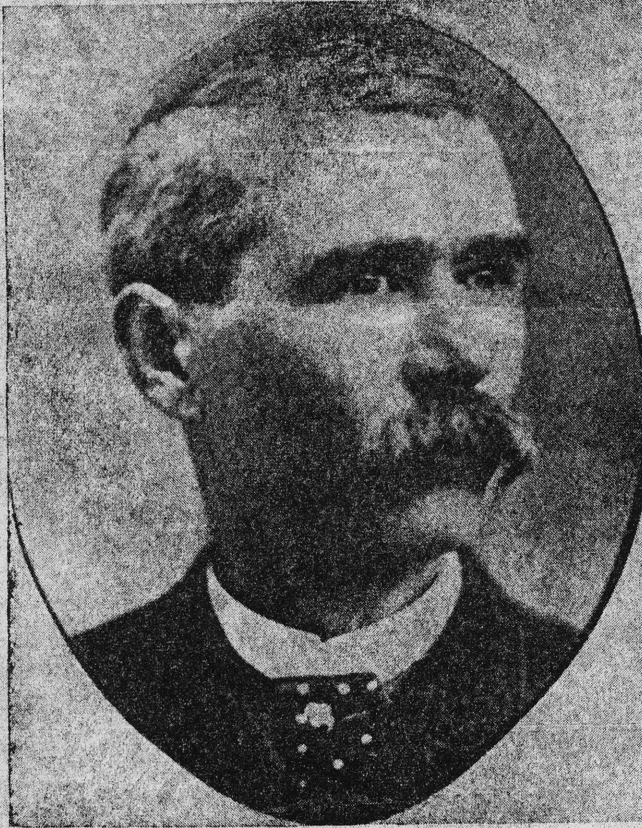
LITTLE BOY BLUE

BY CHARLES E. HAYWOOD



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This year we mark the 100th anniversary of the Pony Express. Mr. Haywood gives us a fictionalized story of one of those early riders, Billie Pridham.

Can you blame us for getting excited? It's not every day that a real Pony Express rider comes to visit.

IN the middle of a quiet summer, when I was a lad, the big excitement burst upon us, news of an event-to-come so stupendous it crowded out everything else. We were so full of it we talked about nothing else.

We did our chores with only half a mind on our work, too absorbed to think up mischief. All of our friends nearby were told, and those at a distance we searched out so we might let them know Uncle Billie Pridham was coming to visit.

Not our uncle, we explained, but our great-uncle, Father's uncle; and he was one of the real Pony Express riders of the Wild West. Father, who had off and on over the years told us of his Uncle Billie, gave us more indoctrination, illustrated by the brilliant-hued Mexican serape sent him in his youth by his uncle. Our parental instruction included strict orders not to ask questions when Billie Pridham arrived; we were to listen carefully and keep quiet, for a change.

To this day I can recall the shock we got when he arrived. While it had been explained to us that the Pony Express had ended about 60 years before, we nevertheless subconsciously expected Uncle Billie to arrive on horseback. He came in a taxicab.

Fringed buckskin jacket, chaps, broad-brimmed hat and pistol — all were missing. Immaculate in a well-pressed, light gray suit, wearing a stiff white collar, a necktie and stickpin, with gold-rimmed spectacles, he might easily have passed for an elderly clergyman.

Yet his neat and conventional attire confused us no more than his age. We had not expected white hair and pink cheeks and a close-clipped white mustache, nor had we thought of him as a small man. In our minds we had pictured a tall, rangy fellow, with bushy black hair flowing down over his collar, a swarthy, sunburned complexion, a black beard, piercing dark eyes and a half-mile voice. Later, in our more raucous moments, we were reminded of his well-modulated voice by Father.

Furthermore, we had thought that as soon as he got settled in a chair he would proceed to give us a full and complete account of life on the Western Plains in the time when he rode at full gallop toward the setting sun with the mail pouches crammed with letters at $5 an ounce. We had hoped to hear of Indian raids, holdups, a rencounter of the fastest gun in the West with our Uncle Billie, smoking pistol in hand, standing over the recumbent form of the hardest ticket west of the Missouri River.

Instead, in his quiet, gentle voice, he asked questions about us boys, so that before long he knew what school subject each of us liked best, who were our friends, what they were like, what we hoped to be when we grew up. Richard told him about singing in the choir; I showed him my stamp collection; Henry ex-

Charles F. Haywood, a Boston lawyer, has written many stories for AVE MARIA.

hibited his woodchuck skins.

He talked to Mother about her folks long enough to gain a good idea of the sort of family his nephew had married into; but most of his questions were about our grandmother, his sister Belle who had died but a few years before. Only once since he had gone West in 1851 had he seen her, and then but briefly. He asked about every detail of her hard but victorious life, how she had studied medicine after her husband's untimely death, and her struggle to bring up the four children.

We boys drifted off to play ball, feeling that our anticipated brilliant event was nothing but another visit from an elderly relative, a time when we had to be quiet and orderly about the house, watch our table

Pony Express currency

manners and be unnecessarily dressed up and clean. Yet to this day I recall Uncle Billie's quiet contentment as he talked with us all and with our Aunt Katherine. A happy man he was in his rocking chair on our piazza on this golden summer day, happy for a reason I in no way understood at age 14.

For a lifetime he had been away from his family; his wife had been dead many years, and no children had been given him. Now he found himself among his own people, not one relative but a swarm of them, for our cousins had turned up by this time. And next day his young sister Grace, now in her late 60's, arrived from Providence. They sat side by side, the last of the generation.

For him it was an experience richer than anything he had known. His blue eyes shone, his every word was about the family; Father and his brother, George Willia, came in for all manner of gracious compliments upon their wives and children. Uncle Billie was getting every ounce of good out of being with all these of his own blood.

So it was for two days. We boys had manfully put away any notion we ever had that this visit was to be a carnival of adventure stories. Then big news was imparted to us by Father. Extra scrubbings, best clothes in all their stiff and starchy discomfort, carefully brushed hair — all these were required; for Uncle Billie Pridham was to give a big dinner for the entire family at Young's Hotel in Boston.

The dinner was ever so much better an event than we had expected. In famous old Young's Hotel, near Boston City Hall, we had a big room done in dark-paneled wood. On the walls were sporting prints — fox hunts, steeplechases and grouse shooting—and the carpet was thicker than anything we ever had walked on. When unobserved we felt it with our hands.

At a huge round table the whole family was seated, 15 of us; we had white linen, gleaming silver, vases of flowers, waiters with white aprons and a five-course meal such as we had read of but never seen. At the head of the clan sat Uncle Billie, his eyes proudly on every one of us. We had grape juice, and healths were drunk. We chattered and ate mightily, and we boys managed to secrete quantities of salted nuts in our pockets with which to regale our friends next day, that they might have tangible proof of the luxury which we had tasted briefly.

And then Father, who never neglected to see to it that his three boys should have a look at the interesting things in this life, at last decided that family had been given its due. He had kept us firmly in check; but now, with Uncle Billie's departure not distant, he tried to give us our look at the Wild West we had hoped to see. Father was a skillful lawyer, a profession where the art of asking questions is learned as nowhere else. And Father was a born master of ceremonies.

Uncle Billie's story commenced with him and his brother George leaving their sick father, overworked mother and four younger sisters in New York in 1851 to take ship for California. The father, our great-grandfather, stumbled through each day's work, so ill he could barely make it, unable to provide more than the most meager living. William and George planned to find nuggets of gold in the mines of California and send the proceeds home to help.

Nuggets they did not find, yet the gold dust they managed to pan out of the diggings did much to make their father's dreary lot more bearable. After years as gold miners, a time when the eagle of good fortune never visited them, they both came to realize that the growing West held other treasures for hard-working youth.

George Pridham was the first to leave the hunt for gold. A man who ran a newspaper in Tombstone, Arizona, called *The Epitaph*, persuaded him that the pen was more profitable than the pan. This George found to be true.

Then Billie Pridham, in 1860, heard of the new project to run a fast mail from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento. Organized by Russell, Majors & Waddell, the riders were to carry two bags of letters at a gallop across the wilderness of half a continent.

Each man rode 80 miles, getting a fresh horse every 10 miles at a "station" established by the company. The famous Pony Express had been born.

"This job was made for me," Uncle Billie told us. "They wanted young men — small, light men, like me. They wanted men who didn't drink hard liquor, swear or get into quarrels. And the pay was excellent — ever so much better than hunting for gold nuggets that weren't there. So I signed on."

Father put a very leading question.

"Tell us about the exciting things that happened to you."

"Nothing exciting. Just hard work. Eighty miles at speed is mighty hard work, yet 80 miles is nothing to the ride Pony Bob Haslam did. He got to the end of his 80 miles only to find that the rider who was to take over the mail from him had been killed in a fight. He kept right on, did another 80 miles, then turned around and carried the eastbound mail over the same route.

"Buffalo Bill Cody did a ride like that. The man who was supposed to get the *mochilas*, the mail sacks, wasnt there. He rode on. Supermen."

One of us boys piped up.

"Did the Indians ever catch you, Uncle Billie?"

"No, boys. The company saw to that. They gave us the best horses in North America. We always outran the Indians."

He paused thoughtfully.

"Yet even the best horse tires. My stretch was in Nevada, from Austin to Smith's Creek. It was during the war with the Piute In-

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Little Boy Blue

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14)

dians that I reached the end of my run only to find that the station was burned, the horses run off and the station keeper lay dead—scalped. I was going to dismount and bury him so the coyotes wouldn't chew up his body, but instantly I knew better.

"The ruins of the station were still glowing, the blood on the poor man was hardly dry. The Indians were near. I knew I must ride as I never had ridden before. The Piutes were not long finding me. They chased me, but I outran them, even with a tired horse. A wonderful animal, that one, the best that money could buy. And he got the mail through. He was worth every cent he cost.

"But I didn't outrun their bullets. One of them got me in the hip, and by the time I reached the next station I had to be lifted off the horse. They laid me down in the hay of the horse corral, and my relief driver was a half mile away on his run by the time they had me stretched out. Changing horses was usually done in 15 seconds. I still have that bullet."

"Can we see it?" I asked.

He laughed.

"No, my boy. It is still in me, lodged near the bone. The doctors have never wanted to go after it. It aches on damp days.

"Boys, those were great days." He seemed to be talking now only to us youngsters. "But always remember, they were hard days; Indians, blizzards, heat, dust, floods and always the lonely monotony of going on and on in a country with no people in it.

"Nothing like it for speed and organization and the spirit of the men who carried the mail, no matter what the danger. Great days that were soon over. The telegraph lines grew every day, and finally the line from the East met the line from the West.

"No need now for fast mail. Messages could go over the wires in minutes. The Pony Express took days.

"No flesh and blood, even the best in the world — and we were the best in the world — can compete with a machine such as the telegraph and soon after that the railroad.

"So the Pony Express was gone. With it went a lot of the money of the men who organized and ran it: Russell and Majors and Waddell. With it went a great deal of my strength. Those rides were man-killers, as far as I was concerned. I took a long rest. Then I got a job with Wells Fargo and stayed with them the rest of my life. I'm still on their payroll, and here I am over 80 years old."

"What was your job with Wells Fargo, Uncle Billie?" queried Father.

"Shotgun messenger on a stagecoach. Easy, compared with the Pony Express. Just sat there and took it easy. We carried gold dust from the mines. The road agents, holdup men, wanted it. My job was to wave the shotgun and shoot them off."

"Did you run into any bad men on that job?"

His blue eyes twinkled.

"Never could tell. A couple of times they started in bad, but we drove away and left them and never did find out much about them. No chance for character study."

"But couldn't a man on horseback overtake a stagecoach?" queried Father.

"Yes," replied Uncle Billie, "if he stays in the saddle. These didn't. I was paid to see that they didn't.

"But you ask about bad men and I can tell you about some, although I was not there when they held up the train. They tied up the messenger in the express car, rolled him into the ditch and proceeded to blow the safe to get the gold. To confine the explosion they dragged a lot of heavy bags over to the safe and lighted the fuse. When she blew, they found there was no gold in the safe; but the bags were full of silver dollars, and the explosion blew most of this hard money into the woodwork of the express car.

"The train robbers got out of there with nothing but a few bent silver dollars. Wells Fargo got most of their money back. Some of it blew through the door and was found along the right of way, but most of it they pried out of the woodwork when the express car was hauled into the railroad shop.

"And then there was another man that wanted to be bad. We were washing up at one of the stations. He threw his basin of water in my face and all over my clothes, and made some remark about 'Little Boy Blue,' which was what they called me in those days. I'm afraid I lost my temper. I took my wash basin by the little hole in the rim and swung the edge down on his head. Then I went inside. The keeper told me this man was a gunslinger who had killed several, and he offered me his best horse.

"I accepted and rode away just as this man got the blood out of his

eyes and could see. Quite a race, but the keeper had given me a real good horse. The gunslinger never got near enough to use his six-shooters. I had a gun in my holster, and I was glad I did not have to use it. I never liked to use a gun unless I was paid to."

And that was what our family and the waiters standing motionless along the wall heard that evening. The next day he was gone.

We saw him to the train; when it had departed and in the days that followed, we thought of him as returning to his home in Alameda, California, not in a railroad coach, but on horseback, galloping into the West on the fastest horse in the world — not a dapper little old man

Billie (Little Boy Blue) Pridham

with white hair and gold-rimmed spectacles, but a young man in riding clothes, a six-gun in his holster, leaving a trail of dust behind him and a swarm of Indians in vain pursuit.

We wrote to him, and he replied to our labored epistles most graciously.

Not much more than a year later Father took us aside one evening and gently told us that he had received word Uncle Billie Pridham had ridden over the last hilltop.

So he came and went in our lives with that swiftness Mark Twain describes in his epic account of the Pony Express rider in *Roughing It*. We were like Mark Twain and the others on the top of the stagecoach on the plains out there by Fort Bridger or Chimney Rock, watching for the Pony Express rider, then seeing him in the distance, coming at a gallop, growing larger, passing with a wave of the hand and then growing smaller, disappearing in the West.

"Swift phantom of the desert," Mark Twain called him, "winging away like a belated fragment of a storm." Not like that in actuality, our Billie Pridham. Yet at that time, and in later years, we thought of our quiet and carefully dressed little old uncle in that way much more frequently than as we had seen him when he was with us. ●

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