

Thomas Owen King

Thomas Owen King, of Almo, Cassia county, is a fine specimen of the pioneer of the Northwest and his life-story is an impressive epitome of the struggles and hardships endured by his class and the triumphs for civilization wrought out by it through tribulation and danger. He was born near Lawston, Cambridgeshire, England, on Dernforddale farm, on which his father's family had been living for 200 years. His parents were Thomas and Hannah (Tapfield) King, the father an industrious and highly respected farmer and the mother an esteemed poetess and authoress. The life of Thomas Owen King began on April 27, 1840, and as soon as he was old enough he was sent to school in the vicinity of his home, attending there until he was nearly nine years old, and, during the next three years and a half going to boarding school some distance away and getting home only twice a year. At this time, in 1851 and 1852, his mother and sisters embraced the Mormon faith and began longing to live among its people in their new Zion, then a municipal bantling but recently baptized into existence on the arid plains of Utah; and the father, although not yet a convert to their belief, determined for love of them to yield to their desire and emigrate to this country. They sold their home and took passage at Liverpool for the new world, shipping on the "Golconda" and landing at New Orleans on March 26, 1853, the party embracing others besides themselves and being under the direction of Jacob Gates. From New Orleans they went up the Mississippi to St. Louis, where supplies were purchased and passage was taken on the "Mt. Vernon" for Keokuk, Iowa, which at that time was a village with only one hotel, and in this small but promising town the subject of these paragraphs passed the thirteenth anniversary of his birth. Here a hundred head of oxen and cows and many horses were purchased and then the party started overland for Council Bluffs, Thomas driving a team nearly all of the way. After a short rest at Council Bluffs, they crossed the river and bade farewell to civilization for a time, beginning their long and trying jaunt across the plains to Salt Lake City, where they arrived on September 19, 1853. To most of the party, perhaps, the journey was merely a practical experience of difficulty and danger, toil and struggle, but not so to Mrs. King. She was of distinguished English ancestry and finely educated. Moreover, she was filled with poetic sentiment and delicacy of feeling. She had already written two works of merit in her native land, "The Toilet," and "The Three Eras," which had been well received and generously patronized by the English aristocracy. And on this trip she saw the romance as well as the danger, the poetical tints and suggestions as well as the practical difficulties, and reproduced them in conversations and letters, to the great enjoyment of her friends. She lived thirty-three years after arriving in Utah to bless and brighten their new home with her sunny and inspiring presence, passing away on September 25, 1886, at Salt Lake City, where her husband also died, his summons coming on November 16, 1875. He had become a zealous Mormon many years before, having joined the church in February, 1858. The full family records are kept in an old Bible published in 1760. The education which their son Thomas had begun in the Old World was finished in the New, where he attended school for a short time. But the exigencies of the situation obliged him early in life to be up and doing for himself. In March, 1855, he went as part of a government escort for Orson Hyde to Carson Valley, arriving there on June 17th of the same year, and returning to Salt Lake in September. In 1856 he went with a government surveying party from Nephi

through the San Pete Valley and up the Sevier River. The next spring, under the same command, he helped to survey all of the upper Sevier, and in May started with Brigham Young's express company to Deer Creek, seventy-five miles east of Fort Laramie in Wyoming, where the party built forty-six houses and corrals. They only remained there until September, however, for at that time Johnston's army came into Utah and the express service was abandoned. Mr. King returned to Salt Lake and was immediately called into military service to repel the advance of the United States troops in the unhappy misunderstandings then prevalent. In 1858 he was engaged in cutting hay and in 1859 in trading with emigrants. In 1860 he rode pony express between Salt Lake and Bear River during the spring and summer, and on September 26th started on a mission for the church to England, which kept him abroad four years and two months. After his return he was occupied for several years in various occupations until he was married, on May 26, 1868, to Miss Dorcas Debenham, a native of Norfolkshire, England, daughter of Henry and Sarah (Larter) Debenham, of London, who emigrated to Utah in 1868 and settled at Mill Creek, where the mother is now living, and the father died after many years of usefulness as a skillful shoemaker. For a number of years after his marriage Mr. King was in the employ of the Z.C.M.I. and then engaged in farming on Bear River for two years. In 1878 he came to Idaho in the employ of Governor Emery, who had purchased a ranch the year before in what is now Cassia county. He settled his family, consisting of his wife and four small children, on this ranch and lived there until November, 1889. In 1890 he started in the spring over the trail to Cheyenne in the service of Andrew Switzer, accomplishing his journey without incident worthy of note and returning in October of the same year, when he took up a ranch for himself on which he built a house and thereafter made his home until April, 1902. He then moved to Almo, where he had previously built a fine brick residence. He was elected county commissioner of Cassia county, and at the end of his term was reelected, but declined to serve. He was also justice of the peace for two terms. He has been from his early youth a devout and zealous member of the Mormon church, and since November 25, 1887, has been bishop of Almo ward. Mr. and Mrs. King have had eight children: Thomas A., who resides in Canada; Louis D., Georgiana R., Harold T., Louisa Helen, Andrew Cookson, who died in infancy; Hannah Tatfield, who died at the age of two years, and Henry Edgar.¹

Just Simple Grave Marks Almo's Pony Express Rider

By Al Dawson, special SIP Staff Writer

¹Progressive Men of Southern Idaho

"THOMAS OWEN KING--Rode the Pony Express from the Weber River and through to a point 12 miles beyond Fort Bridger, Wyoming in 1860"

This simple epitaph on a gravestone in the family plot at Almo, Idaho is indeed a modest tribute to a man who played such an adventurous part in one of the most colorful chapters in the history of the West.

True, the life of the Pony Express was short. It lasted only 18 months, from April 3, 1860 to Oct. 24, 1861, but in that comparatively brief period, it bridged a communications gap of a nation that was sorely pressed with the impending Civil War. The feats of daring, endurance and loyalty of some 100 riders will go down in the annals of history for generation to come.

Thomas Owen King, besides his many other accomplishments, was one of these historic figures. He was perhaps the most illustrious scion of the present pioneer Eames-King-Ward families still residing in Almo. The story of this man's life from the time he left England in 1853 with his parents, bound for Utah, until his death Nov. 16, 1921, sound more like fantastic fiction than true living. He faced danger from the start.

The boat he and his family sailed on from Liverpool was almost shipwrecked in the West Indies and it was perhaps a miracle that he, with his brothers, sisters and parents, reached New Orleans. Facing the dangers of the wilderness, the family crossed the plains in covered wagon, reaching Salt Lake City on Sept. 28, 1853.

Commenting in a journal he wrote years later, Thomas Owen King made this observation: "Up to this time I had driven an ox team and had continued to do so until we reached Fort Laramie on the North Platte. I will not describe all we saw--Indians by the hundreds, buffaloes by the thousands and mosquitoes by the billions."

The future Pony Express rider became ill with mountain fever at this military outpost. His career could have ended here as his condition was serious. Delirious most of the time, his life was in danger. He started to improve at Green River, and by the time the family reached Salt Lake, he had almost completely recovered.

As a mere boy of 15, in 1856 he joined a party of scouts in search of Indians, tracking the hostile to the Silent City of Rocks. It is believed that at this time he was the first white visitor to explore the area of what was later named Almo.

He is credited along with Myron B. Durfee in giving the community its name. There are three versions of the meaning of the word Almo. One is its Spanish meaning, "great battle." Another is Indian, meaning "plenty waters," and the final version means "cottonwood country."

This was approaching a critical time in United States history. The West was starting to be settled, and in the East, rumblings of the impending conflict between the North and South were beginning to be felt.

In 1859 there were three mail routes to California. The majority of the mail was sent by ships by way of the Isthmus of Panama on a 22-day schedule from New York to San Francisco. The Butterfield route from Saint Louis and Memphis to San Francisco by way of El Paso and Los Angeles carried through mail and stagecoach passengers, while the Central route west from the Missouri River carried only local mail. To the early Californians, these arrangements were not satisfactory. Then there was the fact that in a case of a war of

succession, both the Butterfield overland route and the Panama route would be liable to interruption.

A national clamor for a new way was made. Answering the call with an idea was a man with a daring proposal. William H. Russell, representing the Russell, Majors and Waddell overland freighters and stagecoach operator, presented a program. He made a statement that if given a contract, a new corporation, the Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express, would deliver the mail weekly from the Missouri River to San Francisco in 10 days. His route was 1,000 miles shorter than the Butterfield stage line.

This at the time sounded almost impossible. Skeptics scoffed and ridiculed the plan as "Russell's ramblings." The idea was to establish Pony Express stations at intervals from the Missouri River to San Francisco. The mail would be delivered by a relay of mounted riders. From the start the scheme was plagued by political and personal attacks on the promoters.

The post office declared it would stand by its six-year contract with the Overland Mail Company and the owner, John Butterfield--this in spite of the fact that Congressman Colfax, a champion of Russell, brought out in the House of Representatives that the Pony Express plan with shorter delivery service could be rendered for less than one million dollars.

This was one and one-quarter million less than paid for a semi-weekly service.

As the controversy raged, Russell and his partners decided to prove their point by a gamble in action. They would start the run, hoping by so doing to prove the plan feasible and win a government contract.

On that historic day of April 3, 1860 when the Palmyra, Mo. passenger train pulled into Saint Joseph, the first Pony Express rider alighted from the train with his mail pouch. A few minutes later he mounted his horse at the Pike's Peak stable, and in a cloud of dust was off on the first lap of this transcontinental mission. Ten days, 1,966 miles and many riders later, the first Pony Express arrived in San Francisco.

On this same day, April 3, in the West, the first rider out of San Francisco and his mount left the Alta Telegraph office before 4 p.m. As rider and horse boarded the river steamer bound for Sacramento, crowds watched and cheered. Ten days later, the last relay rider brought the mail to Saint Joseph. History records that back in the West, the Bay City area gave this first courier a tumultuous welcome when he rode in shortly before midnight on April 13, 1860.

The crowd was enormous. Bands were out, seniorities waved from balconies and the populace almost mobbed Hamilton, the tired express rider.

In March of 1860 Thomas Owen King, at the age of 19, became a Pony Express rider. On April 7 of that same year he took his first ride from the station at Echo Springs to Bear River, a distance of 40 miles. This was only the start.

The experiences of this man, as recorded by him in a paper he wrote years later, indicate the character and courage of these colorful frontier riders. When he was accepted as a Pony Express courier, Mr. King made this comment: "It was considered that it required the best of riders, and physically able to stand the strain of endurance by day or night, and in all kinds of weather and other dangers to be met in mountains and plains between the East and West. And of such, were collected as brave and daring and true a band of riders as could be found anywhere."

His chronicle tells that outside of the Indians who were a constant threat, there was also the danger of bandits attempting to steal money sent by mail and the ruthless attacks of winter weather. Thomas King experienced them all.

He tells of the terrible ordeal of riding in blinding snow, losing the trail and almost freezing to death, and the many encounters with Indians, "that only by the grace of God and fleetness of our horses did we escape scalping and death."

There was a time in his early career as a rider that he became lost in a blizzard. During this experience he became snowblind and was forced later to remain in total darkness in a bedroom for several days until his eyes could be healed.

The endurance of these young men was incredible. Thomas King related in a story how once when he completed his regular run to Bear River, he found that another express had come in and there was no rider to take it.

Pressed into service, he rode the next relay east and then, forced by the absence of another courier, he rode to another station.

After 48 hours without sleep, during which he covered almost 200 miles on horseback, he returned to Salt Lake. His journal carries this note: "Even then I was not tired for I very well remember taking my best girl for a walk."

The name and exploits of Thomas Owen King, along with other famous Pony Express riders, are listed in the archives of the St. Joseph museum. Names like "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Johnny Fry, Jack Keetley, and John Burnett are only a few of the 108 outstanding riders listed by historian Herbert S. Hamlin, in his account of the Pony Express.

Every rider had a story to tell as danger was a way of life for these flamboyant couriers of courage. For example, there was Charles B. Miller, better known as "Bronco Charley." Fate decreed that he would become a Pony Express rider as a mere boy of 11. The people of Sacramento were anxiously waiting for the express, long overdue on that summer day in 1861. Finally a wild galloping horse entered the city, riderless. An Indian arrow had found its mark on the rider someplace on the trail. The mail pouch was intact. With the next relay to Carson City, Nev., and no one to make the trip, Charlie tells how his father suggested that he continue the journey to maintain the express schedule. It became legend how this boy brought the mail safely to the destination, and from that point on he became a regular Pony Express rider.

"Bronco Charley's" exploits would do credit to the best of TV Western thrillers. On one occasion in the middle of the night as he rode, 10 howling Bannock savages swooped down on him from out of the darkness of the woods. He tells how he set the spurs to his mount, and as the air was rent with the warwhoops of the pointed savages, their arrows whirling past him, he galloped frantically on. Bending low in the saddle, holding the reins in one hand and his six-shooter in the other, he fired to the right and left at the pursuing Indians. Finally his almost exhausted horse, with lather soaked flanks, urged on by "Bronco," made a last desperate effort, and in a spurt of speed outdistanced the hostiles.

It was these dedicated Pony Express riders who first brought to the West the news that Fort Sumpter had been fired upon, starting the War of Secession. When Lincoln was elected, and news of the progress of the Civil War was anxiously awaited, Pony Express riders dared all to bring the word. Not only is society indebted to these couriers, but also to the 400 other employees who manned and operated the stations. Perhaps more express station attendants were killed by Indians in those remote outposts than were riders themselves.

With all its historical accomplishments, the life and eventual death of the Pony Express reflects something of a sad note. It was a financial failure for its promoters, and during the brief existence felt the breath of scandal in money manipulations and political intrigue that hastened its demise.

The final death blow came, however, with the completion of the coast-to-coast telegraph service. No longer was it a feat to bring the word from St. Joe to Frisco in 10 days. Now by wire it was done in hours.²

²"Just Simple Grave Marks Almo's Pony Express Rider" South Idaho Press, Thursday, February 11, 1971, Burley, Idaho page 10. by Al Dawson. Also published in Western Saga, a guide book, under "Courier of Courage", by the same author, pages 15-18.