



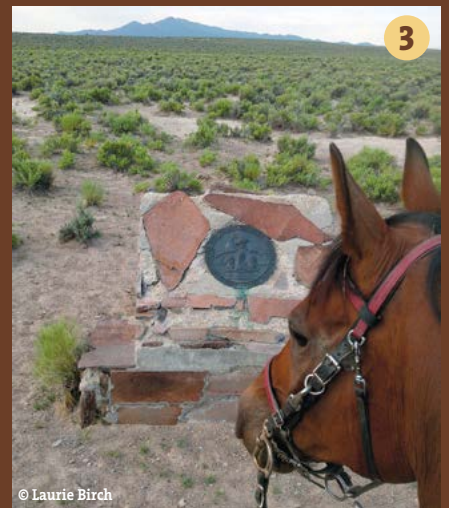
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AERC & the Pony Express Trail

Part 2 of 2



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1. The XP Trail followed one track among the many emigrant trails. They come together to cross the Continental Divide at South Pass, Wyoming. 2. Base camp on a remote ranch in central Wyoming. In 2015 the party was trapped there for a day when heavy rain made the poor roads impassable for big rig. 3. One of many trail markers placed in honor of the Pony Express centennial. 4. The XP ride passed right by Register Cliff near Guernsey, Wyoming, where emigrants scratched their names into soft rock.

by Tom Bache

This article focuses on the Pony Express (aka XP) Trail. This historic trail has had a seminal role in the evolution of AERC multi-day rides. Most of the following material is based upon interviews with David Nicholson, DVM, and articles published on the XP Rides website (xprides.com). Other important sources are referenced.

There are many contenders for the origins of modern endurance riding in the United States. But the AERC version is firmly rooted in Wendell Robie's 1955 ride of 100 miles in one day from Tahoe City to Auburn, California. Robie chose to cross the Sierra Nevada via a familiar emigrant trail that followed the American River drainage and passed near his Auburn home.¹ He was inspired by the mail carriers of the past (especially the Pony Express) and carried a ceremonial mail packet.

Robie was a master promoter and energetic innovator^{2,3} who left big footprints in many places.⁴ His "Tevis Cup" version of endurance riding quickly spread across the nation. Its growing popularity motivated the founding of AERC in 1972. While Robie himself wasn't involved, the founding group included many prominent Tevis Cup riders and organizers, and the AERC offices were established in Auburn.

Another thread leading to multi-day riding begins with the 1976 Great American Horse Race⁵ (GAHR) from Frankfort, New York, to Sacramento, California. The GAHR was an extreme version of what used to be common—riding shorter distances day after day. The GAHR was entirely independent of AERC and used very different rules, but many of AERC's founding generation were participants, e.g., Hall of Fame members Phil Gardner, Hal Hall and Smokey Killen.

This "wild, wacky, and wonderful traveling circus"⁶ never operated as promised and riders got fed up at various places along the way. When GAHR stalled in Hannibal, Missouri, many riders decided they had enough. GAHR veterinarian David Nicholson offered to organize an alternative ride for those still eager to ride

west. With only days to get organized, they planned a 60-day ride on the XP trail from its beginning in St. Joseph to its terminus in Sacramento (nearly 2,000 miles).

The XP route wasn't well mapped, so Nicholson decided to find the trail using Richard Burton's published diary⁷ from his 1860 stagecoach journey along it. As they developed the new plan, a rider from Switzerland said to Nicholson, "How can you do this without a permit? It would take at least a year or more to get a permit to do this in Europe." Nicholson's answer: "This is America, a free country. We don't need permits to ride across it."

With misty eyes and trembling voice, the German answered, "My God, what a country!"

Nicholson's group of 14 riders had what participant Hal Hall called "the ride of a lifetime." In Nebraska they met Paul Henderson, who had walked the trail decades earlier and was one of the leading experts on its location. His knowledge helped the group to find and ride the original trail. Subsequently, Nicholson visited Henderson's home and spent weeks reviewing and copying his maps, including Henderson's notations.

In 1979 the British Post Office contacted Nicholson and offered to sponsor another XP trail ride to commemorate the life of Sir Rowland Hill, the British inventor of the postage stamp. While there was no attempt to gain AERC sanction, the ride rules were similar to the AERC rules of the time. As this group rode the trail, Nicholson noticed that it was fading into the landscape. He then conceived the idea of trail preservation by conducting five-day point-to-point AERC rides along it—a controversial idea at the time.

In AERC's first decade, multi-day rides were limited to no more than three days and 150 miles out of a fixed base camp. Change began in 1982 when Tom Bowling gained sanction for a four-day, 200-mile ride from Carson City, Nevada, to Sacramento via Robie's Western States (Tevis) Trail.

The AERC limits were waived because the ride contributed to

preservation of this historic trail.

Soon thereafter, Nicholson got a similar waiver to sanction his first five-day, 250-mile point-to-point ride on the XP Trail in Nevada. AERC rules were soon modified, and three- to five-day point-to-point rides on the XP trail were annual fixtures for the next 15 years.

During this period, many similar rides (eventually formalized as Pioneer rides) were organized elsewhere. By the early 21st century most of the multi-day point-to-point rides disappeared or were replaced by multi-day rides out of a single base camp. Pioneer rides are now offered in all AERC regions, but are most common in their birthplace (such rides provide about 45% of available ride days in the MT, PS, and SW regions).

Multi-day endurance rides occur elsewhere (for example, the 250-mile Shahzada in Australia), but few, if any, compile multi-day results from independent one-day results.

After 1983, Nicholson and his wife Annie organized annual multi-day rides on the XP Trail. In 1994 they began expanding into other areas. Since then, they have become the most active ride organizers in AERC, through their XP Rides organization (www.xprides.com).⁸

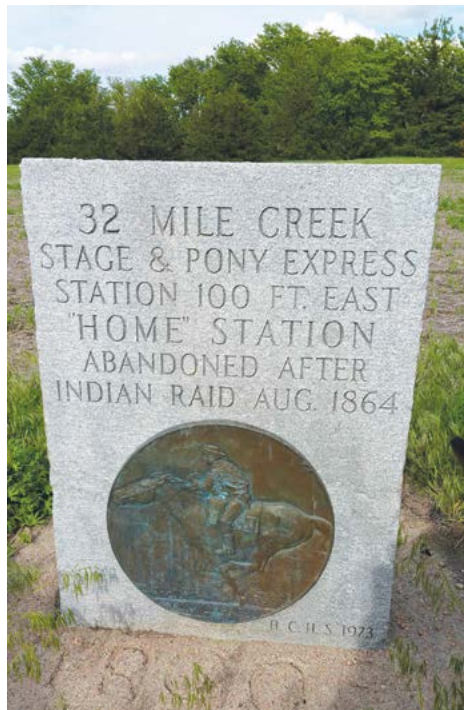
But Nicholson's fascination with the XP Trail and dedication to its preservation never waned. In the late 1990s he conceived the idea of replicating the original 1976 ride, but this time with AERC sanction. To do so, he organized the ride into nine three- to five-day point-to-point Pioneer rides, each separated by one or two rest days.

In 2001, this first eight-week, 2000-mile "grand tour" ride from St. Joseph to Carson City was a memorable equestrian adventure. Participants rode day after day like the cavalry riders or travelers of bygone days, and they did so while complying with AERC rules.

Many riders wanted a chance to experience or repeat this adventure. XP Rides responded with a shorter version (25 days and 1250 miles from Bucklands, Nevada, to Rushcreek Ranch in Lisco, Nebraska) in 2004 and repeated the 2000-mile east-to-west version in XP 2011 and XP 2015. (The author participated in these last two, so this report is colored by that experience.)

What is it like to be a participant? The most important feature of the grand tour rides is that they provide a life-enhancing adventure that integrates immersion in a passionate hobby with an intimate view of one of America's most important historic trails. The opportunity to visit and explore new places is a major attraction of grand tour rides on the XP or other long trails.

The daily grind through wildly different weather, terrain, and vegetation conditions, plus overcoming human, equine and mechanical problems that crop up along the way, inspires deep empathy for long-ago travelers who dealt with similar problems



Markers along the trail celebrate both triumphs and tragedies, including this Nebraska monument. Photo © Laurie Birch.

as the U.S. expanded west. So these rides create a deep connection with the historic roots of American endurance riding.

Since the grand tour rides are a series of point-to-point rides, they pose the same logistical challenges as point-to-point rides common before 2000. Nicholson has made some tasks easier by adapting modern technology. Most notably, in 2011 and 2015 he eliminated the course-marking task by providing annotated maps and GPS tracks.

The most daunting challenge for riders is to acquire all the equipment and horses they need (or think they need) and finding reliable crew support. These problems are challenging but all who persevere seem to find a solution. It adds to the sense of adventure and achievement sweetened by a lasting bond with others who share this intense adventure.

When the weather gets bad, AERC riders can usually choose to stay home. This is not an option on the grand tour rides. In 2011 and 2015, XP riders experienced torrential rain, tens of miles of horse-testing deep and slippery mud, golf-ball sized hail, intense heat that forced start times to 4:00 a.m., thick clouds of mosquitos, wild horses interested in the endurance mares and geldings (go figure), hundreds of range-fence gates, huge farm machines that look like scary monsters (especially to horses), and other interesting moments too numerous to count.

There are hours requiring much willpower to endure, but many others providing deep joy. No one with a sense of history can ride past the many historic sites on this trail without an emotional response. Also, these rides go for weeks across vast unpopulated areas—a reminder that much of our country is nearly empty!

These are long rides, and almost everybody who wants to ride every day has issues with sore-legged horses (metabolic issues are extremely rare on these rides). This too is a learning experience.

Also, it should surprise no one to hear that a diverse group of people living in close contact for months will generate drama, comedy, romance and conflict. That is another unique part of the experience and fun (sometimes only in retrospect).

The four grand tour rides span 15 years, so they change with AERC and the surrounding society. One constant is the wonderful hospitality of local people along the route. From an organizer's perspective, the biggest change is the increasing difficulty of obtaining permits. The 1976 and 1979 rides were done without a need to get permits.

Permits were required and obtained without much difficulty in 2001. But permitting was a struggle in 2011 (despite a year-long effort, the BLM permit for Nevada wasn't provided until a day before we rode across the border), and in 2015 it was just too difficult to get permits for BLM and USFS land in Utah and much

of Wyoming. So the 2015 ride skipped across Utah and substituted two weeks of informal trail rides across western Wyoming.

The current AERC membership is about 90% of its level in 2001, and the total number of ride entries mirrors the number of members. But the median age of AERC members has increased from 45 in 2001 to 54 in 2015. This aging is probably the primary reason for other changes: the number of 100 mile entries in 2014 is only 55% of the number in 2001, and the number of LD entries has increased from 56% of the number of 50 mile entries to 92% in 2015. Many members seem to be shifting their interest toward the shorter distances.

This aging effect is also seen in the grand tour rides. In 2001 a large percentage of the participants wanted to ride 50 miles every day if they could. One did (junior Kayla Ramsdell), and several others came close. Dave Rabe did all 25 in 2004. In 2011 Karen Chaton⁹ completed all 40 AERC 50 mile rides, using only two horses. She says the biggest difference between 2001 and the recent editions is that the earlier riders and equines were better prepared by experience on the many tough point-to-point rides of the earlier times.

The mean number of entries per day was nearly the same in 2011 and 2015 (a bit less than half the total number of participants). But an LD was offered daily for the first time in 2015, and this option was chosen by more than half of the participants.

In summary, the Pony Express Trail has inspired much of the evolution of AERC to its current form. It provided inspiration for the original Robie ride in 1955, and this eventually served as motivation for the creation of AERC.

The independent long rides of 1976 and 1979 led to the creation of four- and five-day point-to-point rides. Most of the early

staging of these rides was on the XP Trail or other historic trails.

As the 21st century began, XP Rides took the multi-day concept to another level by stringing many of them together to create what I call the grand tour rides.

What will happen next? Will a new generation step up to revive multi-day point-to-point rides on historic trails, or even organize an occasional grand tour ride on the XP Trail or elsewhere? I hope so, because these rides are a life-enhancing adventure offering immersion in the true spirit of historic American endurance riding.

Those of us who have had this experience are grateful, and hope future generations can have the same opportunity.

Notes

1. The Pony Express Trail follows a parallel route about 30 miles south along today's U.S. Hwy. 50.
2. www.teviscup.org/archive/prior-years/122-wendell-towle-robie-1895-1984
3. *Challenging the Mountains: the Life and Times of Wendell T. Robie*, by Bill G. Wilson, Robie Historic Foundation, 1998.
4. Another example: Robie had a major role in development of snow sports in Northern California, including the campaign to bring the 1960 Winter Olympics to Squaw Valley. He led efforts to popularize ski jumping. His group conducted several jumping events at temporary facilities in the San Francisco Bay Area (they hired railroad cars to transport snow from the high mountains). Imagine getting permission to do such a thing now!
5. *The Great American Horse Race of 1976* by Curtis Lewis and Dennis Underwood, Buckboard Press, 1993.
6. From participant Shannon Weil's Amazon review of the Lewis and Underwood book.
7. *The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California* by Richard F. Burton, originally published in 1862 (several modern reprints are available).
8. The XP Rides program currently includes 11 events with a total of 38 ride days, each including an LD and endurance distance. These XP Ride events account for about 10% of all AERC rides and about 45% of all rides in the regions where they are offered (PS, SW, MT). These rides attract above-average entries, so the fraction of AERC ride entries is even higher.
9. Karen Chaton provided a three-part report on the 2001 ride (October 2001 and January 2002 EN), which are available at <http://enduranceridestuff.com/blog/>.