

The Pony Express

05.10.2018, Episode 3

A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to the podcast “A Thousand Words”, for Friday October 12th.

Today, I'll be telling you about a special job I had a long time ago. It's a job you can't find anymore. Time moves on, and some jobs just don't move on with the times.

I used to work for the pony express.

This was way back in 1860, I think. You know the pony express? The mail delivery service on horseback – that went from the middle of the US across the country west? It ended all the way in Sacramento, which is about a two-hour car drive today from San Francisco. The route was about 3,000 kilometers. I didn't ride all of it; none of us did. We each had our stretches [1].

In those days, if you wanted to send a letter to someone, it took about 30 days... each way. But today, who writes letters anymore? I even get digital postcards. But back then... we had the pony express. And yes, I'm proud to say that I was one of its riders.

You had to be a good rider. You had to know how to handle your horse – how hard you could work it. I never used spurs [2] on my horses. I just had this natural way with them. Maybe it's what attracted me to the station in the first place.

What attracted people to northern California at that time was the gold that was found there about ten years before I joined the company. People from all over the world went there to try to get some. Most people came by ship, and that meant going through San Francisco. I'm sure you can imagine how quickly the area grew. And because it was cut off [3] from the nearest cities to the east by about 3,000 kilometers, it was like an island. And this island wanted news, it wanted to keep in touch [4] and it wanted to do business.

When I joined, I was told that we were about 400 riders in total. We were all young, and all men. And we all looked alike, too; or our bodies did. We were all lean [5] – not thin, but ... lean. We rode each horse no more than 30 kilometers from station to station. We traveled over hard prairie ground mostly, some grassland... through valleys, over rocks, crossed rivers. Each of us had to ride more than a hundred kilometers, so... you do the math – we changed horses on average 4 maybe 5 times a shift [6]. Yeah, we were tired. But we rested for short spells [7] at the small stations the company built. I don't remember how many stations there were.

When a station opened in my neighborhood, I used to hang out [8] there. I was about 12 years old at the time. I looked at the horses they had in the corral. I listened to the men who took care of them. I liked watching when riders came in, how the men all got down from the saddle in different ways. And the excitement [9] when they rode off! I was a big fan. Some of the riders broke the rules [10] and drank. It was strictly [11] forbidden to drink.

That's how I got my job, actually.

I was hanging out at this station one day when a rider came in. He was exhausted [12] and said that nobody was at the last two stations, that the natives had burned them down. He said he couldn't go any farther, and was there someone there who could ride for him? The other men were drunk or too afraid of the natives. A few months earlier, two settlers [13] ran off with a couple of Native American girls, and the natives went looking for them, settlement by settlement. The US Calvary came in, and war started between them.



So, there I was at this station, with a couple of men too drunk to go out and one too afraid.

"I'll go!" I volunteered [14].

I was only 12 at the time, and you had to be no younger than 14 to join. But... this was the west, and no one asked questions. So, they signed me up [15], and to a drunken man I had to lift my right arm and promise not to drink.

They handed me the mail bag – the mochila, they called it, a leather bag you attached to the saddle. The heaviest one I ever carried was probably ten kilos. Later I found out that some people wrote their letters on thin tissue paper [16] to save on the weight and cost. Mostly newspaper people used us; some military and government, too; and the rich. The most important letter I ever carried was written by Abraham Lincoln asking if anyone was interested in his gin. He made a lot of gin before he became President.

And so out I rode. I followed the path ahead of me that the riders before me made. That's how we did it back then. That was the wild west.

I only worked there for about seven months. The company was only in business about a year and half. When the telegraph lines were finally finished, that shut us down [17] – killed us over-night, even faster than the Internet and twitter are killing today's post. They sold the horses and laid off [18] us riders. They left the stations standing.

You know, lots of men later said that they rode for the pony express, just like lots of people later said they were at the theater when Lincoln was shot, or at Woodstock, or at Harry and Meghan's royal wedding. A man who called himself Buffalo Bill said he rode with us. I never saw him. Maybe he did; maybe at the other end of the route – I was farther west. He created a show, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and he toured all over America saying he rode with us. He even went to Europe and performed in front of queens and emperors, and told them too.

But when you lived out west, cut off from the rest of the country, from the rest of the world, you could say almost anything you wanted about yourself. There was no Internet back then, so it was hard to verify [19] what you said. And I think people expected [20] such creativity. People had this idea of where you came from – so different, they thought, from the places they called home, so exotic, so filled with wonder – that they often accepted that the things you told them were likely to be made up [21].

I'm not so sure that this habit [22] has changed all that much.

Thanks for listening.

You can find all our episodes on our website podclub.ch or by downloading our app. You can also download our vocabulary trainer, and you can follow me on Instagram using the hashtags [#podclubrichard](#) and [#athousandwords](#).

I'll be back on October 26th to tell you another story, about gift horses and why you shouldn't look one in the mouth. If you don't understand what that means, listen in.

Bye for now.

Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] stretches: parts of the route

[2] spurs: sharp metal things on the end of cowboy boots

[3] cut off: not a part of something else

[4] to keep in touch: to communicate regularly

[5] lean: muscularly thin

[6] a shift: a period of time working

[7] short spells: not long

[8] hang out: spend time at a place

[9] excitement: the feeling that makes your heart beat faster

[10] broke the rules: did not do what they promised they would

[11] **strictly**: strongly

[12] **exhausted**: very tired

[13] **settlers**: new people who moved into the land

[14] **volunteered**: my own choice to do it

[15] **signed me up**: registered me

[16] **tissue paper**: often used to blow and clean your nose

[17] **shut down**: closed forever

[18] **laid off**: stopped giving work to employees

[19] **verify**: find out if something is true

[20] **expected**: to think something will happen

[21] **made up**: not true

[22] **habit**: the things you do over and over