

"You—a pony express rider?" Slade, the station keeper, stared at the boy. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen, sir," answered Billy.

Slade threw back his head and laughed.

"My riders need to be the best and the fastest. You're too young, boy. This is a man's job."

Billy looked straight at Slade. "I *am* a man," he said. "I've worked since my father died. I've made enough to support my mother."

"What kind of work have you done?"

"I was a guard with wagon trains."

"Good shot?" asked Slade.

"I am, sir." Billy touched the shiny guns at his sides.

"It's dangerous business," Slade warned. "We expect outlaw holdups and Indian trouble. But we don't want gunmen. We want men to *ride* their way through trouble, not shoot their way through."

"I can," Billy said firmly.

"All right," said Slade. "Try the first run. If you do all right, the job is yours."

Billy waited at the Colorado station for three days. At last the mail arrived from the east. When the rider pulled to a stop, Slade jerked the mailbag off the horse and threw it on Billy's horse. "Good luck!" he yelled, and Billy set off.

He was on his own horse, Prince. They kept a swift, steady pace, and soon reached the first relay station. Billy jumped off and fastened the mailbag on a fresh horse. In a minute he was on his way again.

"Take good care of Prince," he called back. "I'll pick him up on the way back."

On his way he passed a stagecoach. The driver cheered as Billy raced by. Farther on a family waved from their lonely cabin. Once he galloped past an Indian camp. Every ten or fifteen miles there was a relay station. He changed horses at each one.

At the end of his trip Billy met the rider from the west. They traded their bags of mail and started back. Now Billy was carrying the mail from California.

The trip back was over the same trail. At the last relay station Prince was waiting. Within an hour they were at the home station. There Billy handed the mail to a fresh rider who headed on east.

Billy got the job. He was the youngest pony express rider, but one of the best. On one trip he made the longest nonstop ride in the history of the pony express.

The Billy of this story became known through all the West. His real name was William Frederick Cody. Most people, however, know him as Buffalo Bill.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **Billy's age was**
 - A twelve
 - B fourteen
 - C sixteen

2. **At first Slade said that Billy was too**
 - A short
 - B slow
 - C young

3. **Billy began to earn money after the death of his**
 - A father
 - B mother
 - C brother

4. **When he was with the wagon trains, Billy worked as a**
 - A cook
 - B guard
 - C driver

5. **Slade wanted men who could get out of trouble by**
 - A talking
 - B shooting
 - C riding

6. **The first mail that Billy carried came from the**
 - A east
 - B west
 - C south

7. **At each relay station Billy got a new**
 - A horse
 - B mailbag
 - C gun

8. **The people Billy saw along the way were**
 - A worried
 - B puzzled
 - C friendly

9. **On the trip back, Billy**
 - A carried the same mailbag
 - B followed a new trail
 - C got his own horse again

10. **Billy once set a record for riding a long way without**
 - A stopping
 - B shooting
 - C falling