

AERC & Historic Trails



by Tom Bache

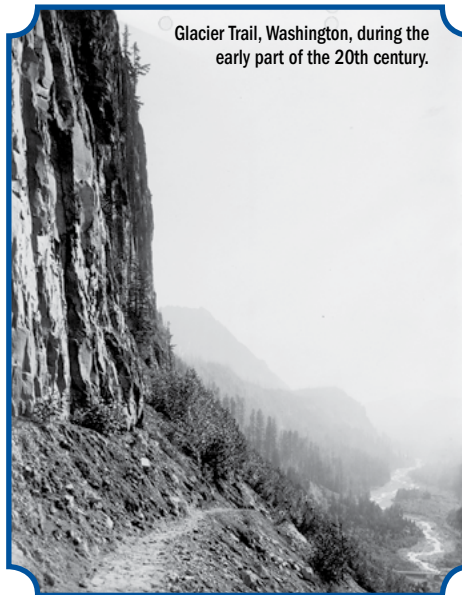
The AERC Bylaws state five purposes for this organization. One begins, “The Conference shall encourage the riding of historic trails . . .” That sounds like a good thing to most members. After all, riding long distances was a normal part of life for millennia, so a taste for it may be embedded in our nature. Doing it over the same ground as our ancestors enhances the pleasure.

But what is a “historic trail?” Most trails follow routes used by animals and people from time immemorial, and many of them have interesting histories. I like this definition: a historic trail is one used for migration (permanent or seasonal) and/or commerce in the time before motorized transportation (1900 is a convenient boundary).

Most famous historic trails were emigration and trading trails from our nation’s expansion west. Examples include the Wilderness Road, the Lewis and Clark Trail, many emigration trails to Oregon and California (the Pony Express Trail follows one option), the Santa Fe Trail, and the Spanish Trail.

Portions of nearly all trails mentioned above (and many others) are officially designated “National Historic Trails.” They are managed by BLM, the Forest Service or the Park Service. But these famous trails are only a small fraction of the historically significant trails that deserve attention and do (or could) provide a marvelous riding experience.

Some rides proudly describe their roots in history: Western States Endurance Ride (Tevis), the City of Rocks in Idaho (which uses trails through a famous landmark on the Oregon-California



Glacier Trail, Washington, during the early part of the 20th century.

emigrant trail) and many of the rides organized by Ann and David Nicholson, DVM.

Many other AERC rides trod on or near trails that may not be famous, but have interesting and significant histories. Do the organizers provide information about the relevant history, or even know about it? Those interested could do research to find historic trails that are used in their area and share that information with ride managers. They may appreciate the information and use it to connect their ride with the past.

The most prominent proponents of using historic trails are the Nicholsons’ and their XP Rides organization. They provide 11 multiday rides each year. Most are in remote locations and use portions of historic trails. At each ride meeting, Dave

takes a few minutes to describe historically significant features on the next day’s route. It is brief, but enough for the interested to find more detail. This practice enhances the ride experience.

Multiday, point-to-point rides replicate the way most historic trails were used. These were quite popular in the 1980s and 1990s. AERC began sanctioning them in 1982 with the Capitol to Capitol Ride from Carson City, Nevada, across the Sierra Nevada to Sacramento, California.

In the following two decades AERC sanctioned many other three- to five-day rides on historic trails in the West. Besides the XP rides, other early multadays included the New Mexico Renegade Ride along the Mexican border, the Outlaw Trail Ride across Utah’s canyon country, the Lost Wagon Train Ride along an Oregon Trail variant in Oregon, the Death Valley Challenge, and the Applegate-Lassen Ride across the Sierra Nevada. (Just read-



The New Mexico Renegade Ride ran from 1987 to 2000 as a point-to-point ride in the "boot heel" area of Southwest New Mexico. Highlights of the ride included ruins of Old Hatchita (above) and an 1800s passenger car "out in the middle of nowhere," as the ride's manager, Randy Eiland, explained. That's Crockett Dumas, in the left photo, taking a rest in 1995. Photos © Genie Stewart-Spears, www.geniess.com.

ing this list will likely speed the pulse of many endurance riders.)

Unfortunately, nearly all multiday, point-to-point rides disappeared after 2003. One survivor is the annual Michigan Shore-to-Shore Ride that began in 1980s.

The Nicholsons took on the challenge of managing very long (26 to 40 riding days) rides on the Pony Express Trail in 2001, 2004, 2011 and 2015. The 10-day Santa Fe Trail Ride in 2007 was an attempt to follow this example, but it has not been repeated.

The early multiday rides were milestones in AERC's history as they demonstrated that traditional long distance riding (point-to-point over many days) is practical and safe for modern horses and riders. Multiday rides are now common, but the point-to-point version is rare. It is sad to lose this direct connection with the horse-riding ways of the past.

All rides pose challenges for organizers and riders, but point-to-point rides are challenge multipliers. The author rode the very long Pony Express rides in 2011 and 2015 and gained much appreciation for this fact. The Nicholsons have embraced modern technology, drastically reducing the trail-marking challenge by collecting and distributing daily-route GPS tracks. But that is after the route has been selected and traveled by horse or vehicle (a large task when the route is hundreds or even thousands of miles long).

Inaccessible areas often make it impossible to follow the precise trace of historic trails (if there is one—most are actually a network of parallel trails). Since the objective is to experience the same conditions and terrain as pre-1900 travelers, it is usually possible to find a practical route within this network, at least in lightly populated areas.

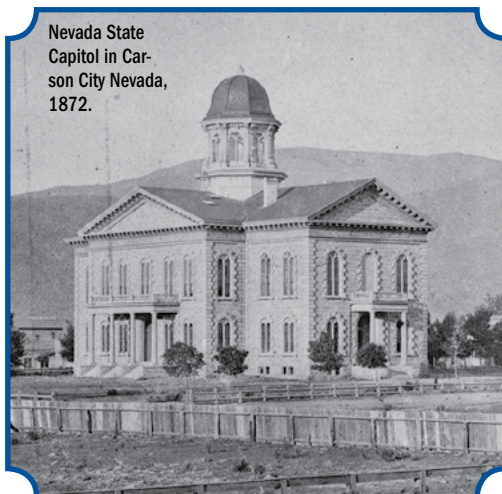
The greatest challenge is to obtain permits. This is a growing problem everywhere, but it is multiplied for long routes crossing multiple jurisdictions. Another formidable challenge for endurance riding is to find suitable "camping" areas about 50 miles apart along the route. The pre-1900 riders required little space. But modern riders travel with big rigs that take much space and tolerate rough ground poorly. Also, riders need helpers to move rigs and spare horses down the trail each day.

Of course, each day brings the issues common to all rides, but they get harder when base camp keeps moving.

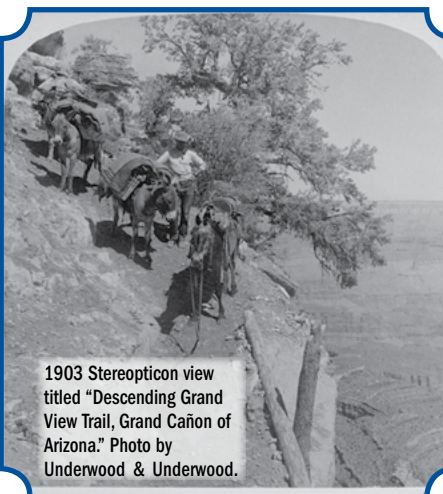
To summarize, preserving historic trails by riding them is an important AERC objective, and we probably do it more than we realize. It is important to honor that history by acknowledging it.

Multiday, point-to-point rides offer the most intimate connection with the pre-motorized past and can be a priceless, life-enhancing experience. Organizing these rides is difficult, but not insurmountable. Such rides could return if enough riders want them. Do you?

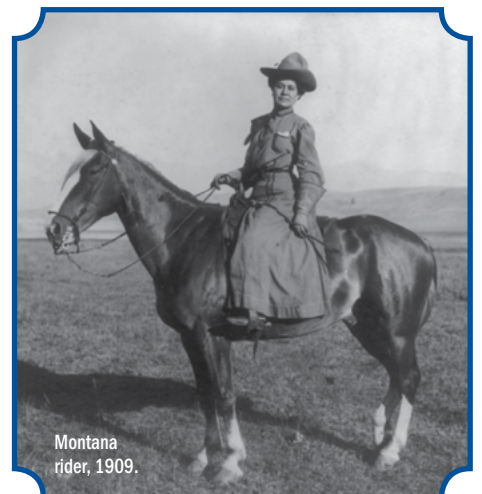
A note about the photos: The historic photos were all found on the Library of Congress website (www.loc.gov), a wonderful resource for photos and prints on just about any topic.



Nevada State Capitol in Carson City Nevada, 1872.



1903 Stereopticon view titled "Descending Grand View Trail, Grand Cañon of Arizona." Photo by Underwood & Underwood.



Montana rider, 1909.