

# Pony Express celebrates 150th anniversary

By Ron Wilson

*Director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University*

The rider gallops up to the station, carrying the mochila full of mail. It's the Pony Express - but it's also 2010. This rider is reenacting this historic delivery service in honor of the 150th anniversary of the Pony Express. A reenactment ride passed through rural Kansas in 2010, including a stop at the nation's only unaltered Pony Express station still standing at its original site. Special thanks to Kansas Magazine and writer Mark Janssen whose article told this remarkable story. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Duane Durst is director of the Hollenberg Pony Express Station State Historic Site near Hanover,

Kansas. The Pony Express was created in 1860 to deliver mail between St. Joseph, Mo. and the west coast. The route generally followed the wagon ruts of the Oregon and California trails through northeast Kansas.

The destination was Sacramento-1,966 miles away. The mission was delivery-transporting the mail in no more than 10 days through Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and California territories.

The Pony Express concept came from the Russell, Majors & Waddell freight company, which provided the horses and hired the riders. Posters seeking riders read: "Wanted-young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred. Wages \$25 per week."

When they said they wanted skinny riders, they meant it. Duane Durst pointed out that the consideration was for the horse. He said, "The total weight of rider, saddle and mail could not exceed 150 pounds."

Riders signed contracts promising they would not use profane language, get drunk, gamble, treat the animals cruelly or "do anything incompatible with the conduct of a gentleman." I'd like to see some behavior codes like that today.

Each rider covered 50 to 80 miles per day, riding at an eight to 12 miles per hour clip. Horses and mochila were changed every 10 to 15 miles. The riders were allowed two minutes to make that change. "A rider would swing off one horse and swing on another," Durst said. "It would happen that fast." Although

the riders were asked to risk death daily, only one of its riders was killed during the existence of the Pony Express.

The cost of sending a letter was \$5 per half ounce, later reduced to \$1 when letters were written on tissue-type paper. More than 30,000 pieces of mail were delivered in the 18-month existence of the Pony Express, including the text of President Lincoln's inaugural address which arrived in seven days and 17 hours-well ahead of the guaranteed 10-day delivery.

The Pony Express captured the imagination of the nation, but it found itself displaced by the telegraph. It ended on October 26, 1861.

In honor of the 150th anniversary of the Pony Express, a reenactment ride was held in June 2010. It passed

through northeast Kansas, going to the Hollenberg Pony Express Station before going to Marysville and beyond.

The Hollenberg Pony Express Station is a 60- by 25-foot, six-room, rustic building. Today it is a National Historical Landmark, making it unique among the 190 stations along the trail. Duane Durst said, "It is the only original unaltered station standing right where it was built. There are other stations, but they have been moved or altered, which takes away the historical value."

Now the Kansas State Historical Society maintains the site, which features educational displays and a beautiful mural. This Pony Express station is located in a truly rural setting, because Hanover is a town of 632 people. Now, that's rural.

Sunday, Aug. 29, will mark the 25th Annual Pony Express Festival at the historic Hollenberg Station. It will include live demonstrations and a short Pony Express re-ride.

More pictures and stories can be found in Kansas Magazine, the beautiful quarterly which showcases our state. Go to [www.kansasmag.com](http://www.kansasmag.com) or [www.travelks.com](http://www.travelks.com).

The rider has transferred the mail, and now he gallops away from the station as a way of celebrating 150 years since the founding of the Pony Express. We commend Duane Durst and all those involved for making a difference by honoring this legacy. It's the type of genuine history which rural Kansas can deliver.

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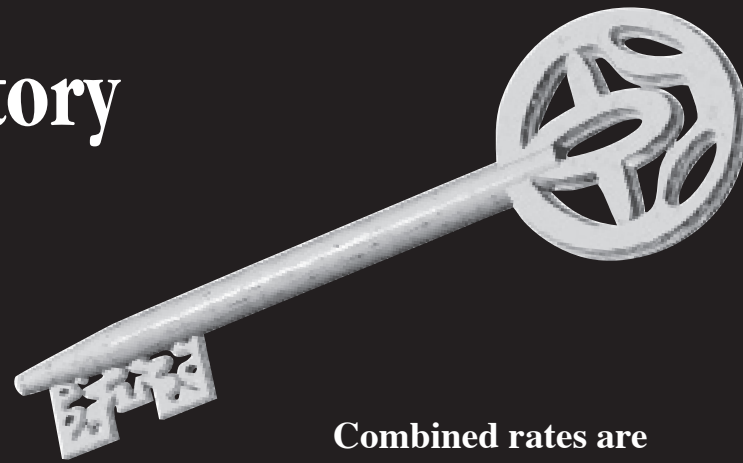
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