

MICHAEL P. SPRADLIN

Action. Drama. Humor. And things BLOW UP.

www.michaelspradlin.com

Off Like the Wind! *The First Ride of the Pony Express*

by Michael P. Spradlin
Illustrated by Layne Johnson

About the book:

Saddle up and take a wild ride through the untamed West with the brave first riders of the Pony Express! In 1860, the first rider set out on a trail from Missouri to California. He carried with him a special deliver—the first mail ever delivered by hand to the West. During the eleven-day trip, he and many other men faced harsh weather, dangerous animals like buffalo and wolves, and more, but nothing weakened their determination and courage. Michael P.

Spradlin and Layne Johnson bring to life in stunning historical detail an adventurous journey that celebrates America’s can-do attitude and pioneering spirit.



About the author:

Michael P. Spradlin is the author of numerous books for young readers including Texas Rangers: Legendary Lawmen, the Spy Goddess series, and the Youngest Templar trilogy. He lives with his family in Lapeer, Michigan, and like Daniel Boone, he won’t ever admit to being lost (though he will say he was mighty bewildered once for three days). Visit him on the Web at

www.michaelspradlin.com

About the illustrator:

Layne Johnson has illustrated more than a dozen picture books for children,

including the acclaimed Farmer George Plants a Nation and Christmas for a Kitten. He lives in Texas. Visit him on the web at www.laynejohnson.com.

Pre-reading:

When do you think this story takes place? Why? What clues do you have about the setting?

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. Why did it take so long for mail to get out to the American frontier?
2. Explain how the Pony Express would work. Whose idea was it?
3. How far is the trail they must ride? Where does it begin and end?
4. How do they keep the horses from wearing out? Where do they keep the mail?
5. Why do you think it cost so much money to send something through the Pony Express?
6. Why were people so excited about being able to send letters overland like this? Can you imagine a time when it would take weeks or months to receive important news or letters?
7. On day two what nearly stops the mail? Do you think they thought this animal might be a problem or not?
8. On day three where is his stop and what danger does the rider face? How is he able to escape?
9. On day four how is the rider reminded that a spooked horse is one of the most dangerous parts of the job? Brainstorm a list of things that might spook a horse.
10. Which day is the half-way point for the mail? What part of the country is the rider in now?
11. Why is the Utah Territory particularly dangerous? Why are the Pah Ute upset with the Americans?
12. Explain why it can sometimes take more than a day to reach a destination that should only take a few hours.

13. How long does it take Abraham Lincoln's Inaugural Address to reach California? Why is this important for what is happening in the country?
14. What is Billy Hamilton surprised to find as he reaches Sacramento, California? How does it feel to have people cheer you on? When do we still do this today? What did the first eastbound rider see and hear when he reached St. Joseph, Missouri?
15. Which illustration is your favorite? Why? How does the artist show people's excitement in the pictures? How does he give details about the time period too?

PROJECTS

Reading:

Vocabulary: Have students work in cooperative pairs to define in their own words the list of vocabulary words. Then, discuss each word in class having children brainstorm examples when possible. Then, put the words on slips of paper and have children play charades trying to act out the meaning of each word (leave the list on the board):

Frontier
settlers
fortune
venture
historic
mochilas
ferryboat
skittish
rampaging
landmark
hazardous
endurance
sagebrush
treaty
critical
continent

Writing:

Write a fictional letter from a person in St. Joseph, Missouri (or other places further east) to a friend or family member who has moved to the California Territory. Tell them about what has happened over the last few months and what you are excited for them to learn about life back home.

Math:

According to the National Park Service the Pony Express Route covered 1,840 miles. Create a map with a route to a place you would like to visit within 1,840 miles of your own home. Calculate how long it would take you to travel there in a car (at 60mph) or a plane.

Music:

Sing these new verses to "My Bonnie Lies Over the Sea"

My mail will ride over the country
My mail will not ride on the sea
My mail will ride on with a pony
and bring back long letters to me

bring back, bring back
Oh, Bring back long letters to me, to me!
Ride back, ride back,
oh, ride back long letters to me!

Art:

Create a diorama of one of the territories that the Pony Express rode through.

-or-

Develop a poster for the Pony Express that advertises its service to Americans in either the east or the western territories.

History:

Create a timeline of American History from 1750-1900 with at least ten important events on your line. Include the Pony Express!

This guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](#), a reading specialist and the author of *Reaching for Sun* and *The Floating Circus* (also from Bloomsbury). Visit her website to find hundreds of guides to children's literature.