

AERC HISTORY:



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Charlie Barieau

TRADITIONS & MYTHS

by Tom Bache

A long-established and accepted practice is a tradition. A myth is a widely held but false belief.

The author learned about AERC's traditions while accumulating 4000+ endurance miles and serving four years on the AERC Board of Directors (2013-2017). But doing the research to write several *Endurance News* articles about endurance riding history revealed several myths.

Some arose when "long-established" morphed into "always." Others arose when people came to believe things that were never true. These myths do no harm, but they are interesting—and seeking the truth has intrinsic value.

The myths and corresponding true stories discussed in this article are:

Myth: 50 miles has always been the minimum length for an "endurance ride."

Truth: Actually, 25 miles was the minimum length for the first four years of AERC (1972 to 1975).

Myth: The limited distance division is a recent innovation to encourage beginners and aging riders.

Truth: The LD division was created in 1986—much closer to 1972 than now.

Myth: 100 miles was the standard distance in earlier times.

Truth: 100 miles is the distance for the Tevis Cup and other long-established classics; 50 miles has always been by far the most popular AERC distance.

Myth: Wendell Robie was active in the creation of AERC. (Note: The author is unaware of any previous publication discussing

the Robie/AERC relationship, so this may be more "mystery" than "myth.")

Truth: Robie was supportive of AERC's founding but was not a participant in its formation.



Pat Fitzgerald's horse Lanny is examined by Dr Murray Fowler with Paige Harper and Lynne Blades assisting. Photo © Charles Barieau.

Background and sources

Most AERC members know that modern American endurance riding began with Wendell Robie's 1955 creation of the Western States Trail Ride (WSTR, *aka* Tevis Cup). This inspired creation of similar events. The concept spread around the country, and AERC was founded in 1972 to organize, standardize, and govern endurance riding.

In a June 2017 article the author explored the historical roots of Robie's concept (AERC.

org/static/History_June17.pdf). In earlier articles the author summarized the history of two important extensions of Robie's original 100 miles in one day concept:

- AERC-sanctioned 3- to 5-day point-to-point rides on historic trails that began in 1982 and remained popular for nearly two decades (AERC.org/static/History_Nov15.pdf), and
- very long point-to-point rides that extend the multi-day concept to months on the trail (AERC.org/static/History_Dec15.pdf).

These histories were based on publicly available documents and interviews with key participants who remain active AERC members.

The core principles underlying AERC endurance riding are quite simple: (a) long rides on trails traversing natural terrain, and (b) emphasis on horse welfare via fit-to-continue criteria. All else is detail. AERC was founded to determine and enforce the details. The changes are almost all on the margins—the experience is the much the same.

The minutes from meetings of AERC Board of Directors (BOD) meetings are invaluable for confirming the dates and details of key decisions. Much of what follows was learned from them. (Find the minutes at AERC.org/M_C_MinutesArchived.)

Endurance ride minimum distance

It is almost universally believed that 50 miles has always been the minimum length for an AERC endurance ride. This is not true—25 miles was the minimum distance from the founding year (1972) until 1976.

AERC points computation table from the 1974 AERC Year Book of Endurance Riding

Each horse-an-rider team receives one point for each mile of a completed ride.

The TOP TEN receive additional points according to the following percentages of ride mileage:

Place	%	Length of sample rides in miles								
		25	28	30	44	50	54	60	75	100
1	100	25	28	30	44	50	54	60	75	100
2	90	22.5	25.2	27	39.6	45	48.6	54	67.5	90
3	80	20	22.4	24	35.2	40	43.2	48	60	80
4	70	17.5	19.6	21	30.8	35	37.8	42	52.5	70
5	60	15	16.8	18	26.4	30	32.4	36	45	60
6	50	12.5	14	15	22	25	27	30	37.5	50
7	40	10	11.2	12	17.6	20	21.6	24	30	40
8	30	7.5	8.4	9	13.2	15	16.2	18	22.5	30
9	20	5	5.6	6	8.8	10	10.8	12	15	20
10	10	2.5	2.8	3	4.4	5	5.4	6	7.5	10

In addition:
 First Place.....50 points
 Best Condition.....50 points

From the beginning AERC supported annual endurance awards based on both miles and points. Points were initially compiled on a national basis, but rapid growth motivated the 1974 separation into regions with standings for each. The formula for compiling points is shown via examples in the table above. Two observations:

- All distances from 25 to 100 miles are treated exactly the same.
- The current formulas for awarding points are little different from those at the founding of AERC.

The 50 mile minimum was established by a motion passed at the February 1976 BOD meeting. It reads, "Effective February 1, 1976, only those endurance rides of 50 miles or more will be sanctioned by AERC."

After this policy was established, many members urged AERC to renew its support for rides shorter than 50 miles. This eventually led to a compromise via a motion passed at the February 26, 1984, BOD meeting. This motion added a new and separate limited distance (LD) division for rides between 25 and 50 miles.

The LD records were to be kept for mileage only; placements were not required until fairly recently. The National Limited Distance Best Condition award was added in 1998, and the Regional LD BC debuted in 2001. The Regional Limited Distance championships were added 13 years ago, in 2005.

Focus on 100 mile rides

It is widely accepted that successful completion of a 100 mile one-day ride is the pinnacle of achievement for an endurance rider. This is certainly true for many riders (including the author), and 100 miles/160

km is the national and international championship distance.

It is also the distance for many of AERC's long-established and well-known classic rides: WSTR/Tevis Cup (established 1955), Virginia City (established 1968), Big Horn 100 (established 1971) and Old Dominion 100 (established 1974).

AERC offers many paths to achievement awards, and 100 mile rides have always been a small fraction

of AERC-sanctioned endurance rides. AERC was founded in 1972 when Phil Gardner recorded results solicited from 23 existing rides (18 at 50 miles, four at 100 miles, and one at 25 miles).

In 1973 results were recorded for 47 rides (35 at 50 miles, five at 100 miles, three at or near 75 miles, and four at less than 50 miles). (Source: 1974 Year Book of Endurance Riding.)

The table on below indicates how the distance distribution of AERC rides has changed over the years. The selected data show the second season (1973), the first year for which the relevant data are published on the AERC website—AERC.org/erol/aerc/AnnualStatistics.asp (1996), the most recent year (2017), and an intermediate year (2006). The raw data are shown at the top, followed by modified version with some adjustments below.

The most obvious change over the years is the enormous growth of rides shorter

than 50 miles. These now are about half of all AERC rides. The 1986 decision to support LD rides has had a huge positive effect on the sustainment of AERC membership and resulting financial viability.

The bottom part of the table isolates the endurance ride statistics (i.e., deletes the LD numbers) and more accurately portrays the 50 mile numbers by adding twice the 100/2+ numbers and 3.5 times the Pioneer numbers.

(Note: 100/2+ indicates a two-day 100 mile ride. These are rides, usually 50 miles each, done on consecutive days and covering a total of 100 miles, both of which must be completed to receive any mileage credit.)

A Pioneer ride includes either three rides on consecutive days totalling a minimum of 155 miles, or four or five 50 mile rides on consecutive days. (Most are three-day rides, but multiplying by 3.5 may underestimate the average.)

The numbers show that 50 miles has always been by far the most popular endurance distance, and its dominance has grown over time.

The 100 mile distance was indeed more common in the early years, and the percentage of 100 mile rides was stable for many years. But over the last 20 years it has dropped by about a factor of three. However, the 75 mile distance seems to have increased in popularity in recent years, so long rides are only a factor of two less than they were in the early years.

AERC achievement awards emphasize equine and rider miles per year and career. Mileage-centric rewards may discourage participation in frequent 100 mile rides, since they require more rest time for horses than 50s do, so the relative rarity of these long rides should be expected.

The Pioneer rides long ago proved that

Actual Ride Data

Distance	1973		1996		2006		2017	
LD	4	9%	209	30%	348	42%	416	47%
50	35	74%	321	46%	283	34%	291	33%
75	3	6%	30	4%	32	4%	46	5%
100	5	11%	77	11%	42	5%	31	4%
100/2+	-	-	23	3%	10	1%	3	0%
Pioneer	-	-	34	5%	109	13%	95	11%
Total	47		694		824		882	

Adjusted Ride Data (without LD)

Distance	1973		1996		2006		2017	
50	35	81%	486	82%	723	88%	660	90%
75	3	7%	30	5%	32	4%	46	6%
100	5	12%	77	13%	42	5%	31	4%
Total	43		593		797		737	

horses can do 50 miles day after day with no ill effects, so many 50 mile rides provide an easier way to accumulate miles and points.

In summary, the AERC ride program is designed to satisfy the preferences of AERC members. Members drive the incentives, and the incentives drive choices by members and ride managers. Incentives can be changed, and they have evolved over the years.

Wendell Robie and AERC

Most of AERC's founders lived in or near the small town of Auburn, California, where Wendell Robie was a leading citizen. All were WSTR riders or otherwise associated with WSTR. Much has been written about Robie and WSTR, but the founding of AERC has not been part of this story. Here it is.

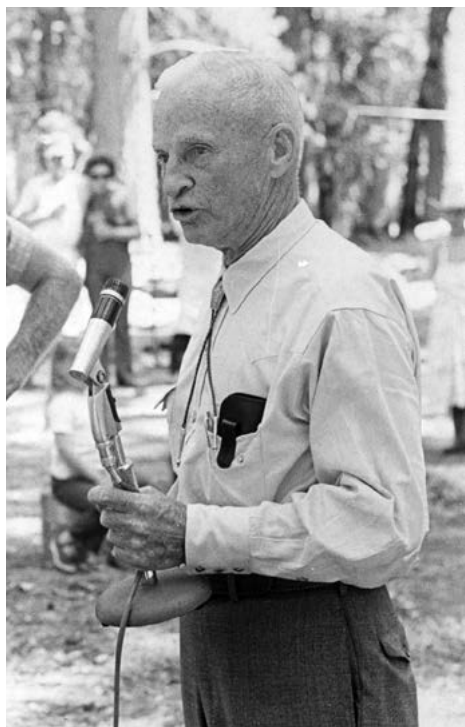
Many factors motivated and influenced the founding of AERC. By the early 1970s, WSTR had inspired the creation of many other endurance rides across the U.S. Also, alternative approaches to trail riding were already organized and standardized by governing organizations in the same area.

NATRC (competitive trail riding) was incorporated in 1963 in nearby Davis, California; on the East Coast, ECTRA came on the scene in 1970. Ride & Tie was founded on the West Coast in 1971. Its growth and attraction for many fit endurance riders was driven by prize money provided by Levi Strauss Company sponsorship.

Another factor was that organized innovation was in the zeitgeist in 1960s and 1970s California. Triathlons were born in San Diego in 1972 (the author was a competitive runner and cyclist at the time and had a small role in triathlon's invention). In 1974 ultra-running was spawned by WSTR when Gordon Ainsleigh completed the course without a horse. Marin County, California, has the most credible claim to have founded mountain biking in the 1970s.

The AERC founders consulted Robie and gained his support, but not active participation, according to Hal Hall. According to the AERC board meeting minutes from February 1, 1976, the founding members of AERC included his granddaughter (Marion Robie Arnold) and Robie's close associates Hal Hall, Charles Barieau, and Phil Gardner. Julie Suhr and Kathie Perry were also very influential in those early years.

AERC quickly became the acknowledged record-keeper for endurance riding. So it became necessary to develop and enforce clear standards for a qualifying endurance ride. Also needed was a way to publish the results. In short, an organization with a



Wendell Robie, first inductee into the AERC Hall of Fame, in 1975. Photo ©Charlie Barieau.

funding mechanism became imperative. Like controversies then and since, there was a vigorous debate about what should be done and how to do it. Similar organizations collected membership and event sanctioning fees, and this approach was chosen.

Robie wasn't opposed to AERC imposing standards and collecting fees from other events, but he was unwilling to compromise the independence of WSTR. This created conflict. Many differences were resolved by compromise (astute readers may notice WSTR-motivated options in the AERC rules). But AERC felt compelled to insist that recognition of WSTR miles and points required compliance with AERC sanctioning rules, and Robie refused to allow payment of AERC sanctioning fees with WSTR Foundation funds. This became an issue when the AERC BOD refused to sanction the 1979 WSTR. (The information in this section is taken from 1980 BOD meeting minutes.)

Soon after, Robie informed AERC that he was not interested in obtaining AERC sanction for the 1980 ride. Failure to resolve this conflict would send the two organizations down different paths, and that division would probably damage both. Pat Fitzgerald (by then an influential member of both organizations) created a temporary workaround. He put a table in the WSTR check-in area and collected sanctioning fees from riders who wanted WSTR miles recorded. Robie tolerated this workaround, and it lasted until he died in 1984.

Fitzgerald managed to obtain the money needed for recording the 1979 and 1980 miles retroactively. AERC was reluctant to accept this method for retroactive sanctioning of WSTR, but it did so and recorded the miles. For the next several years the problem was evaded by the Fitzgerald workaround.

The crisis nearly came back when the AERC BOD revisited the issue in January 1982. First, there was a motion to rescind the 1981 vote. This would remove the retroactive sanction and eliminate the miles for AERC members completing the ride. This motion was rejected by a single vote (9 for, 10 against). A second motion then proposed to exempt WSTR from sanctioning fees due to its stature as the sport's founding event. This was defeated by the same one-vote margin. So by a single vote, lasting AERC-WSTR cooperation was enabled. A few years later WSTR began paying sanctioning fees like other events.

In subsequent decades, the only noticeable differences between WSTR and nearly all other AERC-sanctioned rides is the prevalence of gate-and-go checkpoints at WSTR (AERC rules permit them, but recommend gate-into-a-hold checkpoints) and the absence of an AERC best condition award (AERC rules do not require a BC award, and WSTR awards the Haggin Cup based on similar principles).

Other early controversies

Many newcomers to endurance riding are puzzled that it is not called endurance racing. An event with a set distance and finish order placing is a "race" as the word is defined, and the awards criteria incentivize racing.

Also puzzling is the motto "To finish is to win." This consistent with using the word "ride," but it is in part redundant (every endurance athlete "wins" by achieving personal goals) and in part an oxymoron given the awards criteria. The miles-based awards are, of course, entirely consistent with the name and motto. So racing and riding are both recognized by awards. AERC members are free to choose.

Most of the founders were very competitive "racers," so how were these name and motto choices made at the time of the founding? According to Hal Hall, these were controversial choices with Charlie Barieau (a renowned photographer who never entered an endurance ride) being the strongest and most effective advocate for the choices made.

Also, the motto has become popular because experienced endurance riders recognize that it really applies to the horse, whose only

objective is to finish without excessive stress.

Another early controversy led to the founders' decision that, unlike Ride & Tie, there would be no monetary awards. This decision was inspired by the WSTR example. It has shaped American version of the sport ever since.

All organizations occasionally face conflicts that threaten to cause damaging divisions. The founders and the BODs that followed have demonstrated great wisdom by preserving fidelity to the core principles established by WSTR while allowing many innovative approaches to applying those principles.

These innovations have motivated spirited debate over years or even decades, and decisions were often approved by

narrow margins. (Some of AERC's most contentious disagreements have been over weight divisions, junior rider issues, and BC point calculations.) History rolls on, but so far those governing AERC have made the

right decisions to resolve all conflicts with no lasting negative effects.

This article is meant to be a pleasant ride down memory lane. The stories told are supported by contemporaneous documents. In

that sense they are "true" and so have intrinsic value. Otherwise, they have little importance beyond providing context for current and future issues. ■

Acknowledgement: The author's preparation of this article was greatly enhanced by information (source material, stories, and fact-checking) and assistance (suggestions and thoughtful reviews) provided by 30-time WSTR finisher Hal Hall. Hall, born in 1955 (same as the WSTR), was Wendell Robie's neighbor and protégé (and later, bank employee and colleague) until Robie's death in 1984. As a teenager, he was a central participant in the founding of AERC, and he was an AERC BOD member in the early years. The article also benefited from a review by long-time BOD member Michael Maul.



Hal Hall and Kathy Creighton
Photo © Charlie Barieau