

Generations

Going from the Pony Express to driverless mail trucks

We've come a long way in mail delivery from the Pony Express to today's world of email — and we're going even further in the future with the USPS forging ahead with driverless semi-trucks carrying the mail.

The Pony Express delivered messages, newspapers and mail using relays of horse-mounted riders that operated from April 3, 1860, to October 1861 between Missouri and California. The typical time for a post to reach Sacramento from St. Joseph, Missouri, was 10 days, although the fastest time was in 1861, when William Campbell carried Lincoln's first message to Congress. In November of the same year, the Pony Express delivered its final package. In all, 34,750 pieces of mail were delivered over its short lifespan. Though there are many reasons for the ending of the Pony Express, the primary motive was due to the completion of the transcontinental telegraph. Through the 19th and 20th centuries, mail was sent via horseback, stage-coaches, steam-

ships, trains, hot-air balloons, and finally airplanes, but recent articles in www.observer.com and www.wired.com put a new twist on mail delivery via semi-trucks across the U.S.



Peg DeMarco

Simply put, the trucks are gearing up to run driverless.

Yes, the USPS is joining the future of transportation with a pilot program, in partnership with automated-trucking startup TuSimple, in an attempt to improve its delivery of the 484.8 million pieces of mail it handles every day. The test run will include trips hauling packages and letters between Phoenix and Dallas. The TuSimple truck will have a safety engineer and driver riding for the duration of the trips to monitor performance and ensure public safety, according to company representatives.

"This pilot is just one of many ways the Postal Service is innovating and investing in its

future," USPS said in a statement, which has been on the path to testing driverless hauls for two years.

San Diego-based TuSimple, spearheading the two-week program, is working with USPS, which will then assess the trial's success. The company recently closed a \$95 million funding round, bringing its total to \$178 million since its launch in 2015.

However, the chances of bumping into an automated USPS truck on Interstate 10 in the next couple of weeks are slim as TuSimple's vehicles purposely blend in with traffic.

"We are actually trying to minimize marking," said Chuck Price, TuSimple's chief product officer, "because we find that people tend to either get distracted in amazement or distracted in a devious way and try to mess with us."

Using driverless vehicles will no doubt help the USPS increase efficiency while saving money on transit in the future. The agency spends \$4 billion on third-party hauls to deliver mail, a sum that could be slashed with

the use of automated vehicles.

"When the vehicle can operate truly driverless, it will be much more efficient," Price said. "We think we can complete a coast-to-coast run in two days, where today it takes five."

USPS isn't the first government entity to try out driverless vehicles to maximize productivity. The Army has unveiled its own self-driving pilot program for testing automated combat trucks. The trucks are expected to be deployed to help soldiers avoid accidental casualties caused by driving. A test run at the Army's Fort Bliss, Texas, post saw 10 autonomous trucks go through unmanned driving trials. An additional 60 trial trucks are due to arrive across other Army posts within the next year.

While fully automated vehicles are decades away, their experimental use by public agencies such as USPS signals a growing interest in laying down regulations and infrastructure for their public debut, and TuSimple is leading the way. The company bills itself as a "master of computer vision"

with cameras that can see and identify threats over 1,000 yards away (more than half a mile) and often much farther.

For TuSimple, it's the chance to make enormous revenue, pick up press coverage and test its technology against the rigors of a real-world delivery service. The startup, with headquarters in San Diego and Beijing, claims that the pilot is more logistical rather than technological. For the pilot, the human driver will handle the truck on surface streets, but TuSimple is looking to a second phase of the pilot, where the robot does all the work.

In the meantime, its 400-person team is working to expand the robot's operations. The system can handle high winds, night driving (even switching to high beams) and rain, but ice on the road remains "a nasty problem."

It is for humans, too.

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