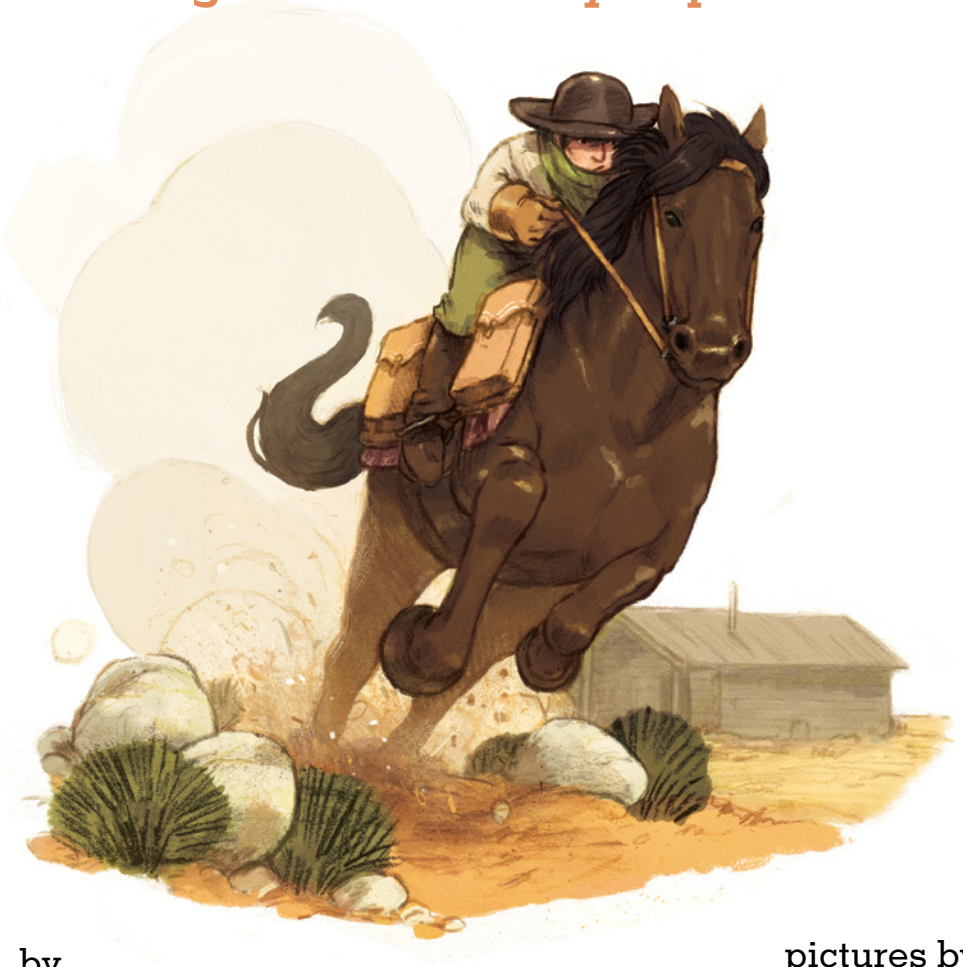
A Teacher's Guide to

Ride On, Will Cody!

A Legend of the Pony Express



by
Caroline Starr Rose

pictures by
Joe Lillington

Guide prepared by the author

Ages 4–8 // Grades PreK–3

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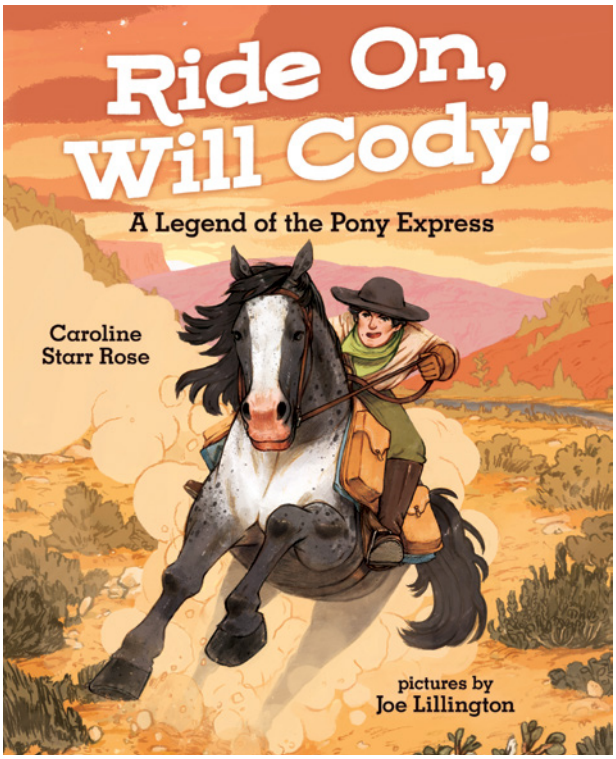
ABOUT *RIDE ON, WILL CODY!*

Horses nicker,
heart beats quicker,
saddle up
for the Pony Express.

Once upon a time, a Pony Express rider set out across Wyoming. He rode through dust and rain, trading horse after horse. But when no rider was waiting at the end of his route, he kept on riding—for twenty-one hours, on twenty-one horses, and over hundreds of miles!

According to legend, this rider was young Will Cody, who would one day become Buffalo Bill, the Wild West showman, and whose stories helped keep the legacy of the Pony Express alive. Award-winning author Caroline Starr Rose revisits that fabled ride in a thrilling and lyrical verse story.



9780807570685 // US$ 16.99

About the Author

Caroline Starr Rose spent her childhood in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and New Mexico. She's taught both social studies and English in four different states. During a recent road trip, Caroline convinced her family to take a detour and visit the Buffalo Bill Museum in Golden, Colorado. The experience inspired her to write *Ride On, Will Cody!* Caroline lives in Albuquerque with her husband and two sons.

About the Illustrator

Joe Lillington was born in London and studied illustration at Falmouth University in Cornwall. He looks to history and nature for inspiration and loves researching the subjects of the books he works on and learning loads of new things. Joe lives in Bristol, England, where he enjoys reading, carpentry, and taking his dog for walks in the forest.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Predictions and Definitions

Share the book's cover with your students, asking them to describe what they see. Use these descriptions to help students make predictions about the story. Read the title aloud, focusing on the words *legend* and *Pony Express*. Call on several volunteers to define the words and create class definitions. Post these definitions where everyone can see.

Horses of the Pony Express

Ride On, Will Cody! includes the names of horses used by Pony Express riders. Introduce each horse (and corresponding images) to your students:

Appaloosa: (called 'loosa in the story) A breed best known for its spotted coat. The spots are much smaller than a Pinto's patches.

Kentucky Thoroughbred: A horse bred for racing, it is known for its speed and stamina.

Morgan: A breed with a compact build and strong legs. Its coloring is usually brown, black, or chestnut.

Mustang or **Bronco:** A wild horse, descended from the domesticated horses brought to the Americas by the Spanish in the 1500s. Mustangs are compact and muscular. Though Mustang and Bronco are often used interchangeably, Bronco technically refers to a Mustang that hasn't been tamed.

Pinto: A horse with large patches of white and another color. The Pinto is not a breed but a coat pattern a variety of horse breeds share.

Morgan

Mustang/Bronco

Pinto

Match the Rhyme

Rhyming words are pleasing to the ear (when listening and reading aloud) and pleasing to the eye (when reading silently). Because they can help listeners anticipate what words might come next, rhyming words are a perfect fit for picture books and their young readers.

To play this rhyme-matching game with your students, you'll need fifty-two index cards. (For classes smaller than twenty-six students, simply use fewer rhyming pairs and play the game more than once.) Write each word below on an index card and mix the cards well. Distribute the cards and encourage students to say their word out loud as they search for its rhyming partner. Remind students though some rhyming words might look similar (i.e., *rushing* and *crushing*), not all rhymes will look alike (i.e., *prairie* and *legendary*).

surrender / ember
nicker / quicker
west / express
going / Wyoming
race / pace
reins / plains
Thoroughbred / ahead
rushing / crushing
dry / fly
glider / rider
flashing / splashing
pass / last
counting / dismounting
ended / expended
waits / late
wrong / on
drifting / lifting
sights / fight
sails / fail
'round / bound
raring / bearing
grime / time
strong / long
track / back
station / celebration
prairie / legendary

A Brief History of the Pony Express

Long before airplanes or cars, the only way to deliver mail from one side of the United States to the other was by boat. It could take months to receive a letter sent this way! In 1860 the Pony Express was organized to deliver US mail quickly overland. The route started in St. Joseph, Missouri, and ended in Sacramento, California, and was almost 2,000 miles long. Riders covered between seventy-five and one hundred miles a day, exchanging horses at swing stations roughly fifteen miles apart. Riders carried mochilas, mailbags made to fit over saddles that could hold up to twenty pounds of mail. Riders learned to dismount, swing the mochila over the saddle of the next available horse, and leave a station in seconds.

By 1861 the first transcontinental telegraph line was completed, allowing communication to flow freely across the country. There was no longer a need for the Pony Express. It ended after an eighteen-month run.

Background on Will Cody / Buffalo Bill

Will Cody, also known as Buffalo Bill, was a one-of-a-kind man. As a teen he worked for a wagon train, participated in the Colorado gold rush, and claimed to ride for the Pony Express. He earned the nickname "Buffalo Bill" while serving as a buffalo hunter for the Kansas

Pacific Railroad work crew. Cody is best remembered for his outdoor touring show, "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," where hundreds of actors recreated stories of the American West for audiences around the world. A key part of the show included the reenactment of a Pony Express rider thundering into a station, swinging his mochila from one saddle to another, and switching horses for the next leg of his journey. The short-lived Pony Express could well have been forgotten if not for the Wild West show, but, because of these performances, its memory lives on.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Questions

1. What time of day is it when the story begins? When it ends? How do the illustrations help you determine this?
2. What does the author mean by "*Night surrenders, /first light embers*"? How do the illustrations help you understand the author's meaning?
3. What are some of the hardships Will faces as he rides? (Answers might include dust, rain, exhaustion, loneliness, hunger, thirst, heat, no rider at his last station means he has to continue on.)
4. Discuss how the language and illustrations show the ever-changing horses Will rode during his journey. See if your students can count all twenty-one! (Consider mentioning the repetitive lines "*Trade a Mustang for a Morgan…,*" paying attention to the shift in rhythm and the two-page spread where the horse illustrations resemble stop-action photography.)
5. What does the author mean by "*Fleet foot glider, /wiry rider— /See them soar! /Watch them fly*!"? Why do you think the author chose the words *soar* and *fly* to describe Will and his horse? How do the illustrations help you understand the author's meaning?
6. Agree or disagree: the rhythm in the story mimics a horse's hoofbeats. (Try clapping the first four stanzas with your students for them to get a feel for this.)
7. The author uses powerful words to describe Will's ride. Identify these words and discuss how they make the story so life-like. (Words might include *barrel*, *racing*, *flying*, *rushing*, *crushing*, *soar*, *flashing*, *splashing*, *thunder*, and *hurry*.)
8. Compare the opening illustrations with the final ones. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?
9. What discoveries did you make as you read the story? What parts of the story surprised you?
10. Review your class predictions and definitions from the pre-reading activity. Discuss with your students the two definitions of the word *legend* ("a traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but unauthenticated" and "an extremely famous person, especially in a particular field"). How do both definitions apply?

Thunder, Barrel, Soar, Fly!

Draw a picture of horse and rider racing across the plains of Wyoming. Include details in the picture to indicate weather conditions and if it's morning, afternoon, or night. What kind of horse is Will riding?

Common Core Standards

Craft and Structure

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.4. Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 2 topic or subject area.

Comprehension and Collaboration

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2. Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.