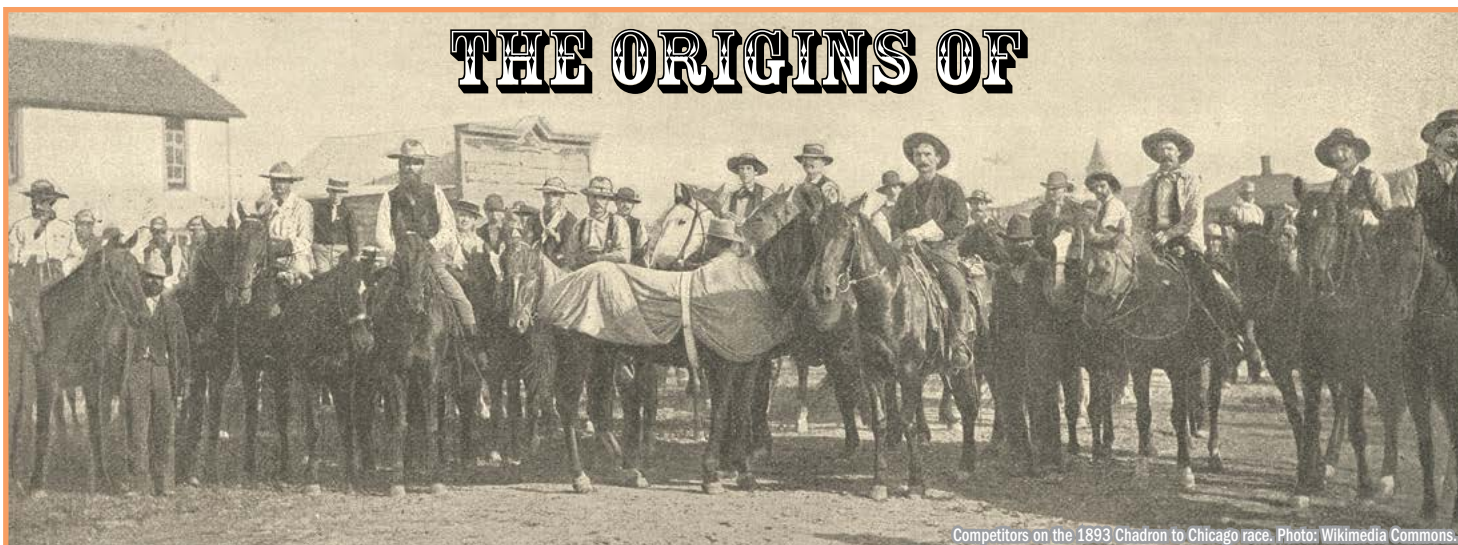


# THE ORIGINS OF



Competitors on the 1893 Chadron to Chicago race. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

# AMERICAN ENDURANCE RIDING

by Tom Bache

The modern sport of endurance riding was born the day Wendell Robie and four friends rode from Tahoe City to Auburn on a neglected historic trail rediscovered by Robert Montgomery Watson and marked by Watson, Robie and friends in the early 1930s. In the early 1950s Robie and others organized 3-day rides on this 100 mile trail.

On August 5, 1955, Robie led the one-day ride that birthed the annual Western States Trail Ride (WSTR or Tevis Cup)<sup>1</sup>. More than 60 years later, WSTR is little different from when it was born. WSTR was and still is organized around a few guiding principles (100 mile course on natural terrain, a ride—not a race—completion is the primary objective, horse welfare is protected with the fit-to-continue requirement, regular veterinary checkpoints, use and preservation of historic trails).

The American Endurance Ride Conference was founded in 1972 to create a national sport based on these same principles. Over the ensuing decades the rules controlling events have been extended and refined, but the principles are unchanged. They provide the foundation that defines endurance riding in America and most of the world.

Long-distance riding and racing has gone on for thousands of years<sup>2</sup> but, as far as we know, never in the WSTR way. What motivated Robie to make the choices he did? The answer is in the pre-WSTR history. This article reviews this history with emphasis on an especially important event: the Great Cowboy Race of 1893.

Robie was an extraordinary man with original ideas plus the skills, energy and resources to promote them. The WSTR creation story has been told in numerous articles and books, most notably Bill G. Wilson's biography<sup>3</sup> and Marnye Langer's history of the Tevis Cup<sup>4</sup>. We know from these sources and interviews with Robie's close associates<sup>5</sup> that he was well informed about the history of the exploration and settlement of the Western United States.

The central role of horses in the development of the American

West is featured in countless novels, films, and histories. Most Americans are familiar with the basic facts about the nomadic Plains Indian horse culture of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Indian Wars of the second half of the 19th century, and the cowboy culture that dominated the Great Plains through much of the 1800s. This cowboy culture has remnants today, and many modern riders feel kinship with it.

Robie was born in 1895. He grew up in Gold Rush and timber country in the Sierra Nevada foothills and spent some years in Arizona shortly after it became the 48th state. When he was young, the horse culture was fresh in memory and still alive in many places. Robie loved riding horses in remote places, so he probably felt regret for its passing.

Some accounts say that Robie founded WSTR to prove that modern horses and riders could cover 100 miles in a day. But he surely knew that this required little more than the motivation to do so. Accounts of 19th century Western history often mention long rides as minor elements of a larger story.

The Cavalry, messengers, and ordinary citizens also rode fast over long distances to carry news and mail and, more dramatically, to pursue Indians and bandits. For example, an obscure account<sup>6</sup> of the 1892 Powder River War in Wyoming tells of a seven-man posse riding 120 miles in 14 hours. The distance may be exaggerated and the time under-estimated, but these were ordinary citizens carrying weapons and riding working horses with heavy cowboy saddles.

Similar tales of one-rider, one-horse feats were common when Robie was young.<sup>7,8</sup> When living in Arizona in the early 1920s, he rode 80 miles in a day to get medicine for his sick son.

A rider hurrying through remote country with one or two horses had to be very careful to keep his mounts fit to continue—his life depended on it. But there was also a dark side, and many of the most famous long rides left a trail of dead animals.<sup>9</sup> So as the 19th century came to an end, the American view of long-distance horse riding had a romantic view (the cowboy culture) and a hostile view (fast, long-distance riding is animal

abuse). The romantic view dominated the rural West, and the hostile view was strong in the more populated and urbanized East.

As described in a booklet available from the Dawes County, Nebraska, Historical Museum<sup>10</sup> and Richard Serrano's recent book, "American Endurance: Buffalo Bill, the Great Cowboy Race of 1893, and the Vanishing Wild West,"<sup>11</sup> the opposing views of long-distance riding clashed dramatically in the weeks before 1000-mile Great Cowboy Race of 1893 (GCR). The conflict was resolved amicably by adding checks along the route to verify that there was no threat to horse health.

Many decades later, the same clash of views threatened the early WSTR, and the conflict was resolved the same way. As the first to use what we now call "fit-to-continue" veterinary checks, the GCR deserves a place of honor in the story of the origins of American endurance riding. It is also the direct antecedent of AERC Pioneer Rides.

The Chadron-to-Chicago GCR in 1893 occurred at an inflection point in American history. While now mostly forgotten, it resonated with other critical events to become what is probably the most publicized long-distance horse race in American history, and perhaps the world.

In 1890 the Indian Wars ended at Wounded Knee near Chadron, in northwestern Nebraska. After the 1890 Census, the Census Bureau declared that the frontier had broken up.<sup>12</sup> This inspired Frederick Jackson Turner to develop his hugely influential framework for interpreting and understanding American history and the development of the unique American character. This framework was first described in a paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," presented to an 1893 meeting of the American Historical Society in Chicago. Turner's framework pervades thousands of scholarly and popular works, so it is deeply embedded in American historical memory.

Also in 1893, the Chicago World's Fair (or Chicago Columbian Exposition) drew huge crowds of American and international visitors. It was created to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to America, but many popular exhibits showcased electricity, motion pictures, moving walkways, and other new technology that would dramatically alter life in the 20th century. In short, the 1893 World's Fair commemorated the past while exuberantly portraying the wonders to come.

Just outside the World's Fair grounds, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show celebrated the "taming the frontier" era just passing into history. Bill Cody was one of the most popular entertainers of the time, and his show attracted huge audiences all over America and Europe by presenting a spectacular and romantic celebration of the Old West, especially the Indian Wars and cowboy culture.

In 1892 little Chadron found a place in these events when a local press correspondent and serial hoaxer wrote a fictitious story about a planned 1000-mile race from Chadron to the Chicago World's Fair. He sent the story to Eastern newspapers as a "let's fool the city slickers" hoax.



Wendell Robie (left) and other riders in Tahoe City, California, at the start of the 1995 Western States Trail Ride. Harry Johnson photo.

But the hoax got out of hand when the story was picked up by newspapers all over America and Europe. Since Chadron had fallen on hard times and needed publicity, leading citizens soon decided that they had to try to make the race happen.

The fictitious start was only a few months away, so success seemed unlikely. But Chadron representatives contacted Buffalo Bill, and he quickly agreed to increase the prizes and host the finish at his show.

His motivation was partly to gain more publicity. But, probably more importantly, he had long been touting the hardiness and endurance of native American cowboy horses and riders. The GCR provided a chance to prove it.

Another event raising the profile of the GCR occurred in Europe in 1892. This was a race pitting 100-plus Austrian mounted cavalry officers against a slightly larger team of German counterparts. The course was 360 miles between Vienna and Berlin (the two teams traveled opposite directions). It was a disaster. According to the Long Riders' Guild, they "raced 46 horses to death in 71 hours."<sup>13</sup> This animal abuse was widely publicized and universally condemned.

Buffalo Bill and his show toured Europe from 1887 to 1892, so he knew about the Vienna-Berlin fiasco. Clearly, he had much to lose if the GCR was anything like it. Nevertheless, he bet his reputation that it wouldn't. This was a remarkable demonstration of faith in cowboy horses and horsemanship.

As the GCR began to come together, there were rumors of hundreds of riders intending to enter. Rules were published. The most important were:

- Each rider could take two horses and switch between them at his discretion.
- The rider could drop one horse, but wasn't allowed to replace it.
- The minimum weight for rider plus tack was 150 pounds.
- Riders were required to register on arrival at each of 12 intermediate checkpoints.
- A course map would be provided just before the start, and riders could otherwise follow a route and schedule of their choosing.

The GCR plans were greeted with great enthusiasm in Western horse country. But the concept also raised the ire of animal rights groups throughout the country. These groups were convinced that the GCR would be an animal abuse disaster, so they insisted that it be prevented. Since the animal rights advocates were very well connected compared to citizens of a small town in Nebraska, they convinced governors of several states, law enforcement officials, and ordinary citizens that the race must be stopped. All along the route there were credible threats to arrest and jail riders or otherwise terminate the race.

While Western cowboys deeply resented what they viewed as ignorant hostility, most interested riders chose prudence. The hundreds of expected riders dwindled to 25 as race day neared, and only nine especially tough characters appeared in Chadron

ready to start. But would the organizers be able to brave the threats and start the race?

According to Serrano's book, thousands of spectators poured into Chadron to witness the planned June 13 start. At the same time, two representatives (one a veterinarian) of the animal rights groups were hurrying by train to Chadron, hoping to arrive in time to stop the race. The race organizers heard they were coming and postponed the start to provide time to negotiate a compromise to allow the GCR to proceed without interference.

While the riders and crowd waited, the GCR and animal rights representatives met for many hours. Their face-to-face contact generated mutual respect, and they were able to work out a solution acceptable to both sides. Since the course stayed near the railroad line, it was possible to use the train to meet the riders at the planned checkpoints. Thus, the agreed-upon solution was for the animal rights representatives to meet the riders at the checkpoints to examine their horses and disqualify any that were unsound or showed signs of abuse (e.g., spur wounds). With this compromise, an early version of the "fit-to-continue" criterion was born.

The riders finally ambled out of town at 6:00 p.m. on June 13. As the days went by, the GCR was a popular success, though a slowly unfolding test of endurance and tolerance for sleep deprivation rather than a dramatic dust-raising race.

The GCR was an important milestone for American endurance riding. It was also an important and nostalgic milestone in American history. Serrano captures it well: "While they could not know it then . . . they were racing for something far more meaningful. Not for individual glory, but for the immortality of the Old West itself, to help ensure that the West would be remembered as young and hopeful and forever vast, a wild and boundless outdoors where a man on a racing, hooves-pounding, heart-galloping bronco symbolized one of America's greatest virtues: endurance."

Communication via railroad and telegraph allowed people to follow the race's progress, and enthusiastic crowds greeted the riders along the way.<sup>14</sup> Seven of the nine entrants crossed the finish line.<sup>15</sup> A few horses had to stop due to lameness, but none showed signs of being overridden at any time along the course. The seven finishing horses were examined by veterinarians who said they were in excellent condition (usually much better than their exhausted riders).<sup>16</sup>

The winning rider covered the course in a few hours less than 14 days, averaging more than 70 miles a day for two weeks. Even split across two horses, this is an extraordinary result, and demonstrated that long-distance horse racing could be done safely.

The GCR clash of views was repeated in the early years of WSTR. From the first ride in 1955, Robie, well aware of the potential for complaints from animal rights groups, asked the U.C. Davis School of Veterinary Medicine<sup>17</sup> to assemble a team of vets to examine the horses at the start, at checkpoints along the way, and at the finish. The close relationship between WSTR and UCD's vet school has continued ever since.

The WSTR was just a ride (no attention to finish place) until

the Tevis Cup was added in 1959. This added an incentive to race, and some horse welfare issues arose that drew the attention of animal rights groups. They concluded that such a long event would inevitably cause unacceptable animal abuse. They tried to stop it. But Robie had already replicated the GCR approach with WSTR's regular fit-to-continue verification by veterinarians.

Animal rights representatives were invited to observe the event, and influential U.C. Davis veterinarians stated publicly that WSTR posed no undue risk for horse welfare.<sup>19</sup> After a few years, the demonstration of WSTR's careful attention to horse welfare caused animal rights concerns to subside.

Over the decades the WSTR concept has been extended to include shorter one-day rides and Pioneer multi-day rides<sup>19</sup>, inspired by lessons from the 1976 Great American Horse Race<sup>20,21,22</sup> (GAHR), which was clearly modeled on the GCR<sup>23</sup>.

What happened to American long-distance riding between 1893 and the invention of modern endurance riding? Curtis Lewis and Dennis Underwood provide a brief history in "The Great American Horse Race of 1976."<sup>22</sup> They describe eight competitions: 600 miles from Evanston, Wyoming, to Denver in 1908; 154 miles in 1913; 162 miles in New England in 1918; and a 1919-1923 series of five 5-day, 300-mile races to determine the best breeds for Cavalry use.

The early 20th century 5-day, 300-mile Cavalry tests provided the inspiration and model for competitive trail riding (CTR). Open CTR events preceded the first modern endurance rides by decades.<sup>24</sup> For example, the Green Mountain Horse Association's 3-day, 100-mile CTR has been held in Vermont almost every year since 1936 ([www.gmhinc.org](http://www.gmhinc.org)).

Another Cavalry horse test in 1923 connects directly to WSTR. In that test Will Tevis, riding many horses, relay-style, beat a team of nine Cavalry riders on a course following the Pony Express Trail from South Lake Tahoe, Nevada, to San Mateo, California.<sup>25</sup> Tevis's time was 11.5 hours for 257.5 miles, including a crossing of the Sierra Nevada.

Then in 1932 Tevis won a bet with famed film director Hal Roach by riding 200 miles in just over 10 hours on a 10 laps/mile banked track.<sup>26</sup> He used four polo ponies, changing every 200 laps (20 miles). This feat was mentioned in a 1980 speech given by Robie.<sup>27</sup>

The Great Cowboy Race occurred as cowboy horse culture was passing into history. The Cavalry interest in horses also passed with the World War I invention of motorized tanks.

The 1930s and 1940s were consumed by higher priorities, so there was little room for reviving what seemed to be an archaic sport. But a richer society with more resources for recreation was emerging in the 1950s, and Robie's concept had room to grow and prosper.

Like the Great Cowboy Race participants, modern endurance participants are not soldiers or other professional riders, but ordinary citizens who integrate long-distance horse riding into their lives.

The author is a retired physicist and amateur historian who tries to understand how the world became what we experience. He began endurance riding as a post-65 retirement hobby and became curious about its origins. This article recounts some of what he has learned.

## Notes

1. Western States Trail Foundation Documentary, *They Crossed the Mountains: The History of the Western States Trail*, Taurus Productions DVD, 2008, available from [www.teviscup.org/the-tevis-store](http://www.teviscup.org/the-tevis-store).
2. Ann Hyland, *The Endurance Horse: A World Survey from Ancient Civilizations to Modern Competition*, J. A. Allen & Co, Ltd, 1999.
3. Bill G. Wilson, *Challenging The Mountains: The Life and Times of Wendell T. Robie*, Robie Historical Foundation, 1998.
4. Marnye Langer, *The Tevis Cup*, The Lyons Press, 2003
5. The author benefited from access to source material, numerous conversations, suggestions, and fact-checking by 30-time WSTR finisher Hal Hall. Hall was Robie's neighbor, protégé (and later, bank employee), from his birth in the founding year of 1955 until Robie's death in 1984. Hall is also co-producer of the Western States Trail Foundation documentary.<sup>1</sup>
6. Helena Huntington Smith, *The War on Powder River*, University of Nebraska, 1966, p. 214.
7. The Pony Express is often cited as one of Robie's inspirations, and Pony Express riders did sometimes cover 100 miles in much less than a day. But they usually changed to a fresh horse every 10 or so miles.
8. Major Frederick Russell Burnham, *Scouting on Two Continents*, Garden City Publishing Co., 1926 [autobiographical account of remarkable late 19th century scouting adventures that exemplify horse welfare concerns during impressive long-distance rides].
9. Especially famous examples are Kit Carson's 1846 800 mile ride on the southern route between Los Angeles and the Rio Grande (Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West*, Anchor, 2007) and Francis

Aubrey's several Santa Fe Trail speed record rides in 1847 and 1848 ([www.truewestmagazine.com/a-race-to-end-all-races](http://www.truewestmagazine.com/a-race-to-end-all-races))

10. *The Chadron to Chicago Cowboy Horse Race of 1893*, compiled by Rip Radcliffe, published by B&B Printing, Chadron, NE, 1984.
11. Richard A. Serrano, *American Endurance: Buffalo Bill, the Great Cowboy Race of 1893, and the Vanishing Wild West*, Smithsonian Books, 2016.
12. The advancing line beyond which population density was less than 2 per square mile.
13. [www.longridersguild.com/shame.htm](http://www.longridersguild.com/shame.htm). Other accounts provide different estimates for the number of horses that died or were ruined, but the true number is surely very large.
14. [www.si.com/vault/1962/09/03/598056/the-great-1000mile-race-from-chadron-to-chicago](http://www.si.com/vault/1962/09/03/598056/the-great-1000mile-race-from-chadron-to-chicago)
15. There were accusations that several riders cheated by resting in a buggy leading their horse or skipping sections by taking the train.
16. The two animal rights representatives who negotiated the compromise reached in Chadron were veterinarian W.W. Tatro and Paul Fontaine from the Minneapolis Humane Society. They then checked the horses along the route and at the finish. Serrano quotes Fontaine: "[The riders] have taken care of their horses better than they have of themselves. And we have no cause to complain or take any action whatever."
17. The team in 1955 and several years after was led by Dr. J.D. Wheat, a founding member of the veterinary school faculty and highly respected expert on injuries to sport horses (the U.C. Davis J.D. Wheat Veterinary Orthopedic Laboratory continues his work).
18. Hal Hall<sup>4</sup> recalls Robie talking about the GCR, so he must have

been aware that he was following their example.

19. A Pioneer Ride is a 3- to 5-day series of one-day endurance rides by one-rider, one-horse teams. Often organizers give prizes for overall placement determined by total time over all days of the ride. Each day is also a typical one-day event. These rides aren't entirely unique to America, but they are quite rare elsewhere.
20. Tom Bache, "AERC & Historic Trails," *Endurance News*, November 2015, pp. 21-23.
21. Tom Bache, "AERC & the Pony Express Trail," *Endurance News*, December 2015, pp. 27-29.
22. Curtis Lewis and Dennis Underwood, *The Great American Horse Race of 1976*, Buckboard Press, 1993.
23. The rules are similar, including the eccentric (to modern eyes) permission to use a second horse that is led when not ridden. The primary differences are that the GAHR had daily stages that covered a specified route and that the second horse could be trailered at the cost of a substantial time penalty.
24. Christina Keim, "The 'bucket list' distance ride: GMHA 100 Mile CTR," *AERC Extra - Online Newsletter*, Spring 2016, pp.13-15.
25. Will Tevis was a friend of Wendell Robie and donated the Tevis Cup in honor of his grandfather, Lloyd Tevis, a leading citizen of 19th century California and President of Wells-Fargo Express Company.
26. J.K. Armsby, "A Modern Endurance Test," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 9, 1932
27. [joomla.teviscup.org/archive/2014/181-presidents-message-2-1-14](http://joomla.teviscup.org/archive/2014/181-presidents-message-2-1-14)