



# Orphans Preferred: The Twisted Truth and Lasting Legend of the Pony Express

*Christopher Corbett*

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“WANTED. YOUNG, SKINNY, WIRY FELLOWS. NOT OVER 18. MUST BE EXPERT RIDERS.  
WILLING TO RISK DEATH DAILY. ORPHANS PREFERRED.”  
—California newspaper help-wanted ad, 1860

The Pony Express is one of the most celebrated and enduring chapters in the history of the United States, a story of the all-American traits of bravery, bravado, and entrepreneurial risk that are part of the very fabric of the Old West. No image of the American West in the mid-1800s is more familiar, more beloved, and more powerful than that of the lone rider galloping the mail across hostile Indian territory. No image is more revered. And none is less understood. *Orphans Preferred* is both a revisionist history of this magnificent and ill-fated adventure and an entertaining look at the often larger-than-life individuals who created and perpetuated the myth of “the Pony,” as it is known along the Pony Express trail that runs from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California. The Pony Express is a story that exists in the annals of Americana where fact and fable collide, a story as heroic as the journey of Lewis and Clark, as complex and revealing as the legacy of Custer’s Last Stand, and as muddled and freighted with yarns as Paul Revere’s midnight ride. *Orphans Preferred* is a fresh and exuberant reexamination of this great American story.

## Orphans Preferred: The Twisted Truth and Lasting Legend of the Pony Express Details

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## From Reader Review Orphans Preferred: The Twisted Truth and Lasting Legend of the Pony Express for online ebook

### Bryan says

Orphans were not preferred, and many other stories about the Pony Express are also myths. This is a good, well researched book on the topic. Somewhat tedious and sometimes repetitive, but worth reading nevertheless.

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### Doug Cornelius says

Legend tells us that this help wanted ad appeared in a California newspaper in 1860:

Wanted.

Young, skinny, wiry fellows. Not over 18.

Must be expert riders. Willing to risk death daily.

Orphans preferred.

The tales of the Pony Express are legendary. It turns out that there are more legends than truth. Most of that is largely because of Buffalo Bill Cody. His traveling show of the wild west was a huge international attraction and spread the legend and grew the legend of the Pony Express. Christopher Corbett brings this all together in his book, *Orphans Preferred*.

Mrs. Doug is from St. Joseph, Missouri, the eastern starting point of the Pony Express route. The rider would mount in front of the Patee House, then charge downhill to a ferry that would take him across the Missouri River and head out to Salt Lake City and on to Sacramento, traveling almost 2,000 miles. In 1860, the Missouri River marked the beginning of the West and the end of American civilization. The railroads and telegraphs ended here.

I find the Pony Express is a great example of the evolution of communication, especially in the current explosion of web-based communications. There is plenty of hype and legend about the evolution of LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and others. The legend is bigger than reality in these money-losing ventures. Perhaps if the Pony Express founders had venture capital money and IPOs they would have turned out differently. Instead, the experiment lasted only 18 months and lost hundreds of thousands of 1860 dollars.

On October 24, 1861, the president of the Overland Telegraph Company sent a two sentence message across a wire from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., telling President Abraham Lincoln that the telegraph has been completed. Two days later, the Pony Express went out of business.

For that short period of time, the Pony Express brought California ten to twelve days closer to the rest of the civilized world.

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### Christopher Corbett says

"The legend overwhelmed the facts long ago, and journalist Christopher Corbett maintains a healthy respect

for both in Orphans Preferred, his history of what one contemporaneous newspaper dubbed "the greatest enterprise of modern times." Though he puts such hyperbole aside, Corbett keeps a healthy awe for the Pony, never selling short the accomplishment of traveling all those miles across so much unforgiving terrain, but also winnowing out the more fabulous accounts to reconstruct the workings of the business, as well as the world in which it operated. . . . Throughout, Corbett remains a witty guide."

--The Onion

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### **Stacey says**

Informationally, this book was great, with bits and pieces from historians, loopy older folks, and drunks alike. i also liked that the author brought up multiple perspectives along with the varied support and refutations they had received over the years. HOWEVER, the writing was a tad dry historian for me. still, if you're into the old west and the pony express, it's worth the read.

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### **Corinne says**

Corbett explores the fascinating world of the Pony Express. A lot of it was interesting, but Corbett's choppy writing style was distracting. Every other sentence led me to a pause. And many more that broke my rhythm. I also know that the author knew his stuff, but filled the book with a bit of fluff and a lot digs too into the legends. I do appreciate him taking the time to dispel other book's inaccuracies, but as a non scholar of the Pony Express this wasn't for me.

If you are interested in the Pony Express, don't let my rating stop you from reading this book. Personally I finished it and said "It was ok."

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### **Rene Blansette says**

This was a bit of a fun read. The author wrote not only about the background of the Pony Express, but where the legends came from.

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### **Russ says**

Anyone who considers this book 'boring' as one person said, is probably not interested in history unless it is dramatized, sexualized, and propagandized. I found this book to be a very complete and yes interesting telling of how the Pony Express came into being, what it did, who did it, and its historical significance. I would credit this book with fanning the flames of my own interest in the subject. Chris Corbett's book is well worth the reading if one has any interest in the Pony Express. Otherwise, I suppose a person can flip on the TV and see who gets "voted off the island" or something.

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## Colleen says

An entertaining read on an interesting topic. Some reviewers complained that the author jumped around, but I did not find this to be the case. He did an initial chapter where he basically laid out the historically known facts. After that, each chapter dealt either with an aspect of the pony express legend, ( I.e. who was the first rider) or an individual or group's description of it ( E.G Mark, Twain, Richard Burton.)

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## Crystal says

I enjoyed this book very much. It's a little slow past the first chapter in which Corbett fills the book out with a wealth of detailed information of everything having connections to the Pony Express. Apparantly, there isn't much factual information out there that can be definately said about the Pony Express, so the book would be incredibly short (already it is not a thick novel) without the additional information. I started to enjoy the asides in the second half of the book when he talks in detail about figures such as "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Robert "Pony Bob" Haslam, Mark Twain and Wild Bill Hickock and their contributions to the Pony Express and the Wild West.

The thorough knowledge of everything having to do (and not directly having to do) with the Pony Express makes me confident as a reader that Corbett has done his homework and knows the subject well enough that I can trust what I'm reading. I also liked that his opinions didn't come into the book too often, and gave a rather journalistic and unbiased picture so I can draw my own conclusions.

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## Rob says

This book is less about the Pony Express and more about the people who have spun so many Old West tall tales. I was hoping for more information about the Pony Express route but the author was more interested in writing about journalists and dime store novelists and those in between, such as Mark Twain.

I realize that getting definite facts about this era in American history is challenging. Yet Corbett doesn't seem to even care about that. He is more focused on the identity of the first Pony express rider than the route that was followed, the content of deliveries, or how this service impacted the country as a whole. There is nary a mention of the transcontinental railroad that was being built along the same Central Route.

There is good material here, but it was left half-baked. I was left wishing it was more.

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## David Ward says

Orphans Preferred: The Twisted Truth and Lasting Legend of the Pony Express by Christopher Corbett (Broadway Books 2004)(383.143). The Pony Express only existed for a very few years; the invention of the telegraph put it right out of business. Its legend is not diminished by that fact. My rating: 7/10, finished 2005.

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### **writegeist says**

As a kid, I grew up on such TV fare as Roy Rogers, Rin-Tin-Tin, Gunsmoke, Wagon Train, Bonanza... The list goes on. Westerns were big, really big. So, I couldn't help but feel like a little kid again when I read books about the Old West. Of course, I always thought the facts about the Pony Express were solid. Evidently not. Considering the whole enterprise lasted only 18 months during 1861 - 1862, and that it was a private enterprise of three gentlemen who would soon go bankrupt, then it makes a little more sense as to why. Corbett's book is a great start in understanding the truth, the fiction, and the amalgam of the two that still follows us along. The bibliography at the end provides extensive directions for any further research. Some of the books -- Majors' *Seventy Years on the Frontier* and Twain's *Roughing It* -- are available on Project Gutenberg.

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### **Soyeun says**

The topic is fascinating but the writing is in need of organization to improve structure and pacing. The patchiness might have been the frustrated result of working with unreliable source material (a fact that the author points out repeatedly) but was not fun to read.

A better approach to learning this material might be to read Mark Twain's book *Roughing It* and otherwise, the biographies of the famous men and women who were alive at the time.

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### **Susan says**

What an unusual book! Not only is it informative, but quite often funny, too. We all know the history of the Pony Express as we were taught in school. But few of us would recognize how much of it is legend and not true. Living in NE Kansas near St Joe, it was fun hearing the history behind the founding of St. Joe and its historical characters. I'll be sharing this book with others near and dear to me.

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### **Brian says**

After reading this, I have to think that all those western movies and *Little House on the Prairie* romanticized what the Old West was really like...wait, no, that couldn't be...

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