



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



August 2026

Steve Johnson, Editor

In this issue: The Army in the West Protects the Pony Express

Island News

Two well-known authors have been coming to the island to meet visitors and autograph copies of their books, available in the bookstore. **Jolene Babyok** lived on the island as a child during the penitentiary era; her father was the assistant warden of the prison.



As an adult she became curious about the guards and prisoners who lived on the island as she was growing up, and after many interviews and much research wrote several books, including *Bird Man* (about Robert Stroud) and *Breaking the Rock* (about the 1962 escape). She is currently coming to the island twice a month, usually on a weekend. She never gets tired of answering questions and sharing stories about what it was like to be on the same island as notorious criminals.¹ **Bill Baker** lived on the island at the same time as Jolene, but in a far different situation - as inmate in the

cellhouse. Bill had been in prisons much of his life, but when he was finally released from Alcatraz in 1960 he wrote a book about his experiences there, entitled *Alcatraz #1279*. The book has been very successful, enabling Bill to buy a house in Ohio and travel to San Francisco part of the year to promote his book. As he says, "Alcatraz finally made an honest man out of me." He can usually be found in the lower bookstore, surrounded by visitors who want to meet one of the last inmates of a bygone era in the long history of Alcatraz.



Dates to Remember

Saturday, August 1
Living History Day
at Fort Point, 10 - 4

Saturday, August 15
Board Meeting
7 pm

Living History Day on Alcatraz

On July 11th visitors to the island encountered military and civilian reenactors portraying the time period 1859 - 1860 in the history of Alcatraz. Attending were both artillery and infantry soldiers,

¹ <http://jolenebabyakauthor.com/books/>

the head of the U.S. Balloon Corps, a fifer and drummer, and ladies of the U.S. Sanitary Commission. all of whom explained their role when Fort Alcatraz was the most important military base on the West Coast during the Civil War. Tours of the fort and the underground citadel were given, and exhibits of weapons, uniforms, 1860s currency, and medical tools were on display. The day was organized by FOCWA, which also provided lunches for the rangers and re-enactors. Your tax-deductible contributions to FOCWA make these events possible.



The U.S. Army and California Volunteers Protect the Pony Express

The Gold Rush had brought thousands of men (and a few women) to California to seek their fortunes, and by 1860 the population was close to 400,000. People were desperate for mail, lonely for their families back East and wanting to know about the news of their state and the nation. The Pacific Steamship Line had been chartered in 1848 to carry mail and goods from New York to San Francisco, and by 1860 could reliably bring mail via the Isthmus of Panama to San Francisco within 30 - 60 days of travel.² The Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoaches received a contract from the Postal Service in 1858 to bring mail between St. Louis and San Francisco; op-

² Fessenden Otis, The History of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company

erating day and night the stages could bring mail every 25 days between the two cities via Tucson and Los Angeles. At one point the Secretary of War Jefferson Davis approved the use of camels to deliver mail and supplies through the Southwest and then to San Francisco, but it proved to be unworkable.³

In 1859 William Russell, Alexander Majors, and William Waddell came up with the idea of organizing a series of riders to carry the mail from St. Louis to San Francisco. Actually, the idea of riders carrying mail was not new; from earliest times riders delivered mail throughout the American colonies. However, what these men proposed was creating a series of stations about 20 miles apart over a distance of 1,966 miles. At these stations, riders could get a fresh horse, and after riding 100 miles would pass on the mail bag (called a mochilla) to a new rider. Riders would race day and night, ford rivers, cross deserts, and outrun Indians, to bring the mail to San Francisco within 10 days. Riders could weigh no more than 125 pounds, and the mail weight was limited to 20 pounds. An ad supposedly ran in a Western paper:



“WANTED — young, skinny, wiry fellows, not over 18. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred.”⁴ The first rider to arrive in San Francisco had come from Sacramento on a river steamer, and found hundreds of people waiting for him at midnight on April 14, 1860 at the Broadway Pier. He delivered 25 letters, each costing \$5 (equivalent to \$200 today).

The route of the Pony Express generally followed the route of the Butterfield stagecoaches, which now was using a more northerly route due to Apache attacks and Southern hostility. However, this route now took stagecoaches and Pony Express riders through Paiute territory; the tribe was hostile to whites who had invaded their land, violated their women, and were destroying their sources of food.⁵ Less than five weeks after those first riders began the service, the so-called Pyramid Lake Indian War began between settlers and the Paiutes, and the Army was called in to stop the attacks against settlers and Express stations. Captain Joseph Stewart, commander of Fort Alcatraz, led a detachment of infantry (Companies A & H, 6th US Infantry) and artillery (Companies G & I, 3rd US Artillery) from there to Nevada. During this time one Express rider, Jose Zowgaltz, was killed by Indians.⁶ After much conflict, a treaty was signed to end the war, and Fort Churchill was established, whose patrols continued to protect the Pony Express stations and riders. Many of those troops stationed there were from California.

³ Vince Hawkins, “The U.S. Army’s Camel Corps Experiment” <https://armyhistory.org/the-u-s-armys-camel-corps-experiment/>

⁴ Gary Kamiya, “How the Pony Express Linked an Isolated San Francisco to the Country” , *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 22, 2017

⁵ Christopher Corbett, *Orphans Preferred* (Broadway Books, 2003), pages 66 - 67

⁶ Wikipedia, “Pony Express”



Map of the Pony Express Route

The Pony Express only lasted for 18 months. It was too expensive to operate, and anyway the completion of the telegraph line in October 1861 brought news instantly to the city. Residents continued to get mail via the steamships and the stagecoaches until the transcontinental railroad - completed in 1869 - could bring mail in a matter of several days.

The route of the Pony Express is followed every year in June by reenactors who make the same journey as the original riders. People can actually send mail via the Pony Express riders. You can also track the riders online to see their progress. See the website of the National Pony Express Association here: <https://nationalponyexpress.org/about/>



Riders who re-enact the Pony Express route have to take an oath similar to the original oath taken by the riders:

"I, _____, do hereby swear, before the great and living God, that during my engagement as a member of the National Pony Express Association Re-Ride, I will under no circumstances use profane language, that I will drink no intoxicating liquors, that I will not quarrel or fight with any other member of the Association, and that in every respect, I will conduct myself honestly,

be faithful to my duties and so direct all my acts as to win the confidence of my associates. So help me God."

Unlike their predecessors they do not have to carry a revolver and a bible with them.