 80) when possible. Then they would take a perilous route through Nevada over the Sierras to Sacramento, finally reaching San Francisco by steamship.

Californians were elated at the prospect of the **Pony Express**. Some experienced western hands, however, insisted that the lone riders would be easy prey for hostile Indians and robbers, and others opined that weather alone would render the route's mountainous stretches impassable in winter. Undaunted, Russell proceeded to purchase four hundred to five hundred fine, high-priced horses, each branded with an XP; buy or build some 165 relay stations made of logs, adobe, or sod; hire about eighty riders and hundreds of support workers; and even commission a special Pony Express stamp depicting a mounted courier. The firm's high rates for carrying a half-ounce letter—initially \$5.00 (~ \$75 today), later \$ 1.00—attest to the demand for the service, but its revenues couldn't begin to cover the \$700,000 (~ \$105,000,000) start-up costs. Everything depended on the Pony's success in winning the government's overland mail contract.



While Russell did the wheeling and dealing, Majors supervised the **Pony Express's** logistics. A born- and-bred frontiersman, he had become an "expressman" after fathering daughters rather than the sons needed to work the family farm. He made a fortune in the freighting business but continued to travel with his wagon trains, which could include 100 vehicles, 1,200 oxen, and 120 men. Most of these "pit stops" were between 10 - 15 miles apart, which was about the distance a fast horse could travel before tiring. Their

crews provided the riders with food and fresh mounts and attended to the horses kept on reserve.

To function at top speed, the horses could carry no more than 165 pounds, counting the courier, his equipment, and up to 20 pounds of mail. (The number of letters carried per trip eventually averaged about 90 westbound and 350 eastbound.) Mail packets could be handed off from rider to rider inside of the two minutes allowed for a relay stop. The men themselves, usually dressed in a deerskin shirt, pants tucked into high boots, and a slouch hat, traveled light, perhaps carrying only a knife and a revolver. This was noted in an ad - **"Wanted: Young, skinny fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred."** Even so, hundreds of men and boys responded to this rhetoric and the promise of good pay plus room and board and were soon winnowed down to a select crew of outstanding equestrians, each weighing no more than 125 pounds. Tough as nails and slim as a jockey, the Express rider was, as author Mark Twain put it, **"a little bit of a man, brimful of spirit"** from his 1872 book **"Roughing It"**.

But in the end, not even the "gallant" **Pony Express** could outrace time and technology. The transcontinental telegraph line, proceeding at twenty-five miles per day, was finally finished on 1861.10.24, just in time to provide instant news for the war's duration, and the cross-country railroad's completion was now within sight (1869). The government balked at supporting an expensive mail service that suddenly seemed antiquated. After carrying 35,000 pieces of mail over 650,000 miles—equivalent to twenty- six times around the globe—the **Pony Express** was abruptly out of business, leaving many of its riders, barely past adolescence, to fend for themselves.

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