

# Witnessing the Pony Express Re-ride, June 2023

By Gwyneth Bowen

6/17/2023  
[gwynethmareeblog.com](http://gwynethmareeblog.com)

For most of my life, Kansas has been my home. I will confess to only more recently exploring it, in large part due to my sister, a Kansas traveler for years. On a perfect summer day the second week of June (2023) my best friend, John, and I headed to Topeka to meet my sister and another friend for a day trip in Kansas.

Loaded into my sister's car, we headed north out of Topeka on Highway 75. In no time at all we were past the bounds of suburbia. The sun was still low enough in the sky to cast beautiful, soft light on the fields and tree-lined lush pastures we were passing. Then in another blink of an eye, the outskirts of Holton emerged.

The plan was to make a coffee and goodies stop at one of my sister's discoveries, Mad Eliza's, a custom cake and gourmet dessert cafe close to the northwest corner of Holton's beautiful old Town Square. It was not to be, as we discovered they are closed Sunday through Tuesday.

It had been many years since I was last in Holton. The Town Square surrounds the Jackson County Courthouse which is the third in Holton's history but only the second on that site. It was built in 1921 in what seems to me a Neo-classical style. I was pleased to see how many of the old buildings around the square have shed their "modern" makeovers and peeled back to the beauty of the original.

Not seeing any other tempting options for coffee, we took Highway 16 west out of town. Even though I'd spent time in and around Holton, I had only been a few miles out on this highway which rapidly turned into my favorite type of drive. The hills are even more rolling than on Highway 75 and the landscape is beautiful. An avid fan of the BBC show, "Escape to the Country," I've been in awe of the UK countryside but that area of Kansas certainly holds its own with the views on that show.

My first surprise of the day was how close Holton is to The Flint Hills. About 25 miles out, I exclaimed, "Wow, this area kind of looks like the Flint Hills!" My sister replied, "That's because it is." A new revelation for me of how far north and east the hills run.

Our first destination was Marysville (in the eastern third of Kansas, about ten miles south of the Nebraska state line), so we continued to the intersection of K99, then north to Highway 36, where we turned west. Since it was close to 11:30 and we'd had no coffee/goodies break, The Wagon Wheel restaurant was our first stop in Marysville. It's a popular local hangout whose good food we had experienced years before.

Happily fed and enjoying the beautiful day we took in a portion of the downtown while walking about two blocks to The Pony Express Barn and Museum. It was one of the places we all had an interest in visiting, particularly my sister and me. In our childhood, we had family that lived in Elwood, Kansas and St. Joseph,



Missouri, so we were always aware of things related to the Pony Express. We even remembered a re-ride done in the 60s that went through our hometown, Hiawatha.

The history we learned in the Barn and Museum was very interesting, with many surprises thrown in. I still feel bad I neglected to get the names of our Guide and another gentleman volunteer that shared so much with us.

The tour begins in the new area, a museum addition that was built onto the barn. It covers several floors and is quite diverse in its historical content. While there was a great deal to be learned about the Pony Express, the

Museum has vast amounts of information and displays covering life throughout Marysville's history. We all felt it was certainly worth the admission and recommend going.

The barn is accessed by returning to the lobby area and being led through a jack arch into the barn. Stepping across the threshold is truly stepping back in time. The sights and smells are of a barn, an old barn. Having grown up on a farm, I loved it even though our barn was nothing close in age. Our Guide reiterated the barn is the only original Pony Express Barn left. Replicas have been built in other places but Marysville was part of the route and has the real thing.



In the course of our tour, the Guide mentioned the annual re-ride was in progress even as we spoke. It took a bit for that to sink in, then we inquired to find out more. Each year the National Pony Express Association does a re-ride that closely follows an original route between St. Joseph, Missouri and Sacramento, California. There are over 750 riders who ride with a leather mochila over their saddle carrying around 1,000 letters. The mochila is like a leather blanket with four pockets (cantinas) that fits over a McClellan saddle. Letters were wrapped in a protective covering and carried in the pockets. It was a good solution and easy to transfer when horses were changed.

The letters carried on the re-ride are handed over to the USPS at the destination city, which alternates each year. The 2023 re-ride began in Sacramento and ended at Patee House in St. Joseph, an original departure and arrival point for the Pony Express.

It all sounded intriguing to me and then our Guide said, "They even have a website to follow the ride. There's a GPS unit in the mochila, it's transmitting so anywhere there's a signal it "moves" a little horse on the website. I made a mental note to check that out later.

The ride is done in 10 days just as the original and they were due in Marysville about 1:00 a.m. on the upcoming Saturday morning (our Guide lamented that timing) and due into St. Jo at 7:30 p.m. that evening. It all seemed fascinating to us but then our tour was over. We lingered a bit, talked with another volunteer that came in, and then headed out to find Historic Trails Park.

With a population of just under 3,400, Marysville is very walkable but more of a hike than we wanted to get to the Park. Even driving though, it took several attempts before the confused Google Maps could get us there. It's a very basic park, mostly commemorating the place where eight historic trails crossed and a rope ferry was used to cross The Big Blue River. Funds are being sought to further develop the site.

While I'm sure there is more to explore in Marysville, from the Historic Trails Park we continued roaming that area of Kansas until at last we returned to Topeka very late afternoon and back to Overland Park (Kansas City area) at dusk.

Our time at The Pony Express Barn and Museum left quite an impression and in the next day or so John and I had both checked out the National Pony Express Association's website. It is quite impressive and when the re-ride is happening, really fun to watch the red horse (it's the one moving) make progress along the route. There are also spotter notes too.

Somehow by Saturday, we both had thought why not go to the route and see a little bit of the ride? When the re-ride reached Kansas they were 4 hours behind the schedule. We knew the folks in Marysville would be much happier about that timing and I believe the actual arrival time there was around 6:00 a.m.

Looking at the route, I thought we could drive to Horton, Kansas (about an hour from Overland Park) and see the rider go through there. We left Overland Park at about 1:30 p.m. on Saturday monitoring the ride progress as we drove. It soon became apparent they were really catching up time and we would not make it to Horton before they did.

We stopped in Atchison, Kansas, and re-grouped. Even though I grew up in Northeast Kansas I am not overly familiar with the nuances of Doniphan County which looked to be where we needed to go. From Atchison, we headed north on Kansas 7, also known as the beautiful Glacial Hills Scenic Drive, which we had been on only a couple of weeks before.

The riders were making up so much time, I wanted to make sure we landed someplace comfortably ahead of them. After much Google Maps and re-ride route scrutiny, we drove to the intersection of Kansas Highway 20 and Fargo Springs Road (a few miles west of Bendena). K20 is a paved road, while Fargo Springs Road is gravel. It was also an intersection of the original route and this year's re-ride trail; we loved the significance of that. The majority of the route was on non-paved roads for, my guess, safety reasons with less motor traffic and better for the horses.

I positioned my car on the south side of the intersection as we knew the rider would turn left and head north on Fargo Springs Road. Settled down to wait we began to take in our surroundings. Behind us were cornfields lush with beautiful, tall green stalks. A good breeze was blowing so we were treated to the lovely rustle of corn leaves.

It was pretty warm in the sun but we opened up the car and took shelter in the shade inside. Just when it would start to feel a little hot a breeze would give relief. Our view of the Highway to the west looked kind of like a straight-on view of one of those ribbon Christmas candies as the pavement followed the contour of the rolling hills beneath. The south side of the Highway is lined with utility poles creating a tall suspended "fence."



On the north side of K20, both west of our position and up Fargo Springs Road are farms with cattle, so pastures as well as crops. Overall pretty "Zen," when we weren't regularly checking to see where the pony was. I

think the waiting was close to an hour and a half but the surroundings were so pleasant time passed quickly.

With the route tracker website showing us they were near, a truck pulling a large horse trailer turned off K20 to the north onto a road about a mile away. Somehow they turned back around to face the highway and parked. We would shortly learn why.

Utilizing the telephoto on my camera I spied a horse and rider profiled by the still strong but slanting rays of the dropping sun. They were flanked by a pickup truck and several other vehicles following behind with more joining



moment by moment. I was so excited it was quite a challenge to hold my camera steady!

Then the pony and rider pulled off onto the highway shoulder as did the other vehicles with the ride. Some traffic passed them and proceeded east on 20. Meanwhile, I could see a rider dismount but my view was partially blocked. It turns out it was one of the stops to change horse and rider. Very quickly the group was back on the road and rapidly approaching. I prayed my camera would make up for what I was not focused on doing in my excitement.



First to pass us was the pickup truck which we then could see had two big flags mounted in the truck bed, an American flag and the Pony Express National Association flag. Next came the horse and rider at a quick gallop, slowing only to turn north onto the gravel Fargo Springs Road. From what I observed, the rider was a woman! (Girl Power!) Once on the gravel, horse and rider took off in a run, which I could scarcely see for the cloud of dust following!

Even now reliving those moments I'm excited. I felt an incredible mix of awe, appreciation, and

thankfulness that we had the opportunity to witness the ride and chose to seize it! John and I just looked at each other with big grins and I know I squealed, "We did it!"

The moment passed and we turned to focus on "What next?" Our adrenaline was still flowing and we thought, "Hmm, we know we can easily beat them to the end in St. Joseph ... should we?" Our unanimous answer was an immediate "Yes!"

With great appreciation for Google Maps, we followed a route to St. Jo. However, I will say, I am thinking very seriously now about getting another physical road atlas. I loved them and sometimes technology doesn't go where I want to! It would also be kind of fun to use markers and document routes exactly instead of the "as the crow flies" Google does.

It took no time at all to get to St. Joseph, find a place to eat so we could re-fuel and be ready for the finale in front of Patee House, a place we had visited and loved in June 22. Funny, our focus then was simply taking the museum in. It's a huge four-story building; two floors of museum-big enough to have a full-sized steam locomotive and a full-size antique carousel under its roof. We had no particular focus on the Pony Express story then.

We continued to monitor the pony's progress and could tell it would not arrive at the originally scheduled time of 7:30 p.m. but we ourselves did arrive about then. Patee House is located at 12th and Penn Streets and covers the full block. The entrance is on the north side of the building, on Penn.

The sidewalk that runs on the west side of the property (on 12th Street) passes by the Jesse James house which has a separate tour/entrance fee but can also be accessed through Patee House. The little house is the one



James and his family occupied when he was shot and killed. Originally located several blocks away, in 1977 it was moved to the grounds of Patee House Museum.

To backtrack a bit, in 1858, two years after John Patee built the 140-room Patee House, Russell, Majors and Waddell established the St. Joseph offices of the Pony Express on the hotel's first floor. The official company name was Central Overland California and Pikes Peak Express Company - and that was before acronyms were popular-yikes! The museum now includes that restored Pony Express office. There we were at 12th and Penn, 163 years and a month later to see the finish of another Pony Express ride! It truly staggers me to think about it.



Joining those waiting, we were surprised by the small number of people gathered to witness the historic event, definitely a group of fewer than 100 people. Many folks were easily identified as being members of the National Pony Express Association by their red shirts, vests, jeans, cowboy hats and boots. In chatting with other folks waiting, we learned some just happened across the event.

I had a great desire to see the horse and rider come across the Missouri River bridge after they made their last change out across the river in Elwood, Kansas. However, in scouring Google Earth I couldn't see anyway feasible to do that due to all the intersections of highways in that area.

Patee House sits on a hill about two blocks from where the rider would come heading north on 10th Street and then turn east onto Penn. It seemed like I'd have a great view until people walked up and placed their folding chairs in front of me. Not wanting to step out in front of anyone else, I told John I was going down Penn toward 10th Street to get a better, unblocked view and did just that.

At first, I was at 11th Street and then moved another half a block down across from an empty parking lot with an unobstructed view. I was so distracted by anticipation it took a few minutes for me to notice across the empty parking lot at the southwest corner of 10th and Penn Streets was a massive mural covering the entire north (back) side of the Bolin Hydraulic Building. The mural starts on its northwest side (right when viewing) with a *Pony Express Rider*, then a stagecoach and is completed with an 1800s locomotive.

I later learned the old building on the southwest corner of 10th and Penn, which was hard for me to discern with the twilight beginning, is the Pony Express National Museum. What I could see very clearly in an area south of that museum and set back off 10th street was the lit 50s-era Pony Express Motel sign. The motel was built in 1955 but my sleuthing skills have yet to uncover when the motel actually closed. It seems it was in operation until at least 1996 and was finally torn down in 2007. New property owners donated the iconic sign to the Museum which spent \$22,000 on restoration and placed it in the small Museum park, about 4 miles away from the motel's original location.

So there it was ... the horse and rider would come into view sandwiched between the huge mural, The Pony Express Motel pony and rider in twinkling lights and the Pony Express National Museum! My excitement level was even more ramped up. First to appear was the pickup truck with the two big flags but no horse in view. Next came the truck with the horse trailer but no rider in view.

Finally very near 8:30 not only did one horse and rider appear but four! When they did the last change out in Elwood, three additional horses and riders were added. The lead rider and pony were carrying another large Pony Express National Association flag and the fourth rider and pony had a large American Flag. One horse and rider would have been powerful enough but seeing those four final horses and riders passing with the flags gives me chills to this day.



Entering Kansas 5 hours behind schedule, those incredible ponies and riders made up 4 hours to arrive at St. Joseph only an hour behind their original schedule. All I can say is “How?!” And “Wow!”

There was a little ceremony of sorts, lots of photos taken and then the small crowd was invited to meet the riders and the horses. There were lots of smiles all around. I even think the horses were smiling and proud, which they and the riders should have been.

It was quite late when we arrived back in the Kansas City area but I don't remember being that tired as it took a while for the “high” of witnessing it all to wear down. Would I do it again? You bet! Next year the 10-day journey begins at the Patee House and goes west to Sacramento. I want to be there for the send-off and then catch them somewhere out in rural Kansas. Hopefully, the word will continue to spread and many more will experience this up-close and personal look at part of America's incredible past.

Little did John and I know our visit to Marysville, Kansas would provoke so many things. Research is something I love, historical or otherwise. Such a tangible way to connect to the past helps me to be more aware of what those who have gone before went through and make a determination in my heart to be a type of pioneer in my own lifetime. Besides, it's fun!

