

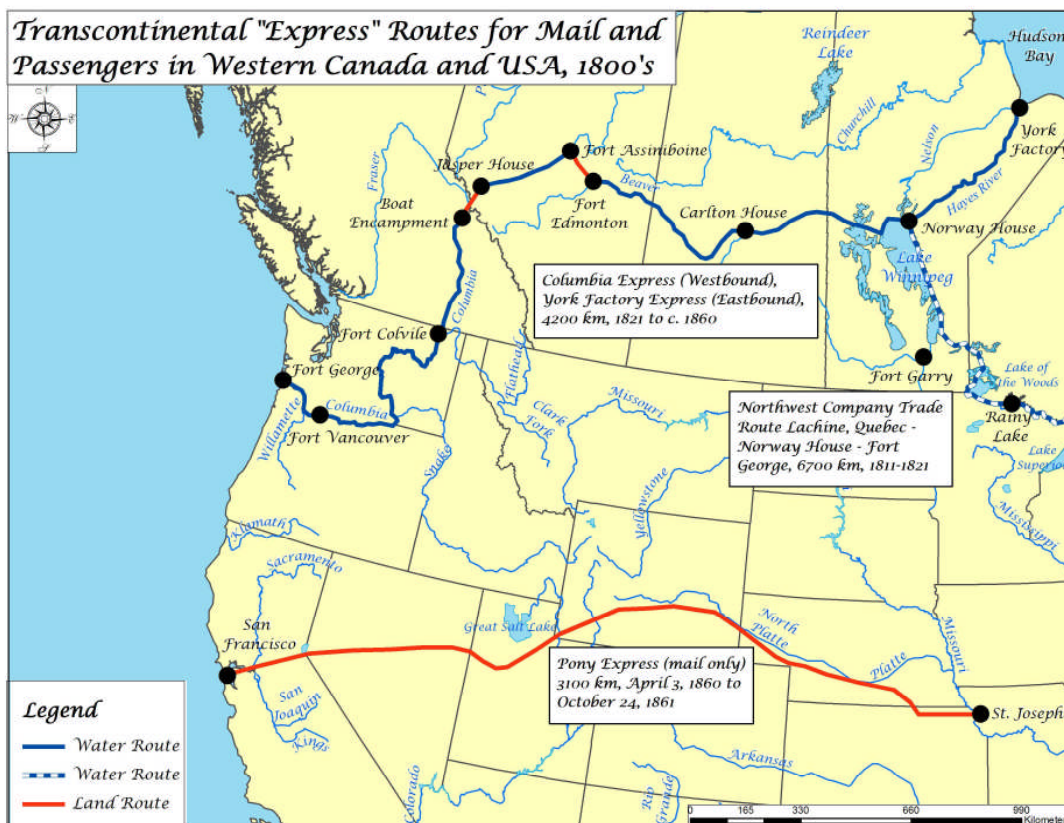
**Adaptive Forest Management/ History Program  
Quicknote #2 – November 2008**

**Canada’s Rich and Unknown History –  
Western Canada’s “Express” mail and passenger service in the 1800s**

People living in the Hinton-Jasper area were pleased in 1970 when Highway 16 was officially designated part of the Trans-Canada Highway System. But unknown to most Canadians, Hinton and Jasper were located on the very first Trans-Canada “Highway” almost 160 years before! David Thompson’s discovery of the Athabasca Pass in January 1811 extended the fur trade routes from Lachine, Quebec, and later York Factory, to the Pacific coast, creating the first regularly traveled “Road” across the continent.

**The Columbia/ York Factory Express**

Generally known as the Hudson’s Bay Express, later referred to as the Columbia Express (westbound) or York Factory Express (eastbound), this arduous route pre-dated the short-lived Pony Express by 50 years, lasted almost 40 years and was about 1,000 kilometres longer!



Following Thompson’s discovery of the pass, in 1811 the Northwest Company began using the route to run packets, mail and passengers between Lachine Quebec and the Pacific Coast via Rainy Lake, an astonishing distance of about 6,700 kilometres. In

1821, when the Hudson's Bay and Northwest companies merged, the route ran instead from York Factory on Hudson Bay to Fort George at the mouth of the Columbia River. Two "Express" brigades completed the 4200 km route in about 3.5 months, the Columbia Express being the westbound brigade, the York Factory Express eastbound.

The birchbark North Canoe (6m long by about 1.5 m wide) was the main vehicle east of the Rockies, while cedar strip canoes were used on the Columbia River. Brigade departures targeted snow conditions on the 130 km portage up and over the Athabasca Pass from each side - "*La Grande Traverse*". They left York Factory in July to get over the pass by mid October, and Fort George in late March to get across before the snowpack got too soft. It was a difficult and uncomfortable trip for passengers, but the voyageurs had to paddle the whole time, load and unload the canoes, portage with packs of 80 km or more, set up camp and cook daily for the 3.5 months of the journey.



The North Canoe by Frances Hopkins, 1869

### **The Pony Express**

This colourful but ultimately unsuccessful enterprise captured the imagination of people across the world. Established by the Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company, it ran 3,100 km between St. Joseph Missouri and Sacramento, California between April 3, 1860 and late October 1861 – about 1 ½ years, delivering mail at a price of \$1 per ½ ounce (15 grams) twice a week each way across the Western USA, taking 10 days in summer, 12-16 days in winter.



Pony Express Stature  
St. Louis Missouri

An ad for riders in California read: "Wanted. Young, skinny, wiry fellows, not over 18. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred." Most riders were around 20 but the youngest was 11, they could not weigh more than 125 pounds (57 kg).

Riders were paid \$100 per month, riding between 120 and 150 km at full gallop – day and night - before being relieved, changing horses every 15-25 km at the 190 stations spaced along the route. During the 1 ½ years the Express ran, only one mailbag (mochila) was lost, and only one rider was killed.

The owners' hopes for a \$1,000,000 government mail contract were thwarted due to political pressures and the outbreak of the American Civil War. In March 1861 the contract was awarded to another company and the Pony Express was shortened to run mail only between Salt Lake City and Sacramento, less than half the original distance. Nevertheless the remarkable experiment lives on in history and is immortalized in the crest for the US Postal Service.