

September 28, 1997

Wheeling Along Where Trains Once Ran

By SHIRLEY CHRISTIAN

THE Osage Indians called it the land of the Middle Waters, the great swath of rolling hills, bluffs and fertile valleys shaped by the Missouri River, extending west from modern-day St. Louis to today's Kansas City and beyond.

First, the Osage shared their bountiful lands with the French fur traders and trappers who made their way along the river and scattered a few picturesque villages in their wake. Then the Spanish Government promised Daniel Boone thousands of acres of land in exchange for bringing settlers to the area. He and his wife, Rebecca, and their many offspring came in 1799, trailed by legions of farmers who found the gentle hills reminiscent of the lands they left behind in Kentucky and North Carolina.

After the territory passed from Spain to France, and then was sold to the United States, President Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore it from 1804 to 1806. In the mid-1800's, the Germans came, lured by a new place that reminded them of the Rhineland. Riverboats came, too, carrying furnishings and luxury goods from the East, gin from London, gamblers, adventurers and more settlers. Later, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad supplanted the riverboats, whistling its way along the north bank of the river past tall bluffs and fields of grain and hay. Then the Interstate highways came and killed the railroad, bypassing the "Petticoat Junction" towns and leaving them to wither and nearly die.

This is where we come in, we of the late 20th century; our capacity to destroy is occasionally balanced by our ability to mend our ways or even to create something wonderful from the ruins. With the aid of \$2.2 million from Edward D. Jones, who founded a brokerage firm bearing his name, the state of Missouri turned the old rail bed into a biking and hiking path that makes it possible to explore the history and natural beauty of the Missouri Valley while forgetting that the roar of Interstate 70 is but a few miles away. This exploration was possible, I discovered, even for someone who hadn't

been on a bicycle in more than 20 years and was convinced she would never make it out of the parking lot on two wheels.

The Katy Trail -- its name comes from the nickname railroaders had for the M-K-T line -- is **a state park 10 to 12 feet wide and 185 miles long.** Missouri officials say it is the longest of the many "rails to trails" conversions around the country, reaching from St. Charles, in the suburbs of St. Louis, to the town of Sedalia, about 85 miles east of Kansas City. With work delayed by the 1993 floods, the trail was finally completed along its present length last September (it may ultimately extend another 30 miles, from Sedalia to Clinton) and opened to rave reviews and instant success. Missouri officials say 300,000 to 400,000 people used it during the past year.

As a friend and I discovered during three days of exploring the trail in late June, the towns are coming back to life, thanks to the ribbon of very fine gravel snaking across most of the width of our 19th largest state. New businesses are springing up to serve trail users, and old ones have been revived. My friend Lilly and I found **descendants of the German settlers still making wine and serving dishes with names ending in "schnitzel."** Devoted preservationists maintain the French towns. Daniel Boone's last home draws crowds of visitors, even while Missouri and Kentucky are locked in an undoubtedly significant dispute over which state has the bones of Daniel and Rebecca tucked away in its soil. Along the way, we slept in two mansions of the last century, enjoyed haute cuisine in a converted country church, traded stories with people coming off the trail, and found that days beside the river and among the fields bring a wonderful peace.

Starting out from Kansas City, we chose to drive to St. Charles, Mo., which marks the eastern end of the trail, and then make our way back over the next two days with several walks and a short bike trip through sections of the trail and the attractions around it. By lunch time of the first day, we had reached Hermann, the delightfully preserved town founded in 1836 by the German Settlement Society of Philadelphia to keep German traditions alive in the New World. Descendants of the settlers still live that dream. The community is a center of winemaking and the site of some sort of German festival most weekends during the summer, as well as Maifest and Oktoberfest, celebrated each weekend in October.

After a lunch of Jaegerschnitzel, German potato salad and braised red cabbage, with a glass of wine, at the Stone Hill Winery and Restaurant in the hills above Hermann, we followed Highway 94, a winding two-lane thoroughfare that parallels the Katy Trail and the river, until we reached **Defiance. From there, we set out on the trail on foot.** Shaded by a canopy of

trees overhanging the path on one side, we walked about five miles west, then turned back, sampling ripening mulberries along the way. We also climbed a steep road to the Sugar Creek Winery and enjoyed a cool drink on its terrace before finishing our walk.

We stayed that night in St. Charles, where we had reservations at the Boone's Lick Trail Inn, a bed-and-breakfast in a brick house dating from the 1840's. The third floor was all ours, with a view out the back to the river and one of the ubiquitous gambling boats lazing in the water. The next morning, we took a walk along the trail at its very end, then strolled through a park surrounding the restored M-K-T depot, with a caboose waiting on the tracks beside it.

Returning to Highway 94, we followed it back to Defiance to visit the Historic Daniel Boone Home. We were struck first by the majestic setting of the farm, with lush and rolling green hills stretching out from the three-story house. Accustomed to thinking of Daniel Boone as a raw frontiersman, I was impressed by the efforts he and Rebecca made to surround their family with the comforts of civilization in a home started in 1803 at what was then the westernmost outpost of the United States. The house even holds a few fine wooden pieces that were in his grandparents' home in England in the late 1600's. Somehow, during a life that carried Daniel from his childhood in Pennsylvania to Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and finally Missouri, the family hung onto these links to its past. Of the 10 fireplaces in the house, which Daniel and Rebecca shared with their son Nathaniel and his family, five have mantels carved by Daniel from black walnut trees on the property. It was reassuring to learn that the house, with its two-and-a-half-foot-thick walls of native blue limestone, survived the New Madrid Fault earthquakes of 1811-12.

But if the Katy Trail has a heart, it is in minuscule Rocheport, one of the settlements from the French era along the Missouri -- and our next stop. Visitors coming into town off the highway are greeted by a population sign that says 255 people live in Rocheport, but at midday in the Trailside Cafe there seemed to be almost that many getting a quick lunch and a rest before returning to the trail. We arrived in Rocheport at midafternoon, just as a torrential downpour was ending and people were cycling in, soaking wet. Concerned about the condition of the trail bed after the rain, we decided to put off riding until the next day, but we stopped by the Trailside Cafe, which also runs a bike rental business, to check out the bikes and prices. Across the way, we spotted Abigail's, a restaurant housed in a long abandoned Baptist church now renovated and painted green. Friends in the area had recommended it highly. Lilly went in and made a dinner reservation on the

basis of the aromas.

A few miles farther west, near Boonville, we found our lodgings for the night at the Rivercene Bed-and-Breakfast, which seems to rise out of cornfields like a palatial mirage. The three-story brick mansion, with 15 expansive rooms, nine Italian marble fireplaces and a hand-carved grand staircase, was completed in 1869 for Joseph Kinney, a riverboat baron, and his family. Local residents dubbed it Kinney's Folly and predicted that the river, then lying just beyond the front lawn, would soon destroy the showplace. They were wrong, at least during Kinney's lifetime and well beyond. That nightmare was saved for Ron and Jody Lenz, who bought the house from Kinney's descendants in 1992. Though time and the Army Corps of Engineers long ago moved the river to the other side of a cornfield, in 1993 it came racing up to the house, climbing to 42 inches on the main floor. The Lenzes mounted a determined salvage operation, and today's visitors find no signs of the disaster.

Dinner at Abigail's turned out to be all that we'd expected. There are eight tables in the spare setting, and they were filled with obviously happy diners. Lilly ordered linguine with apples and walnuts in blue cheese sauce, and I had shrimp and cashew stir-fry -- both good choices.

The next morning, I proved the adage that we never forget the things we learn in childhood. Riding a bike turned out to be a piece of cake. The Trailside Cafe had dozens of bikes to pick from. We bypassed the quadricycles, the tandems and the adult tricycles. Lilly picked something with a lot of gears. I picked the one with the softest seat.

Almost as soon as we rode out of the trailhead area the bluffs appeared, soaring above us on the left, while the river flowed by on the right. The virtually level path made for effortless riding. That minimal grade was the reason the railroad engineers had selected the narrow stretch of land for the rail bed back in 1892. Trees provided shade for much of our ride; wildflowers and other growth lined the route. I could hear water trickling through the limestone of the bluffs. We passed several cave entrances marked by signs saying they were home to protected bats. Occasional park benches along the trail provided places to rest as we watched sand barges plumbing the river's depth.

Lilly said she saw six bald eagles atop one of the bluffs, but my eyes were too concentrated on the road to notice. It was along these bluffs, in 1804, that William Clark saw, as noted in his words (and spelling), "several

Courious Paintings and Carveings in the projecting rock of Limestone inlaid with white red and blue flint, of a verry good quality." When members of the expedition landed to examine the Indian inscriptions, he said, they encountered "a Den of rattle Snakes" and killed three.

To my relief, we encountered neither a den nor a single rattlesnake. Katy Trail authorities make no promises that unwelcome wildlife won't sometimes find its way to the trail, but the most fearsome things we saw were rabbits, squirrels, birds and bugs. Another rider told us that in an area farther west, where farm fields line both sides of the trail, she had encountered a cow that was reluctant to make way, but had resolved the matter without violence. We didn't see any trash or litter along the trail. We met or were passed by maybe 40 other bikers as we rode the 15 miles from Rocheport to Easley and back. Everybody exchanged greetings and seemed happy to be out there.

My only disappointment, as we whizzed through McBaine and continued to Easley, was that neither of those spots in the road had a shady stand offering icy martinis, or even lemonade.

When we got back to Rocheport after riding a bit more than three hours, we were planning to have lunch from the menu of the short-order cook at the Trailside Cafe, but Abigail's was beckoning seductively, so we chose to go upscale. Sitting at one of the patio tables while a rabbit munched nearby, I marveled at the simple pleasure of enjoying an excellent meal amidst towering trees and beside a mighty river, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

Bike rentals and B & B's

The Basics

The Katy Trail, an old railroad bed converted to a biking and hiking path, is a state park extending 185 miles across Missouri, between Sedalia on the west and St. Charles on the east. The trail, which is covered with very fine gravel, is very flat; grades seldom reach 5 percent. There are 22 trailheads, or entry points, mostly at towns and villages spaced no more than 10 miles apart with bike rental shops, restaurants and lodging. Each trailhead has parking facilities beside the trail and most have restrooms. There are a few campsites along the trail. Rocheport, near the center of the route, is probably the busiest of the trailheads and offers some of the most scenic stretches.

Trail information may be obtained from the Missouri Department of Natural

Resources at (800) 334-6946. Another good source is The Complete Katy Trail Guidebook, by Brett Dufur, available from Pebble Publishing in Columbia, Mo.; (800) 576-7322.

There are close to 10,000 miles of public trails converted from former rail lines and connecting corridors in both urban and rural areas in the United States. Depending on location, weather, condition and surface material, some are suited to in-line skating, cross-country skiing, horseback riding and wheelchair recreation as well as bicycling and hiking. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a 10-year-old nonprofit organization based in Washington, D. C., has a useful Web site (www.railtrails.org) offering a state-by-state guide to the trails, with links to sources for information about local weather, B & B's, tourism offices and map-drawing services. The organization also publishes "700 Great Rail-Trails: A National Directory," available through the Web site or by calling (800) 888-7747, extension 11; \$9.95.

Where to Stay

In St. Charles, the Boone's Lick Trail Inn, at 1000 South Main Street, (314) 947-7000, has five rooms with private baths, ranging in price from \$85 to \$115 on weekdays, \$115 to \$150 Friday and Saturday, including a large breakfast. St. Charles, a historic French and German town loaded with charm, has many other bed-and-breakfasts; call the St. Charles Visitors Bureau for information: (314) 946-7776.



Rivercene Bed-and-Breakfast, 127 County Road 463, in New Franklin, (816) 848-2497, just north of Boonville and about 12 miles from Rocheport, has nine rooms with private baths, at \$85 to \$140, including breakfast.

Rocheport itself has several locally acclaimed bed-and-breakfasts, which were booked full when we tried to make reservations. One that many people recommend is the School House Bed-and-Breakfast, 504 Third Street, (573) 698-2022, in a two-story 80-year-old former school, with rooms at \$95 to \$155. The attractive Yates House Bed-and-Breakfast, 305 Second Street, (573) 698-2129, also in Rocheport, has rooms at \$95 to \$115.



Hermann, though two miles off the Katy Trail on the south side of the river, has about 40 B & B's in and around the town. Information is available through the Visitor Information Center; (800) 932-8687.

Where to Eat



Abigail's, at 100 East First Street, in Rocheport, is a joyful eating

experience, inside or on the patio, with good wines and a new menu at every meal, depending upon the cook's whim and what's available. Open Wednesday to Sunday for lunch and dinner; reservations suggested for dinner; (573) 698-3000. Main dinner courses at \$8.95 to \$13.95.

Another place in Rocheport that was recommended to us, but which we didn't try, is Les Bourgeois Winery and Bistro, a mile uphill from the trail at Interstate 70 (take the Rocheport exit, then follow the signs); (573) 698-2300. Closed Monday. Still another is the Word of Mouth Cafe next door to the post office; (573) 698-2099. Open Wednesday to Sunday for lunch; Friday and Saturday for dinner.

In Hermann, our lunch at the Stone Hill Winery and Restaurant, 1110 Stone Hill Highway, was \$7.95 each. Stone Hill has its own wines on the menu, including some nonalcoholic varieties. A bottle of Stone Hill Vidal is about \$9; (573) 486-2221.

Sightseeing

The Historic Daniel Boone Home, 1868 Highway F, in Defiance, (314) 987-2221, is open daily from March 1 through November and also the first two Fridays and Saturdays in December for the candlelight Christmas tour. Tours are conducted from 9 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Admission is \$6 (\$10 for the Christmas tour).

Bike Rental



We rented our bikes from the Trailside Cafe, at First and Pike, in Rocheport, which has an extensive selection at \$3 an hour, \$10 for the day; (573) 698-2702.

Some other places along the trail that rent bikes are the Katy Roundhouse in New Franklin, (816) 848-2232; the Hartsburg Cycle Depot in Hartsburg, (573) 657-9599, and Scenic Cycles, at 203 Depot Street in Marthasville, (314) 433-2909. With a 24-hour advance notice (48-hour notice on weekends), Scenic Cycles will also organize a shuttle service for people who want to cycle only one way along the trail, then be driven back to where they left their cars. The cost varies according to distance. S.C.