



The longest ride

By TOM MOATES

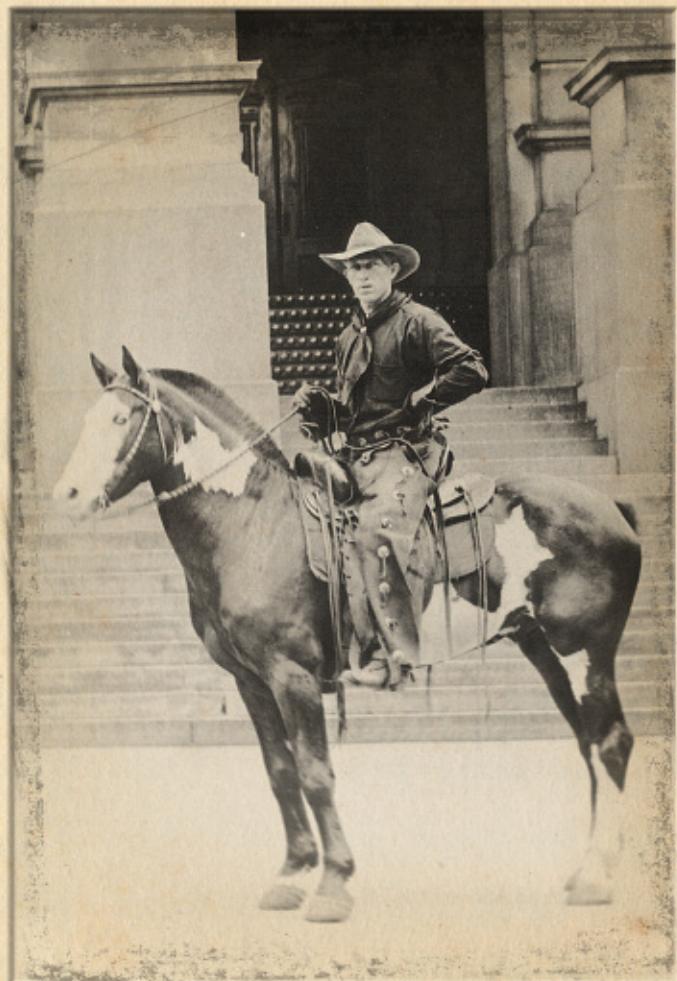
THE LONGEST HORSEBACK
TRIP EVER MADE STARTED
WITH FOUR MEN AND A PAINT
HORSE NAMED "PINTO."

One of the most amazing equestrian journeys of all time began in 1912 when 30-year-old logger George Beck decided that the scant living he hacked out in the forests of Washington state just wasn't cutting it.

The odyssey ultimately ended with the longest confirmed horseback trip of the 20th century. Perhaps most exceptionally, it provided the opportunity for the single longest journey made by a horse in recorded history, a Paint Horse named "Pinto."

This fact is substantiated by The Long Riders' Guild (LRG, thelongridersguild.com), an international organization of equestrian explorers who have made continuous horseback journeys of 1,000 miles or more. The LRG boasts being the largest repository of equestrian travel knowledge in history, and they verify that Pinto made the entire trip, dubbed "the ride of the century."

This expedition astonishes those lucky enough to bump into the few accounts of it remaining today. Beck and three other horsemen—his younger brother, Charles Beck; a 20-year-old friend, Raymond "Fat" Rayne; and Beck's 38-year-old brother-in-law, Jay Ransome—passed through each capital of the 48 states that comprised the United States at the time. This required zig-zagging over mountains, deserts, plains, rivers and every other imaginable geographic challenge nature can dish out from sea to shining sea.



COURTESY TOM MOATES

Above: Though many horses began the expedition, only the striking Paint Horse named Pinto completed the 20,352-mile trek.

Facing: The Overland Westerners—George Beck, Charles Beck, Raymond Rayne and Jay Ransome.

*"Let's make the longest
horse ride on record and get
ourselves a reputation."*

George Beck



Above: After posing for a local photographer in May 1912, the four horsemen stepped into their saddles and began their ride.

Bottom right: The posse started their long ride in Olympia, Washington, then headed for Oregon, eager to continue their journey.

"What is ironic about the most logically impressive equestrian journey of the 20th century," said CuChullaine O'Reilly, a founding member of the LRG, "is that it didn't begin in Dodge City, or any other town associated with the mythology of the Old West. Nor was it a legendary cowboy who completed the most difficult ride in 20th century American history. Though it is hard to believe, the greatest American equestrian journey began under the shadow of the mighty Olympic mountains, in the tiny village of Shelton, Washington, when four former loggers, turned Long Riders, rode into the record books."

Pinto may have lived half a century before the American Paint Horse Association was formed, but we know he sported striking markings and color that would turn the head of any Paint Horse enthusiast today. Also, thanks to solid conformation and a sturdy build, he never took a lame step in 1,127 days, as he covered 20,352 miles on that continuous journey—a singular feat worthy of praise and reflection for any horse lover, and certainly qualities sought after by Paint Horse breeders today.

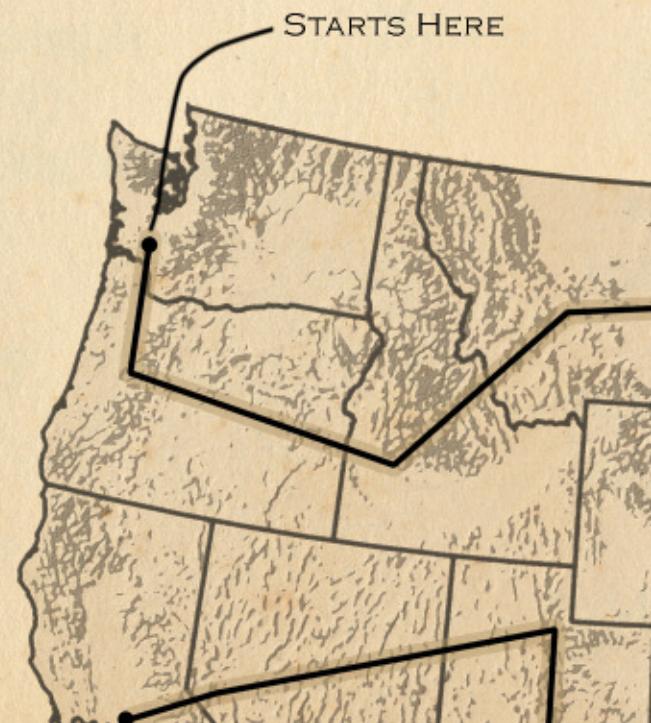
THE GREAT JOURNEY

To George Beck, seeking celebrity and affluence from the saddle seemed a much superior situation to laboring with an axe.

"Logging is a lousy business," he wrote in his autobiography. "We're lucky if we work 6 months a year. In the meantime, there's a World's Fair, the Panama Pacific International

Exposition, comin' up in San Francisco in 1915. The gold is there. We have the nags and gear. Let's ride to every state capital in the Union. Let's make the longest horse ride on record and get ourselves a reputation. We'll win fame. We'll write an adventure book. We'll put on a show on the midway at the Exposition. There's a pot of gold out there and we'll find it!"

Thus Beck assured his friends of their bright futures and optimistically got the trip together. Dubbing themselves the Overland Westerners, the posse agreed with Beck and



figured fame and fortune awaited them on the long trail, building up over the journey and finally erupting into great fanfare and a brilliant finale at their final destination.

Aside from the big shows they could attend, surely newspapers would pick up their story and governors from every state would come to greet them with smiles and handshakes. Their names would be known from coast to coast. They also had a few additional entrepreneurial tricks up their sleeves. The horsemen printed post cards and calendars illustrating their proposed route all over America to sell along the way. Also, they hammered out an agreement with a Seattle-based magazine, *The Westerner*, to cover their expenses in exchange for their taking subscriptions across the country.

It never occurred to the adventurers that what awaited at the end of successfully completing such an amazing, ambitious and publicized spectacle of equestrian endurance was absolute obscurity and a disinterest that would greet them even upon their completion.

On the morning of May 1, 1912, the original five horses and four riders stood still momentarily for the camera of a local photographer. Then they stepped into their saddles and rode 18 miles to Olympia, Washington, where the governor greeted them. Next they headed out for Oregon, where another member joined the group—Nip, a zealous Gordon Setter puppy.

Twenty-three days after the trip's warm, sunny beginnings they headed across the snow-covered Cascade Mountains. On a trail up the Hackleman Pass, they had to hold up near the summit in freezing temperatures in a deserted cabin, and then set out at 4 a.m. the next morning to travel beyond this first great obstacle.

"Got to the snow line at 5 a.m.," Beck wrote, "and then the fun began.... It held us up pretty well. But the horses went through

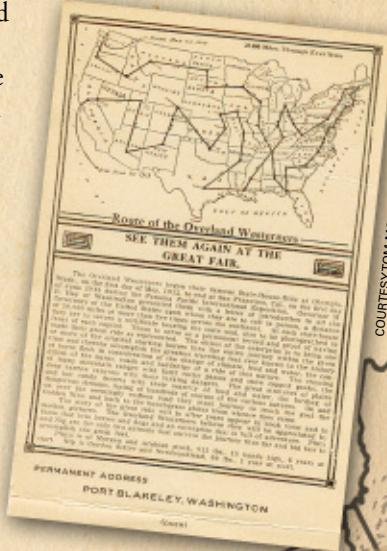
Through it all, "Pinto" alone stayed sound and sure-footed on the trail.

to their belly once in a while. It tired them out pretty much on the start, as it was pretty tough work and new to them. But when they got their second wind they done better and got somewhat steadier. I thought once we would never make her but a fellow can do more than he thinks he can if he makes up his mind and we made up our minds to go through or bust."

Beck and Pinto fell into many unique opportunities on the road. While Pinto started out as a packhorse, by the time they reached the third state, Idaho, he already was becoming Beck's favorite mount. In Boise, the pair accepted an invitation to ride in the famous traveling 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show. Already, many of the group's horses were showing signs of fatigue and trouble, and the need for swapping out horses along the way began. Yet, through it all Pinto alone stayed sound and sure-footed on the trail.

The Overland Westerners did make a little money by selling their printed materials, and the magazine sponsorship helped at first, but as the journey proceeded the publication folded and with it went their only regular source of income. As they ventured east, they often found themselves penniless. What scant income came from the sale cards and calendars always went to caring for the horses first. Mostly, their nightly accommoda-

*The Overland
Westerners made
a little money selling
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such as postcards
describing their
amazing voyage.*



COURTESY TOM MACK

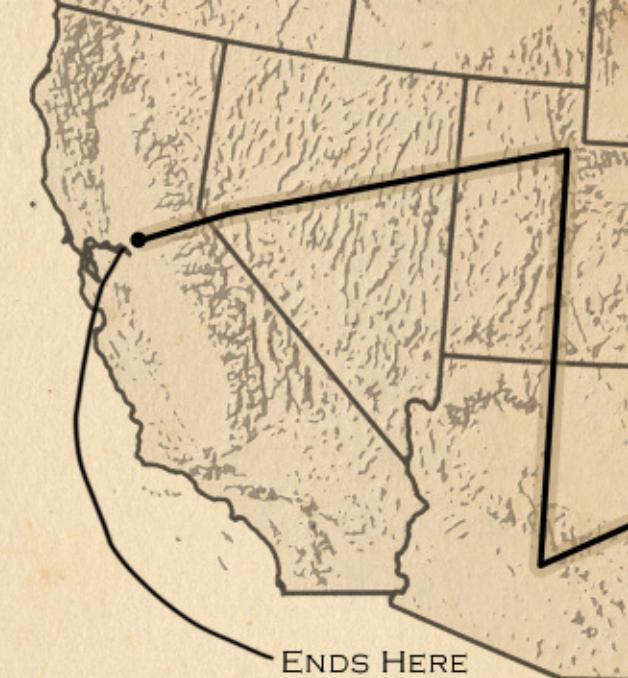
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Far Right: Through months of travel over horrendous roads, the tenacious crew managed to average 22 miles a day.

tions were haystacks, barns or just the great outdoors. Once in a rare while they could scrape together the change to get a room. Even then straws were drawn to see which one of them would get the bed, leaving the others to sleep upon the hard ground yet another night. The men even sold their winter coats to get an extra \$1.75 as they navigated eastward.

Through months of travel over horrendous roads (often little more than glorified trails) the tenacious crew still managed to average 22 miles a day. They put thousands of miles behind them, enduring every imaginable hardship and long, lonely expanses, but the road was always dotted with brilliant adventures. Pinto did not manage the trip without his share of near brushes with death. In one of these, he was nearly swept away and drowned in a treacherous river crossing. Beck wrote:

"We had forded dozens of busy rivers. Jay tested the stream with a long pole, then rode



over to show us how it could be done. Everything went find until he got in midstream when Pinto, carrying our pack, which slipped, flipped over and couldn't flip back. I thought he was a gone horse, but Jay hung on, flipped him over right side up, headed him upstream and snaked him to shallow water. I don't know how. We all rushed in and after slashing the diamond hitch, got Pinto on his feet. We lost some grub and a few utensils but we were very glad to escape that easy by saving Pinto."

THE GLORIOUS END?

Two years passed, as did many states, their capitals and jolly plump politicians. Photographs from the trip show the wiry crew clad in dusty clothes contrasting against the backdrop of grand buildings and clean, smiling locals with an ever-changing string of horses—except for one, the always-present, sturdy Pinto.

Thanksgiving came during their time on the trail, and the Overland Westerners still remained far too poor to even stop for a restaurant dinner.

"Having no invite for a turkey feed," Beck recalled of the time, "we moved down the road. Although we were practically busted, we were thankful for our good health and for the willing horses which had taken us so far along our trip. To celebrate, we had a hobo stew which we prepared on the road. It seems a good-sized rooster got in the way of a rock which Fat happened to throw."

On May 24, 1915, three years and a month after setting out from Shelton, the Overland Westerners and Pinto rode into Sacramento, California—the 48th and final capital—thus completing their heroic journey. Their photo-

PINTO

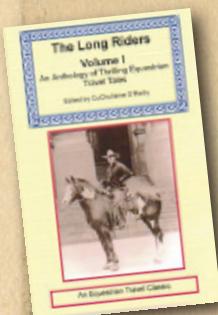
fared well for a while after the trip, cared for by Beck. In fact, he was so gentle he was allowed to wander at large through a neighborhood near Port Angeles, Washington, to the delight of children, many of whom remembered the beautiful, freely roaming gelding for decades to come.

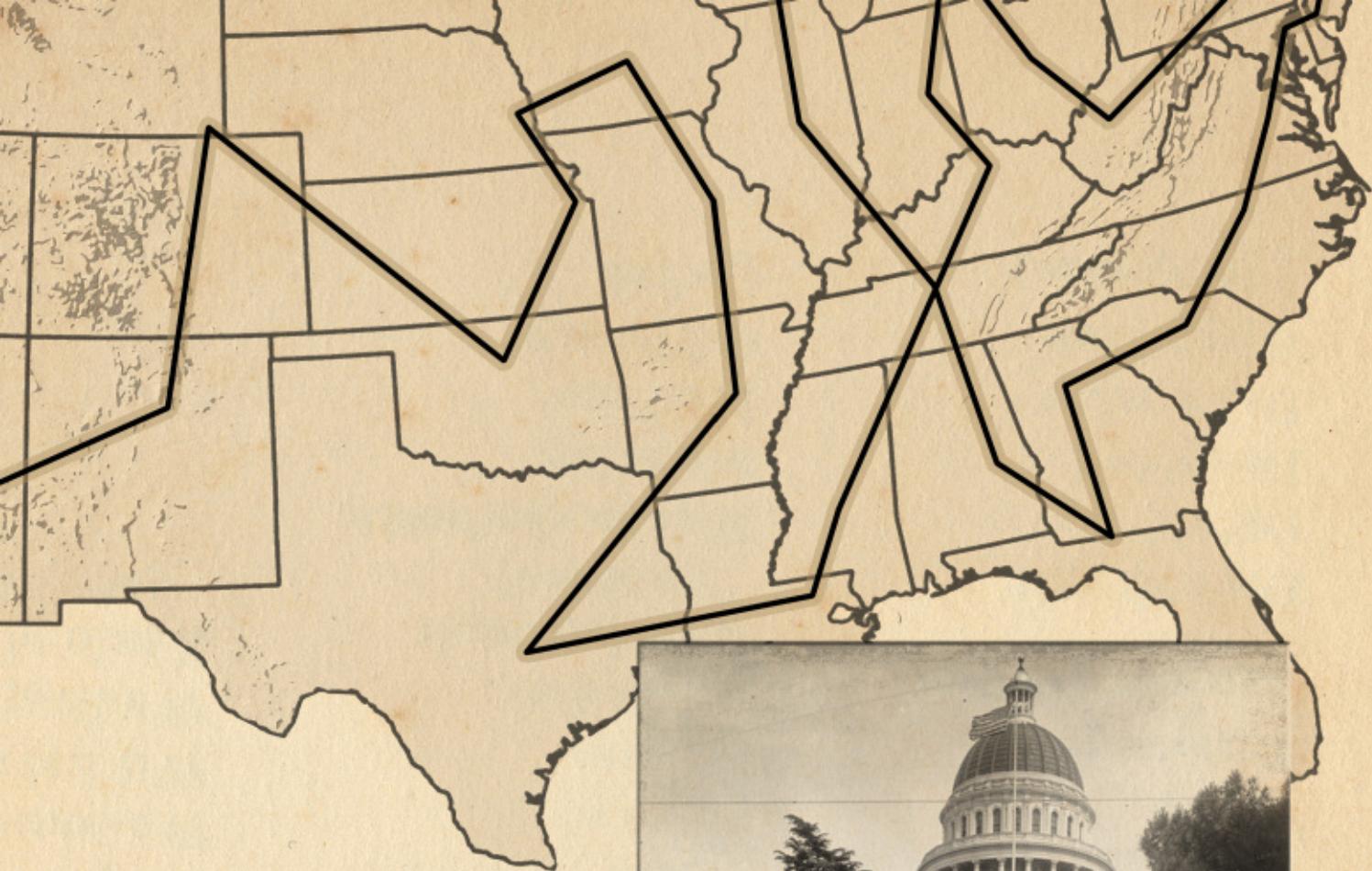
Beck, unfortunately, did not fare so well. He wrote an autobiography of the great trip, but, as with all the other attempts to turn the experience into a dollar and a reputation, he admitted: "I wrote it sweet enough, but it came up sour." On one dreadful night, the man who spurred "the ride of the century" ended up dying, dead drunk, drowning in six inches of muddy water in a roadside ditch.

Soon afterward, it is known that Pinto was sent off to work as a pack animal in the harsh terrain of the Olympic Mountains. It is all that is certain of his fate except that, like his former master, all his unsurpassed glorious deeds went abandoned to obscurity...until recently.

The LRG recently re-discovered the truth about Pinto and the Overland Westerners and corrected their sentence to oblivion. Not only is their story now returned to public attention, the pair even grace

the cover of a book, *The Long Riders*, one of around 300 titles put out by the LRG's publishing arms





graph with California's governor was taken marking the momentous event. Then, they set out for one final leg of the trip, the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Finally, with the longest ride on record completed, they thought surely that the boisterous crowds gathered there to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal would welcome them too as adventurous American legends! At last, their moment of fame had arrived.

"Get them hayburners off the street!" however, was the greeting they received from a policeman. Their momentous, historical adventure utterly failed to spark public interest.

Within a few days, all mention of the conclusion to the ride of the century also passed from public view. The news was focused on the outbreak of World War I, not on one of the greatest equestrian feats of all time.

Beck's three saddle companions, depleted of money and energy, sold their horses and took the train back home to Washington State. Beck, however, wasn't ready to give up. He stayed in San Francisco working hard to bring the amazing story of this unequalled horseback odyssey to the public by approaching editors and authors. It still failed, and he was turned down by many, including Jack London. Without hope for the fame and fortune he was so certain awaited him, and now com-



COURTESY NATIONAL COWBOY MUSEUM

pletely broke, he managed one last great act—to care for his horse, Pinto.

Beck and the 900-pound gelding had bonded over more miles of a single journey than any other horse and man have ever taken together throughout all of history. The horseman managed to scrape together the money to get himself and Pinto (and Nip, as well) back home on a tramp steamer.

There, Puget Sound awaited in the calmness of its regular workday routine, and the pair came full circle from one of the most amazing adventures of the era to the same regular status with which they had left—richer only for the experience. **PHJ**

Ending their journey on May 24, 1915—three years and a month after they began—the Overland Westerners arrived in Sacramento, California, their 48th and final capital.