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Review of *Death of a Gunfighter: The Quest for Jack Slade, the West's Most Elusive Legend* By Dan Rottenberg

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Death of a Gunfighter: The Quest for Jack Slade, the West's Most Elusive Legend. By Dan Rottenberg. Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2008. xiv + 520 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

Freight teamster and wagon master along the Overland Trail, stagecoach driver in Texas, as well as stagecoach division superintendent along the Central Overland route, Joseph Alfred "Jack" Slade (1831-1864) is remembered for having helped launch and operate the Pony Express in 1860-61. He is also remembered as a gunfighter and the "Law West of Kearney." The

legends about him (including those in Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and Prentiss Ingraham's dime novels about Buffalo Bill) are largely false, but the truth has been difficult to establish.

Dan Rottenberg was faced with three challenges in writing this book, the first to deal so extensively with Jack Slade: a lack of reliable documentary evidence; an abundance of fictitious material; and the complexity of the character of his subject. By all accounts, Slade gave the appearance of an educated, soft-spoken, generous, and kind individual when he was sober. After one of his drunken rampages his recognition of the damage he had inflicted on others horrified him. There is little in his story that is not in dispute to some degree, including the killings of Andrew Ferrin and Jules Beni and the background of his wife Maria Virginia Slade. His career came to a sudden and dramatic end on March 10, 1864, when he was hanged in Virginia City, Montana, on a charge of disturbing the peace. Until now his story has been left largely to the folklorists.

In spite of these challenges, Rottenberg has left no document, publication, or interview unexamined in his search for the truth. He presents his conclusions dispassionately and eloquently, supported by ninety pages of extensive notes and twenty-two pages of bibliography. Slade's story is told in the context of the times, making it as much the story of communication and transportation in the Great Plains as the story of a fascinating individual. The building of the stations along the Oregon Trail and the route of the Pony Express and the physical challenges faced by men who braved floods, droughts, blizzards, bandits, and hostile Indians to transport goods and the mail are recounted in considerable detail. If Slade remains an enigma in the end, it is not the fault of the historian who has made a concerted effort to present us with more of his story than anyone else.

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